Moral Epistemology in Muslim Ethics

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Abstract

In this paper I will discuss the main approaches of moral epistemology in Muslim ethics. At first rationalism of Mu'tazila will be discussed and compared with the intuitionism of Western ethics. Secondly Ash'arite voluntarism is discussed and rejected. Philosophical rationalism in Islamic ethics is explained, and finally we come to non-cognitivism.[1]

Key Words: 1- Moral Epistemology   2- Rationalism
3- Intuitionism   4- Voluntarism   5- Non-Cognitivism

1. Introduction

There is no doubt that the Noble Qur'an, the book of "the guidance",[2] and hadith (narratives relating the deeds and utterances of the Prophet) explain the entire ethos that is needed for being a Muslim, but we do not find any explicitly ethical or meta-ethical theory in them. Muslim scholars have taken on the task of driving a variety of ethical and meta-ethical theories, including epistemological ones, from them. There were and still are many different approaches to this matter. Muslim jurists, theologians and commentators on the Qur'an have tried to understand the moral principles and ethical grounds of the Qur'an by various methods. They wanted to build a thoroughly Islamic ethical system, which derives all its basic elements from the teachings of the Qur'an and hadith, so it is appropriate to bring their efforts under the rubric of "Islamic ethics." After the translation of Greek books into Arabic and the growth of philosophy among Muslims, there appeared another sort of ethical contemplation, which derives its basic materials not from the Qur'an or hadith, but from the philosophical

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works of Plato, Aristotle and other figures of ancient Greece. Nevertheless, in virtue of their faith, Muslim philosophers have tried to create harmony between philosophical and Islamic ethics. Al-Farabi (d. 950) and Miskawayh (d. 1035) are the leaders of this trend in the Muslim world and we can call their ethical works Islamic in the sense of being in harmony with Islam, but it would be better to say that their works represent Muslim philosophical ethics, rather than Islamic ethics, which suggests having been derived from scriptural sources. We have selected the term "Muslim ethics" in the title of this paper to include all sorts of ethical trends in the Muslim world.[3]

I discuss the main approaches in moral epistemology in the Muslim world regardless of their significance, using the current terms of moral epistemology to distinguish them so that they can be understandable to a Western audience. In some cases where there is an approach in Western moral epistemology, which is not in Muslim ethics, I will explain the reasons, and vice verse.

I know that we do not have a systemized epistemology in our world and this branch of philosophy is has only achieved explicit recognition after the Enlightenment, but we can speak, for example, of the moral epistemology of Aquinas and likewise for Muslim thinkers.

As we know, there is a controversy about the basic concept or concepts of morality in Western ethics. G. E. Moore, for example, takes the concept of *goodness* as his starting point for the semantic analysis of morality and consequently takes language that includes this and related terms as a starting point for his epistemological discussions,[4] while Ross takes the concept of *rightness* as his starting point, and for Prichard the concept of *obligation* is fundamental. The same controversy may be found among the Muslims scholars, so the theologians emphasize the concepts of goodness and badness as basic, and define other moral concepts in terms of them, while philosophers emphasize the concept of virtue and jurists take the concept of obligation as basic. Below we briefly review each of these approaches.

2. Theological Ethics

The major sects of Islamic theology are the Mu'tazilah and Shi'ite, who formulated rationalistic ethical system between the

eighth and tenth centuries, and the Ash'arites, who developed a voluntaristic system of morality.

2.1. Rationalism

The main question for moral epistemology is how we can justify our moral beliefs and have warranted belief in this regard. The Mu'tazila and the Shi'ites were the first important groups in the Muslim world that tried to answer this question. But they saw that answering this question required at first an ontological investigation of the character of moral properties.

This led them to accept an objectivistic view in ethics. According to them some actions as such and in themselves have a good character and others have a bad character. It is not the case that God confers these properties on them by His will or commands. In other words, these properties are essential (*dhati*) and inherent in acts and God plays no part in their designation as good or bad. They didn't say more about the categories of these properties, because their primary interest is not in ethics, but in theology. They wanted to show that we have some obligations independent of revelation, and even that we have an obligation to submit to the revelation. They hold that not only do such obligations exist, but also, we can recognize them through the intellect. Shahrestani, the famous expert on the sects of Islam, says:

> They [Mutazilites and Shi'ites] were agreed that the principles of knowledge and gratitude of benefaction are obligatory, prior to the advent of revelation, and similarly, that right and wrong ought to be known through reason, and that the adoption of right and the avoidance of wrong is likewise obligatory. The advent of religious obligation is a grace from God Almighty that He imparted to mankind through the Prophets to test and prove them (20, p:29).

Before explaining Islamic ethical rationalism, I must refer to a little deference between two usages of the term *rationalism* in Muslim ethics and modern moral philosophy.

In both usages it refers to the objectivity of the values of acts called 'good' and 'obligatory' and also the ability of reason to recognize good and obligatory actions. But the emphasis on this ability in the West is in contrast to ethical naturalism, the idea that we can know ethical properties by the same methods as are used to know other natural properties, while in the Muslim word rationalism is opposed to the voluntaristic theory developed by the

Ash'ariah. (7, p: 99) This is because in Muslim ethics there wasn't any (and still isn't any) empirical or naturalistic theory to speak of.

First of all we must know something about the meaning of moral terms. Nearly all Muslim theologians consider the good and bad as the basic terms of morality. They think that other moral terms are reducible to them; obligation is just a qualified form of good and so on. So, they focused on the discussion of good or bad.

They distinguished between three meanings of 'goodness' and 'badness'. At first, good refers to every property of ontological perfection and bad to the absence of that perfection, for example, we say that knowledge is good and ignorance is bad. The second meaning of good is to announce the desirability of something with regard to our purposes regardless of its morally status. When we say that food is good, we mean that it is suitable for us. Almost all theologians accept that we can recognize these meanings of good and bad by our reason and there is no controversy in this regard between them, but these meanings of 'good' and 'bad' are not ethical. The ethical meaning of 'good' and 'bad' and consequently other moral terms is that" An act is good when the doer of it deserves approval and admiration and is evil when the doer of it deserves blame;" and "An act is obligatory when the one who omits it deserves blame for that." As we see the moral meaning of terms was related to our feelings of approval or blame (6, pp: 200-203).

All the controversy in Muslim theology is about where this property of actions, that is to say, being deserved of approval or blame, comes from.[5] Rationalists hold that it comes not from God's revelation, but is in the very essence of the act or is related to the various aspects (*wajh*) of the act. So we have two forms of ethical propositions: self-evident and what is known not immediately, but by appeal to these self-evident truths. Concerning the first type of moral propositions 'Abd al-Jabar (d.1025), one of the leading Mutazila theologians holds that lying and wrongdoing are always evil because of their essences (Ibid). The moral property in these cases is essential to the object and the propositions that assert them are self-evident, having the status of axioms of reason, known without any argumentation. These are the principles of morality. But there are many other truths of morality, which do not have this status. As a case of these sorts of moral truth, he refers to pain:

"Pain is evil in itself, i.e. when it is simply useless suffering, not a necessary step to future benefits and not a just punishment for wrongdoing" (Ibid). We can know these truths only by reflection and driving them from basic moral propositions.

Here we must refer to the reasons given for accepting rationalism in ethics. We can find two forms of reasons in their works: independent reasons and reasons derived from Qu'ran itself. We find the following reasons in one the earliest books (third/ninth century) in Shi'ite theology: (1) an understanding of moral truths is found among those who do not accept any divine revelation; (2) if good and evil are entirely dependent on revelation, the good of the revelation itself is undermined, for we would not have any means independent of the revelation to submit to it; (3) if what is good is whatever God commands, then we would have no independent means to assert the goodness of God (16, p:51).

With regard to Qu'ranic reasons, they appeal to some verses that presuppose a realistic and also a rationalistic conception of morality. As an example see the verse: "and whenever they commit an indecency they say, we found our fathers practicing it, and God has commanded us to do it. Say: God does not command indecency; what, do you say concerning God such things as you know not?" (7, p: 28)[6].

If we take intuitionism as "the claim that some people are immediately or non-inferentially justified in believing that some judgments are true" (1, p: 880) then we can call the moral rationalism of Islamic theology an intuitionist theory. Hourany rightly remarked that:

> It (This form of Islamic ethical rationalism) will be of interest to Western philosophers because of its many anticipations of modern intuitionist ethics (7, p: 99).

2.2. Voluntarism

Voluntarism is an ethical theory that denies that goodness and badness are intrinsic properties of things, asserting instead that they are relational properties founded in the positive and negative attitudes of conscious beings (11, p: 1772). This theory is a cognitive and descriptive one, because it holds that the property of goodness is a real relationship between the will and the action desired or commanded. To say that something is good is to assert the fact that it is related to the will. There are different versions of

voluntarism depending on whose will is considered. The will of individuals, experts, society or God are four candidates for being the sources of moral value. The way in which moral judgments are justified differ in each case; for example, if you take the will of God as conferring goodness and badness on things, the natural way (and not necessarily the only one way) to justify moral judgment would be by revelation.

We do not find any sign of individual voluntarism in the Muslim world, because this is in explicit contradiction to the teachings of the Noble Qur'an. Morality cannot depend on the human will and cannot be limited to the realm of human desires and will. Instead, it aims at transcending his desires and improving his will. Sometimes human desires are not in accordance with real happiness and perfection.

> "You may hate something when it is good for you, and you may like something when it is bad for you. God knows and you don't know" (2:116).
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> "And what of him, the evil of whose deeds has been decked out fair to him so that he thinks it is good? God leads astray whomsoever He will, and whomsoever He will He guides" (35:8).

Social voluntarism, i.e. the position that the will of the majority of a people is the source of ethical value, also has not been accepted for the same reason, but there are some phrases concerning the goodness of justice in Avicenna and also in the contemporary jurist Isfahani that has been mistakenly interpreted as a form of social voluntarism. Avicenna said "Justice is good" is one of the widely accepted propositions (*mashhurat*) and not a self-evident proposition (*badihi*). To accept that justice is good, one needs to be trained by society. This has been interpreted as the acceptance of social voluntarism, but as his commentator said, he merely wanted to distinguish between the varieties of apparent truths, differentiating ethical ones from logical ones by affirming that moral truth appears in the context of society and not in solitude. This is the proper interpretation of Avicenna that makes his view coherent with his generally Aristotelian approach in ethics (10, p: 51). Isfahani (d.1833) holds that when we say, "Justice is good", we assert that justice is something on the basis of which rational persons agree to act. So there is no real property in these cases, all is due to our intention or decision to act in this way (4,

pp: 183-188). However, what is important in this view is that it is only insofar as *rational* agents as such accept certain principles that they become moral. Arbitrary agreement would not produce moral principles. At any rate, social voluntarism was and is still not accepted as an ethical theory in the Muslim world.

The third candidate, that is expert-voluntarism, while it has more appeal than the previous ones, also was not given attention by Muslims scholars.

But this form of voluntarism, as Becker remarks, has a problem of internal incoherency, because the concept of experts or rational persons is more appropriate to rationalism than voluntarism (11, p: 1773).

2.3. Divine-command theory

This is one of two common views in Islamic theology. It has had and continues to have the strongest influence among Muslims. The first sophisticated version of this theory is found in Ash'ari's work. His successors developed the idea and defended it against the rationalism of the Mu'tazila. They also were concerned originally with the moral concept of "goodness" and "badness" and took the concept of obligation as a special qualification of them.

We must consider where the moral sense of the good comes from. According to Muslim theological voluntarism it comes from the will or the command[7] of God. According to them moral properties are not essential or objective, instead they are related to God's will (*ilahi*). This is at the level of ontology, but epistemologically, they believe that the only proper way to know the good and bad is by relying on God's revelation (*shar'i*) not on reason (*aqli*). They believe that no action deserves approval or blame in itself. Lahiji reports that the Ash'arites hold: "There is no action that deserves approval or blame as such. Only God's commands and prohibitions make them to demand such feelings" (10, p: 51). "Our idea that goodness and badness are *shar'i* means that reason cannot and has no right to understand the good or bad and also the respect by virtue of which a good or bad thing is good or bad, neither prior to nor after the arrival of revelation" (Ibid).

Rationalistic theologians reject this ethical voluntarism. They refer to the existence of many people who have moral knowledge without having any religious knowledge. Al-Tusi (d.1274) in this regard refers to atheists of his age in India to defeat theological

voluntarism. He also emphasizes the importance of moral knowledge in knowing the obligation to accept revelation itself.

At any rate theological voluntarism is one of the main trends in Islamic ethics and is wholly comparable to Christian and Jewish divine command theory. I think the main motivation for theological voluntarism is the attempt to keep the will of God as a source of moral guidance. They were worried about the place and significance of revelation and the prophets that would result if rationalism in ethics gained wide acceptance. They believe that this sort of view is needed to preserve the ability of God to "act as He wills"[8], but this pure motive leads them to accept some beliefs that are not only contrary to reason, but also contrary to revelation itself, as we mentioned above in discussing rationalism.

3. Philosophical Ethics

The writings of Porphyry, Aristotle, Plato and others, translated into Arabic at the middle of ninth century, had a direct impact on the moral philosophers and qualified their views on the nature of moral activity, right and wrong, virtue, happiness and related ethical questions. But certainly the most important Greek text to influence Islamic ethics is Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, translated by Ishaq Ibn Hunayn (d.911), and commented on by Al-Farabi, Ibn Rushed (d.1298) and others.

Muslim philosophers followed Aristotle in beginning their ethical books with an explanation of the happiness. They held that without considering happiness as the only intrinsic value, we couldn't understand the moral properties of our actions. This belief distances them from deontological theories and brings them closer to other teleological views in morality.

Aristotle's conception of happiness has an important difference with other standard versions of consequentialism, such as utilitarianism. In the case of Aristotle, the final end, happiness, is not a separate thing from the moral virtue that results in it, but it is the same thing as realizing moral virtue or contemplation. This is the point of his insistence on the dispositions of the soul instead of merely the performing of moral actions. According to him, the flourishing of the human capacities is all that is needed to be happy. So, although happiness is the end of virtue and moral action, it is not the same as being the end in the sense of utilitarianism. In

other words, moral virtue is not only an instrument to achieve happiness, but in itself also is the end and intrinsic value, because it is happiness.

Muslim philosophers continue in this way and we can consider their ethical works as the earliest versions of virtue ethics. I don't see the need to illustrate theirs views here in detail, because of their affinity to Aristotle's ethics. I will only refer to a couple of important points in this regard.

The main method for Muslim philosophers to understand human well-being was the argumentation from the function of the human being. Like Aristotle, they hold that every kind of being, including human beings, has a distinct function and its happiness is related to that function. If the members of a species are functioning appropriately and in good condition we can say that they are flourishing, and in the case of humanity that they are happy. This is the argument of Aristotle to show that happiness is the Good, and is in contrast with Mill's way of showing that pleasure is good, by appealing to its actual desirability through the inductive method.[9]

In this regard, Miskawayh, one of the leading moral philosophers in the Muslim world says:

> Every existent has, in virtue of what it is, a perfection proper to it and a certain activity which it does not share with the rest… man is distinguished from all other existences by a certain activity which is proper to him and is not shared by any other. This activity is the one that proceeds from his discerning, reflective faculty…the happiness of man consists in the performance of his properly human actions in accordance with discernment and reflection (13, p: 12).

In addition to the use of reason in discovering happiness, the rationalists also use reason, especially practical reason, to discover the good and right actions suitable to happiness. This approach deserves to be called a rational ethics much more than others because it uses reason not only in discovering the right and wrong way of life, but also takes reason itself to be an important elements of happiness, regardless of its role in that discovery. Reasoning in this context has two aspects; the discovery of happiness and being an element of it. Happiness is not self-evident and knowledge of it is not by intuition.

I think that the main deferent between Muslim philosophical ethics and its Greek antecessor is that they wholly accept Aristotle's ethics as a good starting point, not as the whole of morality. Aristotle in his book, particularly in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, did not attend to the after-life of humanity and took this worldly flourishing of humanity as the end, but this not acceptable for religious philosophers. They tried to take human flourishing in a large context that includes all parts of human life, especially his important life after death. Thereby they introduce what Aquinas called the teleological virtue in the moral life. This is an important contribution of Muslim philosophers and must not be neglected. In the light of this point, while I agree with the impression of Majid Fakhry about the relation of morality to religion, I don't agree that it is the whole of the story; that impression must be qualified and improved. This is his statement:

> The impression one gains from reading ethical, philosophical literature in Islam is that ethics, according to it's exponents, is an autonomous inquiry which revelation can confirm, but whose principles and precepts are valid in their own right and independently of such confirmation" (3, p: 67).

4. Non-Cognitivism

This theory originally is about the meanings of moral terms, but has its impact on moral epistemology. All versions of this theory agree that moral sentences are not factual; they don't assert anything about reality or even the will of God or humans. They only perform some acts, such as presentation of our feelings, approving or blaming some act, commanding or prohibiting certain acts and so on. According to emotivism, we may use moral sentences to bring about, to display and to present our feelings and desires, and thereby to stipule the feelings of other persons. Morality according to this positivistic theory remains merely in the realm of emotions, having no relation to our reason. Ayer, one of the main figures of logical positivism in the twentieth century, holds that the function of moral sentences is to command or forbid some sort of actions. When we say, "lying is wrong" in spite of its appearing that we are reporting something, we only are forbidding lying. There is no essential deference between saying, "don't lie"

and "lying is wrong." The only difference is in the style of speaking. This theory (imperativism) also keeps morality outside of reasoning and takes moral values as our wants. The late British philosopher, F. Hare, tried to make a theory about the meaning of moral sentences to keep the performative character of morality by allowing at the same time for reason and rationality to enter into moral discourse. His theory (prescriptivism) also doesn't succeed in this regard except at the cost of loosing the non-cognitivist character of moral sentences.[10]

I think that the appearance of the variety of these theories in the West is mostly due to influence of logical positivism, especially the verification theory of meaning. Accepting that moral sentences don't satisfy empirical verification led many philosophers to find deferent functions for moral sentences other than stating facts. Muslim scholars to the contrary, being not under the influence of logical positivism, realized the meaning of every term and sentence by what they call *tabador*. If normal people hear a word, its meaning is what strongly suggest itself to the mind and appears at first glance. Applying this method, they realized that even though moral terms might bring about our feelings or stipulate others' feelings, this is not what suggests itself when one hears a moral sentence. As we know, at least prima facie, there are two forms of moral sentences; assertive ones such as 'justice is good' and performative ones, such as 'you must be fair.' Muslim scholars take the first form of moral sentences at face value as assertive, but find that the second form, despite its appearance, is also assertive in meaning. Essentially the sentence 'you must be fair' is not a command, because commands require that one person have authority over those commanded, while this is not the case in moral discourse. This is just to inform and refer to an obligation or goodness rooted in the essence or accidents of justice (rationalism) or in the will of God (voluntarism) independently of our commands.

In the twentieth century, the late philosopher and commentator on Qu'ran, Allamah Tabataba'i (d.1981) proposed a theory to justify the plurality of the forms of our beliefs called the theory of inventions (*itibariat*). He analyzes the plurality of our beliefs and finds among them some beliefs that do not aim at truth but are invented for other purposes. So, he tries to explain our need for

them. He concludes that they are needed in order to forge a relation between the will and action. When we say that the head of someone is broken, here the concept and consequently the word *head* is used in its proper literal context so it is a statement and proposition, To the contrary, when we say that the head of a department is absent, the usage of the concept and also the word of *head* is not the same as in the previous usage. According to him in this case we lent the concept of the 'head' and applied it in another case. This is to bring about and present the role and functions of the real head for this person. This is a metaphorical usage primarily of the concept and secondarily of the word *head*. In this case we don't state a fact, but make a contract and apply it by the way of invention through the concept. He thinks that the original usages of all ethical terms are similar to this. He discusses moral terms in detail one by one and concludes that all of them, like the concept *head*, has an original real meaning but we abstract them from their real contexts and apply them in invented cases for some purposes such as stimulating feelings or commanding actions. The concept of 'good,' for example, has a real meaning, to assert the correctness of some sighting relative to our visual faculties, but we apply it in the case of an act that has no relation to seeing. He says the same thing about concept of 'necessity'. This concept originally applied to the real relation of cause to effect, but is borrowed for application to the relation of humanity and human actions, by saying that you must (derived from the concept of necessity) tell the truth. There is only a contingent relation between the agent and saying the truth, but this necessity is alleged to serve as a cause for it to be done.

It was natural that this view, despite having been proposed by one of the most illustrious religious scholars in the contemporary Muslim word, has been rejected on the grounds of violating the explicit teachings of Islam.

M. Mutahhari (d.1980), his famous student, compared this view, taken literally, with that of the famous British atheist, Bertrand Russell, and claimed that it is not only wrong, but also is in explicit conflict with his other writings in philosophy.

We can conclude that although in some cases we find theories that have non-cognitivist associations, because of their explicit conflict with the realistic grounds of Qu'ranic ethics, discussed above, have not gained wide acceptability.

Notes

1. I should express my gratitude for help with the writing of this article from Prof. Hajj Muhammad Legenhausen.
2. As it describes itself in the verse: *"that is the Book, wherein is no doubt a guidance to the god fearing"* (5, p: 2).
3. Reinhart distinguishes between Islamic and Islamicat ethics, but this is not suitable for our distinction, because the islamicate ethics includes descriptions of the ethos of each country in Muslim world. See: (19, pp: 513-561). I think we can get a better understanding of Muslim ethics if we distinguish its trends in accordance with their methods. We have theological, scriptural, mystical and philosophical ethics in the Muslim world. See: (3).
4. Moore holds that ethics has a unique object as its primary subject and this object is what users of English denote or refer to by the word 'good'. See: (18, p: 1109).
5. The idea of distinguishing between these three meanings of the moral concepts has been challenged by contemporary scholars. See as an example: (14, p: 51).
6. See also the verses: (15, p: 90), (7, p: 33) and (7, p: 157).
7. An important distinction is made between divine will and divine commands in the principles of jurisprudence (*'ilm al-usul*).
8. As in the verses of Quran (19, p: 107), (22, p: 40).
9. Audi, however, claims that Mill followed Aristotle in this regard. See: (2, p: 272).
10. For a detailed discussion of the debate between cognitive and non-cognitive theories in ethics see (12).

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