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ETHICS IN MEDIEVAL ISLAM: A CONSPECTUS

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The aim of this paper is to present a general review of one theme of Islamic ethical thought that should be of significance and interest to modern philosophers: analytical discussions of the meanings of ethical terms, together with some background information on normative ethics which provide the basis for the evolution of analytical ethics. Two other topics of contemporary interest were also discussed extensively by Muslim thinkers, the psychology of moral action and the question of moral freedom, but I shall leave these aside and concentrate on the first topic.

I shall start with a simplified classification of types of ethical writing in medieval Islam, which will provide a frame of reference for the types we are interested in. Two levels of generality in ethical thinking have already been mentioned, which were called "normative" and "analytical." (I should have liked to call the latter "philosophical," but as we shall see there is a theological theory which is consciously antiphilosophical, though just as general. The term "meta-ethics" is currently in use, but I find it nothing but a modish substitute for what used to be simply "ethics.") There are also two traditions of ethical thinking, which we can call secular and religious, according to their conceptions of the proper sources of ethical knowledge. Thus we can derive a fourfold scheme of types of writing on ethics: (A.) Normative religious ethics. (B.) Normative secular ethics. (C.) Ethical analysis in the religious tradition. (D.) Ethical analysis by philosophers. I am going to review A, B, and D rapidly, and to concentrate on C, where it seems to me that the most interesting thought is to be found. I shall then discuss whether one school of religiously oriented analytical thought, that of the Mu'tazilites, is not really philosophical in its method, in spite of the usual classification as theological.

A. Normative religious ethics begins in the primary sources of Islam, the Qur'^{ān} and the Traditions, which prescribe many rules of law and morality for man. The Qur'^{ān} also contains suggestions for answers to some more general questions of ethics, but it is not a book of philosophy or even theology, and its suggestions are not without ambiguities. If they had been, there would have been less controversy among Muslim theologians on these questions. The Traditions include the same kind of materials, more extensively but

carrying less weight for Muslims. Next, we have the books on *fiwā'*, the details of Islamic law, systematizing and classifying the prescriptions of the Qur'^{ān} and Traditions. Another genre of moral literature in the religious tradition is the books on "noble qualities of character" (*makārim al-akhlāq*), which are concerned not with detailed law but with religious virtues. Then we have Ṣūfī books for meditation and manuals of instruction in the path to God, which are deeply moral in a practical or normative sense. All these kinds of normative religious books provided materials for analytical ethics, without themselves analyzing ethical terms.

B. Normative secular ethics is represented by "Mirrors for princes" in the Persian tradition, giving advice to sultans and wazirs about government and politics. We may also include here wisdom literature contained in proverbs and poetry. Then there is a Greek tradition of popular Platonism, found in books like the treatises of the Sincere Brethren. The books of Miskawayh and others on character (*akhlāq*), listing the virtues and vices, should really be put here, as I shall explain when I come back to them in their customary location under philosophical ethics. All these kinds of literature at least provide materials for more philosophical efforts.

Of a more inward character in both lines of normative writing, A and B, there are abundant works of Sufism and Platonic mysticism. These two traditions, which merged in later centuries, came close to philosophy through presenting total outlooks on life, although often not fully reasoned.

C. The study of ethical principles in the religious tradition starts with the jurists' discussions of the sources of divine law (*sharī'a*) in the eighth and ninth centuries A.D. In these controversies we have the roots of an analytical treatment of the concepts of justice and obligation, because they take theoretical stands on how the law is known. From about the middle of the eighth century there are, roughly speaking, two parties on this issue. The party of rational opinion (*ra'y*) held that in deciding questions of Islamic law and morals judges and lawyers might make their own rational judgements independently of scripture, in cases or aspects where scripture gives no guidance. The other party, more strictly traditional, held that legal judgements can be based *only* on the divine law, or derived from it in certain approved ways, such as analogy (*qiyās*). The conflict on this question was focussed by Shāfi'ī in particular, with his systematic critique of legal methods. Shāfi'ī worked out in a very thorough way the theory of a positive law, based entirely on Islamic revelation; and he states his primary principle in his maxim that justice is nothing but obedience to the law.

Theologians' discussions (*kalām*) of the sources of right probably arose out of the jurists' discussions, but they paid more attention to principles. The division of parties follows the same lines: the partisans of reason maintaining that man can know much of what is right and obligatory by independent

thought, the traditionalists supporting revelation as the sole source of such knowledge. This debate is part of a wider one on the sources of knowledge in religion.

In surveying the history of this debate, I shall begin with the early Muʿtazilites. They have some historical relation to Greek philosophy, Christian theology, and the partisans of opinion in law, but the details of influences on them are still rather obscure. Their rationalistic ethical theories are known only in outline from the books on sects by their opponents, Ashʿarī and others, who give their bare positions with little of the arguments leading to them.

The early reactions of traditionalist theologians against rationalistic ethics were closely connected with traditionalist fears of reason in jurisprudence. Following up the line of thought started by Shāfiʿī and Ibn Ḥanbal, theologians before Ashʿarī as well as Ashʿarī himself formulated these reactions, although still in rather brief statements. The main objection they raised against rationalistic ethics was that independent human reason implies a limit on the power of God; for if man could judge what is right and wrong he could rule on what God could rightly prescribe for man, and this would be presumptuous and blasphemous. They further objected that the judgements of reason were arbitrary, based only on desires; that such judgements in fact always contradicted each other; and lastly that they arrogated the function of revelation and rendered it useless. The doctrine of this school on ethics corresponded with that of Shāfiʿī on legal justice; in brief, that right action is that which is commanded by God. In fact we can find an even closer relation than one of correspondence, for such a view merges right ethical action with legal justice. I call this view (of both jurists and theologians) “theistic subjectivism.” It is subjectivist because it relates values to the view of a judge who *decides* them, denying anything objective in the character of acts themselves, that would make them right or wrong independently of anyone’s decision or opinion. And the view is theistic because the decider of values is taken to be God.

Now, going on to the later developments inside *kalām*, I shall return to the rationalistic side and describe its more developed form. This was worked out by the later Muʿtazilites in defense against traditionalist attacks. By the tenth and still more the eleventh century they have been vigorously criticized. So they are alert to the objections and have to be more sophisticated in answering these and elaborating their theory. Their position is seen in its most detailed form in the later Muʿtazilite ʿAbd al-Jabbār (c. 935–1025), whose enormous work the *Mughnī* in about twenty volumes was recovered in the 1950s in a single Arabic manuscript in Sanʿa, Yemen, and has since been edited in Cairo by I. Madkour, G. Anawati, and others. So we have this vast material available, and it contains the most extensive discussion of ethical

principles known in Islamic literature. It is not entirely ʿAbd al-Jabbār’s original creation, but develops a school tradition, going back about a century earlier to Abū Ḥāshim (d. 932) and his father Jubbāʾī (d. 915).

It is indeed an elaborate theory of ethics. Much space is devoted to defensive arguments, showing that the power of God is not limited in any way that matters by the existence of rational human judgements of value, for God is always superior and we never have the slightest ground to criticize Him morally for what He does, thinks or commands. Moreover, our judgements of reason when properly made are not arbitrary but conform to objective principles. What these are is set forth in the detailed system of ʿAbd al-Jabbār. His principles of ethics resemble those of British intuitionism, and they are such as any rational person can know—e.g., the principle that lying is wrong, so long as it does not come into conflict with a more insistent ethical consideration. (Here we enter into a complication, which will be mentioned later.) The rationalism of ʿAbd al-Jabbār and his predecessors allows a place for revelation as an indispensable supplement to reason. It tells us some important truths on value that reason unaided could not have discovered, although reason can recognize and accept them as rational when once they have been revealed—e.g., the value of prayer in building character.

In their offensive efforts against opponents, the later Muʿtazilites argued that the commands of God are not enough to constitute right and do not by themselves, in their character as mere commands, fulfill the requirements of what we normally mean by “right.” Moreover, we have the natural ability to know the right independently of any command or revelation, as is shown by the existence of moral judgements outside Islam. They also pointed out what they took to be the immoral consequences of theistic subjectivism, such as that God could then make lying right for men if He wished to do so, simply by commanding men to tell lies. And then if He wished He could punish them for not lying—or again, if He wished, for lying!

The traditionalist reactions against rationalism were sharp, and were formulated by several famous theologians, in particular Ibn Ḥazm, Ghazālī, and Shahrastānī. They renewed the insistence on the omnipotence of God: He must not be limited in any way in His power to command man. They accepted fearlessly consequences such as God’s power and right to command things which seem wrong to man, such as lying, and rejected the charge of immorality in God as being meaningless or blasphemous. They attacked the rationalists’ principles as inconsistent, discordant with scripture, and not really known by reason since they are not universally accepted. They objected strongly to the suggestion that revelation was supplementary, and reaffirmed that it is the primary source of ethical knowledge and provides everything that is needed. Reason is only an aid to understanding scripture, according to Ibn Ḥazm, but others allowed its use to extend the prescriptions of scripture

by certain legitimate methods. To prove these positions, scripture itself was called upon regularly for quotations of texts showing approval of the traditionalist theory.

The general result of this debate in the Muslim world was that rationalism continued to be widespread in Shi'ite countries such as Iran, where it was incorporated into Shi'ite Islam, while the traditionalist view prevailed in Sunnite countries until modern times. But with the incursion of western rationalism, that type of view on ethics seems to receive a favorable welcome among modern Muslim intellectuals in all countries, without any commitment to the particular Mu'tazilite doctrines.

After this review of schools, I want to raise an important historical question of method. Is the *katām* discussion of ethics theology or philosophy? With regard to subject matter, Islamic ethics in *katām* is seldom far from God, and in this respect it can be classed as always theological. But with regard to method we distinguish two types of theology: revelational, based entirely on information derived from scripture (after an initial rational apologetic justifying scripture as authentic), and philosophical, based on natural knowledge and not relying on scripture for anything essential. So the question can be reworded, How much of *katām* ethics is philosophical in method? To answer this question we have to consider the two main schools separately.

Mu'tazilite theology as a whole starts from a few broad principles learned initially from the Qur'ān, such as the unity and justice of God. I am not sure whether even these principles are not also justified by independent rational arguments. R. M. Frank has done significant work on the methods of *katām*, and we may hope that he will give us further clarification of this basic question. But certainly when the Mu'tazilites work on ethical theory it seems to me that their method is philosophical, not revelational. To judge from 'Abd al-Jabbār, the negative evidence is clear enough: he does not quote scripture as a decisive argument, but only in passing, if at all. The positive evidence consists in the types of argument that he uses. Two types are prominent, according to the subject matter.

First of all, there are arguments for definitions. These are asserted with reasons, then defended dialectically by answering objections. For example, an act that is *wājib*, "obligatory," is defined in the *Mughnī* as that act whose agent deserves blame for omitting it (without deserving any praise for doing it). Such acts are called "*wājib*" by everyone, as can be confirmed by the authority of lexicographers. The objections which 'Abd al-Jabbār thinks he has to answer are those of inconsistency, of discordance with linguistic usage, and of irreligion and immorality, and each one is refuted by an appropriate method. He criticizes his opponents' definitions in the same ways. For example, the definition of *wājib* as commanded by God, or that of which the omission is punished by God, implies that one cannot use "*wājib*" intelli-

gently without knowing that there is a commander. This is false, because pre-Islamic peoples and pagans remote from the Islamic world have known what "obligatory" means.

A second type of discussion concerns the specific content of the obligatory, the good and so on: ethical rules such as "lying is always evil," "wrongdoing is always evil." At this level of ethical thinking, we sometimes have to weigh relevant factors against each other, so this leads to a theory of *prima facie* goods and evils like that of W.D. Ross. And, again as in Ross, the rules are known by rational intuitions. He answers objections in ways similar to those mentioned before. Opponents assert, for example, that if God commanded lying it would be good. He criticizes such an assertion as immoral, i.e., ultimately discordant with our ordinary conception of what is "moral."

The question of method in Mu'tazilite ethics needs further investigation, as does method in Mu'tazilite theology in general. Provisionally, I have to conclude that it is primarily philosophical, in a modern sense that is not essentially tied to the Greek tradition as is Islamic philosophy in the accepted sense. The Mu'tazilites have usually been classified as theologians because of their origins, their interests and, above all, the absence of explicit influences from Greek philosophy.

The method of the traditionalists accords with their first principle, that the primary source of religious knowledge is revelation. This principle is itself supported by rational apologetic arguments, such as the miracle of the Qur'ān; if it were supported by revelation the argument would be circular, as Ibn Ḥazm and others noted. But, once revelation is established as a source of truth, all knowledge of theology and ethics after that point is based on scripture or traditions or their derivatives. Consequently, the clinching arguments of Ash'arī, Ibn Ḥazm, and others of their tendency are quotations from the sacred texts, correctly interpreted. Quotations are not used merely to illustrate or support, as we might think at first sight; they are the main evidence, sufficient and final. So the ethics of this school is revelational, not philosophical in its method. This fact does not exclude an extensive use of dialectic to refute opponents.

This difference in primary principles and methods between the two schools often produces arguments at cross purposes. If the Mu'tazilites claim that some kind of act is immoral and therefore cannot have been approved of by a prophet, Ibn Ḥazm answers that a prophet approved of it, therefore it cannot be immoral and the Mu'tazilite criticism of it is irreligious. This ploy follows the rules of gamesmanship in controversy, that you must whenever possible score a point that cannot be answered frankly by your opponents, in the intellectual environment of the times, for fear of ridicule, disapproval, censorship, or worse. Thus in the present instance the Mu'tazilites could not reply that even if a prophet had approved of something, such as stealing, it

would still have been wrong, because it was not acceptable in medieval Islam to declare that a prophet was mistaken about anything, and least of all that Muḥammad was. Shahrastānī, too, is often at cross purposes with his opponents and answers arguments of rationalism made on the human level with theological considerations. Thus, when the Muʿtazilites say that we know truths of ethics by reason, he is apt to change the subject and discuss how God knows such things or to write about the relations of obligation between God and man.

The sustained discussion on ethics in the *kalām* literature is all the more remarkable because it owes little to the Greeks except in an indirect and diffuse way. It is original in Islam, and grew quite naturally out of the early theological and juristic debates among Muslims. It appears to me as chronologically the second major occurrence in history of a profound discussion on the meanings and general content of ethical concepts, the first being that of the ancient Greek sophists and Plato. If this is a sound judgement, it gives an importance to medieval Islamic ethics in the general history of philosophy that has not been realized up to now. It is to be hoped that in the future it will be more appreciated as a result of the recovery of other substantial texts in addition to those of ʿAbd al-Jabbār.

D. I shall say little about ethics in the mainstream of Islamic philosophy. What is usually known as such is the books on *akhlāq* ("character" rather than "ethics") by Miskawayh, Naṣīr ad-dīn Ṭūṣī, and Dawwānī. These works follow a settled tradition of Hellenic philosophy in Arabic, dealing with the perfection and ends of the soul, virtues as means and vices as extremes. They contain much of interest for the social history of medieval Islamic morals, manners, and society. But their philosophical framework is taken from Aristotle, the Peripatetics, and Neoplatonism, and offers little of general philosophical interest that is new. The authors do not enter into the controversy of *kalām* about the concepts of right and wrong, good and evil, so that these *akhlāq* books are not the place to look for ethical philosophy in an analytical style.

In the major philosophers, Fārābī (870–950), Ibn Sīnā (980–1037) and Ibn Rushd (1126–98) we do find significant remarks on these concepts, in the Neoplatonic tradition but with individual developments. But they did not write much on ethics in lengthy passages or separate works, so we have to piece their views together from scattered pages. We find that Ibn Rushd, for instance, has much to say on ethics, but perhaps even in him the main interest comes just where he is reacting against Ashʿarite *kalām* and its theistic subjectivism. He compares it to the ethics of the sophists, having observed with his usual acuteness the common elements of subjectivism between the two schools, so remote from each other in time and environment. He strongly

upholds the objectivism of Plato and Aristotle, with full consciousness of the great tradition he is following.

Later philosophy is predominantly mystical, a blend of Islamic Sufism and Hellenic Neoplatonism. We can look forward to finding ethical ideas of interest in the Persian works of Ṣadr ad-dīn Shīrāzī and others in this tradition, now being studied intensively by S. H. Nasr and F. Rahman.