

Morality in Theory and Practice

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ABSTRACT: The present essay is a short discourse on the theoretical and practical aspects of ethics, in the course of which a number of arguments and solutions shall be articulated. Mentioning different ways of acquiring knowledge such as sensory perception, empirical observation, reason, and inspiration; emphasizing that revelation is the prerogative of the prophets and there is no knowledge that can rival it, for it is immediate and objective rather than mediate and subjective; and declaring that since the divine religion can have only one efficient agent, i.e., Almighty God, and only one vessel for its reception, so, religion must necessarily be one; the essay comes to the conclusion that justice, liberty, independence, and other manifestations of personal and social perfection are identified and delimited by revelation and the only legitimate source for the articulation of the principles of human rights is what God has decreed.

KEYWORDS: morality, revelation, principles of human rights, theoretical aspects of ethics.

Introduction

All praise is due to God, who has manifested Himself in His Book to edify the souls; and blessed be His Prophet – whose “great character”¹ God praises – and his household and whosoever follows his example and speaks “upright words.”² We hold dear those to whom God is dear and disown those who reject God.

The present article is a short discourse on the theoretical and practical aspects of ethics, in the course of which a number of arguments and solutions shall be articulated. We hope that God – the Glorified – should teach us that which is right and grant us the blessing of acting upon those deeds to which He has attached a reward. It would be appropriate to start out, in order to clarify the obscurities of the discipline of ethics, by elaborating on the premises and principles around which this discipline revolves. The premises are as follows:

First Premise

The science of ethics is among those branches of humanities regarding which there are divergent views, just as there are differing views on how to define the human being and his nature and essence. The reason that gives rise to this difference of opinion is that the human being holds a unique place in the existential order, and therefore, the disagreement in understanding existence naturally leads to a difference of opinions as regards the human being.

Those who believe that existence is solely material and sensible and that which is not material and not sensible is non-existent and can serve only as a subject for superstition presume that the way to knowledge is limited to sensory perception and experience, that the human being possesses a purely material existence, that death is absolute annihilation, that his existence is without purpose, and that it is the expiration of his time that destroys him, not some supreme deity.³ They suppose that the human being is born into this world and dies without there being a Beginning or an End.

On the other hand, there are those who believe that living beings consist of two types: material and immaterial, that the human being is composed of a material body and an immaterial soul that does not perish at death but rather lives on after the body dies. Those who are of this conviction maintain that the human being has a lofty purpose and his life is not pointless; there is an immaterial Origin for the world and the human being, Who is omniscient, omnipotent, and without equal. Consequently, there are two modes of

acquiring knowledge: one consists of sensory perception and empirical observation and the other of reason and inspiration.

Second Premise

Without doubt, God, the Glorified, is the One; Unequalled Lord Whose entitative attributes of perfection are identical with His Essence. These attributes are in reality identical with His Essence; though, in concept they are distinct. His eternal knowledge is a pure truth from which irrationality, negligence, and forgetfulness are excluded and that is immune to change and alteration. He is the Creator of all creatures – humankind and all else – and His Lordship consists of giving every creature its due and guiding it toward its destination and informing it of the way that leads to that end. This guidance in relation to the human being may be by way of intellectual inspiration or revealed knowledge, for God, the Glorified, guides humankind by means of revelation (*wahy*), and this revelation is discovered either through reason (*‘aql*) or through authoritative tradition (*naql*).⁴

Revelation is the prerogative of the prophets, and there is no knowledge that can rival to it, for it is immediate (*shuhūdī*; lit., “of witnessing”) and objective (*‘aynī*) rather than mediate (*huṣūlī*; lit., “acquired”) and subjective (*mafḥūmī*; lit., “conceptual”); it is free of error. Furthermore, the prophets onto whom revelation is bestowed are infallible. It is in this light that they are distinguished from others – that is, those seekers of knowledge who are not equipped with revelation. For, first, the latter’s knowledge is mediate rather than immediate; second, their knowledge is fraught with error; third, they are not infallible. The way to discovering the knowledge He bestows onto human beings by means of divine inspiration or revelation (which latter is given to His prophets) is either rational reasoning (*‘aql burhānī*) or authoritative tradition (*naql mu‘tabar*; lit., “authenticated report”).

Third Premise

It is a matter of fact that divine religion can have only one efficient agent and only one vessel for its reception. As God – the Efficient Agent of religion – is

one, His existence being free of composition, and as the vessel that receives it – that is, the human being's essence (*fiṭrah*), which does differ from one individual to another and which is unalterable – is one, being unblemished by multiplicity, religion must necessarily be one. God, the Glorified, says:

Indeed the religion with God is *Islām*. (Sūrah 3: 19)

But since the people of each age and region have certain distinctive characteristics, God – the Glorified and Exalted – has ordained multiple paths (*sharī'ah*). These multiple paths share the same fundamental essence, principal goals, and substance so that in their inner core, they are all the same. For, the essence in humankind is one which is immutable; it is the paths and methods that are different, which is due to the peculiar traits that characterize different ages and regions. As such, the immutable substance remains unchanged, and it is only the particulars that change and vary.

Fourth Premise

Without doubt, the edifice of religion, the principles of morality, the fundamentals of jurisprudence and law, and the regulations and precepts of religion are created by God, the Exalted, Who is their sole source. God takes no partner or aid in decreeing the fundamentals and instituting the paths of religion. Moreover, the comprehension of religion and its fundamental guidelines is possible only through the medium of revelation, which is bestowed onto the prophets; and the rest of humankind may acquire knowledge of revelation either through a rational reasoning or through an authoritative tradition or through a combination of both. From this, it is made clear that the human being as such – excepting his intellect which is itself granted by God as a means for realizing the divine injunctions – lacks the capacity and the sound basis for establishing reliable regulations and a definitive law. For, the human being – if deprived of his God – given intellect which is the only element in his existence that enables him to comprehend divine revelation – is essentially incapable of making judgments.

God brings the human being out of his mother's womb in a state of total

ignorance, just as many people reach old age while still in a state of utter ignorance. Thus, the human being is flanked by two states of ignorance, just as his existence is flanked by two states of nonexistence – for prior to his creation, he is nothing and following his annihilation (*fanā*), in the existential realm in which there remains naught save the Divine Essence, he is once again nothing. Therefore, the mediocre human being, from whom the revelation-comprehending intellect has been withheld, is deprived of knowledge. In this light, it may be inferred that just as the authority to decree law belongs solely to God, so the only means for attaining knowledge is by God’s grace.

That which differentiates, however, between these two elements – God’s exclusive authority in decreeing law and His sole agency in imparting knowledge – is that as regards the former (which consists of ordaining the principles of religion, establishing the fundamentals of morality, and preparing the way through which humankind may arrive at its ultimate end), God retains the authority for Himself and does not allow others to partake of this authority whereas in relation to the latter (that is, the element of knowledge, which consists of comprehending the principles of religion and the fundamentals of morality), although it is He alone Who possesses independent authority, yet He grants this authority, by virtue of revelation to His prophets – whose authority is dependent on His – and to the rest of humankind by virtue of the intellect and an authoritative tradition.

Conclusion

Now that the above premises have been elaborated, it may be concluded that the essence of the human being is not that which is commonly spoken of and written in books – namely, “rational animal”. The essence of the human being must rather be re-defined as the “living and God-seeking being”. As such, true knowledge, exalted morality, and righteous conduct – which render the human being God-like and immerse him in the knowledge of God and His Names and Attributes – infuse in him the eternal life by virtue of which he becomes the manifestation of the Living Immortal Existence. The contrary holds true as

well; false beliefs, evil traits, and unrighteous deeds, which incline him toward unfaith and lead to a conviction that is not supported by a rational reasoning or an authoritative tradition, entail his death, leaving him with only the appearance of life. For, the life of the soul is nourished by true knowledge and pure faith, and its death consists of irrationality and imprudence.

The human being is composed of an immaterial soul that is immutable – which constitutes the principal element of his identity (*buwāyyah*) – and a material body that is subject to change – which is the secondary element of his identity. As such, his first moral perfection consists of distinguishing the principal element of his identity from the secondary element. Only then, he can know what is appropriate for his soul and body. So, he must grasp the true path of perfection for his soul and body; and then, he must comprehend the exalted end, the ultimate destination of this true path; and finally, he must learn the factors that are necessary and conducive to traversing this true path and those that can obstruct his progress and deter him from traversing thereon. At this point, we will enumerate a number of these factors:

The human being does not perish at death, for he incessantly struggles and advances toward his Lord till he attains union with Him. It is the human being that tastes death, not vice versa; as God, the Exalted, says:

Every soul shall taste death. (Sūrah 3: 185)

Therefore, it is death that is tasted and digested, and hence, disintegrates and perishes while the human being is the agent that tastes it, digests it, and persists it. He journeys toward his Lord; passing from one realm into another till he finally arrives at the Abode of Stability, where he remains for all eternity. In this light, the human being – who withstands death and cannot be overcome by nonexistence – is inevitably in need of provisions to prepare for his journey. The provisions for this journey are none other than the perfection consequent on knowledge and the spiritual beauty that results from virtuous conduct.

Therefore, morality is efficacious only when it is grounded in conviction, a conviction that derives from knowledge and belief – to be convinced that God is immaterial and immutable existence. For, immateriality and immutability constitute the provisions needed by the human being's immaterial soul, which is, by God's grace, immortal. It is for this reason that God addresses the living, God-seeking being – that is, the human being as such – with this description. He views death as merely a bridge that connects this world to the hereafter.

As the human being is God's handiwork, he is inherently equipped with a divine inspiration that inclines him to virtue and makes him to be repulsed by vice, compelling him from within to be wary of God. In gaining knowledge of reality, the human being has recourse to three methods. First, he employs sensory perception and experience, for he knows that this is the only way for seeking knowledge of the material world, and he should lack a certain sense, he is deprived of the knowledge consequent on that sense.

Second, the human being has recourse to reason; the way of abstraction, for it has been proven to him that the conventional sciences, for whose efficacy the theoreticians of knowledge vouch, depend on it in addition to empirical observation. As such, were it not for the principle of the impossibility of contradiction – which can be grasped by abstract reason alone – invoking sensory experience would have been unwarranted.

The third method by which the human being acquires knowledge of reality is the way of the heart and spiritual purification. For, it has adequately been demonstrated that lacking God-wariness (*taqwā*) deprives one of the insight that derives from it – a fact substantiated by the words of God:

Should you be wary of God, He shall grant you discrimination
[between right and wrong]. (Sūrah 8: 29)

As such, the light that can distinguish between truth and falsehood, good and evil, vice and virtue, and the pure and the impure can come exclusively from the lamp of God-wariness.

These are the ways for gaining knowledge of reality, which have been established by the divine religion revealed to God's prophets, which can be comprehended by others by a way of reason or an authoritative tradition. A number of conclusions may be drawn from this tripartite classification of the methods for acquiring knowledge, which are as follows:

The human being as such is possessed of a life that can result in certain desirable outcomes – such as ascending to the Court of the Truly Self-Sufficient One, who is without equal, by means of obtaining the rewards, He has set for righteous deeds and by being pleased with His mercy and enjoying His blessings. There is also a death for the human being, which entails a state of deprivation of these desirable outcomes. There are also states of health and sickness, vigor and weakness.

As he sees himself in the presence of God, His Prophet, the angels, and His close friends, the living, God-seeking being – that is, the human being – hearkens to the invitation offered by God and His Prophet to embrace that which gives him life. That is, he obeys the injunctions of God and His Prophet, carries out their commandments, and refrains from what has been forbidden, so as to enjoy the “good life” which brings with it numerous blessings, and the state of health and well-being wherein one is freed of the ills and diseases God has enumerated in His Book. This could be the sickness of unfaith, polytheism, disbelief, or hypocrisy, as God says:

There was a sickness in their hearts, so God increased their sickness.
(Sūrah 2: 10)

Or it could be the sickness of evil politics, which is to incline toward those gone astray and the unfaithful:

You see those in whose hearts is sickness race toward the [non-Muslims], saying, ‘We fear lest a turn of fortune should befall us.’ But God may bring about victory or a command from Him, whereat they would regret what they kept secret in their hearts. (Sūrah 5: 52)

There is also the sickness of lewdness:

O wives of the Prophet ... do not speak softly so that he in whose heart is sickness may be lustful; rather speak in an honorable tone.
(Sūrah 33: 32)

As such, revelation is salutary and curing by God's grace, and such is the Qur'ān, for it proclaims:

There has certainly come to you an advice from your Lord and a cure for what is in the breasts. (Sūrah 10: 57)

And again the Qur'ān asserts:

We send down of the Qur'ān that which is a cure and a mercy unto the believers. (Sūrah 17: 82)

There can be no doubt that the sickness of the heart is more harmful than the sickness of the body. The Master of the Faithful states:⁶

Lo! Verily poverty is an affliction, but a worse affliction is the sickness of the body, and worse still is the sickness of the heart.⁷

Inappropriate dispositions are, therefore, spiritual diseases for whose cure divine religion – which can be comprehended by means of the intellect or authoritative tradition – has offered remedies, remedies whose power to cure is granted by God. Of course, as this cure is sought from the Qur'ān, God accompanies it with a special grace; as such, He states that the Qur'ān is “a mercy unto the believers.” (Sūrah 17: 82)

In this light, should the human being come to recognize that he is a dependent existence that lacks any degree of independence and is utterly contingent on the Self-Sufficient Existence of God, he shall be of those who have acquired self-knowledge and, consequently, knowledge of their Lord. And as God is absolute existence, unimpaired by any degree of nonexistence; as He is unqualified, pure, true, and simple existence Who is free of all qualification, impurity, falsehood, and composition, the human being realizes

that all other than Him is the mirror in which His existence is reflected and the locus of manifestation in which He is manifested. Upon this realization, he shall no longer attribute any degree of independence to creatures but will rather view them as in need of Him, relying on Him, and advancing toward Him.

Thus, he – the living, God-seeking being – shall never again rely on himself or on others, for all creatures are equal in that they are all in need of His succor, are impoverished, and seek His richness and sanctuary. It is only then that he can worship God exclusively, refrain from oppressing other creatures, and rid his soul of the temptation to manipulate and subjugate his fellow human beings or exploit their ignorance, for in the eye of such a perfect, God-seeking person – whose character is now fashioned by the ethos of divine unity, thus, observing the ethic dictated by such an ethos – all people are equal in value as are the teeth of a comb.

For one attained to this level of perfection, all states are the same. For, he knows that God, the Glorified, is aware of the mysterious and the manifest, of the concealed and the visible; that He sees the new as well as the old, the past as well as the future. As such, he hides naught, for he is certain that God comprehends not only the heart but also the heart of hearts. And he understands that God exposes the rancor of the vindictive hearts, for He asserts:

Do those in whose hearts is sickness suppose that God will not expose their rancor? (Sūrah 47: 29)

Such a God-seeking and living being is invariably cognizant of divine unity, whether it be in his private seclusion, in his time with his family, or when he is an active participant in the society. That is, for him divine unity is manifest in his existence, his home, his community, his culture, and his religiosity. For, his adherence to religion consists of submitting to the divine religion, his morality is shaped by the example of the Prophet, his fidelity to the tradition is realized in following the tradition of the Prophet, and his ethos is informed by that of the Prophet.

So long as he is a wayfarer of the straight path of the truth, the human being – that is, the living, God-seeking being – has an outright enemy named Satan, who is constantly scheming to divert him away from this path and lead him astray, as well as another enemy, which is his archenemy – that is, his “self” – for it beguiles him by presenting to him falsehood in the guise of truth and iniquity in the appearance of virtue, inciting him to do evil and thwarting him from doing good. Thus, he has no choice but to fight and vanquish his enemies or at least to resist submission to them and being enslaved by them.

The human being’s outright enemy watches him from positions hidden to the human being.

Indeed he and his hosts see you whence you see them not. (Sūrah 7: 27)

To escape this situation, he must seek refuge in a sanctuary wherein he is safe from Satan’s surveillance while he himself being able to see Satan. For, God sees Satan whence he cannot see Him, for Satan only sees himself, and that is why he cried:

I am better than him. (Sūrah 7: 12)

This sanctuary – wherein one can take refuge to escape Satan’s surveillance – is the remembrance of God.

In the Qur’ān, God in certain instances exhorts the human being to remember God.

Remember Me, and I will remember you. (Sūrah 2: 152)

Elsewhere, He commands the human being to remember Him often.

Remember God often. (Sūrah 33: 41)

And in other verses, God forbids the human being from negligence in remembering Him.

And do not neglect to remember Me. (Sūrah 20: 42)

When it is said that we should not neglect to remember God, what is intended is

that we should be steadfast in His remembrance, not that we should be content with the slightest degree of remembrance; we should be steadfast and vigorous in our remembrance of God in the same spirit that God commands His slaves to be steadfast in upholding the divine religion. Explaining how we must cling to His Book (which is the distillation of the divine religion), God, the Glorified, says:

O John, hold fast the Book. (Sūrah 19: 12)

He words this injunction, thus in another verse:

Hold fast what We have given you. (Sūrah 2: 63)

In a similar vein, God thus enjoins us to muster our strength to confront our enemies.

And prepare against them with force. (Sūrah 8: 60)

According to the reports that have come down to us from the infallible House of the Prophet, the force intended in the latter verse is not restricted to bodily might and military prowess but also includes the strength of the heart.⁸

Therefore, in this concise treatise it was elaborated that:

The true definition of human being is the living, God-seeking being. This God-seeking identity has remained unaltered throughout the course of history, for nothing can render it old, and it is immune to change and alteration.

The human being's morality consists of his being engrossed in seeking God, so that he would ultimately act solely upon that which God shows to him, as discovered through a rational reasoning or an authoritative tradition.

Justice, liberty, independence, and other manifestations of personal and social perfection are identified and delimited by revelation. But it is the function of the rational reasoning or authoritative tradition to uncover revelation's treatment of these issues.

The only legitimate source for the articulation of the principles of human rights is what God has decreed, for it is toward Him that humankind advances and it is from Him that it originates.

We hope and pray to God that He should enable us by His grace to succeed in accomplishing that which He desires and pleases and that He should safeguard Islām and protect the *Ummah*, wherever they may be. May God bless us all.

Notes

1. This is an allusion to Sūrah 68:4. [Translator; henceforth “Tr.”]
2. The author is alluding to Sūrah 33:70. [Tr.]
3. This last part of the sentence is an allusion to this Qur’anic verse: “They say, ‘There is nothing but the life of this world: we live and we die, and nothing but time destroys us.’ But they have no knowledge of that, and they only conjecture” (Sūrah 45:24). [Tr.]
4. Authoritative tradition or *naql* refers to the corpus of Islamic tradition in which the words of the Prophet and his true successors (i.e., the twelve imams, the first of whom is Imām ‘Alī, the Prophet’s cousin and son-in-law, from whose progeny the next successors of the prophet emerged) and accounts of their lives are recorded. [Tr.]
5. This is an allusion to Sūrah 8:29: “Whosoever acts righteously, whether man or woman, We shall revive him with a good life. [Tr.]
6. This is an honorific epithet reserved in Shia literature exclusively for the Prophet’s immediate successor, Imām ‘Alī. [Tr.]
7. Sharīf Raḍī , *Nahj al-Balāghah*, (Qum: Amīr al-mu’minīn School, 1375 S.A.H.), no. 381.
8. Muḥammad-Bāqir Majlisī, *Biḥār al-Anwār*, (Beirut:Dār al-’Iḥyā’ al-Turāth al-’Arabī,1403A.H.),vol.67, 209.

