

## **Concept of Ethics in Islam: A Conceptual Study In the Light of Quran and Sunnah**

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### **Abstract**

The Ethical philosophy of Islam is based on the knowledge of good and evil or in other words the standard of distinguishing good from evil is a part of the *sapiential sense* of man. This *sapiential sense* includes, besides many other concepts, moral concepts like justice, truthfulness, honesty, helping the weak, freedom in one's personal matters etc. It is quite possible though; that there is a difference in the application of these concepts in practical life situations, yet the concepts themselves have never been questioned and are, and have mostly remained, universally accepted. It is for this reason that ethical values like justice, honesty, trustworthiness and truthfulness etc. have never even been questioned philosophically, even if there is a considerable practical deviation from these values or a huge difference in the practical application of these values. Islamic ethics is the ethical system formed by the teachings of the Quran and explained by the Prophet Muhammad (SAAS) through his actions and words. In this paper, an attempt has been made to highlight the fundamental concept of ethics in Islam in the light of its primary sources. i.e. Quran and Sunnah.

**Key-words:** Ethics, Islamic ethics, Quran and Sunnah.

### **1. Introduction**

Islam is the revealed religion. Quran is the book of revelation. It is also known as the constitution and book of guidance. The main subject of this book is human beings. The major purpose of it is the welfare and betterment of humanity. The literal meanings of Islam are peace, love, tranquility, tolerance and goodwill. The Prophet Muhammad (SAAS) is the last messenger of Allah

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(SWT) for the entire humankind. He (SAAS) lived an ideal and exemplary life. Allah (SWT) declares him (SAAS) as an ideal for all the beings. The value of a being depends upon the attitude, behavior manners and character.

Ethics deals with conduct, behavior, and character. Attitude, behavior, conduct and character are of two kinds: intentional or unintentional. Ethics deals with intentional behavior. Human beings are rational beings. Rationality is the prominent feature of a human being. Among all the species only human being is the creature, which depends upon reason. Therefore, morality, ethics and norms are related with human beings. A human being thinks, behaves, acts and reacts within a society because he is a rational as well as social being by his very nature. Unintentional behavior and actions have no gravity in ethics and morality because they have no rational ground. Ethics seeks the principles that will tell us what is the right thing to do, or what things are worth doing, no matter what people in fact approve or disapprove and no matter what people will be damaged by the decision. It is not concerned at all with what public opinion on moral matters actually happens to be, but with what public opinion ought to be.

## 2. Meaning and Definition of Islamic Ethics

Islamic ethics is being defined as *akhlaq* (plural of *khuluq*) which means character, nature, and disposition. The word *akhlaq* has a very close relationship with the word *khaliq* (the Creator) and *makhluq* (the creature). Therefore, *akhlaq* assumes a good relationship between *khaliq* (the Creator) and *makhluq* (the creature), and between *makhluq* (the creature) and *makhluq* (the creature) themselves. The term *khuluq* appears in the *Qur'anic* verse “And You [Muhammad (SAAS)] are on an exalted standard of character”.<sup>2</sup> *Khuluq*

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<sup>2</sup> Al-Qur'an: Surah Al-Qalam, 68: 4. See also Al-Qur'an, Surah As-Shura, 26: 137.

(*akhlaq*) or character has been referred as the state of the soul that determines human actions. It is neither the soul nor the action. Such character could be acquired through training and practice. In addition, to differentiate between the words character and action, character is the internal and hidden state of the soul, while action is its outward manifestation. Character or *akhlaq* is the inward cause while action is its outward consequences. A good character hence begets good action whereas a bad character yields bad actions.<sup>3</sup> Al-Farabi (d. 950) was to be known as the earliest great Muslim philosopher who acknowledged the interrelation of *akhlaq* or the state of the soul with human action.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, he defined Islamic ethics or *akhlaq* as ‘a science that studies the state of human soul’. Besides al-Farabi, Ibn Miskawayh (d. 1030) in his work *Tahzib al-Akhlaq* defined *akhlaq* as ‘a state of the soul which causes it to perform its actions without thought or deliberation’. The definition of *akhlaq* as the science of the human soul was further elaborated by successive writers and philosophers on Islamic ethics, such as, al-Ghazali (d.1111), Fakhruddin al-Razi (d. 1209), al-Tusi (d. 1274), al-Dawani (d. 1502), and others. Overall, they defined ethics or *ilm al-akhlaq* as the science of the human soul which defines the characteristics and qualities of the soul as well as the methods of how to control and moderate them.<sup>5</sup>

Al-Ghazali stated that man consists of two forms, *khalq* and *khuluq* or *akhlaq*. *Khalq* refers to the physical form of mankind while *khuluq* or *akhlaq* refers to

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<sup>3</sup> Mohd Nasir Omar, *Christian and Muslim Ethics*, Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, 2003, p. 4.

<sup>4</sup> In his work *Fusul*, al-Farabi emphasized that ‘the states of soul by which a man does deeds and fair actions are virtues, and those by which he does wicked deeds and ugly actions, are the vices’. Refer to Mohd Nasir Omar, *Christian and Muslim Ethics*, p. 4.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid. p. 6.

the spiritual form of mankind. Thus, *akhlaq* from al-Ghazali's point of view is rooted in the soul and manifested through man's actions. Good soul will produce right action and vice versa. Al-Ghazali defined Islamic ethics or *Ilm al-akhlaq* as the way to acquire the well-being of the soul and to guard it against the vices. It is also a study of certain religious beliefs and of rightness or wrongness of actions for the purpose of practice, and not for the sake of mere knowledge. For him, the study of *akhlaq* includes the study of right actions towards God, family members, and society. Thus, the scope of *akhlaq*, according to al-Ghazali, is very wide.<sup>6</sup> Meanwhile, according to Ibn Taimiyah, Islamic ethics or *ilm al-akhlaq* is a science that seeks to know which actions should be done and which should be avoided. It is a practical science meant to be applied.<sup>7</sup> Accordingly, Islamic ethics or '*ilm al-akhlaq*' is a science which deals with the ways to maintain virtues at their optimum level, i.e. to avoid wrongdoing and to do what is right and desirable.<sup>8</sup> The scope of Islamic ethics is numerous, far reaching and comprehensive because Islamic ethics deals with the relationship between man and God, man and his fellow men, men and other creatures of the universe, and man with his innermost self.<sup>9</sup>

### 3. Basis of Islamic ethics

In Islam, while the Quran lays the foundation of ethical concepts and standards, the *Sunnah* (way of life) of the Prophet (SAAS) contains the actual practices of

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<sup>6</sup> A. Q. Muhammad, *The Ethics of al-Ghazali: A Composite Ethics in Islam*, Selangor: National University of Malaysia, 1983, pp.

<sup>7</sup> R. G. Hovanniasian, *Ethics in Islam*, California: Undena Publications, 1983, pp.11.

<sup>8</sup> M. D. Sheila, *Muslim Ethics and Modernity*, Canada: Wilfred Laurice University Press, 1984, pp. 5.

<sup>9</sup> *International Journal of Social Science and Humanity*, Malaysia, Vol. 3, No. 6, November 2013, p.1.

such concepts. For instant, in chapter 68 of the Quran, verse 4, the Quran states that: “You (Prophet Muhammad) are on an exalted standard of character”. When Āishah (RA), the spouse of the Prophet (SAAS), was asked about the personality (character) of the Prophet (SAAS), she replied: “it was a reflection of the Noble Quran”.<sup>10</sup> As ethical concepts taught by the Quran are embodied in the way of life of the Prophet (SAAS), both the Qur’an and *Sunnah* are the source of the Islamic ethics.

### 3.1 Islamic ethics in the Quran

To begin with, according to the Quran, belief in Allah (*s.w.t*), humility, better communications and continuation of good deeds are the foundations of good morals. The Quran states that the best person is the person who upholds these moral foundations and invites others to practice these values.

*“Who can be better in religion than one who submits his whole self to Allah, does good, and follows the way of Abraham the true in Faith? For Allah did take Abraham for a friend.”* [Al-Qur’an, Surah An-Nisa, 4:125]

*“Who is better in speech than one who calls (men) to Allah, works righteousness, and says, I am of those who bow in Islam”?* [Al-Qur’an, Surah Fussilat, 41:33]

Furthermore, the Qur’an associates good morality with fair and compassionate behavior towards parents, kinsfolk, orphans, those in need, neighbors, while arrogance and vainglory have no place in the Islamic morality.

*“Serve Allah, and join not any partners with Him; and do good- to parents, kinsfolk, orphans, those in need, neighbors who are near, neighbors who are strangers, the companion by your side, the wayfarer*

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<sup>10</sup> Reported by Imam Muslim in his *Sahih Muslim*, *hadith* no.746.

*(ye meet), and what your right hands possess: For Allah loveth not the arrogant, the vainglorious.” [Al-Qur’an, Surah An-Nisa, 4:36]*

Similarly, the Qur’an prescribes the behavior of being truthful in speech and actions. Truthful actions and sincerity illuminates the heart and improves the conditions of the mind, which eventually enhances the person’s outlook and worldview.

*“O ye who believe, fear Allah, and (always) say a word directed to the Right, that He may make your conduct whole and sound and forgive you your sins: He that obeys Allah and His Messenger, has already attained the highest achievement”. [Al-Qur’an, Surah Al-Ahzab, 33:70-71]*

In another chapter, the Qur’an prescribes the moral duty of authenticating received reports and narrations. The intellectual attitude of classification and scrutiny of given information is part of the moral duty of every man and women.

*“O you who believe! If a wicked person comes to you with any news, ascertain the truth, lest ye harm people unwittingly and afterwards become full of repentance for what ye have done.” [Al-Qur’an, Surah Al-Hujurat, 49:6]*

In addition, making decisions and judgments on given issue, based on doubts (*shakk*) and speculations (*zann*) is morally wrong and unacceptable in the Qur’an. The Qur’an teaches that unfounded information cannot be the basis of claiming the truth (*haqq*). Truth claim must be established beyond reasonable doubts.

*“But most of them follow nothing but fancy: truly fancy can be of no avail against truth. Verily Allah is well aware of all that they do.” [Al-Qur’an, Surah Hud, 11:36]*

In the Qur'an, abetting or helping transgression is tantamount of doing it; therefore, the act of supporting or inclining towards immorality is prohibited. Thus, the Qur'an teaches its adherents not only to refrain from unethical conduct but also to disassociate themselves from those immoral conducts.

*“And incline not to those who do wrong, or the Fire will seize you; and ye have no protectors other than Allah, nor shall ye be helped.” [Al-Qur'an, Surah Yusuf, 12:113]*

The Qur'an requires Muslims to refrain from cheating, misuse and betrayal (*yaghlul*) of trusts, as these inappropriate conducts would eventually lead to injustice and distortion of rights.

*“If any person is so false, He shall, on the Day of Judgment, restore what he misappropriated; then shall every soul receive its due, - whatever it earned, - and none shall be dealt with unjustly.” [Al-Qur'an, Surah Ali Imran, 3:161]*

With regards to trust, the Qur'an states that man and woman need to uphold trusts and responsibilities (*Amanah*) that are bestowed upon them. According to the Qur'an, those in a position of trust including company managers, political leaders, decision makers, householders (husband and wife), and etc., are required to uphold and discharge their duties in the best possible ways.

*“Allah doth command you to render back your Trusts to those to whom they are due; and when ye judge between man and man, that ye judge with justice: Verily how excellent is the teaching which He giveth you! For Allah is He Who heareth and seeth all things.” [Al-Qur'an, Surah An-Nisa, 4:58]*

According to the Qur'an, corruption (*fasad*), which basically means misappropriate and mishandling, leads to destruction of life; hence, the Qur'an

commands Muslims to avoid *fasad*, instead it calls them to do *ihsan* (doing good or better).

*“Do no mischief on the earth, after it hath been set in order, but call on Him with fear and longing (in your hearts): for the Mercy of Allah is (always) near to those who do good.” [Al-Qur’an, Surah Al-A’raf, 7:56]*

The Qur’an promotes the moral behaviour of kindness, generosity, self-discipline and the culture of forgiving.

*“Those who spend (freely), whether in prosperity, or in adversity; who restrain anger, and pardon (all) men; - for Allah loves those who do good.” [The Qur’an promotes the moral behaviour of kindness, generosity, self-discipline and the culture of forgiving. [Al-Qur’an, Surah Ali Imran, 3:134]*

### **3.2 Ethics in the Prophetic Tradition**

The Prophet (SAAS) mentions that the aim of his mission (*bi’tthah*) is to complete the good morals. For the Prophet (SAAS) was sent to upgrade and inculcate the better moral values taught by all prophets (AS), religion of Islam aims to uphold and perfect universal values of human conduct. As such, the entire religion of Islam aims to serve good morality. The Prophet (SAAS) said, “I have been sent only for the purpose of perfecting good morals”.

Furthermore, the Prophet (SAAS) was asked who are those whom Allah (*s.w.t*) loves the most? The Prophet (SAAS) replied: “those who possess good morals”.<sup>11</sup> On another note, the Prophet (SAAS), taught his companions to avoid indecency and immoral conducts, and stated that: “the best amongst you

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<sup>11</sup> Reported by al-Tabrani.



are those who are the owners of the best morality”.<sup>12</sup> In another occasion, the Prophet (SAAS) stated the defining attributes of the Muslim character. He (SAAS) said: “A Muslim is the one who avoids harming Muslims with his tongue and hands.” Al-Qurtubi quotes in his exegesis the Prophet (SAAS), saying: “you cannot afford to win the hearts of people through your wealth, but you can win their hearts with smiling face and good morals”. In other words, the real property that man owns and can share with and perhaps extend to others is the good character. As reported by Muslim, the Prophet (SAAS) said: “in the eye of Allah (*s.w.t*), the worst amongst people in rank on the Day of Resurrection is one whom people abandon in order to avoid his indecency.” Generally speaking, ordinary people turn to avoid and abandon those indecent individuals, while those decent individuals are beloved by all. These are some of the Qur’anic verses and Prophetic statements, which served as the foundations and millstones of Islamic ethics.

#### 4. Conclusion

So in short we can say that in order to ensure the happiness and goodness of life, man needs to refer to the code of ethics to monitor his relationship with God, with his family, with other fellow men in society, with other creatures of the universe, and even with his innermost self. For example, ethics provide some manners in performing ritual obligations, such as, performing five daily prayers within stipulated time and also the manners in reciting the *Qur’an* in which ablution is necessary and the like. It shows the beauty of Islam that everything should be done in proper ways. Therefore, man cannot ignore the code of ethics because negligence of it would lead to the deviation and going astray from the straight path of Islam. In terms of the relationship between man

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<sup>12</sup> Reported by Imam Tirmidhi in his *Sunan Tirmidhi*, *hadith* no. 1975.

and his fellow men, it is clearly mentioned in the *Qur'an* that Muslims are brothers; thus, one should possess ethical characteristics, such as, helpful, kind hearted, generous, and polite to one another. Similarly, Muslims should not be telling lies to others, spread false news, backbiting, slandering, and other unethical deeds. If every individual abide by the prescribed codes of ethics, people can live peacefully and there would be no cases of crime such as, murder, rape, theft, incest, and prostitution and so on. Therefore, Islamic ethics is vividly vital because it is a basic pillar for a healthy society. It aims at establishing life's order and giving it regulation, dignity and serenity as desired by the teachings of Islam.