

Ethics in Islam: A Brief Survey

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Abstract: In Islam, ethics (akhlaq) is inseparable from religion and is built entirely upon it. Naturally therefore, the Quran and the Sunnah are the ultimate sources for Muslim ethics. The books on adab (good manners) and makarim al-akhlaq (noble qualities of character) which have embodied the earliest works on ethics in Islam demonstrate, the extent to which they utilize the Quran and the Sunnah. However, early Muslim discussions on ethics, such as those by Al-Kindi (d.874), Al-Farabi (d.950) and Ibn Sina (d.1037) did not attain to the status of a discipline though invariably serving as an introduction to their wider studies on politics, law and other fields of knowledge. Miskawayh (d.1030), Al-Ghazali (d.1111), Al-Tusi (d.1274) and Al-Dawwani (d.1502) through their major respective research on ethics, Tahdhib Al-Akhlaq, Ihya' 'Ulum al-Din, Akhlaq Al-Nasiri and Akhlaq Al-Jalali have separated ethics from other disciplines, offering a very thorough analytical system of Islamic ethics. Thus, this qualitative study which applies conceptual content analysis method seeks to make a critical study of the meaning and development of ethical thought in Islam.

Key words: Ethics, Islamic ethics, akhlaq, character, Tahdhib al-Akhlaq

INTRODUCTION

The term khuluq (character) is definitely Quranic, so that it antedates Greek terms in the Islamic world such as ethos. Of the two occasions of its occurrence in the Quran, the more often cited is "and you (Muhammad) have an exalted level of character (khuluq)" (68:4). It denotes the meaning of one's innate individuality; such as character, natural disposition, temper, nature, manners and even one's customs and religions. The term khuluq (its plural: Akhlaq) which usually occurs in the expression makarim Al-Akhlaq (noble qualities of character) appears to be very popular in the titles of many books that deal particularly with religious ethics in Islam, such as the Makarim Al-Akhlaq of Ibn Abi Al-Dunya (d. 894). In his introduction to the Makarim Al-Akhlaq of Ibn Abi Al-Dunya, states that there are no <15 works in whose titles the expression makarim Al-Akhlaq has been traced while in another study of his, the Makarim Al-Akhlaq by Ibn Abi Al-Dunya Muslim World, Bellamy (1963) has concluded that treatise makes no quotations from the 'Books of Indians', the Greek philosophers, the Sassanian kings or Persian wise men such as Buzurjmihir; nothing even from Ibn Al-Muqaffa' or any of the more recent writers in the Arabo-Persian tradition.

In classical Islam, khuluq was normally defined as a state of the soul which determines human actions. This state is neither the soul nor the action, since the soul is innate while character is a state of the soul that causes the soul to perform its actions. The state is acquired by training and practice while the soul is inborn and part of man's nature. That is to say, the soul represents an

ontological structure not indeed a thing but something as real (and real in the same way) whereas character is something that can be described as a human achievement. One can be said to make one's character but one has one's soul by virtue of one's existence.

It was Al-Farabi (d.950) who was among the earliest great Muslim philosophers to acknowledge the interrelation of the state of the soul with human action for the stresses:

The states of the soul by which a man does good deeds and fair actions are the virtues and those by which he does wicked deeds and ugly actions are the vices (Al-Farabi, 1961, 1985a, b)

Then his Christian student, Yahya Ibn 'Adi took a similar view, defining khuluq as:

A state of the soul by which man performs his actions without thought or deliberation

Yahya's definition is in agreement with that of his contemporary, Miskawayh (1966) who also defines khuluq as: A state of the soul which causes it to perform its actions without thought or deliberation. Almost the same definition of character is later elaborated by successive writers on ethics in the Islamic world, such men as Al-Ghazali (1976), Al-Tusi (1964) and others.

THE SCIENCE OF ETHICS

It is this state of the soul, i.e., character (khuluq) that has become the subject matter of Muslim ethics. Its scope

and contents given by Al-Ghazali (1982) which seem to have been universally accepted by philosophers up to his day, may serve as an example:

The professors of this (ethics) occupy themselves with defining the attributes and qualities of the soul, grouping them according to genus and species and pointing out the way to moderate and control them

Al-Ghazali's specific description of the science of ethics is attested later by Al-Tusi (1964), who writes:

Now this species (of philosophy: Ethics) with which we shall begin, is a science concerned with how the human soul can acquire a disposition such that all its acts, proceeding from it by its will may be fair and praiseworthy. Thus, the subject-matter of this science is the human soul, in as much as from it can proceed, according to its will acts fair and praiseworthy or ugly and to be condemned

Ibn Sadr Al-Din Al-Shirwani as cited by Hajji Khalifa takes much the same view and summarises:

Ethics is the science of the virtues and the way to acquire them for the welfare of the soul and of vices and the way to guard the soul against them. Thus, its subject-matter is the innate state of the soul, aptitudes and the rational soul as far as it is affected by them

The identification of character (khuluq) with a state of the human soul was pioneered by Aristotle. In almost all of his major studies on ethics, *Ethica Nicomachea* in 1980, *Magna Moralia* in 1985 and *Eudemian Ethics* in 1986, Aristotle repeatedly states that things that exist in the soul are of three kinds: Passions or feelings, faculties or capacities and habits or states of character. By passions, Aristotle (1980) further elaborates:

I mean appetite, anger, fear, confidence, envy, joy, friendly feeling, hatred, longing, emulation, pity and in general the feelings that are accompanied by pleasure or pain by faculties the things in virtue of which we are said to be capable of feeling these, e.g., of becoming angry or being pained or feeling pity by states of character (khuluq) the things in virtue of which we stand well or badly with reference to the passions, e.g., with reference to anger we stand badly if we feel it violently or too weakly and well if we feel it moderately and similarly with reference to the other passions

Aristotle (1985), also thinks that in virtue of this state of character, man has a tendency to do either good or bad. Or to put it another way, it is man's actions that indicate the hidden nature of such a state (Aristotle, 1985). But the interaction between this state of character and human action, widely accepted by the Arabic writers on ethics is a concept derived almost verbally from Galen. For instance Galen writes:

A trait of character (Al-khuluq) is a state of the soul that induces a man to perform the actions of the soul without consideration or precise knowledge. An illustration of that is that some people when surprised by a terrible sound, are frightened and shocked and that when they see or hear amusing, they laugh involuntarily they often wish to refrain from this but they are unable to do so

Character, then as it is understood by Muslim writers on ethics is a state (hal) of the soul by which man does his action without any reflection or fresh thought. Some moralists, however leave this conception of character without further clarification. Miskawayh (1966), the famous Muslim moralist in contrast, goes far beyond both Aristotle and Galen and says further that this state of the soul is not yet called "character" (khuluq) unless it becomes a relatively permanent disposition of man which produces a stable or a single type of behaviour in all or most situations. Thus, it is wrong to call a man greedy on one occasion and generous on another unless the act of either greediness or generosity has become stable and relatively permanent to him then he deserves to be called such. Yet this state of character, Miskawayh (1966), Al-Tusi (1964) and Dawwani (1839) should also induce a man to do an action spontaneously until it grows into a habit and second nature. So that all his activities are performed freely and easily without any need for further reflection and thought. Man, therefore is largely governed by habit and after some time, he no longer able to transform his habit by any act of reflection and deliberation but that habit becomes his disposition and represents a trait of his character.

Miskawayh (1966) further develops that character is neither the capacity nor the soul nor even the action. It is not the capacity, faculty or power, for it is not right to call anyone a good or a bad man simply because one has the power or capacity to do good or evil. But, only he whose goodness or badness has developed into a habit is rightly to be called a man of good or bad character. Neither is character the soul, for the soul is innate while character is a state of the soul that causes it (the soul) to perform its

actions. The state is acquired by training and practice while the soul is inborn and part of man's nature. Hence, character is either good or bad, the soul is neither.

Character is also different from action. Character, as we have just learned is the internal and the hidden state of the soul while action is its outward manifestation. Character is the inward cause while the action is its outward consequence. A good character hence begets good actions whereas bad character yields bad actions. Hence, he who persistently enjoys giving away his wealth, for example is called a man of generous character. His acts of giving are called actions while the thing that makes his soul to do such a generous act is called "character" (khuluq) (Miskawayh, 1966).

Thus character as Al-Farabi (1961) has said, has no name. It is neither a virtue nor a vice but a seat of both. If there proceeds from it only a single type of action, either virtues or vices, it may be called virtue or vice accordingly (Aristotle, 1985; Miskawayh, 1966). But, this is simply due to homonymy not that the real nature of the one is the nature of the other. Galen, also maintains that part of character belongs to the rational soul, part to the irascible and still another part belongs to the concupiscent soul. Aristotle (1985) on the other hand, thinks that character belongs mainly to the irrational parts of the soul, i.e., the irascible and the concupiscent but yet are able to obey reason while Arabic writers on ethics including Yahya, Miskawayh, Al-Ghazali, Al-Tusi and Al-Seem to believe that character is rather an independent state in the soul that is attained through the proper harmony of all the three faculties of the human soul. Therefore, it is because of character that man is either praised or blamed. It is because of character that he is either happy or in misery. Consequently, character has consistently become the object of the science of ethics. In Arabic, this science is called 'ilm Al-Akhlaq (ethics or moral philosophy), its name similarly indicating that khuluq or character is the object of its enquiry.

THE SCOPE AND FOUNDATION OF ETHICS

It is this state of the soul (hal al-nafs) that has likewise become the subject matter of the works on ethics in Islam, for example by Al-Kindi (d.874), Al-Razi (d.925), Al-Farabi (d.950), Yahya Ibn 'Adi (d.974), Miskawayh (d.1030), Al-Ghazali (d.1111), Al-Tusi (d.1274), Al- (d.1502) and others. The two major researches on ethics, Tahdhib Al-Akhlaq (the refinement of characters) by Yahya Ibn 'Adi and Miskawayh, for example are the books that aim at assisting mostly future philosophers in achieving excellent states of character such that all actions

proceeding from them may be good and praiseworthy (Miskawayh, 1968). These states, as Aristotle (1985) has illustrated, are those from which men have a tendency to do the best action and through which they are in the best disposition towards what is best and best is what is in accordance with right reason and this is the means between excess and defect relative to us. For Yahya and Miskawayh (1966) alike believe that only by means of possessing noble character traits does man become human, share the ranks of the angels and eventually and especially, attain the highest goal of his existence that is happiness.

Khuluq or character, then refers to the state of the soul which induces man to perform his actions whereas 'Ilm Al-Akhlaq (ethics or moral philosophy) is the science that khuluq or the state of the soul, i.e., character, becomes the object of its enquiry. Since, the soul itself possesses different faculties and aptitudes and a noble state of the soul (or character), is realisable only through the total equilibrium and harmony of all of these powers of the soul, ethics is viewed, especially by the Muslim ethicists as the science of the human soul. It defines the characteristics and qualities of the soul as well as the methods of how to control and moderate them. So that happiness, the supreme goal of ethics, may become possible to man (Miskawayh, 1966; Al-Ghazali, 1978; Al-Tusi, 1964; Dawwani, 1839). Thus, the primary subjects of Muslim ethics comprise the following (Hourani, 1985; Donaldson, 1953):

- The good for man, i.e., virtues and happiness of the soul
- The three faculties of the soul and their effects on character
- The theory of self-control or the refinement of character through knowledge, discipline and association with people, so that the soul may become free from vices, attaining human perfection and complete happiness

However, the ultimate reference of Quranic ideal is happiness in the world to come (Al-Quran 11: 105, 108) which is contingent upon the purification of the soul from vices:

By the soul and the proportion and order given to it and its enlightenment as to its wrong and its right; truly he succeeds that purifies it and he fails that corrupts it (al-Quran 91: 7-10)

And because this purification can only be actualised by means of ethico-religious knowledge, beliefs and practices, ethics thus occupies the central place in Islam. Other subjects, such as politics and economics are

connected with ethics basically either in a supportive role or as its background. This is referred to, for example in the Quran, verse 2:177:

It is not righteousness that you turn your faces towards East or West virtuous, rather is he who believes in God, the Last day, the Angels, the Book (i.e., all revealed books) and the Prophets (and) who gives of his wealth, despite his love for it, to his (poor) kinsmen, to orphans, to the indigent, to the way farer, to those who ask for financial help and for the freeing of captives and slaves; he who establishes prayers and pays zakat-tax, those who keep their pacts when they make them and are steadfast in adversity, tribulation and in war such are the people of truth, the God-fearing

Islam, as evidenced by its basic sources, the Quran and the Sunnah, places great importance on the acquisition of knowledge and of moral acts. The Quran (35:28) not only equates man's ability to truly fear God with the possession of knowledge but also locates morality as the core of both knowledge and belief in God. For the former, the Quran (17:85; 12:76) or example, warns scholars against pride, for knowledge has no limit and it is only a little of it that is vouchsafed by God to man while above every man of knowledge there is one who knows more, the all-knowing (God). As for the latter, the Quran (2:25 and many other verses) repeatedly uses the expression, "those who believe and do good works" which means that the first namely, the believers would not be true believers without possessing the qualifications of the second which are good deeds and vice versa.

The purpose of knowledge in Islam is to attain the truth (i.e., God) whereas the purpose of ethics is to behave in accordance with this truth (i.e., God's law). Therefore, ethics has been the main interest of Muslims since it deals with the fundamental nature of all actions in Islam and by extension, the nature of the Islamic law (shariah). To put it another way, ethics for a Muslim are the practical implications of his faith in God. All his actions and activities are judged as acts of obedience or disobedience to God.

According to the Quran, it is ethics that enables man to fulfil the purpose of his creation:

I have not created the jinn and man except to worship Me (Al-Quran 51:56)

And it is ethics that distinguishes man from his fellow man. Though otherwise, they would enjoy the same status:

Surely, the noblest of you in the sight of God, is the most righteous of you (al-Quran 49:13)

Another Quranic verse reads:

He who created death and life that he may try you which of you is best in action (Al-Quran 67:2)

In the hadith literature (Ali, 1983), we find such sayings of the Prophet as:

The most perfect of the believers in faith is the best of them in conduct and the best among you are the best in character

The emphasis of the Quran and the Sunnah on acquiring knowledge and on acting morally which together constitute the purpose of man's creation has stimulated the Muslim to look to the Quran and Sunnah for overall moral and social guidance. Naturally therefore, the Quran and the Sunnah become the ultimate sources for Muslim ethics, since moral life for the Muslim is essentially a religious life. Similarly, ethical inquiry also starts with the study of every aspect of Islamic religious teachings, since ethics occupies the central place as the core of Islam.

ISLAMIC ETHICAL LITERATURE

Islamic literature on ethics, however began to take clearer shape in the 8th and 9th centuries AD with the study of the principles of the Quran and Sunnah by Muslim jurists (fuqaha), theologians (mutakllimun), sufis (sufiyyun) and other scholars. The works on adab (good manners) makarim Al-Akhlaq (noble qualities of character) and those on the concepts of justice (Al-'adl) and moral obligation such as *Risala fi'l-Qadar* by Hasan Al-Basri, *'Uyun Al-Akhbar* by Ibn Qutayba, *Kitab Makarim Al-Akhlaq* by Ibn Abi Al-Dunya, *Al-Mughni fi Abwab Al-Tawhid wa'l-'Adl* by Al-Qadi 'Abd al-Jabbar, *Adab Al-Dunya wa'l-Din* by Al-Mawardi, *Al-Akhlaq wa'l-Siyar* by Ibn Hazm and *Mizan Al-Amal* by Al-Ghazali which have embodied the successive efforts in the field of religious ethics in Islam offer a remarkable and profound discussion on the concept and content of Islamic ethical principles. It is clear that they are original in Islam due to the fact that they not only demonstrate the extent to which they utilise the Quran and the Sunnah but they also owe almost nothing to the Greek tradition (Hourani, 1985). They pioneered we would say, the early inquiries about the subject and laid the foundations for more detailed enterprises for the Muslims later on.

Philosophical ethics ('ilm Al-Akhlaq) or moral philosophy in Islam begins with the introduction of Greek sciences and philosophy roughly after the first half of 9th century AD to the Muslim scholars who were particularly interested in Greek philosophy. Thus, the Quranic notion

of happiness which is conditional upon the improvement of the human soul by means of ethico-religious practices was gradually supplemented by the Aristotelian idea of eudaimonia and also by the Platonic tripartition of the soul (Rosenthal, 1990; Walzer, 1962; O'Leary, 1949). Yet even these Greek theories of ethics, were extended and used in many ways, especially by the early writers on Islamic ethics including Al-Kindi (d.874), Al-Farabi (d.950), Miskawayh (d.1030), Al-Ghazali (d.1111), Nasir Al-Din Al-Tusi (d.1274), Jalal Al-Din Al-Dawwani (d.1502) and many others.

The Aristotelian conception of happiness for instance, was given a fuller and deeper meaning by extending it to the whole of human society and also to the happiness of this world and more especially, to the future world (Miskawayh, 1966; Al-Ghazali, 1978; Al-Tusi, 1964). On the other hand, Plato's trichotomy of the soul was systematically connected with the Aristotelian idea of virtue as a mean between two vices (i.e., extremes). Also, vices were additionally viewed as diseases of the soul and were treated in considerable detail by the Muslim philosophers. All these matters present a fresh approach in what was previously lacking in Greek philosophy.

However, early Muslim discussions on philosophical ethics, for example by Al-Kindi (d.873), *Risala fi'l-Hila li-Daf' Al-Ahzan*; by Abu Zakarriya' Al-Razi (d.925), *Al-Tibb Al-Ruhani* and by Al-Farabi (d.950), *Fusul Muntaza'a fi 'Ilm Al-Akhlaq*; did not attain to the status of a discipline, though invariably serving as an introduction to their wider implications for politics and law and also offering the new way of looking at ethics specifically in bringing the health of the soul.

Miskawayh (d.1030), however through his chief ethical treatise, *Tahdhib Al-Akhlaq* was the first Muslim thinker to work out a very clear and in many respects, a thorough analytical system of Islamic ethics. Al-Ghazali (d. 1111), as has been brought out by a number of writers on his ethical thought, incorporated the greater part of Miskawayh's treatise, especially in the third book of his *Ihya' 'Ulum al-Din* (Quasem, 1975; Umaruddin, 1970). While Al-Tusi (1964), admitted that his main research on ethics, *Akhlaq Al-Nasiri* was based primarily on that of Miskawayh. Then Al-Dawwani (d.1502), in turn, also used the present *Tahdhib Al-Akhlaq* when writing his *Akhlaq Al-Jalali* (Walzer, 1962).

Miskawayh's ethical work was thus occupying a prominent place in this particular branch of Islamic ethical literature. It is scarcely an exaggeration to say that most of the later works that deal with this subject use it as their main authority and some of them are even based on it. Hence, we may state provisionally that philosophical ethics in Islam is in effect, the story of Miskawayh's *Tahdhib Al-Akhlaq*. Accordingly, a close examination of

this important or perhaps unique compendium is indispensable for a proper understanding of Islamic ethical thought. Here are the brief outlines of Miskawayh's *Tahdhib Al-Akhlaq*:

- The principle of ethics: The soul and its faculties, namely; the rational, the irascible and the concupiscent, the good and happiness, virtues and vices
- Character and its refinement: Human perfection and its means
- The good and happiness
- Moral virtues: Justice
- Love and friendship: The ways towards moral virtues or justice
- Vices: The diseases of the soul, their causes and remedy

For further studies on the ethical philosophy of this great Muslim moralist, Miskawayh see for example, the present researcher's other research, Miskawayh's ethical thought and its sources (Bangi: Faculty of Islamic studies, National University of Malaysia 2003); Christian and Muslim ethics: A study of how to attain happiness as reflected in the works on *tahdhib Al-Akhlaq* by Yahya Ibn 'Adi (d.974) and Miskawayh (d.1030) (Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa Dan Pustaka 2003) and Miskawayh's theory of self-purification and the relationship between philosophy and sufism. *Journal of Islamic studies*, Oxford. There are also other important studies on the ethics of Miskawayh such as those by 'Abdul Haq Ansari, *The ethical philosophy of Miskawayh* (Aligarh: Aligarh Muslim University Press 1964) and by 'Abdul 'Aziz 'Izzat, *Ibn Miskawayh: Falsafatuhu Al-Akhlaqiyyah Wa-Masadiruha* (Cairo: Maktabah Mustafa Al-Babi Al-Halabi 1964).

On other important and recent studies on Islamic ethics in general, see for example, D.M. Donaldson's studies in Muslim ethics (London: SPCK in 1953); Majid Fakhri, *Ethical Theories in Islam* (Leiden: E.J. Brill in 1991) and Al-Fikr Al-Akhlaqi Al-'Arabi, 2 vols (Beirut: Al-Ahliyyah li Al-Nashr wa Al-Tawzi' in 1978); Sayyed Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas, *Islam: The concept of Religion and the Foundation of Ethics and Morality*, (Malaysia: Muslim Youth Movement of Malaysia in 1976); Abu 'Ala Al-Mawdudi, *Ethical viewpoint of Islam*, translated and edited by Khurshid Ahmad, (Lahore: Islamic Publications in 1967); Toshihiko Izutzu, *ethico-religious concepts in the Quran* (Kuala Lumpur: Islamic Book Trust in 2004); S.N.H. Naqvi, *ethics and economic: An Islamic Sythesis* (Leicester: The Islamic foundation in 1981); G.F. Hourani, *reason and tradition in Islamic ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press in 1985) and R.G.

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CONCLUSION

In Islam, ethics (akhlaq) is inseparable from religion and is built entirely upon it. Naturally therefore, the ethical teachings of the Quran and the Sunnah become the ultimate sources for Muslim ethics. The books on adab (good manners) and makarim Al-akhlaq (noble qualities of character) which have embodied the earliest researches in the field of ethics in Islam demonstrate the extent to which they utilize the Quran and the Sunnah. Philosophical ethics or moral philosophy in Islam on the other hand, starts with the introduction of the Muslim philosophers to Greek philosophy after the first haft of the 9th century AD. However, early Muslim discussions on ethics, such as those by Al-Kindi (d.874), Al-Farabi (d.950), Ibn Sina (d.1037) and others did not attain to the status of a discipline though invariably serving, as an introduction or preface to their wider implications for politics, law and other fields of knowledge. Miskawayh (d.1030) through his famous ethical work on ethics, *Tahdhib Al-Akhlaq* was the first Muslim moralist to have separated ethics from other disciplines, offering a very thorough analytical system of Islamic ethics. Such an ethical work of Miskawayh was thus, occupying a prominent place in this particular branch of Islamic ethical literature up to the present day. Most of the latter researches that deal with ethics, such as those by Al-Ghazali (m.1111), Nasir Al-Din Al-Tusi (m.1274) and Al- (m.1502) are based on it. Thus, a close examination of Miskawayh's *Tahdhib Al-Akhlaq* is indispensable for a proper understanding of the meaning and development of ethical thought in Islam.

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