

## Morality and the Qur'an

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### Introduction

Al-Quran and morality is a topic of special relevance particularly for the reason that current dominating civilization (the Western civilization is beset with serious crisis. It impinges not only on the people in the Western hemisphere of the globe, but seriously undermines the cultural fabrics of the world over. This has been made possible because of the colonial and the post-colonial attitude of the Western countries. In the recent past new process of hegemonisation in the garb of globalization has accelerated the pace of destroying the other cultural and civilisational trends throughout the world. Al-Qur'an is Allah's greatest blessing for mankind. It is the fulfilment of His promise to Adam and his descendants:

There shall come to you guidance from Me, and whosoever follows  
My guidance no fear shall be on them, neither shall they sorrow.

(Al-Baqarah 2:38)

### Man's Encounter with the Issue of Morality

Morality or ethics deals with conduct, so far as this is considered as right or wrong, good or bad. According to Dewey, the terms 'ethics' and 'ethical' are derived from the Greek word 'ethos' which originally means customs, usages, especially those belonging to some groups distinguished from another, and later came to mean disposition, character. They are thus like the Latin word 'moral',

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from mores.<sup>1</sup> Many theories have emerged in the process of human evolution, varied experiences and the differing ways of contemplating on the issue. Morality is generally considered as a code or set of principles by which men live. Its theoretical study concerns itself with such questions as 'what is the good life' and 'how ought men to behave' and so on.<sup>2</sup> We shall take a cursory look of the classical theories about morality before looking at the Qur'anic teachings.

**(a) Plato: Evil is due to Lack of Knowledge**

Platonism holds that evil is due to lack of knowledge; if a man discovers what is right he will never act wickedly. In his book, *The Republic*, Plato speaks of the philosopher king as the most efficient ruler, for he possesses knowledge of 'the good' and can lead men to 'the good life'. Plato holds that there is fundamentally one and only one good life for all men to lead because goodness is something which is not dependent upon man's inclinations, desires or wishes but is absolute as it exists independently of men and remains to be discovered if men can be properly trained. Such is the absolutism in Plato's philosophy.

Thus it becomes evident that Plato regards morality as being a matter of knowledge but only a few are intellectually gifted to have such ability. It is not sufficient to say that those of us who have not the ability can live good lives by being led by those who have. Since to behave morally presupposes that one has responsibility for one's actions and an action is not truly moral or immoral unless it is the result of free choice of the individual performing it. Aristotle seems aware of these defects in Plato's theory, since he adopts his own doctrine of morality.<sup>3</sup>

**(b) Aristotle: the Doctrine of the Golden Mean**

Aristotle, in his ethical writings adopts a scientific or empirical approach to ethical problems. He says that the aim of life is not goodness for its own sake, but happiness. His doctrine of Golden mean is explained as follows:

Being happy, according to Aristotle, is like being well-fed. How much food should a man eat in order to be well-fed? To Aristotle, there is no general answer

to this question in the sense of specific amount. It depends on the size of the man, what sort of work he does, whether he is ill or well, and so on. The proper amount for anyone to eat can be ascertained by trial and error: If we eat a certain amount of food and still feel hungry, we should eat more; if we eat the same amount and feel uncomfortable, then we should eat less. The correct amount is a 'mean' between eating too much and too little. But the mean cannot be interpreted as being synonymous with 'average'. The golden mean, however, is not, like the mathematical mean, an exact of two precisely calculable extremes; it fluctuates with the collateral circumstances of each situation and is subject to flexible reason.

Aristotle's theory is subject to some criticism as in certain situations it is difficult to follow the mean. For example, there is no 'mean' between keeping a promise and not keeping one. The same applies to telling the truth: either one does or does not tell the truth. But we have to bear in mind that the question of 'mean' arises only when there is the possibility of going to extremes.

**(c) Hedonism**

To Plato, the good life is in no way connected with pleasure, but Aristotle moderated this doctrine in holding that 'pleasure must be in some way an ingredient of happiness'. Epicurus disagreed with both of them and held a view, which is called 'Hedonism', the doctrine that pleasure is the sole good to him, morality is identical with expedience.

**(d) Cynicism**

It is the philosophy of cynics, founded by Antisthenes, a pupil of Socrates, who condemned ease, wealth, and enjoyment of life. The most famous was Diogenes who carried principles to an extreme. This is the philosophy which holds that if salvation is to be found it is to be found in a rejection of society and in a return to simple life, to a life of asceticism.

The word 'cynic' comes from the Greek word 'kunos', which means 'dog-like'. Diogenes, for example, is supposed to have lived in a large tub, and rejected

all refinements of dress, food, personal cleanliness. The cynics believed that the world was fundamentally evil; in order to live properly a man must withdraw from participation in it. Cynicism is not only anti-social, but also contributed largely to undermine the social standards, contending that only individual virtue was of essential importance.

**(e) Stoicism**

Stoicism has been the most influential ethical doctrine of the ancient western world before Christianity. Zeno was the founder of stoicism and is supposed to have lectured in the third century BC from a porch, and stoicism gets its name from this fact, since 'stoa' is the Greek word for 'porch'. The basic tenet of stoicism for achieving personal salvation is just like that of the cynics and can be summed up in one sentence: Learn to be indifferent to external influences! It is a philosophy of indifference. By practising indifference one becomes independent of the world. The stoics hold that man is not free but instead is chained to his destinies in accordance with the divine plan. But this view is inconsistent with their view that a man can alter his character and can change his frame of mind in such a manner that he will become indifferent to things that he formerly prized.

**(f) Spinoza: The Ethics**

Spinoza is reckoned as one of the towering figures in the history of ethics. He was a rigid determinist as he says, 'All things come to pass, according to the eternal order and fixed laws of Nature'. Thus he was in the metaphysical tradition of the stoics. In holding that nothing is good or bad in itself, but is only so in relation to someone. Spinoza is a relativist. His masterpiece is *The Ethics*, which is considered to be his great work by many philosophers, but he did not effectively resolve the conflict that exists between determinism and freedom. He believed that all events in nature are determined which means that man is essentially powerless. The question is: 'how can he change his attitude and frame of mind towards life and be free from anxieties when he is powerless'?

**(g) Bentham and Stuart Mill: Utilitarianism**

One of the earliest exponents of this moral theory was Francis Hutcheson but the most famous exponents of it were Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill who attempted to lay down a principle for determining the rightness or wrongness of an act and called this maxim the principle of Utility. According to this principle an action is right in so far it tends to produce the greatest happiness for the greatest number and happiness is taken to mean pleasure. The fundamental point is that it is consequence of a given action which determines its rightness or wrongness, not the motive from which it is done. The object is to separate the rightness or wrongness of an action from the goodness or badness of the person who perform the action.

**(h) Kantian Moral Philosophy.**

According to Kant ethics is the most important subject in philosophy. He believes in the moral basis of religion. He even used ethical arguments to establish the existence of God. Since men who are not virtuous are happier in this world there must be another world for virtuous men to be rewarded and this leads him to the conclusion that there is God and an eternal life.

'What is the nature of morality' is the main question which Kant's moral theory formulated to answer. Kant believed that the key to answer this question lay in distinguishing between acts done from 'inclination' and acts done from a 'sense of duty or obligation'. An obligation is that which a man ought to do despite his inclination to do otherwise. For him, a man is acting morally only when he suppresses his inclinations and obeys the command of duty. Further, he makes a distinction between actions which are 'in accord with duty' and those done 'from duty'. The former are not moral acts but the latter are.

The classical ethical theories are characterized by their efforts to answer two questions: 'What is the good life'? And 'How ought men to behave'? Moral theories like Hedonism, Cynicism, Stoicism, Utilitarianism and so on seem to be of highest complex nature. We find ourselves constrained to support G.E. Moore

who claimed, in his *Principia Ethica*, that the classical theories were attempts to deduce moral precepts from theological, metaphysical or scientific premises and that such arguments are fallacious, since one cannot argue from premises of one logical type (ie. descriptions) to conclusions of a different logical type (i.e. prescriptions)<sup>4</sup>. Certain categories emerge as a result of the respective treatment being accorded to the issue of morality. They are cognitivists (who perceive values), Non-cognitivists (who do not perceive values), subjectivists, objectivists, relativists, absolutivists, intuitionists and nihilists.<sup>5</sup>

### **The Qur'anic View-point**

The Qur'an while bestowing humanity an all-encompassing guidance lays primary stress on the attainment of faith. The principle of Allah's Oneness and uniqueness, of His being the Originator and Fosterer of the universe, the Fount of all-living grace, He is One to Whom man is ultimately responsible, and the Only Power that can really guide and help are the teachings of this faith. The principle of life after death and of the organic consequences of man's actions and behavior (expressed in the term "Day of Judgement") are instructed by Him. Similarly it is His message given to the Prophets at different times and finally to Prophet Muhammad (SAAS) that forms the edifice of Islam. The importance of the message is stressed in the Holy Qur'an.<sup>6</sup>

The Qur'an warns that the worst immoral acts are performed by those who reject all the moral laws. In this way the faith propounds for the right conduct of the people.

Hast thou ever considered (the kind of man) who gives lie to the moral law?<sup>7</sup> Behold, it is the (kind of man) that thrusts the orphan away. And feels no urge to feed the needy.

*Al-Mā'ūn 108: 1-3*

The Qur'an integrates the metaphysical truth and values with the good conduct, and it is elaborated at various places. For examples, it says:

This Divine writ-let there be no doubt about it—is [meant to be] a guidance for all the God-conscious who believe in [the existence of] that which is beyond the reach of human perception and are constant in prayer, and spend on others out of what we provide for them as sustenance; and who believe in that which has been bestowed from on high upon thee, [O Prophet] as well as in that which was bestowed before thy time for it is they who in their innermost are certain of the life to come! It is they who follow the guidance (which comes) from their sustainer; and it is they, who shall attain to a happy state.<sup>8</sup>

*Al-Baqarah 2: 1-5*

#### **Morality— A blend of Faith, Values and Laws**

If looked at seriously one cannot miss the realization of a beautiful blend of attaining the faith, the values and the laws in the Quranic scheme of moral teachings. The above mentioned verses [al- Baqarah 2: 1-5] are enough testimony to the assertion. Allah, in His ultimate Mercy bestows man all that is needed for the latter. Here human contemplations on the issue of morality over the years and inadequate religious treatments suffered handicaps because of many factors. Some laid stress on human reason alone to solve the issue; others laid emphasis on values ignoring the law. Some regarded man-made laws sufficient for providing the ethical framework. The Qur'anic injunctions about morality embody this unique blend of faith and laws in them and, therefore, serve as the best system of thought and action for the entire mankind. However, moral values as depicted in the Qur'an can be classified as following:

##### **1. Virtue**

You will never attain virtue until you spend something you are fond of; while God is aware of anything you may spend.

(3:92 see also 2: 177)

##### **2. Heedfulness**

O mankind, We have created you from a male and female and set you up as nations and tribes, so that you may recognize one another.

The noblest among you before God are those of you who best perform their duty; God is aware, informed.

(49:13 see also 9:108-109)

### 3. The Golden Rule

Who is finer in speech than someone who appeals to God, acts honourably, and says: "I am a Muslim"? A good deed and an evil deed are not alike; repay [evil] with something that is finer, and see how someone who is separated from you by enmity will become a bosom friend.

Yet only those who discipline themselves will attain it; only the most fortunate will achieve it.

Nevertheless if some impulse from satan should prompt you, seek refuge with God; He is Alert, Aware.

(41 :33 -36, see also 10:40; 17:15 and 65:7)

### 4. Truthfulness

You who believe, heed God and stand by those who are truthful.

(9:19 see also 33:24 and 39: 32-35)

### 5. Keeping One's Word

Do not use God as an excuse in your oaths, to keep yourselves from being virtuous, doing your duty and improving matters among mankind. God is Alert, Aware.

(2:224 see also 5:89 and 16 :90-91)

### 6. Trustworthiness

God orders you to restore things entrusted [to you] to their [right -full owners.

(4:58 see also 22:283 and 23:8-10)

7. Justice and Fair Play

Whenever you judge between people, you should judge with [a sense of justice.

(4: 58 see also 57: 25)

8. Patience and Discipline

Be patient, just as those messengers who were steadfast were patient.

(46:3 5 see also 2:153-157)

9. Elements of Patience

(a) Endurance.

Endure patiently whatever may afflict you, for that shows determination in [handling] matters.

(31 : 17)

(b) Steadfastness

Seek help from God and be patient; the earth belongs to God anyone He wishes from among His servants shall inherit it.

(7:128)

(c) Controlling Desire

Restrict yourself to those who appeal to their Lord in the morning and evening, desiring His Countenance, do not let your eyes wander too far away from them, desiring the attraction of worldly life.

(18: 28)

(d) Patience and its Rewards

Surely the patient will be paid their wages without any reckoning.

(39:10 see also 13: 24)

10. Courage

Those whom people have told: "Some people have gathered to [oppose] you, so be on your guard against them", yet it increased them in faith and they said, "God is sufficient for us; and how splendid is such a Guardian!"

(3: 173 see also 33:22)

### 11. Tolerance

Let there be no compulsion in religion. The Right Way has been distinguished from error; so he who disbelieves in the arrogant ones and believes in God has grasped the Firmest Handle, which will never break. God is Alert, Aware.

God is the patron of those who believe.  
He brings them out of darkness into light,  
While those who disbelieve have the arrogant ones  
For their patrons; they will lead them  
Out of light into darkness. those are  
Inmates of the fire; they will remain there.

2:256-257 see also 6:52)

### 2. Self Defense

Those who have been wronged are permitted to fight [back] since God is able to support them they who have been driven from their homes, without any justification, merely because they say; "our lord is God [alone] ."

If it were not because God repels some men by means of others, cloisters, churches, synagogues and mosques where God's name is mentioned frequently, would have been demolished.

(22:39-40 and 60)

### 13. Moderation

#### (a) In Prayer

Do not shout in your prayer nor say it under your breath; seek a course in between.

(17: 110)

#### (b) In charity

Do not keep your hand gripping at your neck nor stretch it out as far as it will reach, lest you sit back blameworthy, destitute.

(2 17: 29)

(c) In Spending

...who, when they spend, neither give too lavishly nor yet hold back,  
and keep a happy medium...

(25: 67)

(d) In speech and Action

Be modest in the way you walk, and lower your voice: the ugliest  
sound is a donkey's braying.

(31 : 19)

14. Kindness (*Ihsān*)

Act kindly just as God has treated you kindly.

(28:7 see also 10 : 26)

15. Generosity

Those who spend their wealth night and day, both privately and publicly,  
will receive their earnings from their Lord. No fear will be upon them  
nor need they ever feel saddened.

(2 : 274)

16. Forgiveness

Practise forgiveness, command decency and avoid ignorant people.

(7: 199 see 24: 22)

17. Kindness and Affection

It is because of mercy from God that you have been so lenient with  
them. If you had been harsh and cruel-hearted, they would have  
dispersed from around you. Pardon them, seek forgiveness for them,  
and consult them on the matter.

(3:159)

18. Repaying Bad with Good

A good deed and an evil deed are not alike: repay [evil] with something  
that is finer and see how someone who is separated from you because  
of enmity will become a bosom friend!

(41: 34 see also 113: 22-23)

19. Humility

...and the Merciful's servants who walk modestly on the earth and say: "Peace [be upon you]," whenever ignorant men address them.

(25: 63 see also 31: 18)

20. Self- respect

...When they pass by [people] gossiping, pass by in a dignified manner...

(25: 7 see also 2: 273)

21. Modesty and Chastity

O Prophet, tell your wives and daughters, and believer's' wives as well, to draw their cloaks close around themselves. That is more appropriate so that they may be recognized and not molested. God is Forgiving, Merciful.

(33: 59 see 24: 30-31)

22. Etiquette

Whenever you are welcomed with a greeting, then answer back with something finer than it, or [at least] return it. God is a Reckoner for everything.

(4: 86 see also 24 : 27-28)

23. The right to Privacy

You who believe, let those whom your right hands control, and those of you who have not yet reached puberty, ask permission from you on three occasions; before the daybreak prayer; when you take your clothes off at noon [for a siesta]; and after the late evening prayer. You have three times for privacy, outside these times there is no objection for you nor for them moving about attending on each other, thus God explains signs to you; God is Aware, Wise.

Whenever any children of yours reach puberty, let them ask permission just as those before them have had to ask for such permission, thus God explains his signs to you; God is Aware, Wise.

(4: 58-59)

24. Reliance on God

God suffices for anyone who relies on Him.

(65 : 3 see also 14: 12)

**Norms of Social Behaviour**

1. Unity

Cling firmly together by means of God's rope and do not be divided.  
Remember favour towards you when you were enemies; He united  
your hearts so that you become brothers because of His favour.

(3:103)

2. Brotherhood and Fraternity

Believers are but brothers, so set things right between your brothers  
and heed God so that you may find mercy.

(49 : 10)

3. Greetings

Whenever those who believe in our signs come to you, say; "peace  
be upon you!

(6:54 see also 4:86)

4. Mutual Help and Co-operation

...Command what is proper and forbid what is improper.

(31: 17 see also 2 83 and 5:2)

5. Respect for life

Anyone who kills a believer deliberately will receive as his reward [a  
sentence] to live in hell forever, God will be angry with him and curse  
him, and prepare dreadful torment for him.

(4: 93)

6. Respect for Feelings and Emotions

Those who commit crimes have been laughing at those who believe.  
Whenever they pass by them they wink at one another. Then when  
they go back to their own people, they return exultant. ...

(83: 29-31 see also 49 : 11 )

7. Manners at Meetings

You who believe, whenever someone tells you to make room at meetings, then make room; God will make room for you [elsewhere] when it is said; "move up," Then move on. God will raise in rank those of you who believe as well as those who are given knowledge. God is informed about anything you do.

(58:11)

8. Protocol with Public Business

Believers are merely those who believe in God and His Messenger. Whenever they are with him on some common errand, they should not leave until they asked him for permission to do so. Those who do ask you for such permission are the ones who believe in God and His Messenger.

Whenever they ask you permission [to attend] to some business of their own, then give leave to anyone of them you may wish and seek forgiveness from God for them, God is forgiving, merciful.

(24:62)

9. Rules for Discussion

Do not argue with the people of the Book unless it is in the politest manner, except for those of them who do wrong. say, "We believe in what has been sent down to us and what has been sent down to you. Our God and your God is [the same] one, and we are Muslims before Him."

(29:46 see also 6:68-70)

10. Intervention and Reconciliation in case of Hostilities

Whenever two factions of believers fallout with one another, then try to reconcile them. If one of them should oppress the other, then fight with the one who acts oppressively until he complies with God's command. If he complies then set things right again between them in all justice and acts fairly. God loves those who act fairly.

(49:9)

### 11. Praying for other Muslims

...beg forgiveness for your offence, as well as for believing men and believing woman. (47:19)

The above categorization of the Quranic verses amplify the various moral values and principles of Islam. They comprise the dealings of a Muslim with the people in general as well as his fellow believers. However, in essence they are the outcome of his faith in God. Islam in this regard is an indivisible whole where faith and the law, are consistantly blended to each other. All its domains of politics, economics, society and education etc. are governed by the Divine guidance. This leads to solidarity and harmony in every respects in the society. The outstanding feature of Islamic life is that it is free from the extremes. It is a properly balanced system of virtue and the virtue itself is to avoid extremes on either side. The extremes in life are thus avoided and the middle path is followed. The constituents of this golden blend, faith, values and laws reinforce each other. Life is here inspired by spirituality and morality. Its social, economic and political aspects are so beautifully harmonized that the development becomes holistic and dynamic through and through.

**References and Notes**

1. Mohammad , Muslehuddin, *Morality its Concept and Role in Islamic Order* Delhi, Markazi Maktaba Islami, 1982, p.1.
2. Ibid; pp. 2-3
3. This section of the paper makes an overview of the classical theories of morality is largely based on the treatment given to the subject by Dr. Mohammad Muslehuddin's book referred to in N .1.
4. See Muhammad, Muslehuddin, *op. cit.*, pp 17-27.
5. See also Dr. Sanaullah Mir's 'Philosophical Justification of the Islamic Ethical Standard', *Journal of Central Asian Studies*, University of Kashmir, 1999.
6. See, for instance 3:84; 2: 285-286; 60:12.
7. Muhammad Asad' s translation of the verses has been presented. In the footnote he explains that the verse characterises the man who denies that there is an objective validity in religion as such and thus the concept of moral law (which is one of the primary connotations of the term *din*). He also makes it clear that some commentators are of the opinion that in the above context signifies "judgement", i.e. the Day of judgement, and interpret this phrase as meaning "who calls the Day of judgement a lie".
8. Here too Muhammad Asad's translation has been presented. It shall be worthwhile to see the relevant footnotes of these verses in his commentary of the Quran, *The Message of the Qurān*.
9. Bashir Ahmad Dar in his article on 'Ethical Teachings of the Qur'an, *History of Muslim Philosophy*, ed. M.M. Sharif, pp. 155-178 discusses some values like life, eternity, unity, power, truth, beauty, justice, love and goodness and some disvalues like destruction of life, lack of unity (*shirk*), inertia, error, showing off (*riyā*), injustice, hatred and unkindness and vice with reference to Al-Quran. He highlights moral discipline, repentance, *taqwa* as the most noble teachings of the Quran. Dr. Sanaullah Mir in his article, referred at N. 5, portrays Islamic viewpoint on ethics in the synthesis of the two prevalent schools of philosophy, deontological and teleological.