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On Ethics - Part II

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Abstract



In this part, the relation between actions and qualities is discussed. In Islamic ethics, both actions and qualities are important, though moral qualities and good nature are more important, as they lead to many good actions. Those qualities that are established remain after death if they are well-rooted. Hence, our main emphasis should be on acquiring virtues and good nature. To determine whether a quality is a virtue, most scholars hold that its results should be considered. Another group hold that a virtue is a virtue even if it does not lead to action. A third approach is to consider the human soul and whether that virtue makes it a better soul or, in other words, more human. In Islamic ethics, keeping the balance is considered a virtue and a sign of wisdom. A person who manages to keep a balance in all three faculties of the soul achieves the virtue of justice.

Keywords

Islamic ethics, good nature, virtues, balance, justice.

The Importance of Both Actions and Qualities

In Islamic ethics, both actions and qualities are important, and qualities may even be considered more important than random and occasional actions. For example, an essentially greedy person is worse than a person who commits acts of greed. The Quran calls our attention to both actions and qualities: “O you who have faith! Bow down and prostrate yourselves, and worship your Lord, and do good, so that you may be felicitous” (Quran, 22:77). This verse shows that both are important. In another verse, only qualities are mentioned:

Allah will say, “This day truthfulness shall benefit the truthful. For them there will be gardens with streams running in them, to remain in them forever. Allah is pleased with them and they are pleased with Him. That is the great success.”
(Quran, 5:119)

And in the following verse, actions are mentioned: “O you who have faith! Be wary of Allah, and be with the Truthful” (Quran, 9:119).

However, it should be noted that there are some instances where people may tell the truth but they are not truthful:

When the hypocrites come to you, they say, “We bear witness that you are indeed the apostle of Allah.” Allah knows that you are indeed His Apostle, and Allah bears witness that the hypocrites are indeed liars. (Quran, 63:1)

This verse speaks of the hypocrites who make true statements but are called liars because they say what they do not believe. Thus, a person may say the truth yet be dishonest. On the other hand, a person may be honest but at the same time morally required to avoid telling the truth; for example, if an honest person is asked by a tyrant where an innocent person is hiding, he should not

reveal the innocent person's whereabouts. If possible, he should stay silent; otherwise, he may manipulate the answer to keep his secret, or he may lie if there are no other ways.

Possessing a Good Nature

In his commentary on *Usul al-Kafi*, Mulla Salih Mazandarani quotes the following hadith of the Prophet (s): "On the Day of Judgement, nothing is put into the scale of a person's deeds weightier than a good nature" (Mazandarani, 1382 AH, 8:378). Hence, from all the good deeds, the heaviest on the scale is possessing a good nature, which is a quality that motivates many good actions. Mulla Salih continues:

This hadith shows that in the same way that the reward and punishment apply to actions, they also apply to having a good nature. Furthermore, the reward and punishment for qualities are greater than the reward and punishment for actions. (Mazandarani, 1382 AH, 8:378)

Laws and ethics

In his *Forty Hadiths*, Imam Khomeini mentions that there are three types of suffering in hell, each one more painful than the one preceding it: suffering caused by evil actions, suffering caused by vices, and suffering caused by false beliefs (Khomeini, 1371 Sh, 49).

Human beings are firstly formed by their beliefs, then by their qualities, and finally by their actions. As Muslims, our concern should not be only to follow Islamic law, but to also pursue the aim of Islamic law, which is to correct our actions, and then to correct our morals.

As an example, if we come across a person who is starving and

we have the ability to help him, it will be obligatory on us to give him something to eat. Legally speaking, we can offer him stale bread, since it will keep him alive. However, morality instructs us to offer him our own food and that which we desire for ourselves: “You will never attain piety until you spend out of what you hold dear, and whatever you may spend of anything, Allah indeed knows it” (Quran, 3:92). Islamic law also recommends this but does not make it obligatory. By nature, Islamic law is broad and has to include everyone, with all capacities. Islamic law advises us to keep him alive, but Islamic ethics tells us to rid ourselves of our ego and selfishness and give him the best of what we have. Hence, we should not restrict Islam to legal requirements.

Similarly, in the discussion of the rights of husbands and wives, Islamic law does stipulate certain boundaries. However, an Islamic family cannot function only by observing those boundaries. Islamic ethics states that a family should bear in mind the principles of affection and mercy (Quran, 30:21), which are not legal responsibilities but ethical requirements.

Some Exceptions

The priority of qualities over actions has some exceptions. Sometimes a single action can save others, or even humanity, or can alter the course of history. It could be that someone possesses the quality of bravery but does not display it, whereas another person does not have the quality of bravery but is able to display bravery just once. Generally speaking, the person who has the quality of bravery is better. But at times the brave person happens to fail in action, and the person who is not brave somehow performs a brave act, such as someone who saves the life of an Imam on one occasion.

Imam Ali (a) was both a brave person in his quality, and, on the Day of Khandaq, his one sword-stroke was so important that the

Prophet (s) declared: “The stroke of Ali on the Day of Khandaq is better than the actions of both human beings and jinn” (Mazandarani, 1382 AH, 12:393). Thus, sometimes a single act can be immensely significant. If a quality does not result in an appropriate act at the appropriate time, then it would not be worth possessing it.

Therefore, we should not be satisfied with qualities alone, nor should we be disappointed if we do not have good qualities when we are able to perform good deeds, as God can provide us with the opportunity to achieve great things through these actions. At the same time, a single evil deed can outweigh a good quality.

It has been said that a very pious person who used to work closely with great scholars passed away and was seen by someone in a dream. The dreamer enquired about the deceased’s state, and the latter said that he was in a very bad situation. The dreamer asked why, and the deceased explained that there was a girl who was very noble and he wished her to become his daughter-in-law, but once someone came to him to enquire about that girl for marriage, and because he did not want to lose her, he did not say good things about her. Later, his own son did not agree to marry her either, so the girl remained single. He explained that despite his good intention he was now suffering. His one act changed the future of that girl and destroyed her life.

In another instance, a young seminarian once said that the reason why he chose to become a scholar was an incident that took place in his childhood. He was with his father, and they both came to see a scholar, who showed the boy love and respect. The boy was so impressed that he decided to become a scholar himself. Small things can indeed lead to great results.

In summary, in Islamic ethics, both actions and qualities are important, and relatively speaking qualities are more important than actions. Hence, our main emphasis should be on acquiring

virtues. However, we should be careful not to miss any single righteous deed, because it can have a massive worth.

Acquiring Virtues

In his commentary on *Usul al-Kafi*, Allamah Sha‘rani writes, “Indeed, those qualities that are established (*malakah*) remain after death if they are well-rooted (*rasikh*). So he who does a good deed or exhibits a virtue on one occasion but not at other times will not benefit from it [in the Hereafter]” (Mazandarani, 1382 AH, 8:215, footnote 1). Therefore, someone who is not well-rooted in generosity, for instance, he would not be resurrected with this quality.

In a discussion on whether something is a virtue, most scholars hold that its results should be considered. For example, in the case of generosity, most people agree that it is a virtue, because it helps to get rid of poverty. Similarly, most people agree that greed is not a virtue as it leads to war, conflict, and deprivation. Therefore, one criterion of a virtue is the positive results to which it leads.

Another group of scholars hold that a virtue is a virtue even if it is not acted upon, such as a generous person who is poor and cannot give. But I would like to propose a third approach, which is to consider the human soul and whether that virtue makes it a better soul or, in other words, more human. If yes, then that is to be considered a virtue. Conversely, whatever prevents the elevation of our soul or damages our humanity is to be considered an evil quality, even if it is not acted upon.

There are certain things unique to humankind that are not shared by other creatures. Hence, having strong muscles is a quality shared by many animals unless building such muscles is done for the enhancement of a person’s human qualities. Therefore, the question of why someone pursues a particular course of action becomes very important. And anything that demotes our humanity is destructive and should be avoided.

The Concept of Ethical Balance

The scholars of Islamic ethics have counted three faculties for the human soul: appetite, anger, and intellect. The faculty of appetite is what motivate us to fulfil our physical needs. Those who possess no appetite or desire, as well as those who overindulge in physical pleasure, are both wrong. However, one who keeps a balance between these two extremes is in the perfect position and acquires the virtue of chastity (*iffah*).

The faculty of anger helps us defend ourselves against attacks and threats. One who has no anger at all is considered a cowardly person, and one who has too much anger is a brute person. The balanced position in this faculty is bravery: a brave person is one who exercises his anger in a moderate and balanced way. A brave person may be beaten up but refrain from retaliation. Imam Ali (a) was the bravest warrior in battles, but the way he reacted with calmness after the demise of the Prophet (a) showed his bravery in self-control in an even more profound manner.

The faculty of intellect is concerned with reason, and the balanced position in this faculty is wisdom.

Signs of Wisdom

The sign of a wise person is that he does not believe or reject anything without reason. At the same time, when there is convincing evidence for something, he accepts it; it is not wise to remain undecided and in doubt all the time.

A wise person does not accept something merely because it is what most people say or believe. A wise person follows the right path even though most people may be against it. At the same time, a wise person does not wish to be necessarily different from others. He seeks the truth, whether it is accepted or rejected by

the majority.

Another pitfall avoided by wise people is that they are not against old things simply because they are old. Past beliefs or practices are not always wrong, and new things are not necessarily good. Many prophets used to be told that you are saying what the previous generations said! On the same token, to oppose new things just because they are new is not wise.

A person who manages to keep a balance in all three faculties of the soul achieves the virtue of justice. Therefore, a just person is wise, brave, and chaste. Thus, he is free of all extreme positions in his ethical life.

Judging an action directly from that action

The proponents of virtue ethics claim that we can look at actions and judge which are good and which are bad, and accordingly we can judge the quality that relates to that action.

However, Islamic ethics approaches this matter in a different way. In using the teleological¹ approach, Islamic ethics states that an action becomes good when it produces a good result. And this result is judged by the ultimate end in Islam, which can be termed “nearness to God”² or “reaching perfection.” Any action that helps us achieve this goal is good.

However, at times an action can have a combination of results that help and hinder the achievement of this ultimate goal. Islam

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1. Some contemporary writers have said that the deontological view is actually the Islamic position, but we will refute this later.
 2. We will discuss the concept of “nearness” later and prove that it is not an abstract concept but in fact very real and concrete.

teaches that in this situation, one should not perform that action if its disadvantages outweigh its good results. There is a very detailed discussion here, which we will only touch upon below.

Utilitarian's maintain that an action that has good and bad outcomes is considered good if it leads to greater good or benefits more people. In this model, a person can rob from five people and give to fifty others, and this would be deemed a good act. Islam does not agree with this. In the science of *principles of jurisprudence (usul al-fiqh)*, there is a clear methodology to deal with such a scenario. There may be problems in an action that can make it impermissible even if many good things result from it. For example, by telling a lie I may be able to attract people to Islam, but this is not acceptable. In the life of the Prophet (s), his son died in infancy. Coincidentally, at the same time, an eclipse occurred, and many people said that the eclipse happened as a result of the death of the Prophet's son. It would have been easy for the Prophet (s) to claim this as an act of God and use it to his advantage, and to strengthen his position and pull more people towards Islam. He could even simply remain silent and let the people what they wanted. However, he did not do that; rather, he clarified that an eclipse was a sign of God, unrelated to people's death. In Islam, the end never justifies the means, and this is because true success does not come from any wrong means.

Therefore, an action is good if it brings about good results that serve our ultimate purpose. The results may be entirely good or there may be a mixture of good and bad results, but the bad results are not severe enough to make the action forbidden (*haram*) or disliked (*makruh*).

In exceptional circumstances, we may have to do something that is primarily forbidden if we are left with no other choices. For example, a person is drowning in the house next door and I do not have the permission to go inside the house, but if I do not enter, he will drown. In this scenario, according to Islamic law, I have to

go and save the person, because the significance of human life is so high that it overrides the badness of entering someone's property without permission. Hence, when there is no other way to avoid a forbidden act and the result is very important in the view of God—and not in my subjective view—then Islam permits that forbidden act.

Five Types of Actions Based on Their Results

Obviously, an action that assists us in reaching our ultimate end is good, and an action that prevents us from reaching our ultimate end is bad, but scholars have developed further classifications. In Shia jurisprudence, we believe that God's legislation is based on the real benefit or harm of actions and is not arbitrary. And based on that benefit or harm, He commands us to perform certain acts and to refrain from certain others. Those actions that secure our interest and produce positive results, and those results are necessary for our long-term salvation are termed *wajib* (obligatory). The interest they produce is so great that it brings about obligation (*al-maslahah al-mulzimah*).

At other times, a deed may produce positive results and be in our interest, but not to such a fundamental level, and we can still gain salvation without it. Such deeds are termed *mustahabb* (recommended); they take us closer to our ultimate end, but they are not crucial to achieving it. Their benefit only brings about recommendation (*al-maslahah ghayr al-mulzimah*). An example of this is the night prayer: one who does not perform it may still achieve nearness to God, but the night prayer speeds up his journey and takes him even to higher levels. Interestingly, as far as the Prophet (s) was concerned, the night prayer was obligatory for him: "And keep vigil for a part of the night, as a supererogatory [devotion] for you. It may be that your Lord will raise you to a praiseworthy station" (Quran, 17:79).

On the contrary, any action that harms us so severely on our journey to our ultimate goal that it prevents us from achieving it is *haram* (forbidden). This is because its harm is detrimental to our chances of achieving our goal (*al-mafsadah al-mufawwitat*). However, if the harm is not so intense and one can still achieve one's goal, this is termed *makruh* (disliked). The harm produced by such an act is not detrimental (*al-mafsadah ghayr al-mufawwitat*).

Finally, an action that neither carries interest nor harm is *mubah* (permissible). However, from a moral or spiritual point of view, it seems unlikely that any act can be truly *mubah*, because a human's life and resources are limited and at every moment, he is either gaining interest or is in loss in his journey towards his ultimate goal. A useful analogy here is that of a person selling ice on a hot summer day with no customers: his capital is melting and he is not making any profit. Hence, from a moral point of view, there are no *mubah* or neutral actions. Using Quranic terminology, an action either brings about light or darkness, and there is no middle way. To stagnate and remain as you are is a loss:

Allah is the Guardian of the faithful: He brings them out of darkness into light. As for the faithless, their patrons are the Rebels, who drive them out of light into darkness. They shall be the inmates of the Fire, and they shall remain in it [forever].
(Quran, 2:257)

Three Further Classifications

In his *Usul al-fiqh*, Muhammad Rida Muzaffar states that actions in themselves may not have any moral status, but can acquire a moral status and be judged accordingly. Consider the following:

1. Walking does not essentially have any judgement attached to it. But once we consider where the person is heading to

and for what reason, then it could be judged as good or bad. Walking in order to perform an act of kindness is a good act, but walking to hurt an innocent person is an evil act.

2. Honesty is good most of the time, but in exceptional circumstances it could be bad, such as when it endangers an innocent person's life, or leads to conflict. In such cases, it is better to remain silent or to tell a lie.
3. Justice is always good and injustice is always bad, and there is no exception.

Muzaffar, therefore, states that there are three relationships between actions and moral judgements. At times, there is sufficient causation (*al-illiyah al-tammah*), which is when whatever the effect requires to come into existence is there. Sometimes there is incomplete causation (*al-illiyah al-naqisah*), which is when only some of the requirements for the existence of the effect are present; for example, since fire cannot come into existence only by wood, wood is an incomplete cause for fire. Muslim scholars maintain that the only thing that is a sufficient cause for the goodness of a deed is justice. (Muzaffar, 1398 sh, vol. 2, p. 286)

Muzaffar then speaks about an incomplete cause (*muqtadi*) by which the effect comes into existence if there are no obstacles. For example, fire is an incomplete cause for burning if there are no obstacles, such as protection. In these situations, for an effect to be produced, there needs to be an incomplete cause, as well as the absence of an obstacle (*mani'*). For example, someone loves to visit his parents; this love motivates him, but his health may not allow him to visit them—this is an obstacle that prevents the action.

In the example of honesty, telling the truth is good if there are no obstacles, but if there is an obstacle—e.g., if it leads to the murder of an innocent person—then telling the truth is no longer good in that situation. However, in the case of walking, there is no

inner causes for goodness or evilness, so an external factor is needed to give it a moral status.

In conclusion, Muzaffar states that an action may be a sufficient cause for goodness, such as justice, which is always good; sometimes it is only an incomplete cause: it is good as long as there are no obstacles; and sometimes an action in itself is not a cause for goodness or evilness, and an external element is needed to make it good or bad.¹ Hence, our response to those who claim that moral values are relative and can change from situation to situation is that this is not the case and that there is a standard to measure morality, and this can be found in Islamic ethics.

Conclusion

Acts such as drinking, walking, and speaking have no moral status in themselves and require an external element in order to be considered right or wrong. Other acts such as telling the truth have a default status of goodness but we cannot know their final status until we understand their context. And there are acts that are sufficient causes for their own moral status.

Hence, based on what results and outcomes they produce, actions are either good or bad, right or wrong. Acts that are usually considered neutral (*mubah*) have a positive or negative result as well. For example, talking may be seen as morally neutral in itself, but we have many hadiths and instructions in Islamic sources encouraging silence when speech is not necessary. It is said that some pious people used to put a pebble in their mouth so as to train themselves to speak only when necessary. Therefore, an act is not morally neutral.

1. This point is extremely fundamental and can lead a person to change their outlook on life if understood properly.

In our modern times distractions are increasing and people have become increasingly unable to spend their time wisely. They tend to find leisure activities to simply kill time. In the past, things were a little different in that people spent more time in travel and work, and were naturally more physically active; they spent quality time at home with their loved ones. In today's lifestyle, however, our bodies are used less and we spend less quality time with our families.

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