

**ISLAMIC ETHICS: SOURCES AND PRACTICAL RELEVANCE**

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**Abstract**

Human ethics, values, and Islamic ethics have been studied as matters of concern since the Prophet of Islam. Islamic ethics is the moral code derived from the Qur'anic teachings and articulated by the Prophet (s.a.w.w) through words and deeds. Islamic ethics addresses how humankind ideally accommodates divine guidance as appropriate human behaviour, good conduct, and personal Morality. When discussing "Islamic ethics," it is imperative to begin by defining and describing the terminology and the sources of ethics (al-akhlaq). In Islam, ethics should be studied concerning law and jurisprudence (Fiqh), philosophy–theology (kala<sup>m</sup>, falsafah), as well as mysticism (tasawwuf). This paper investigates the importance, essence, and characteristics of Islamic ethics. Although Islamic attributions have significantly contributed to all civilizations, contemporary events raise issues that require a revisit. This paper attempts to clarify the concept of Islamic ethics as a fundamental pillar of a healthy society. It explains the need for ethics for the development of individuals and culture and its significance in character building. The paper concludes that Muslim character should develop along with Islamic ethics, and its application to daily affairs of Muslims' lives should be given due attention.

**Index Terms**—Ethics and Morality, character building, Islamic ethics, principles, scope, analysis

## **Introduction of Ethics**

Generally, the word "ethics" originates from the Greek word "*ethos*," which means "character, spirit, and attitude of a group of people or culture" (Loeb 1971). According to the Oxford Dictionary, ethics is defined as (1) a system of moral principles by which human actions may be judged as good or bad, right or wrong; (2) the rules of conduct recognized in respect of a particular class of human actions. From an Islamic point of view, ethics is related to several terms like *ma'ruf* (approved), *khayr* (goodness), *Haqq* (truth and right), *birr* (righteousness), *qist* (equity), *adl* (equilibrium and justice), and *taqwa* (piety)<sup>1</sup>. Good actions are described as *salihat*, and wrong actions are called *sayyi'at*. However, the term most closely related to ethics in the Quran is *Akhlaq* (Beekun 1996).

Islamic ethics are well-documented in the literary canon. Many Muslim scholars have written about ethical issues based on the central Islamic sources: Quran and Sunnah. Islam, ethics can be defined as the sound principles and values based on Islamic sources (Mohammed 2011). These ethics are consistent with the ability of human beings (Al-Ghazali 2001). It also covers all aspects of life (Al-Qaradawi 1994). It is essential to highlight the importance of ethics in Islam when discussing ethical issues. Islamic worship, defined as religious deeds and actions ordered by Allah; to get His acceptance (Yaken, 2006), is designed to improve and protect ethics (Al-Banna 1940; Al-Qaradawi 1985, 1994, 1996). Prayer refrains one from indecency and evil. Allah says: "*And establish regular prayer, for prayer restrains from shameful and unjust deeds*" (Al-Quran 29:45). Zakat is taken from the rich to be given to the poor to sanctify the former and clean them from their sins. Allah further says: "*Of their goods, take alms, that so thou mightiest purify and sanctify them*" (Al-Quran 9:103). Fasting teaches Muslims how to live with ethical principles and values. The Prophet Muhammad (peace and prayers be upon him) said: "Whoever does not give up false speech and acting upon it and does not give up offensive speech and behavior, Allah does not need his giving up his food and drink." Allah also says: "Fasting does not mean abstaining from food and drink only; rather, it is also abstaining from lying, falsehood and idle speech" (Al-Ghazali 2001). The pilgrimage (Hajj) trains Muslims to develop characteristics of patience, endurance, and altruism. Allah says: "For Hajj are the months well known if anyone undertakes that duty therein, let there be no obscenity, wickedness, and nor wrangling" (Al-Quran 2:197). In sum, the Prophet (peace and prayers be upon him) indicated that the primary purpose Allah sent him to the people was to improve their ethics. He said: "I have

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<sup>1</sup> Each of these terms is polysemic; Izutsu exercises great care and takes considerable time to define and to situate the moral values enumerated within his proposed general structure.

been sent to accomplish the best of morality" (Al-Ghazali 2001).

Ethics is related to faith (Imaan). Imaan is the religious feeling resulting from following what Allah asks Muslims to do (Al-Banna 1940). Imaan is the power that improves and protects ethics (Al-Qaradawi 1994; Maududi 1977; Yaken 2006), and Imaan is not acceptable in the eyes of Islam without connecting it with good deeds (Al-Ghazali 2001). Solid faith generates a good character and weak faith results in a collapse of Morality. The Prophet Muhammad (peace and prayers be upon him) connects faith (Imaan) with ethics. He mentioned, "None of you (truly) has faith until he loves for his brother what he loves for himself" (Yaken 2006). The Prophet (peace and prayers be upon him) was told about a woman who prayed and fasted constantly, but she used to hurt her neighbors with her words. The Prophet (peace and prayers be upon him) said the woman would go to hell hereafter (Al-Ghazali 2001). The Prophet also said, "Let he who truly believes in Allah and the Last Day speak good or be silent" (Al- Qaradawi 1985). The Prophet asked his companions, "Do you know who the bankrupt is?" His companions replied, "The bankrupt among us is the one who has neither money with him nor any property." The Prophet (peace and prayers be upon him) said, "The real bankrupt of my ummah would be he who would be resurrected with much of his prayer, fasting, and sadaqah. But he will still find himself bankrupt on that Day as he will have exhausted the funds of virtues because he reviled others, brought calumny against others, unlawfully devoured the wealth of others, shed the blood of others, and beat others; so his virtues would be credited to the account of those who suffered at his hand. If his good deeds fall short of clearing the account, their sins would be entered into his account, and he would be thrown into the Hellfire (Yaken 2006). The Prophet (peace and prayers be upon him) said, "The complete believers in Imaan (faith) are those who are best in character" (Al-Ghazali 2001).

The study of Islamic ethics, whether philosophical or theological, grew out of early discussions of the questions of predetermination (qadar), obligation (taklif), faith (Imaan), and the injustices of temporal rulers, notably the caliphs. Early writers on ethics from the Mu'tazila school were probably influenced by Greek philosophy. By the third century AD, a clearly discernible current of philosophical ethics began to take shape, with strong influences from Greek ethics, including Stoicism, Platonism, and Aristotelianism.

Al-Kindi, the first genuine philosopher of Islam, appears from his extant ethical writings to have been mainly influenced by Socrates and Diogenes the Cynic. Other classical influences can be seen in the work of Platonists such as Abu Bakr al-Razi, who followed Plato's division of the parts of the souls, and Neo-Platonists such as al-Farabi. In contrast, Aristotelian influences can be

seen in al-Farabi, who also discussed the problem of evil, Ibn Sina, and Ibn Rushd. Ibn Sina developed a theory of the conjunction of the soul with the active intellect; this conjunction is bound up to the ultimate perfection of the soul, which has attained the highest degree of wisdom and virtue.

Neo-Platonism again surfaces in the work of Ibn Miskawayh and his followers, to whom we owe the groundwork of a whole ethical tradition that flourished in Persia well into the twelfth century (eighteenth-century ad) and beyond. Onto Plato's threefold division of the soul, Ibn Miskawayh grafts a tripartite division of virtue into wisdom, courage, and temperance. His views were elaborated upon by al-Tusi and al-Dawwani, among others. A blend of philosophical and religious ethics is characteristic of the work of later writers such as al-Ghazali and Fakhr al-Din al-Razi, in which the road to moral and spiritual perfection has mystical overtones.

A specific blend of philosophical and religious ethics is characteristic of the writings of some late authors, including al-Raghib al-Isfahani, Abu Hamid al-Ghazali, Fakhr al-Din al-Razi, and others. Al-Ghazali is the foremost representative of this group; in his ethical treatise *Mizan al-amal* (The Balance of Action) and his religious summa, *al-Ihya' 'ulum al-din* (The Revival of the Religious Sciences), has developed an ethical theory in which Platonic psychology serves as the groundwork of an essentially Islamic and mystical worldview. In this theory, the table of the four cardinal virtues accords with the Platonic virtues but admits to a series of subdivisions or ramifications analogous to those of his predecessors. A good example of the combination of religious and philosophical ideas in al-Ghazali is how happiness can be achieved. Happiness, as the chief good, admits of two subdivisions, the worldly and the otherworldly. Otherworldly happiness, our ultimate goal, cannot be achieved without certain worldly goods. These include the four cardinal virtues of wisdom, courage, temperance, and justice. The bodily virtues of health, strength, good fortune, and long life. The external virtues of wealth, kin, social position, and noble birth, and the 'divine virtues' of guidance, good counsel, direction, and divine support. Those virtues are referred to in the Qur'an and the Hadith, al-Ghazali says, and the final virtue, 'divine support,' is identified with the Holy Spirit (Surah 2: 87, 253).

The road to moral and spiritual perfection is described as the 'quest for God.' The seekers after God must satisfy two conditions: their actions must be governed by the prescriptions or ordinances of the 'divine law' (al-shar') and ensure that God is constantly present in their hearts. By this presence, al-Ghazali means genuine repentance, adoration, and submission, born of the seeker's awareness of the beauty and majesty of God, which al-Ghazali, like other Muslim mystics or Sufis, regards as analogous to human passion or love (Ishq).

### **Islamic Theory of Ethics**

The Islamic theory of ethics studies the rational/religious foundations of the rules and principles that man must act upon in the different walks of life through reliance on Islamic sources. The theory also studies the foundations' rootedness in the Islamic perception regarding man's relationship with God and existence and the dependence of such foundations on the Islamic existential, cognitive, and metaphysical axioms. It necessarily answers those philosophical problems that call into question the pillars upon which man's behavior is built, its yardsticks, and the source from which these yardsticks are derived. These problems include the yardstick of good and evil, the source of moral obligation, the concept of human responsibility, its requirements and relation to human Liberty, the relation of this latter to the idea of determinism and Divine Decree, the concept of moral duty and its relation to moral goodness, the possible existence of an honorable reward, the intentions and motives which obligate man to act, and the extent of the relationship between the human effort and moralism.

The Islamic theory of ethics field has relatively emerged in recent years. Its history dates back to the pioneering and classical work authored by Sheikh Muhammad Abdullah Diraz. Written initially in French in 1947 under the title "Ethics in the Qur'an," the work raised common philoso-ethical questions in the domain of ethics in Europe. Having profoundly understood this domain, Sheikh Diraz started to answer the said questions through reference to the Noble Qur'an. He interpreted and even criticized many theological, juristic, and legal theorems in Islamic sciences while pointing to their ethical indications. Sheikh Diraz did not restrict his critique to the Islamic heritage but adopted a similarly critical stance towards the western philoso-ethical theorems, which have evidently crystallized in Europe under what came to be called "Ethical Philosophy" or "Theoretical Ethics" or "Ethics." This field emerged approximately during the period of David Hume.

The study by Sheikh Diraz resulted in the development of an integrated Islamic ethical theory dependent on the same five pillars of the western ethical theory: Obligation, Responsibility, Reward, Intention, and Effort. In reality, none of the Muslim moralists of the second half of the twentieth century is known to have directly built their works on the results of the pioneering work of Sheikh Diraz. None of them has even adopted a similar approach. This pioneering and magnificent work remained isolated until further studies on "The History of Islamic Theory of Ethics" accumulated. Most of these studies adopted a defensive approach that aimed at proving that Muslims did have a "theoretical ethical" system like the West. Muslims were centuries ahead of the West regarding ethics, yet our ancestors are not known to have developed a field of science called "ethics." Instead, the issues of this field were discussed and examined within the subject

matter of other sciences, including scholastic theology, principles of Islamic jurisprudence, and mysticism. Among these studies are the work authored by Dr. Ahmed Mahmoud Sobhi entitled "Ethical Philosophy in Islamic Ideology: Rationalists and Sensationalists or Theory and Practice, 1980" and another work by Dr. Majid Fakhri entitled "Ethical Theories in Islam, 1991". These were followed by other studies which focused on "the history of ethics" rather than the "development of ethics." Then Dr. Taha Abdurrahman authored a work on ethical criticism of western modernity (The Question of Ethics, 2000). This work aimed at undermining the axioms on which western modernity is based. However, this work was confined to adopting this destructive approach and presenting a parallel constructive one that aimed at developing an ethical theory rooted in Islamic metaphysics and based on existential and cognitive postulates.

There is a wide range of approaches to the "development" of the Islamic theory of ethics and other methods of reading the history of Islamic sciences to establish the "history" of the Islamic idea of ethics. Two ways can be identified concerning the approaches relating to the development of the Islamic theory of ethics: the compound approach adopted by Dr. Diraz and the simulation approach of the mystical pattern followed by Dr. Taha Abdurrahman. Dr. Diraz has combined several techniques to arrive at the formation of an Islamic theory of ethics. First: The five modes of the philosophers' rational approach include (defining, dividing, proving, disproving, and responding). Second: The Deductive Approach is based on deducing secondary issues from principal ones. Here Dr. Diraz deduced the central meanings and directives from the Qur'an and Hadiths [Prophetic Sayings], out of which secondary ethical rules and concepts were established. Third: The Comparative and Critical Approach compares western theorems on ethics and other Islamic theorems in the area of theology, principles of Islamic jurisprudence, or Fiqh. Here Dr. Diraz criticizes and dismantles such theorems and, afterward, develops new theorems based on the Qur'an and Hadith. Fourth: The Qur'an and Hadith Exegetical Approach, where the Qur'an is read from a philosophical perspective that casts doubt on specific issues, call them into question, and then poses questions to what the Qur'an has to say about these issues.

The definite answers to such questions are arrived at through reading the Qur'an or referring to specific Qur'anic passages that might not be linguistically and directly related to the ethical issue under consideration. However, Dr. Taha has used a unique approach, namely, the simulation approach of the Islamic mysticism structure, to develop an Islamic ethical theory. Dr. Taha has used some mystical concepts to erect the pillars of an Islamic ethical theory. These concepts included the Earliest Covenant [made between God and the Children of Adam], Splitting Prophet Muhammad's Chest, and Changing the Direction of Prayer. Having inspired the concepts of

mysticism, Dr. Taha clothed these theorems with ethical garments and gave them new names like drawing a comparison between a moralist and a mystic, changing the mystic rule regarding the murid's (disciple's) need to have a sheik into an ethical principle known as the principle of living emulation (*al-iqtida al-hayy*), and calling theomorphism (*at-tashabbuh bil-lah*) as assuming the noble character traits of God (*at-takhalluq bi as-sifat al-husna*), etc. This led him to create a new ethical science from ancient mysticism's womb. The approaches to developing the Islamic theory of ethics differ from those of reading the history of the ethical theory in the Islamic culture. Coming atop these approaches is the systematic and analytic approach which re-examines and disintegrates the different sciences of the Islamic civilization to lay the foundation for other modern sciences. This was the same approach followed by Dr. Majid Fakhri in his English book "History of Ethical Theories in Islam," where he re-examines the history of Islamic sciences, in general, to draw there from a history of Islamic theoretical ethics similar to the modern western academic ethics with all its four divisions: scriptural, theological, philosophical and religious ethics. Dr. Majid Fakhri reclassified the Islamic sciences so that they may come in line with this contemporary pattern. He extracted the theorems of the Mu'tazilites [followers of Wasil ibn 'Ata] and Ash'arites [followers of al-Hasan al-Ash'ari] to lay the foundation for a type of Islamic ethics which he called "philosophical ethics." He also read the theorems of the peripatetic Islamic trend, which kept close contact with Greek and Hellenistic heritage. He gave this type of ethics the name "Philosophical Ethics." He also found imam al-Ghazali to be the true embodiment of the integration of the Islamic sciences. Such integration was classified as "Religious Ethics." The ethics he derived straightforwardly from the Qur'an and Hadith were called "Textual Ethics" as analogized to "Scriptural Morality." While examining the Qur'an and Hadith, Dr. Majid employed the linguistic analysis approach, which discusses the semantics and etymologies of the Qur'anic terms addressing the ethics issue to arrive at their interpretative concept. This includes such terms as "al-birr" (righteousness), "*al-qist*" (equity), and "*al-adl*" (justice) and other similar terms.

We conclude by stating that the history of "theoretical ethics" is as ancient as the Greek civilization. This history has spread across the entire civilizations of the world and has been recently divided into theoretical and practical categories. The history, origin, and subject matter of this pattern of ethics differs from what came to be called "axiology," which has developed thanks to economics recently. This type of philosophy introduced the concept of "added value." The axiology or philosophy of values consists of three categories: rational, aesthetic, and ethical. Therefore, ethical values constitute only one branch of axiology and cannot stand on equal

footing with axiology or share similar issues.

### **Western Understanding of Ethics**

While many approaches to ethics in the West exist, we will examine three distinct theories here. Aristotle's approach is agent-centered in that it focuses on the development of the individual, which in turn, benefits society as a whole. Kant's approach is duty-based, meaning that we have specific duties as human beings binding for us. Utilitarianism is the final approach we will address here, and this is the view that consequences are essential for resolving ethical dilemmas. Here we will look at the basics for two utilitarians, Bentham and J.S. Mill.

For Aristotle, happiness is the only good we desire for its own sake. All of our other goods/goals/ends are for achieving happiness. His notion of happiness is not simply a feeling of contentment or satisfaction but an activity for human beings. This should be understood in terms of the function of human beings (activity of the soul following reason). Human beings are unique insofar as we can reason. Thus, human life must be lived according to reason to be happy and flourish. This would mean that we have a balance between reason and emotion, in which reason is the guiding aspect. According to Aristotle, it is the function of human beings to live a specific type of life; this life is to be an activity of the soul following reason. Therefore, the role of a human being (i.e., a good human being) is the excellent performance of these actions. For Aristotle, happiness is an activity of the human soul following excellence and virtue manifested over an entire lifetime. Happiness as the ethical end does not simply consist of moral virtue but includes intellectual virtue. Complete happiness is both a contemplative and practical activity.

1. On the other hand, Kant's moral theory has two formulas for the categorical imperative. So, if you're facing an ethical dilemma, you must determine whether or not your action is permissible according to the formulations of the Categorical Imperative. The first formula states that we ought to act so that our act's maxim, or principle, can be willed as a universal law. If your maxim cannot be universalized, then that act is morally off-limits. For example, if I am considering stealing a loaf of bread, I have to ask myself if my maxim can be made a universal law. This would look like this: Is it okay for everyone to steal all the time? The answer is no; the maxim itself would be self-defeating because if everyone stole all the time, there would be no private property, and stealing would no longer be possible. The key is formulating maxims everyone could support (even if some don't). The rules are fair. So, what you are essentially doing with the test is ensuring that your maxim is logically consistent and can be used without it being self-defeating (Frankena, 1963, pp. 32-3)

The second formula states that we should treat humanity (self and others) as an end and never as



a mere means. This entails treating all persons with respect and dignity; I help others achieve their goals when possible and avoid using them as tools or objects to further my goals. To Kant, we must treat humans with respect and dignity since humans have the capacity for autonomy and rationality. With these two formulas of Kant's categorical imperative, we can see that the focal points of his moral theory include: fairness, justice, individual rights, and consistency.

Utilitarianism is a widely popular approach to Morality that focuses on the consequences of one's actions. The idea put forth by Bentham and then Mill rests on the idea that the morally correct action is the one that generates the most happiness, pleasure, and/or well-being in the world or reduces the most pain and suffering in the world. This is a compelling approach to moral reasoning and typically comes in two primary varieties:

- 2. Act utilitarianism:** This version is about the consequences of specific acts. So, A may be the morally correct option in one situation, but it might be B in another. It depends on the amount of happiness or pleasure produced or reduced pain. This version of utilitarianism is most often attributed to Bentham, the founder of utilitarianism. Bentham argued that to make the best decisions and we must consider a few elements to determine the optimal outcome. These elements include factors such as scope (how many people will be affected by the action), whether or not the pleasure obtained will lead to optimal long-term effects, and whether or not the pleasure obtained will produce more joy. Essentially, Bentham thought that all pleasure was equal in a democratic sense, so whatever brings you happiness or pleasure might differ from what brings me happiness (Frankena, 1963, pp. 35-7)
- 3. Rule utilitarianism:** This version is about the consequences of general rules. So, if lying tends to reduce well-being in the world, there ought to be a general rule against it. If persecuting innocent people results in bad outcomes, there should be a rule against it. Mill is the author that is thought to introduce rule utilitarianism in his attempt to defend individual rights and protect the nature of justice. As you can imagine, one major problem with Act Utilitarianism is that preserving the nature of justice would be challenging if persecuting an innocent person happens to bring about optimal results for the greater good. His defense of individual rights is referred to as Mill's Harm Principle, which is located in his book, *On Liberty*. This states that one cannot restrict another's behaviour unless one is harming others. So, individual freedom and autonomy are essential because if everyone's rights and liberties are protected, the overall good will be promoted (Frankena, 1963, p. 39)

## **Conclusion**

Islamic ethics prescribe its followers to fiercely guard their behaviour, words, thoughts, and intentions and observe certain norms and moral codes in their family affairs, dealings with relatives, neighbours, and friends; business transactions; and social matters; and in private and public life. The unique feature of the Islamic ethical system is that it permeates all spheres and fields of human life. Islam also has its own distinctive value-based moral system for business dealings. It prescribes certain specific guidelines governing business ethics, which are dictated primarily by the notion of halal (lawful or permitted) and Haram (unlawful or prohibited) as per Islamic jurisprudence (Fiqh). However, there is a difference between the Islamic and Western perspectives on Ethics.

The Islamic system runs in the light of Shariah. The ethical system in Islam is also based on the Law of Shariah. According to Islamic Shariah law, whoever works for the sake of humanity and works for the betterment of society is morally good. And whatever is harmful to society is ethically wrong. Islamic ethical structure forces its followers to strictly guard their behaviour, words, thoughts, and intentions and observe certain norms and moral codes in their family affairs; in dealings with relatives, neighbours, and friends; in their business transactions; in their social affairs; and private and public life. For Muslims, both law and ethics are ultimately concerned with moral obligations, which they believe are the central focus of the Islamic message. Islam also has its own distinctive value-based ethical system for business dealings. It prescribes specific guidelines governing business ethics, which are dictated primarily by halal (lawful or permitted) and Haram (unlawful or prohibited) as per Islamic jurisprudence. Islam has its ethical structure for business dealings. This moral structure prescribes specific guidelines for the business community based explicitly on Halal (Lawful) and Haram (Unlawful). A Muslim is expected to be humble before God and with other people. Islam also forbids every Muslim to control their passions and desires. Islam warns against excessive attachment to the pleasures of this world. Morality in Islam addresses every aspect of a Muslim's life, from greetings to international relations. It is universal in its scope and its applicability.

The Islamic ethical system highly influences the Western Ethical structure. Because Muslim rule over Europe, Islam is currently the second-largest religion In Europe after Christianity. Greeks have also influenced Western Ethical structures. Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle started talking about Morality. They are the founders of Greek ethics and philosophy. Greek Ethics tries to prove "What is the good life?" According to the Greek ethical structure, ethical life is a happy and good life. Different theories are based on ethics. Such as:

- 1. Utilitarianism:** Utilitarianism is an ethical theory that argues the proper course of action maximizes a positive effect, such as 'happiness' and 'welfare.'

2. **Consequentialism** refers to the moral theory that holds the consequences of a particular action form the basis for any valid moral judgment.
3. **Hedonism:** Hedonism points out that the principal ethic is maximizing pleasure and minimizing pain.

The argument here is that Islam believes in collectivism, not individualism. (Islamic teachings expand outwards with the family as the unit of society, not the individual). The vote of the majority does not determine ethical principles. If society votes for an unethical condition to be true or ethical, it won't be accepted in Islamic ethics. Any situation or action is untrue until and unless it does not pass through the holy Quran and Hadith. The activity can be wrong and unethical if it contradicts the Holy Quran and Hadith laws.

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