

# A Comparative Analysis of Ethical Thoughts of Ayatollah Meṣbāḥ Yazdī and Søren Kierkegaard

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## Abstract

This study is an examination of the relationship between Islamic and Christian ethical thoughts. In this study, we find that faith is the central element of both ethical thoughts. Ayatollah Meṣbāḥ Yazdī defining the Islamic ethical thoughts, understands faith as the key determiner of ethics, which is rationally understood by human reason. On the contrary Søren Kierkegaard who argues that surrendering to the will of God, regardless of the rationality of commands of God, is the highest moral trait. Kierkegaard concludes that the goal of humans is to reach the Abrahamic level of submission to the will of God, whereas Ayatollah Meṣbāḥ Yazdī concludes that the goal of human life is to find happiness obtained by seeking proximity to God. Both ethical thoughts emphasize the importance of God as the true judge of virtues concluding that acting in accordance with the wish of God is the highest level of morality, but the Islamic ethical thought concludes that ethics are based on ethical truths. The final goal for both ethical thoughts is reaching nearness to God, through human responsibility. This means that both ethical thoughts argue that being ethical means the fulfilment of ethical responsibilities towards God, oneself and others. Finally working together in a symbiosis where God and all His creations are closely connected and upholding virtues in relation to all dimensions of life will lead to final bliss.

**Keywords:** Moral Thought, Islamic Ethics, Christian Ethics, Ayatollah Meṣbāḥ Yazdī, Kierkegaard

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## **Introduction**

Ethical discussions have been a part of human interests since the beginning of human's written history. Thinkers, philosophers and religious scholars have tried to answer questions related to ethical truths, ethical realism, good and bad conduct. All religions hold a code of moral actions and virtues. Numerous ethical theories answer differently to at least one main question: "What is the greatest good?" and the answers have transformed into a set of rules on how to behave as individuals and societies.

Despite the high number of ethical theories, ethical questions are still discussed. As science and technology develop, country demographics are changing, immigrations and refugees are fleeing war, poverty, natural disasters, and information is spread worldwide due to globalization, ethical questions are always applicable.

Despite the world being globalized and offering us unlimited access to free information, intolerance is an increasing problem. The science of ethics is as relevant as it has always been, for even more so, as the world is faced with new challenges on a constant basis.

Despite from having unlimited access to knowledge, which should cause a development of human intellect, Europe is facing its worst human crisis since the WWII (second world war). The structure of global and local laws that once secured human rights, are now replaced with ignorance and discrimination. Lawmakers are openly targeting Muslims as a minority, reducing their religious rights, and this yields the highest number of hate-crimes occurrence since the pre-WWII period.

Psychological warfare and misinformation are the main propaganda tools used in political campaigns, mainly targeting the Muslim minorities in Europe.

The main argument holds that Islam is something essentially different from Christianity, which is the religion that the country and former laws has been built upon. Islam is being portrayed as harsh, immoral, and barbaric unlike Christianity which is

portrayed as peaceful and morally good. The motivation to do a research on the differences and similarities of the two religions, namely their ethical thoughts, is derived from first-hand daily experiences as a Muslim living in the west.

My main question is therefore, will a research of the similarities and differences, comparing and contrasting, between these two provide a better understanding of the meeting points of Islam and Christianity? This includes a comparison of the two ethical systems: The Divine Command theory which Kierkegaard is subjected to, and the system of Ayatollah Meşbāḥ Yazdī which includes the human pursue of happiness.

### **Theological Methods**

As I want to do a comparative analysis, I will introduce the two theological methods which form the bases of the two ethical thought systems. Their differences are key to understand why their determination of ethics differ. Both may argue that nearness to God is the end goal of ethics but based on the different theological methods and approaches the end result differs. Søren Kierkegaard (d. 1855), which is the representative of Christian ethics in this comparison, is understood as the father of Christian existentialism.

This means that he is a firm believer in the Divine Command Theory. As for critics of the Divine Command Theory, we find scholars such as: Allamah Hilli (d. 1325), and Şadr ad-Dīn Muḥammad Shīrāzī (d. 1640) an Iranian philosopher and a Muslim theologian, Shahid Morteḍa Muṭahharī (d. 1979) an Iranian Muslim Philosopher, Sayyid Muḥammad Bāqir al-Şadr (d. 1980) an Iraqī philosopher and a Muslim theologian, Allamah Muḥammad Ḥusayn Ṭabāṭabā'ī (d. 1981) an Iranian Muslim philosopher and prominent scholar, Sayyid Ruḥollāh Mūsawī al-Khomeinī (d. 1989) an Iranian philosopher, a Muslim theologian and a religious leader, Ayatollah Abd' Allāh Jawādī-Amulī (b. 1933) an Iranian Muslim philosopher, and Ayatollah Muḥammad Ṭaqī Meşbāḥ Yazdī (b. 1934) an Iranian scholar.

The last person mentioned is the main figure of our research but what is common in all of them is that they do not agree on the terms of the Divine Command theory.

Ayatollah Meşbāh Yazdī, as my key example of Islamic ethical thoughts, described thoughts and the ability to reflect on good and bad as well-known abilities since the beginning of humans' written history. He then argued that despite humans' ability to reflect, it was only through the Divine epiphanies of the Prophet Muḥammad (s), that the "raw material of human thought" was transformed into Divine standardly moralities. (Meşbāh Yazdī, 2014: 26)

Whereas the Divine Command theory solely ascribe definitions of good and evil to God, scholars such as Ayatollah Meşbāh Yazdī and the above-mentioned, argue that human intellect has been given a reason to reflect upon good and evil themselves. Supporting this point of view is Allamah Hillī, who is one of the highest esteemed scholars. In his book *al-bāb al-ḥādī 'aṣhar*, he argued that human reason (*al-'aql*) necessary passes judgment on what is good and evil. (al-Hillī, 1928: 40)

He described "good" as the doing of an action which is praised in "this World and the World to come".

Ayatollah Meşbāh Yazdī earlier concluded that humans have the ability to understand good and evil through reason, but it was only through Divine epiphanies the "raw material of human thought" was transformed into Divine standardly moralities.

The normative theory which Meşbāh Yazdī bases his ideas on, is the theory of happiness. This means that true happiness is found in achieving salvation through nearness to God, and the criterion of considering of ethics is achieving human perfection. Based on the meta-ethical view of Meşbāh Yazdī, there is a real relation between human qualities and actions, and human perfection, meaning that human will find happiness through perfecting their qualities, and as they reach perfection, they reach closeness to God.

This is completely different from The Divine Command Theory by which all ethical truths are related to the divine orders not real independent truths. To further understand the theoretical differences between the two ethical thought-systems, I will introduce the Christian ethical thoughts.

The prime value of existentialism is achieving freedom and its key virtue is acknowledged as authenticity. An essential part of existentialist theory is “the existential attitude”.

It is the individual’s starting point and defined as a sense of confusion and disorientation. Some of the most essential points of existentialism are the concept of existence before essence, the authenticity, the absurd, angst, facticity and despair.

One of the most central concepts of Existentialism is existence precedes essence. Existence precedes essence means that the most important idea for individuals is that they are individuals. They act independently and responsibly as conscious beings. A theological approach to existentialism has been used by several philosophers such as Augustine, Aquinas, Pascal, Maritain and Kierkegaard. The theological approach to existentialism is shown in the argumentations of Kierkegaard, as he states that the universe is a fundamental paradox, where the greatest paradox is the union of God and humans in Jesus Christ. He postulated having a personal relationship with God that surpassed all prescribed moralities.

### **Ethical Responsibilities and Faith as the Bases of Islamic Ethical Thoughts**

The ethical thoughts of Ayatollah Meşbāḥ Yazdī emphasizes on the meaning of human responsibilities. The responsibilities are connected by three unbreakable links. The responsibilities towards God, oneself and others. That is why both faith, certainty and intention is important elements of the ethical thoughts of Ayatollah Meşbāḥ Yazdī.

Like, self-worth and mental firmness is a key part. Lastly, the way we feel and treat others and our surroundings like the environment. The responsibilities are fulfilled through the implementation and acting upon virtues, creating an ethical life. The first and most central virtue, as it is presented by Ayatollah Meṣbāḥ Yazdī, is faith. Virtues are valued on their ability to fulfill the purpose of life. Faith is the central part and most essential tool to determinate a trait as a virtue, whereas intention, the performance and certainty are all tools to define the value of the virtue. The most prominent virtues are therefore related to faith. Virtues are based on faith is the key to an ethical life and the reaching of happiness. Ayatollah Meṣbāḥ Yazdī explained how virtues are linked between the three areas of human responsibility.

The four central points of the text Du‘ā’ Makārim al-Akhlāq including: the perfect faith, highest type of certainty, purest intention, and the best deeds, form the foundation of the ethical thought of Ayatollah Meṣbāḥ Yazdī. The ethical thought consists of normative rulings where faith is the most essential virtue. Ayatollah Meṣbāḥ Yazdī concluded that “the importance of the role of faith in man’s perfection and prosperity is because of his soul’s main characteristic”. (Meṣbāḥ Yazdī, 2009: 394)

That means that faith determine whether man will stay on the path towards perfection or decline and adversity. Logical results of faith lead to social responsibility and the kindness towards others.

A part of faith is the human choice, and thereby the free will to choose, which then became an essential part of striving for moral traits and upholding an ethical life. As the moral traits of the Islamic ethics are judged in relation to God’s wisdom and their support of reaching humans’ final goal, it becomes essential to have true certainty in faith.

If one is not certain, that the wisdom of God is the only true source of understanding and valuing moral traits, one might not act regarding to the ethical rules.

The intention and action are two central terms in the science of the Islamic ethical thoughts. The relationship between the intention and action is key to understand the values of a virtue.

Ayatollah Meşbāḥ Yazdī argued that “one’s own intention mediates one’s deeds and soul”. (Meşbāḥ Yazdī, 2009: 394)

Furthermore, concluded that “the value of a voluntary act depends on the motivation and intention of its doer and good deeds without good intentions will have no effect on the progress of one’s soul”. (Meşbāḥ Yazdī, 2009: 395)

Within the ethical thought of Ayatollah Meşbāḥ Yazdī humans have different responsibilities. The responsibilities are all tools for humans to reach their goal and purpose of creation. Humans must take care and be aware of their responsibilities towards God, themselves and others. The different responsibilities are all a part of the same ultimate liability. Responsibilities cannot be segregated therefore one cannot fulfill the responsibility towards God without fulfilling it towards oneself and towards others.

Ayatollah Meşbāḥ Yazdī argued, that “working for other people’s benefit like individual acts of worship will be effective on one’s perfection [...] it originates from Divine motivation”. (Meşbāḥ Yazdī, 2009: 395)

All of the actions are then connected to each other and the perfection of man. The inner mental state must be in balance to be able to worship and perform one’s responsibilities. Like, food is the nutrition of the body, the mental state must be in balance and nourished to fulfill the responsibilities. If man’s mental state is not well or in balance he will not be able to perform any act of worship with a sound heart. The inner state will affect the inner spirituality, and the virtues that are needed to reach the end-goal, will be corrupted.

Related to the responsibilities towards oneself, man must perfect his faith, be free from needs, be grateful, humble and accept the guidance of others.

One must shut one's eyes towards evil and stay righteous through a general moderation affecting all aspects of human life.

In relation to others, one is required to repel bad actions with those of good, thereby erasing the evil. Humans' ethical responsibility towards each other is to treat one another with goodness, even though they are treated badly. Bad and evil actions done against oneself, do not justify an evil response, as even bad actions must be repaid by good. One must not only have good behavior, but also must support and encourage others to behave well. One must spread justice and act just. One must cover others' fault, and show others true love, affection, devotion and generous friendliness. One must always be trustworthy and helpful towards others. One must never show hate or spread hate. One must restring his rage and have a mildness of temper.

All virtues are related to the respect and care for others, securing that people do not separate by holding on to the community. Humans are social beings, and one cannot reach perfection and the final goal of creation, without respecting all three responsibilities. An ethical life does not only help humans to reach their purpose, but it helps humans to live in peace with each other. It is a perfect system for man to follow to secure a happy life and end.

Ayatollah Meşbāḥ Yazdī even argued that man must acquire a good social standing, to discharge his religious obligations in a better way. Concluding that humans' relation to God, themselves and others all work in a perfect symbiosis, without the virtues, none of this would be possible. The key element of the Islamic ethical thought is to illustrate the purpose of an ethical life. The purpose of an ethical life is the search for happiness. Happiness is, as argued by Ayatollah Meşbāḥ Yazdī, the key goal and natural drive for all humans. Happiness is only achieved through closeness to God, which introduces a central term: Qurb (Meşbāḥ Yazdī, 2014: 42)



In short, Ayatollah Meşbāḥ Yazdī described closeness to God as the realization that humans will achieve everything while having the love of God, and nothing without God (Meşbāḥ Yazdī, 2014: 44). All noble traits and actions are tools to fulfill this purpose.

### **Ethical Responsibilities and Faith as the Bases of Christian Ethical Thoughts**

Søren Kierkegaard is the most famous Danish philosopher and influential theologian till date. He is still a well-used reference in ethical discussions, and his ethical system is taught to all children. His ethical thought is a key example of Christian ethics, especially related to Denmark and other Northern-European countries. Kierkegaard wrote a various works published from year 1843-1851 and latest year 1855, mostly by using pseudonyms.

His ethical thoughts are not found in one specific book within that period, rather it is found as a combination of different works. The concept of “ethics” is therefore presented in different ways. The meaning of “ethics” used in the theory of the different stages of humans’ life has a specific connotation.

In this theory, “ethical” is a certain stage, indicating that a person acts according to the social norms and ethical prescripts. He does not conclude on what is considered “ethical norms”, it is left out, maybe because Kierkegaard understood this stage in relation to different societies. At this point, he argued that there is no universal ethical idea, rather it is the norms that is understood by the individual society.

The use of ethics in this example is then only related to describing the actions of a person living an ethical life. To be at the ethical stage is to choose and not only to choose to follow one’s desires as in the example of the aesthetic life, another stage in the same theory. It is not ethical to change principles out of feelings, desires or personal interests.

True ethics is the active choice, choosing a certain view or certain principles, and not changing them whenever one desires.

In the work “Fear and Trembling” ethics is understood as the common morality in society. Ethics is then understood as relative and depended on the different societies and their norms. What could be ethical in one society, could be unethical in another. To Kierkegaard, acting ethically correct, is to act according to the norms of the society. As this leaves out the questions on intention, choice and the authority of the society as truly ethical, he concluded that the best stage is the religious, as one act ethically but for the sake of God. If ethics is the common morals, then it can be overruled by the religious, as it is considered as higher. (Kierkegaard, 1982c: 50)

The last example of the term “ethics” is from work: “Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments”. Here ethics is described as something which is gradually forgotten in the society. (Kierkegaard, 1982e: 24)

He argued that ethics is what makes one understand the “reality of oneself”, and as ethics are more and more forgotten, people will lose their understandings of the reality of themselves.

To reflect, to think, and to choose the ethical choices is to understand the existence, and the consequence of forgetting ethics, is disremembering of one’s purpose of existence, or even the existence in and of itself. All knowledge and sciences in the World, does not matter if one forgets oneself, because then one forgets the ethics. To know oneself is to be ethical, Kierkegaard argued.

In the first theory, “ethics” was used to define a stage, ranging lower than the “religious” stage, but in his later use of the term, being ethical and being religious is the same. It is uncertain whether Kierkegaard understood ethics on different levels, or he gradually changed his idea of ethics as time passed.

As briefly mentioned, Kierkegaard argued that humans find themselves at different stages. One can move from one stage to another, but that takes self-understanding.

The first stage is the “spidsborger”. At this stage, one acts according to the norms of the society one lives in, without reflecting, questioning or choosing the actions. One merely acts as the society expects from you and does it on a non-reflected foundation. At this stage, one has not yet come to understand that one has a choice. The next stage is the aesthetical one. Here one understands that one has a choice, but one does not want to choose. The aesthetician only follows his or her desires, rather it be sexual, intellectual, psychological or art related desires.

A stage related to the aesthetical stage is “the Ironist”. The Ironist is a person, who want to choose, but cannot, and therefor he becomes frustrated which is shown in anger and hatefulness towards “spidsborgeren”, who he ridicules.

The third stage is the ethical one. The ethicist is one who knows he or she has a choose and can act upon that choice. The ethicist acts according to what is understood as ethical correct, and he or she does it as a result of a choice. The ethicist chose to act ethically, instead of following his or her desires.

A subcategory of the ethicist is the “comic”. He is an ethicist, but uncertain whether he should move onto the next stage. This means that “the comic” is a stage or transition between the ethicist and the last category: the religious.

A religious person is one who chose to act ethically, but does it for the sake of God, and understand that the relation to God is the true ethical goodness. It is through the relation to God, one finds oneself, and if one does not find oneself, it is up to one’s surroundings to define one, which is understood as a horrific position to be in.

Ethical discussions are often related to the question of purpose and goodness. In the ethical thoughts of Kierkegaard, true goodness is found as one submits oneself to the will of God.

Abraham is an example of true goodness, and the highest moral stage. Abraham was commanded to sacrifice his son, despite killing one's offspring is ethical wrong according to Kierkegaard. Faith is the highest moral trait, and as Abraham had faith in God he became the example of the best moral stage. The purpose of human life is defined in the example, as humans are to understand themselves in accordance with understanding the power and will of God.

Another key element of the ethical thought is the human responsibility. Humans are, according to Kierkegaard, responsible for making a choice and understand oneself. The worst position a human can be in, is the unreflective stage, where the surroundings such as cultural, social, and political norms define one, instead of gaining the control to define oneself in relation to God.

Kierkegaard argued that with the responsibility and the choices becomes angst and despair. Angst is the dreadful feeling one faces when one has the full individual control over one's choices, and then has to take full responsibility over the following consequences. When a person is fully responsible for the consequences of one's actions, Kierkegaard concluded that one would be filled with angst.

The feeling of despair is also related to the choice, as deciding consequently means that one chooses not to choose something else. In every choice, Kierkegaard argued, is a deselection.

Related to the ethical system, Kierkegaard here shows his understanding of humans. Humans, according to Kierkegaard, are dreadful and in despair when they must choose, and therefore most humans end up not choosing. They would rather act according to the norms ascribed to the society they live in, than to face the angst and despair of choosing. The despair of humans regarding to their choices, shows that humans will never truly be satisfied, except those who find themselves in relation to God. Angst and despair is then a part of human nature, and a necessary part of reaching the highest moral state.

Faith is the highest stage and the best moral trait in the ethical system. Abraham became the example of the importance in a “teleological suspension of the ethical”. One must act ethically, but one must act ethically because of one’s relation to God, one’s faith, not merely because of the norms. Humans must fulfill their duties towards the society and themselves, but the duty to follow the commands of God is more important.

To reach the position of religious faith, which in some cases involve a “teleological suspension of the ethical”, the individual must first act according to the ethical. One can be ethical without being religious, but one cannot be religious without being ethical, and in some sense, only true ethical positions are reached through faith.

In conclusion, we understand that Kierkegaard, in his understanding of a Christian ethical system, is an eventual advocate for the Divine Command theory, as he argued that individuals has an ethical and religious obligation to obey and understand the commandments of God. Humans must not only obey orders, but must do so through self-awareness, self-reflection and the active choice, as faith must be the individual, free, reflective choice, concluding that faith is the final and central concept of the ethical system.

### **Ethics and the Relationship to God**

Both ethical thoughts agree on the role of virtues and their relation to the goodness of God but differ in their examples. In the Islamic ethical thought, one holds the ability to do well, but need the help by God to perfect the goodness within oneself. In the Christian thought, goodness is found in the individual relationship with God, and the choice of being religious. Both thoughts argue that one must choose the good, and that the good actions performed for others, will evidentially lead to a better position for oneself.

A constant fulcrum out through the analyses is the relationship between the Self and God. It is the central theme of both ethical thoughts, and the greatest similarity between them. Responsibility, free will, and choices were some of the key words through the analyses of the ethical thoughts, which indicate that humans must act, choose to act, in accordance to living an ethical life.

In the Islamic ethical thought, we learned that only actions based on free will can be judged as ethical actions. In the works of Kierkegaard, we were taught that only the active choices, and the actions performed on the base of independent, self-reflective choices, could be valued as ethical. But what is the role of God then? If one has the power to act ethically, the power to choose to act, then why ask God to help one achieve noble traits? To answer this, we must understand the relationship between God and the Self.

Firstly, I will go through the understanding of the Self and God in the Islamic ethical system. To do this, I will look at the 16<sup>th</sup> Qur'anic verse of chapter 50, Qaf:

«وَلَقَدْ خَلَقْنَا الْإِنْسَانَ وَنَعْلَمُ مَا تُوَسْوِسُ بِهِ نَفْسُهُ وَنَحْنُ أَقْرَبُ إِلَيْهِ مِنْ حَبْلِ الْوَرِيدِ».

“And We have already created man and know what his soul whispers to him, and We are closer to him than [his] jugular vein”. (Qur'an, Qaf: 16)

The Qur'anic verse is a key example of the relationship between the Self and God. In the verse, God explains, not only how He created man and knows what is within him, but also places Himself closer than the “jugular vein”. Being close is not a physical distance, but a spiritual one. A distance between the soul, or in this case, the Self, and God. The well-known scholar, Ibrahim Amini, explained in his work *Self-building*, that the human Self is “a single reality but is the possessor of different dimensions within his single existence”. (Amini, 2012: 19)

The Self is described as having different dimensions. On one point the Self is gifted with “heavenly excellence” and given a source of perfection through the Godly characteristics. (Amini, 2012: 19)

Ibrahim Amini calls it a “Heavenly gift”, and cited a quote from Imam ‘Ali (‘a) stating that:

“Whoever discovers the nobility of the Self shall guard him against lowness of passions and false desires”. (Ghirar al-Kukm: 710)

This narration introduces us to the point that the Self also holds a dimension of lowliness. The Prophet Muhammad stated, that “your greatest enemy is yourself, which is located between your two sides”. (Al-Majlisi, 1983, V. 70: 64)

This does not mean, that the Self is divided into two, rather it means that there are different dimensions of the Self. Perfecting the heavenly given, will result in the Self being better than the angels, and heedlessly following the lowliness will cause the Self to be worse than the animals. In this example, angels are creations of total submission and obedience, and animals are creations of sole desires. The battle, Ibrahim Amini argued, continue until one of the dimensions becomes dominant. Getting more in contact with the Self’s divine nature, one acquires nearness to God. (Amini 2012, 25)

Finally, the relationship between the Self and God, is defined by several steps. Humans must strive to gain a certain character trait or quality, then ask for its perfect form through the power of God. When a virtuous person makes an ethical decision and act upon it, his actions has potential to be more effective and complete through the power of God. The closeness of the Self and God has a direct influence on the ability to perfect one’s ethical actions.

To start off understanding the self, as Kierkegaard described it in the Christian ethical thoughts, I will introduce one of his most famous quotes on the self:

“Mennesket er Aand. Men hvad er Aand? Aand er Selvet. Men hvad er Selvet? Selvet er et Forhold, der forholder sig til sig selv, eller er det I Forholdet, at Forholdet forholder sig til sig selv. Selvet er ikke Forholdet, men at Forholdet forholder sig til sig selv”. (Sabir, 2007: 109)

Translated into: “The human is spirit. But what is spirit? The spirit is the Self. But what is the Self? The Self is a relationship, which relates to itself. It is the essence of the relationship, that relates to itself. The Self is not the relationship between the two but exists as the relationship relates to itself”.

The Self, Kierkegaard argued, is the concept of one relating to oneself. The Self is a vital substance, dynamic and productive. The Self is the understanding and reflecting about oneself. As humans can think about themselves, think and reflect about their soul, actions and intentions, shows, to Kierkegaard, that humans have selves. It is not the thinking which is the self, but it is the ability to reflect upon oneself. The self is a key element of the ethical system, Kierkegaard presented in his works. It goes hand in hand with his understanding of God, as the Self is a constant reflection upon God.

Kierkegaard concluded, that the Self had its origin in God, and He created signs of Him everywhere in the World, and in the human body and mind. If one truly wants to know God, one must know one's self, Kierkegaard argued (Sabir, 2007: 112).

Kierkegaard did not need rational or scientific proof that God exists, rather he stated that by looking around oneself, looking at the World and the Universe, and looking inside of oneself, one would find proof of God's existence. Kierkegaard argued, in another quote: “If I were to wish for something, I would not wish for wealth and power, but the passion of the opportunity. (I would wish for) an eye that forever and everywhere sees the opportunity”. (Kierkegaard, 1997: 18)



The “opportunity” is the hidden knowledge of the World, only God can provide for His servants. The quote is an example of a servant of God asking Him to give him the opportunity to understand and witness the hidden wonders of the World, might even be the nearness of God.

One must understand himself in order to understand God, Kierkegaard said. To understand oneself is a trying and hard matter, he further argued. All humans might have a Self, but to have an awaking Self is hard work. It demands a struggle or fight, not against others, but a fight to gain self-control. (Sabir, 2007: 112)

It is not to fight one’s Self, but to have self-control. One must seek awareness of one’s Self and the outer factors which affects the Self. If one does not take control over one’s Self, the Self will act in accordance with the influences of others. If one, on the other hand, separates oneself from outer influences, one will gain the power to create one’s own destiny.

Not only must one fight the outer influences by others, but also the outer influences of oneself. Kierkegaard divides the Self into the inner sphere and the outer sphere, where the outer one affects the inner. The inner is the pure Self, which is in relation to God, and the outer is the egocentric, and self-desiring Self.

Humans must, first and foremost, act in accordance to what is ethically right and stay away from what is ethically wrong. One will never reach the higher levels without being fully ethical. Ethics are in the case, a method to reach the desired goal. Through ethics, one will grow spiritually, and through one’s spiritual growth one will understand true love. (Sabir, 2007: 113)

Love is the most important part of having faith and being truly ethical. Only through love for others, one will reach the highest level of love (faith) of God. Without love, even love for one’s own self-discovery and self-recognition, one will never fully have a pure heart, which is essential to the nearness of God by one’s Self.

Purity of one's heart is the highest level of self-recognition, and with an impure heart, one will merely gain self-deception. (Ibid)

Kierkegaard stated:

“Hjertets Reenhed, dette er et billedligt Udtryk, som sammenligner Hjertet med Havet, og hvorfor vel just med det? Fordi Havets Dybde er dets Reenhed, og dets Reenhed er dets Gjennemsigtighed [...] Som Havet gjengiver Himlens Høide I sin rene Dybde, saaledes gjengiver Hjertet, naar det er stille dybt gjennemsigtigt, det Godes himmelske Ophøiethed I sin rene Dybde”. (Walker, 1985: 121)

Translated as: “The purity of the heart is related to the comparison between the Heart and the Ocean. And why do we compare the two? Because the depth of the Ocean is its purity, and its purity is its transparency. Like the Ocean reflects the elevation of the Heaven, the Heart reflects the sublimity of the heavenly Good, in its pure depth”.

With this quote, Kierkegaard concluded that the purity of the heart is equal to the example of the sea. The colour of the sea reflects the depth of the sky, and the purity of the heart reflects one's closeness to God. An impure sea will not reflect the depth and beauty of the sky likewise will an impure heart not reflect the depth of the Divine. The purer the heart is, God will be visible in one's Self. (Sabir, 2007: 115)

Conclusively, Kierkegaard argues that the Self is the true reality of humans, but the Self will never escape God. Humans will never be able to outrun God, even if one does not believe in God, God is always near. He is always in front, behind, on both sides, beneath and above.

Humans can know God, but one must truly know oneself through self-reflection and self-recognition.

He concluded that the Self has no stagnation, as it always moves in relation to God, closer or further away depending on one's self-understanding and self-control.

The Self and God is in constant relation to one another, as the Self is a part of God, the owner of the Self just have to realize it through reflections and self-search. Ethics, in this symbiosis, is a tool to control one's Self, and thereby obtain closeness to God.

Like in the Islamic ethical thoughts, humans must take the initiative to act, to intent to act, or to search for God. Both ethical thoughts agree to the point, that God is always near, and all humans possess the ability to reach Him. Humans are required to want the nearness of God, and actively search for the path towards Him. The essence of both understandings of the Self and God is similar, and likewise is the relation between the two in the regards to ethics. This sums up the role of virtues, and the position of God and the Self in the search for an ethical life. Conclusively, we can argue that there is no ethical life without virtues, and the father of all virtues is faith. This means that God must be the centre of one's life to fully reach the state of having an ethical life.

## **Conclusion**

In this analysis, I wanted to understand the similarities and differences of the two ethical thoughts. A Christian and an Islamic. The very foundation of the two ethical thoughts are different. They are based on different ethical branches, and it is therefor striking that the ethical thoughts have more similarities than differences. Despite the foundational differences, they differ in the expression of examples, or differs in the details.

The main difference between the two ethical thoughts is found in the determination of ethical values. In the Islamic ethical thought, ethics and morality is viewed as ethical truths, that exist independently of God's revelations and human reason. God created the ethical truths independent. In the Christian ethical thought, the knowledge of God plays the central and only role in determining ethics.

Another difference is found in relation to the ethical thoughts' opinion on human reason. They differ as the Christian ethical thought is based on the Divine Command theory, meaning that God's commands and knowledge is the only elements of valuing ethics. Ethical concepts and moral conducts are determined as good if they are in line with the commands of God, and they are understood as evil if they oppose God's commands.

This means that the virtues as they are commanded by God, could be different from ethics as they are understood by human reason. We saw this in the example of Abraham, as he was commanded to kill his son despite it being irrational. The common ethical concept is that it is wrong to kill one's own offspring, and still God commanded it meaning that, according to the ethical thought, that it was ethically good. The commands of God are found in scriptures, prophetic examples and spiritual intuition and experiences.

The view of the Islamic ethical thought is that ethical truths are independent from the commands of God, and human reason. The only role of reason and revelation is to discover ethical rules, not to create them. As they are independent truths, the commands of God cannot contradict the human reason, like exemplified in the Christian ethical thought.

God plays a necessary role in both thoughts, but the purpose of the creation of humans is important too. The purpose and final goal of humans, in the Islamic ethical thought, is reaching perfection, meaning closeness to God and thereby happiness. It is based on the concept and ethical idea, that humans seek happiness as a natural instinct. The perfection is reached through perfecting noble traits, whereas the ethical rulings are key tools. The purpose of ethics is then to help humans to reach happiness.

The purpose of human life, according to the Christian thought, was to be created in the image of God. The Islamic ethical thought does not use the same term, but if one makes use of interpretations, one could argue that the implementation of God's attributes holds the same meaning as the one of the Christian thoughts.

The fundamental ideas regarding the purpose of life are similar, but they are expressed and explained in two different ways. With other words, we find similarities in the general concepts, and differences in the foundations and the details.

The Christian ethical thought agrees to some extent, that only through perfecting of ethical traits, humans can obtain their relation to God. Different from the Islamic thought, the Christian does not describe the purpose of ethics. Ethics are somehow implicit in the Christian thought, and something commonly understood, but we find that choosing God, and surrendering to the command of God is the highest moral trait. This leads us to the conclusion of both ethical thoughts that faith is an essential part of ethics.

Faith is not the only element the two ethical thoughts have in common, human responsibility too is a key concept in both thoughts. They agree that humans must fulfill three responsibilities: towards God, oneself and others. They also agree, to some extent, on the meaning of the responsibilities, which is exemplified in a triangle, where the fulfillment of one responsibility affects another.

One cannot fulfill one's responsibilities towards oneself without fulfilling the responsibilities towards God and others. Doing good, is not only doing good by oneself, one must do good to God and others to fulfill the true virtues. Both ethical thoughts agree on the concepts of goodness, and the goodness of God, but differ in their examples, where in the Islamic ethical thoughts, one holds the ability to do good, but need the help by God to perfect the goodness within oneself. In the Christian thoughts, goodness is found in the individual relationship with God, and the choice of being religious. Both argue that one must choose the good, and that the good actions performed for others, will essentially lead to perfecting of character traits, and leading to the final goal of both ethics and human beings.

Faith is the fundamental element of both ethical thoughts. Despite the disagreement of the two ethical thoughts, found in the Christian ethical thought that argues that the commands of God are the key source of ethics, in contrast to the Islamic ethical thought that argues that ethical truths are independent from the commands of God. They agree on the importance of faith. An action can never be valued as ethically correct nor good, without it being performed by a person who has faith. Both ethical thoughts emphasize that acting in accordance with the wish of God is the highest level of morality.

The ethical thoughts differ in their understanding of religion and the goal of human life. Kierkegaard argues that the religious paradox and belief despite irrationality is the highest level of morality, and Ayatollah Meşbāḥ Yazdī argues that faith is not essential opposite to reason, as Islamic beliefs do not hold any paradoxes as seen in Christianity. The goal of human life, to Kierkegaard, is to reach the Abrahamic level of submission to the will of God. Whereas Ayatollah Meşbāḥ Yazdī concluded that the goal of human life is to find happiness, as it is found through closeness to God.

The final goal for both ethical thoughts is to reach nearness to God, through human responsibility although it is explained differently. This means that they differ in their understandings of God but agree that being ethical translates as fulfilment of ethical responsibilities towards God, oneself and others. Finally working together in a symbiosis where God and all His creations are closely connected, and upholding virtues in relation to all dimensions of life will lead to final and eternal happiness.

## Resources

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