The Identity and Bases of the Ethical System of Islam

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ABSTRACT

The identity and bases of the ethical system of Islam is the main question that the present study desires to answer. Another concept contrary to the foregoing one is the approach in which the personal and atomistic ethics is taken to replace the ethical system as an institution and structure with a specific goal and interrelated constituents. The religious ethics system can be defined as a set of interrelated ethical statements with a divine origin that – along with other social institutions – moves toward human perfection. The main effect of proving the systematic identity of ethics is confirmation of religion's inclusion of ethics in an organic, part and whole relationship, which opposes the humanistic and secular ethics. This is because the most important indicator of the religious ethics system is its divine origin and root, which differentiates it from human and humanist viewpoints. The bases constituting the Islamic ethics theory are a set of foundations that are considered as its essentials and without which, there is no such reality as a system. Among these, the main foundations include the theological basis that regards the metaphysical aspects, the ontological basis which addresses the ethical realism, the anthropologic basis which concerns the comprehensiveness and the golden principle of human moderateness, the aesthetic basis which regards the action and agent goodness as the two principles of human behaviors, and finally, the methodological basis which suggests that the religious ethics has the potential for discursive, mystical, and divine explanations.

KEYWORDS: Identity, Bases, Ethical system, Islam, Religious ethics

INTRODUCTION

Statement of the problem

Instead of talking about the individual ethics – which usually leads to secular ethics – Islam suggests the ethical system, a reality that has been neglected by the previous researchers of ethics and in fact, it can be considered as the common shortcoming of all ethical resources which are based on both rational and traditional methods. It might have been this restricted view toward ethics that formerly kept it at the level of personal advice and recommendation and led to its underdevelopment in comparison with other Islamic sciences. Another point is that the systematic view toward the ethics domain – which has been unprecedentedly welcomed in the Western as well as the Islamic world – can reveal the importance of Islam in introduction of an ethical system that despite its commonalities with other ethical schools, enjoys its exclusive merits and qualities. Every personal and collective ethical decision can be meaningful based on this system, which will be elaborated on in the following sections.

Research structure

In the present study, the main question is that what is the epitomical nature of the religious ethics system and what are its bases?

Our hypothesis suggests that Islam has an independent ethical system in its composition, which perfectly differentiates it from other ethical approaches.

The significance of this discussion is in that we can be committed to an independent religious ethics if we are committed to an ethical system and structure. Without this, ethics is a common issue between all people and schools.

The philosophy of the ethical system

The key point about the importance of the ethical system in Islam and its consequences for the effectiveness of religion is the presence of a systematic view to religion, since individual view is in fact an atomistic one which might lead to collection of conflicting and even paradoxical teachings. Contrary to this atomistic view is an approach based on a specific system and structure whose derivative principles are based on its basic principles and its ideology is rooted in its worldview. Allameh Tabatabaee says in this regard, *Every ethical system is firstly based on its own worldview and the difference between ethical theories originates from difference in worldviews, and secondly, it is based on anthropology and the philosophical aspects of that

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In other words, the nature of the religious ethics system is discussed here because some viewpoints such as secular ethics approach – when talking about ethics – only address certain aspects like individual ethics. However, with regard to the concept of system, the religious ethics should be considered as a system with specific principles and constituents necessary for its creation and survival. In fact, lack of belief in a systematic religious collection paves the way for various eclectic views to religion. Therefore, to answer the question whether ethics without God is basically possible or no, we might suggest that if the absolute ethics is not intended, but rather, the ethical system is meant which provides human with true bliss, and if God is taken as the eternal, unique God, then the answer to this question will be absolutely negative. The reason is that, from the philosophic and ontologic viewpoint, ethics in every form and at any level is a phenomenon like other phenomena, and there is no phenomenon without a creator. Thus, ethics is not possible without God – but if we mean different ethical systems with different levels in value and importance, then we might assert that these can exist without God. (Misbāh Yazdī, 1993, pp. 197-198)

In other words, it is not possible to absolutely claim that ethics is connected to religion or is independent of it, but rather, we should ask what ethics based on what foundations? If we take only the primary bases of this theory, then it won't be dependent upon religion, but if we want to shape it in a certain form and to say that which ethics is good and why it is good, then it will be related to the principles of religion. When we want to specify the ultimate perfection of human, we have to bring up the issue of God, so as to prove that human’s ultimate perfection is in nearness to God. (Ibid)

**Practical outcomes**

Some reasons for systematization of ethics can be enumerated as following.

1. **Exact understanding of the Islamic teachings** relies on seeing their relationship with each other and comprehending these relationships. The reason is that religious teachings constitute a related, coherent, and goal-oriented collection. Deep understanding of one of them depends on recognizing it in a set of relationships.

2. **As the leaders of the religious governments consider humans’ ethical growth** as one of their main goals, then for correct planning, they need a systematic picture of the Islamic ethics based on which they can carry out the necessary actions to develop and publicize the Islamic ethics.

3. ** Provision of a system which is based on a worldview on one hand and sets the grounds for observance of religious orders on the other hand – that is, one which is derived from theology and is precedent to jurisprudence and so, rejects the secular ethics approach.**

**The epitomical nature of the ethical system**

There have been different definitions for the ethical system. Although each of these has adopted a certain view as the main indicator of its definition, a considerable amount of the suggested definitions are focused on the goals of the ethical system, as following.

Master Javadi Amoli says, “It means gathering the interconnected elements and constituents in a collection; these are directed to obtain a certain, unique goal through mutual effects on each other”. (Javādī Āmolī, 2011, p. 141)

Master Sobhani asserts, “A system is a kind of harmonious relationship between constituents of a collection to fulfill a specific goal, in a way that each constituent completes the other ones, and lack of each constituent makes the system lose its specific goal and favorable effect”. (Sobhānī, 1996, p. 73)

Master Mesbah Yazdi notes, “The term ethical system considers a set of interrelated elements which aim at a specific function and goal, in the same way that different organizations of a government which act to administer a country are called a ruling system. (Misbāh Yazdī, 1997, p. 149)

**The common points**

In the aforementioned definitions, the main factors of the ethical system include: A) the internal, interrelated elements and B) a common goal and result

The present authors’ opinion

In the foregoing definitions, valuable points about the ethical system have been pinpointed. However, in order to give a complete and comprehensive definition for the ethical system, two points should be noted:

**Consideration of the triple sides**

In the present authors’ view, the foregoing definitions have forgotten one of the main constituents and factors, that is, the origin and root of an ethical system. A system can originate either from God or human. As we will discuss later, the most important indicator of the religious ethics system is its divine root and origin. Therefore, it seems that an ethical system entails three sides, namely elements, origin, and goal. With elements we mean the set of ethical principles and rules whose origin is reason, traditions, and the divine disposition, while the goal in an ethical system is human perfection and nearness to God. In other words, an ethical system
starts with the divine origin, is completed with internal elements, and ends with a divine goal. Contrarily, in the secular definition of ethics, the elements are taken as human’s ethical deeds whose origin is only his conscience with a humanist support, with no consideration of revelation or motivation for nearness to God. So, the religious ethics system can be defined as a set of interrelated ethical statements with a divine origin that move toward human perfection. Actually, with this definition, two natural differences between the ethical system of Islam and the secular ethics can be identified in their origin and their function and goal. The common point between them is just the ethical deeds, which are the orders adjuncts which in essence do not entail moral virtue or vice, nor any certain direction. The organic relationship between religion and ethics as a prerequisite for the ethical system. What is important in clarification of the identity of the ethical system is religion’s inclusion of ethics and their organic, part and whole relationship, since religion includes beliefs, ethics, and orders. These three categories can be clearly seen in a famous tradition from the Holy Prophet, where he says, “Verily knowledge is three things: The strong sign, the just obligation, and the established rite” (Kulaynī, 1992, p. 37). These three principles are the same as beliefs, ethics, and canonic rules, which are all included in religion and are interrelated. For example, adherence to canonic rules will bring about divine morality and beliefs, and vice versa.

In fact, the most important indicator of the religious ethics system is its divine root and origin, not the human and humanist roots. Therefore, ethics can be meaningful only if it is based on religion. Consequently, the relationship between religion and ethics is not partial inclusion, but rather, is an organic, part and whole relationship. That is, ethics is part of religion. Indeed, religion is like a tree whose roots are beliefs, whose stem is ethics, and whose branches, leaves, and fruit are canonic rules (Misbāh Yazdī, 1999, p. 37). In fact, this fact should be noted that religion includes all phenomena related to life (J’afarī, 1999, p. 252). Accordingly, it has been said that religions are not sets of teachings about good or evil, but rather, they are general plans for life. (James, 1998, p. 26)

Bases of the ethical system of Islam

The theory of the ethical system of Islam is derived from a set of fundamental bases. These constitute the distinction of this system from other ethical schools. The main bases are as following.

1. The theological basis (the metaphysical aspects)

One of the features that distinguishes religious ethics from human ethics is its divine aspects, since it is natural and evident that senses and reason cannot be fully functional in provision of a comprehensive plan for the worldly life, let alone specifying the perspective of life after death and the metaphysical realities, since without having a minimal grasp of the metaphysical or religious bases, the endeavors of ethics are fruitless. (Ibid., pp. 13-14)

As Master Motahhari asserts, since religion views realities from above, it has a guiding and legitimizing role in various domains. For example, in the business domain, religion explicates if something is forbidden or authorized, with no consideration of the business itself. (Motahhari, 1999, vol. 3, pp. 51-52)

One of the long standing and vital desires of human is the need for justice. With their emphasis on the life after death, the divine religions promise the real justice (Misbāh Yazdī, 1994, vol. 1-3, p. 493), since justice is the peace for the oppressed ones throughout the world who have always been afflicted with oppressors’ harshness and cruelty. Imam Ali (AS) says in this regard, “Although Allah gives time to the oppressor, His catch would not spare him. Allah watches him on the passage of his way and the position of that which suffocates the throats.” (Nahj Al-Balaghah, sermon 97) In other words, since humans’ natural inequalities have doomed some of them to failure, the foregoing hope is the only remedy for this group’s disappointment. If this hope is taken away, the class clashes will be intensified (Durant, 1989, p. 445). When all hopes vanish, only religious feelings can change our lives for better, and just religion is capable of doing so. (James, 1998, p. 26) Consequently, some constituents of Theocentrism are based on this point that the existence and basis of anything in the universe originates from the absolute and infinite being of God, and also on the fact that human has the potential to move and achieve the perfection of self and attain nearness to God and His pleasure. Moreover, God’s pleasure and anger is the criterion for consideration of human’s free-will deed as a virtue or a vice.

2. Ontological basis (ethical realism)

Ethical realism contends that ethical principles and values exist independent of human. Contrarily, the opinion that there is a real and unconventional relationship and association between being and nonbeing and ethical virtues and vices is non-realism, which not only does not consider the values as unadapt and unrelated to the world of reality and existence, but also believes that it is people who make ethics and create values. In fact, realism is based on two premises. First, ethical claims express statements that are really true or false. Second, some of these statements are really true (Williams, 2004, p. 186). For these to be true, it should be accepted that the reality and existence of something is not dependent on its comprehension by others (McNaughton, 2001, p. 158), but rather, is related to the reality and existence. Therefore, realism is a basic principle in and a crucial criterion for discerning the truthfulness or falseness of a claim. Imam Ali (AS) also considers realism as one of
the main factors for sending the prophets and revelation of the Scriptures, when he says, "Then Allah sent His Messengers and series of His prophets towards them to get them to fulfill the pledges of His creation…to unveil before them the hidden virtues of wisdom …" (Nahj Al-Balaghah, sermon 1) This clearly reveals consideration of some ethical principles as fact-itself; principles which have been internally known by humans before the advent of the prophets. The importance of this point is that in the non-realism approach, the ethical values will be void of constancy and eternity, and the grounds will be set for their consideration as relative phenomena.

3. Anthropological basis (comprehensiveness and moderateness)

The basis of Islam's anthropology is consideration of human's existential features like his emotions, feelings, desires, and instincts, establishment of an internal coherence among them, and preventing them to conflict with the divine intelligence and even nearness to God. Moreover, Islam pays attention to human's free will and conscious choice despite the different inconveniences that happen in his mundane and spiritual life. Moreover, Islam notes that human has duties and responsibilities toward God, his conscience, and society.

Therefore, the ethical value and importance of the affairs related to conscience and society is in line with the responsibility toward God, and their consideration as virtue or vice is dependent on God's (dis)pleasure. This comprehensiveness cannot bear humans and dimensionality and is against emphasizing only one of the foregoing three sides. In ethical electiveness, each of these approaches leads to the appearance of a different humanist ethical school. The ethical school of Islam – in the form of the particular affirmative proposition – entails the features of other schools, and at the same time, it is established based on constant ethical virtues and its goal is human perfection.

4. Aesthetic basis (the action and agent goodness)

In the view of religion, the goodness of an ethical act depends on both its action goodness and agent goodness, especially on the agent goodness and cleanliness of the intentions in performing the deeds and that the intention is not an arbitrary or conventional affair, but rather, it is an existential reality which affects human deeds. In the ethical system of religion, intention has been valued greatly, since "Verily deeds depend on the intentions" (Ṭūst, 1985, vol. 1, p. 83) and "One will attain what he has intended" (Ibid). The importance of intention is a sign for the importance of the inner state, and this means that in Islam's view, the inner state is more important than the outer state. As Master Motahhari puts it, the goodness of action is not enough for the Otherworldly reward, and agent goodness is also needed; the goodness of action is like body and the goodness of agent is like the spirit and life. And faith in God and in the Day of Resurrection is the basic and necessary condition for the goodness of agent. (Motahhari, 2001, vol. 1, p. 307)

5. Methodological basis (the potential for discursive, mystical, and divine explanations)

Regarding the methodology discussion, the Islamic ethics developed and attained a level where it had the potential to acquire from all resources. It is one of the positive points of the ethical system of Islam that it can provide both traditional and rational explanations. Thus, one cannot find an absolute order in the ethical discussion which is contrary to an absolute order in Islam. Moreover, Islam has clearly the potential to express its points softly and with spiritual and mystical beauties, which has been terminologically called the mixed-method. Besides the explanatory aspect, the association of tradition and reason will bring about considerable effects with regard to the guidance dimension. As Mulla Sadra asserts, the inner state of humans is like a mixture of traits: some are bestial, some are fierce, some are devilish, and some are angelic. The bestial trait is the origin of desire, avarice, and impiety; the fierceness originates the envy, detestation, and animosity; the devilish trait is the root of machination, duplicity, deception, pride, and ambition; and the angelic disposition is the source of knowledge and purity. The basis and root of all moralities are these four traits, which are deeply mixed and interconnected within the human. The only way to get rid of these traits is the light and guidance taken from the divine law and reason (Sadr al-Motallehin Shirāzi, 1998, vol. 9, p. 93). Since human knowledge is limited, his recognition is liable to mistake, and his reason can be blinded and get ineffective due to the dominance of whims of the soul and temptations of Devil, the Noble Quran and the honorable Sunnah are two more resources in this regard. These two resources are highly guiding and decisive, and will have deep effects on the science of ethics. Besides, when reason gets help from revelation, it gets more powerful.

Conclusion

The study at hand, which planned and developed the identity and bases of the ethical system of Islam, attained several results as following. One of the practical outcomes of adherence to an ethical system is having a systematic picture of ethics which can be used to develop and institutionalize ethics in the society. After review and examination of different opinions about the definition of the ethical system – which mostly regarded the interrelated elements and goal – the present authors suggested the definition that the religious ethics system is as a set of interrelated ethical statements with a divine origin that move toward human perfection, provided that these are related to and affect each other.
Accordingly, religion is like a tree whose roots are beliefs, whose stem is ethics, and whose branches, leaves, and fruit are canonic rules. The bases of the ethical system of Islam discussed in the present study include:

A. The theological basis which contends that the existence and foundation of everything in the universe originates from the Absolute Being of God, and that human has the potential to attain nearness to God.

B. The ontological basis, which suggests that there is a real and unconventional relationship between being and nonbeing and ethical virtues and vices.

C. The anthropological basis which considers human's existential features like his emotions and instincts, establishment of an internal coherence among them, and preventing them to conflict with the divine intelligence and even nearness to God.

D. The aesthetic basis which maintains that the goodness of an ethical action depends on both its action goodness and agent goodness.

E. The methodological basis which suggests that the ethical system has the potential for discursive, mystical, and divine explanations. This has been called the mixed or combined method.

REFERENCES


Holy Quran


Naḥj Al-Balāgha.


