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On Ethics: Part I

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Abstract



Building on the Prophetic tradition which states, ‘I have been appointed a Prophet only to perfect the noble traits of character,’ this article examines the Islamic approach towards morality and ethics. It begins with an overview of the character of the Prophet Muhammad (S) and the question of whether in him – and in others – character traits should be seen as discrete entities or as stemming from one or two foundational values. It proceeds then to the formal definition of *akhlaq* (generally translated as ‘ethics’) and why it has traditionally been studied. This is followed by a discussion on the structure of the science of ethics and some reflections on the study of ethics today. A classification of ethical studies is also given. The article concludes with a discussion of philosophy and ethics.

Keywords

Islamic ethics, virtue ethics, morality, hadith, Prophet Muhammad

Introduction

This article will cover the topic of the science of morality or ethics. It will cover the significance of this science in Islam, and will also discuss its aims, and its objectives.

The Holy Prophet Muhammad (S) introduced the essence and nature of his mission in one brief yet profound sentence: ‘I have been appointed a Prophet *only* to perfect the noble traits of character.’ (Majlisi 1403 AH, 68:382)

Looking at this saying in more depth, we can derive the following points:

1. The Prophet introduced the nature of his prophetic mission through ethics, as opposed to anything else. Therefore, whatever else he did in his lifetime ultimately relates back to this point of building ethics and morality.
2. The objective of perfecting noble character traits is a process that had already begun with the previous prophets who all came to teach and establish good ethics; however, Prophet Muhammad’s task was to complete and perfect that process.
3. The Prophet does not mention merely ‘teaching’ ethics, although he was clearly a teacher. But he was a true teacher: one who derived pleasure at seeing his students implementing his teachings. The Prophet wished to nurture people according to these teachings. In essence, he was a spiritual trainer (*murabbi*) who wished to impart knowledge as well as cause a change in behaviour.¹ Prophet Muhammad therefore states that he has come to seek change in people, and that to the maximum level. Therefore, if a person acts

1. Even when the Qur’an refers to the missions of the Prophets as ‘teaching the book and wisdom’ this is a reference to spiritual nurturing, not merely the acquisition of factual knowledge. ‘Knowledge of the book’ is a Qur’anic concept that is very profound.

within the framework presented by the Prophet Muhammad, then that person can reach their fullest potential, without any limit or restriction.

4. The word used in this saying is *makarim* as opposed to *mahasin*. *Mahasin* is the plural of the word *husn*, meaning 'good', and its antonym is *masawi*. Thus, the term *mahasin al-akhlaq* means to do good and reciprocate good, for example to those that have done good to you, or at least people who have not done bad to you. *Makarim* however is the plural of *makrumah*, meaning noble traits. This is more than merely reciprocating goodness; it is actually to do good to people who have done bad to you. In *Misbah al-Shari'ah*, a book attributed to Imam al-Sadiq (A), he says:

Establish ties with one who has cut ties with you.
(*Misbah al-Shari'a*, p. 159)

It is of the most noble traits to visit a person who has previously broken kinship ties. Imam al-Sadiq (A) also states:

Forgive the one who has wronged you. Grant to the one that denied you. Do good to one who has done evil to you. (Ibid)

This kind of behaviour requires an expansive heart. Thus the Prophet came to perfect the noble traits of character for humanity.

It behoves us to keep a constant check on our character and the extent to which we have been able to acquire these noble traits. Hence, a process of self-scrutiny is very important. Even if we hold a dislike for people in our hearts but show outward signs of affection or indifference towards them, this would still not be classed as noble. The basis of achieving noble traits is to love others.

The Prophet himself possessed such a character:

And indeed you possess a great character. (*Qur'an*
68:4)

In this verse, which is a noun statement with additional emphasis of the word *inna* as well as the letter *lam* – thus signifying emphasis in Arabic language–, Allah makes clear that this is a statement that is both tremendous and undoubted. Furthermore, for Allah to declare something as great truly shows the greatness of that thing.¹

The example of the Holy Prophet (A)

It can be seen from the life of Prophet Muhammad that he did not suddenly come to possess a great character at the age of forty when his official designation of prophethood began. Although his stature increased with the advent of revelation, history shows that he was already a special person in the midst of a society that had very few virtues.² Prophet Muhammad displayed outstanding virtues from his childhood, and despite being an orphan was never swayed by the corruption of his time. There is no record of any mischief, sin, or questionable act at any time in his life. His immaculate honesty earned him the title al-Amin (the trustworthy). Lady Khadijah opted to propose to the Prophet and cites his great character as the reason for her proposal.

In the Apostle of Allah there is certainly for you a

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1. It is interesting to note that Allah describes the character of the Prophet Muhammad as 'great' whereas He describes the world as 'a small enjoyment' (3:197).
 2. In pre-Islamic Arabia, only a few virtues were recognized in society, such as offering protection to a guest, hospitality, and generosity; however, even these were manipulated to suit certain selfish needs.

good exemplar. (*Qur'an* 33:21)

This statement from Allah is very general, thus showing that the Prophet should be followed in all aspects. The Prophet was not merely an expert or an exemplar in certain areas as most people are; rather he was a complete human being in all regards. Thus, Allah chose him to impart these teachings and perfect the noble character traits.

The science of ethics in Islam helps an adherent to gain nearness to Allah. This is an oft-used phrase and is the fundamental aim and objective of Islam as a religion. This nearness to Allah is of course not a geographical nearness, but rather it means we must resemble Allah as much as possible in his perfection and virtues. In a narration from *Rawdat al-Muttaqin*,¹ Prophet Muhammad says:

Acquire the virtues of Allah.

As Allah is Merciful, we must also try and be merciful. As Allah is Kind, and keeps His promises, He is Knowledgeable and Powerful, we must also try and have these characteristics. Although there are a few exceptions that we should not try and emulate, such as His Majesty (as it will manifest in us as arrogance), we should focus on acquiring most of His qualities that suit us.

In *al-Kafi*, Imam al-Sadiq (A) says:

O people! Try and acquire the etiquettes that Allah has. (Kulayni 1407 AH, 5: 70)

In this saying, Imam al-Sadiq uses the word etiquette (*adab*)

1. *Rawdhat al-Muttaqin*, authored by Muhammad Taqi al-Majlisi (father of 'Allamah Majlisi) is a commentary on the famous hadith collection *Man La Yahdhuruhu al-Faqih*.

rather than ethics. The difference between them is that a form of etiquette is more a matter of practice and ethics is more to do with the quality of the soul.

Therefore, we should strive to be closer to Allah by acquiring His qualities.

The late Mulla Salih Mazandarani was a great scholar and was the son-in-law of 'Allamah Majlisi. He has a commentary on *al-Kafi* and states:

Nearness to Allah is not in terms of time or space, but rather it is through resembling perfection, just as it has been said: 'Acquire the virtues of Allah.' Whenever any quality of His is earned by a human being, such as knowledge or forbearance or mercy or goodness, and the more it becomes perfected through spiritual practice and abstinence, the nearness becomes more intense. And it has been narrated from 'Isa son of Maryam that he said to the disciples: 'Be perfect, just as your Lord in the heavens is perfect.'(Mazandarani 1382 AH, 9: 352)

There is no doubt that in Islam the most important thing is to improve our character, and all the acts of worship within Islam should cause us to become better people, rather than be merely routines that do not improve us as people.

When considering the science of ethics, we come across this question: we have the sciences of ideology, law, and ethics – which of these is the most important and takes priority? In my opinion, our ideology is the most important of these three sciences because through ideology we achieve our foundations, the doctrines of Islam, and we derive our faith. After this however, we must prioritise ethics and then the laws.

However, in practice, and not as a science, when we wish to prioritise our time in becoming a better person, we should

prioritise ideology, but then law, followed by ethics. In this way we will ensure that we are abiding by the compulsory laws and refraining from those things that are forbidden.

Furthermore, in the arena of human development, the study of law is certainly not the most important. Between ideology and ethics my view is that ethics takes priority because it is a collection of positive qualities that explain to a person how to be, as opposed to what to know. This, in turn, will enhance our faith as faith is not merely to believe, it is also to possess good qualities. There are many people who know about Islam but do not believe. To believe and submit requires humility and openness to the truth. An arrogant and unjust person will not accept the truth even if they know it to be true. This is shown in the *Qur'an*, wherein Allah does not treat disbelief as an epistemological issue, but rather as a moral issue, i.e. it is a matter of poor morality.¹

For example, Abu Dhar was a polytheist, but he was able to excel in his moral development and became a close companion of the Prophet due to some of his qualities such as his utter truthfulness.² Similarly, Salman al-Farsi whose earnest search for the truth led him to multiple changes of faith whilst he searched for the Prophet. The same may also be said for the respected brothers and sisters who have reverted to Islam, sometimes in contrast to those Muslims that are born into Muslim families.

The definition of *akhlaq*

We now proceed to the definition of *akhlaq*. The word *akhlaq* is

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1. The *Qur'an* mentions four types of disbelief; in this context we are referring specifically to the type known as *kufr al-juhud* (obstinate disbelief) in which the disbeliever may be rebuked for their disbelief.
 2. The Prophet has narrated: 'The sky has not cast a shadow on someone more truthful than Abu Dhar.' (Majlisis 1403 AH, 22: 343)

derived from two terms: *khalq* and *khulq*. *Khalq* refers to that aspect of our being that is obvious. *Khulq* refers to that aspect of our being which is not obvious, and thus linked to our inner beings and character traits. There is a prayer that has reached us from the Infallibles to be recited when standing in front of the mirror:

O Allah! Just as you have made my outer being (*khalq*) good, also make my inner being (*khulq*) good. (Harrani 1414 AH, p. 11)

The famous lexicographer, Raghīb al-Isfahani, says:

They are both from the same root but they are pronounced differently and their meaning is also different. *Khalq* is used only for shapes and forms, which are visible to the eyes. But *khulq* refers to the internal or inner faculties and traits that cannot be seen by eyes but can be understood by insight.¹ (Raghīb 1412 AH, p. 297)

The late Mulla Muhsin Fayd Kashani² – a very established and respected scholar – says in his *al-Mahajjat al-Bayda*, which is a modification of Ghazali's *Ihya' al-'Ulum* with the addition of narrations from the Ahl al-Bayt, says regarding *khulq*:

Khulq is a quality of the soul, not of the body. When one has this, it is an established trait of character that facilitates you to act accordingly without thinking

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1. Regarding 'insight': it is one of the gifts that Allah bestows upon some believers, allowing them to see the reality in situations and people. In one tradition we have been told: 'Be careful of the insight of a believer, as he sees with the light of Allah.'
 2. Mulla Muhsin Fayd Kashani was the son-in-law of Mulla Sadra. Another Mulla Sadra's son-in-law was Mulla 'Abd al-Razzaq, known as Fayyad. *Fayd* means emanation/grace and *fayyad* means one who immensely bestows grace.

and contemplating. (Fayd Kashani 1417 AH, 5: 95)

For example, someone that has the quality of generosity will act generously very easily. He can share with others and donate very easily. The person who is not generous can still do these things but will find it somewhat painful.

The subject matter of the science of ethics

Haji Khalifah in his *Kashf al-Dhunub* says:

Khulq is a permanent quality (*malakah*)¹ and is something you own that is established in the soul and does not disappear quickly. There are two types: natural and conditioned. (Haji Khalifah 1941, 1: 35)

Miskawayh, in his *Tahdhib al-Akhlaq wa Tathir al-A'raq*, makes this distinction:

There are two types of *khulq*: sometimes people have a natural disposition to a quality, and others acquire it through habit and training. (Miskawayh 1961, p. 36)

The late Tabarsi in his compiled commentary on the *Qur'an* titled *Majma' al-Bayan* tries to take a different approach. Whilst he recognises there are two types of inner quality, he only recognises one of them and says:

The reality of *khulq* is the one you acquire yourself; and the reason it is called *khulq* is because it has

1. As opposed to *hal*: a transient quality; for example the feeling of bravery after hearing a stirring and motivational speech.

become part of your being. (Tabarsi 1372 sh., 10: 500)

In conclusion, from the opinions discussed thus far, we understand there are two types of inner quality: one that is natural and the other that has been acquired through struggle. The second one is undoubtedly more valuable as it results through effort.

However, my opinion is that there is a third type: when *khulq* is generated from a person's beliefs. The way persons view the world and their role and position in it can cause them to possess certain character traits. For example, if a person that believes he is in this world as a servant of God, and that he was created by God, and that everything else is secondary to Him, and that the most important thing for him is to submit to God, such a fundamental belief can change his actions and also his character traits.

Once, in a meeting in Qum, a group of people were busy compiling an encyclopaedia on Prophet Muhammad (S) and a section of this encyclopaedia was regarding his ethical conduct. I was invited by them to help design the entries and headings in that particular section. They had conducted immense research and had consulted different scholars and books, and had managed to come up with some of the different traits of character of Prophet Muhammad. I had raised an issue at that time that remains with me: when we list the different qualities of the Prophet and subdivide them into categories, we are somehow treating them as independent of one another. However, I believe that throughout all of them there are some underlying qualities that lead to the manifestation of the other qualities. For example, humility and servitude to God could be classified as the roots of his ethics and the other qualities as the fruits of his ethical personality. It is not the case that the Holy Prophet had to struggle to acquire those qualities individually. Rather, he was perfectly positioned in his attitude towards Allah, and when this happens other qualities come into place in a person naturally and automatically. One piece

of evidence for this is the example of a person who goes through a transformation. At one time he may have been drinking, gambling, and fornicating, but then, almost suddenly, for some reason he wakes up (in a spiritual sense) and repents. And when he repents, things change automatically. It seems that when a person is willing to give over control to Allah, and if the light of Allah comes to his heart, then such bad habits can cease.

Another instance of this is when people embrace Islam and become totally reformed. I recall that a person mentioned that before accepting Islam they disliked children, but after accepting Islam began to love children.

An Arabic couplet states:

It suffices a man in terms of honour that his faults
can be counted.

This is a profound couplet meaning that if a person has enough faults that they may be counted and limited, and are not countless and unlimited, then that is praiseworthy and honourable. Furthermore, if a person can count his faults, then he is able to address them.

Therefore, it is necessary to address the more fundamental issues in order to straighten out the smaller issues. At many times a town can be riddled with problems, but if the governor changes, many smaller issues will follow suit. If the governor of our selves is the intellect and not emotions and desires, then many things can be solved.

The structure of the science of ethics

At the outset, scholars divide the different sciences into two categories: some sciences are studied for their own sake, whilst others are

studied as tools to reach another objective; for example, logic is studied to better understand philosophy and theology, and Arabic grammar is studied to better understand source texts.

The science of ethics is of the first category and has its own intrinsic and essential value. It is one of the most important sciences.

‘Allamah Sha’rani, a scholar of Tehran and a teacher of the contemporary sage Ayatullah Hasan Zadeh Amoli, was an expert in Islamic law, theology, and philosophy. In his commentary on *Usul al-Kafi* he mentions his sadness at how little attention people were paying to the science of ethics at his time:

It is shocking that people have abandoned the science of ethics and acting according to it and what it requires, and they have just focused on outward rituals and actions. They guess that eternal happiness can be achieved by outer actions only. They do not concentrate a one-tenth amount on the purification of the soul and that which will destroy the soul, as much as they concentrate on keeping their bodies clean from impurities. And this is one of the misguiding mistakes. Allah says: ‘The day that nothing of wealth or sons will avail except a tranquil heart.’ And He has also said: ‘To Allah does not reach the flesh or blood, but rather the piety from you reaches Him.’ And: ‘The soul and what it is inspired with, one who purifies it has been successful and has achieved salvation and one who does not will be a failure.’ The people’s attention is focused on Islamic law and the issues discussed in it are very much related to the (physical) senses and thus closer to understanding and practice. (Mazandarani, 1382 AH., 8: 289)

Whilst actions are very important, it is the main impact of ideology and ethics that is very important. Generosity, for example, has a great impact on your relationship with Allah.

Hatim Ta'i was a pagan but was very generous and according to narrations Allah did not punish him due to his generosity. On the other hand, if someone practices outward actions nicely but has bad morals, they will be subject to punishment.

On one occasion, one of the companions of the Holy Prophet died and the Prophet took part in his funeral. The companion's mother commented that her son must be in a good position in the Hereafter, having been a companion of the Prophet. The Holy Prophet corrected her and said the companion was going to suffer on account of his bad temper. Therefore, whilst Islamic law is very important, morality is even more so. This is, at times, difficult for people to comprehend, especially sayings such as:

Backbiting is worse than adultery. (Hurr 'Amili
1409 AH, 12: 281)

This is not lessening the seriousness of adultery, rather it is highlighting the seriousness of backbiting.

Classification of ethical studies

There are three categories of ethical studies:

1. Descriptive ethics. This is the objective study of the morals or value systems of a person or tribe or group or community or religion, without making any judgements. For example, the purely factual study of the life of Hitler, or of the society of Eskimos. This type of ethical study is mostly undertaken by historians, or anthropologists, but not philosophers.
2. Normative ethics. This is the study of ethical norms, with an element of judgement and evaluation. This study has an underlying theory or basis that can explain what is good and bad, right and wrong, and this is argued and defended.
3. Meta-ethics/analytic ethics. This is a deeper analysis of

ethics with a much broader outlook. Here, the study is not about what makes an action good or bad or right or wrong, rather it discusses the very notion and meaning of 'good' and 'bad', how such concepts are derived and the relationship between them. 'Meta-' means 'beyond', and in this branch of ethics the study goes beyond normal considerations.

The first is not philosophical or intellectual, but is more suited to historical and/or anthropological approaches. The study is done in an objective manner. The second and third of these three methods of study are both intellectual and based on rational arguments, hence they have been categorised as 'moral philosophy', although some ethicists use the term only for the third category. My own view is that both second and third categories are included within these classifications, as they both require rational reflections. . Hence according to some ethicists the term 'philosophical ethics' or 'moral philosophy' refers to the second and third categories.

The normative study of ethics makes a judgement on what is right or wrong based on reason. It is more than merely quoting and referring to others. The aim of this is to ascertain criteria by which we are able to judge. Meta/analytical study of ethics is also intellectual and rational, but tackles more fundamental questions than a normative study. Questions such as what is 'right' and 'wrong' as concepts, whether moral values are relative or not, whether a person can derive knowledge in ethics, etc. are discussed. Such questions relate to the epistemology of ethics and the relationship between ethics and other fields, for example between ethics and law, e.g. how a person becomes morally responsible.

As an example: at times we may want to know a certain religion's view on slavery. In order to do this we would refer to their texts and scripture to see what they stated. In this study there is no room for rational argument. But when we wish to discover whether slavery is good or not and we start to use

philosophical arguments, then this would be moral philosophy.

Muslims, especially followers of the Ahl al-Bayt, believe that rational discourse is religious. If we want to understand the Islamic position on a matter, then if we can prove a decisive rational judgement on something being right or wrong, then Islam will definitely be in conformity with this and there will be no difference between the decisive rational judgement and Islam. This is known as the ‘rule of conformity’ between Islam and the intellect. If there ever appears to be an apparent disagreement between the two then there must be an error that should be investigated. A hadith states:

Whatsoever the intellect concludes, the Islamic law
also concludes. (Harrani 1414 AH., p. 396)

Hence, the third category is Islamic as well. The same cannot be said for some other religions, or even other sects of Islam, as they frown upon intellectual discussions, seeing them as a threat to their beliefs. The school of the Ahl al-Bayt believes that the human intellect is a proof of Allah, but of course it must be trained and nurtured.

Intellectual discourse in ethics

In Islamic ethics, to embark upon an intellectual journey that proves ethical arguments using rational discourse is more difficult than merely describing Islamic positions by quoting from source texts.

We should not merely listen to religious advices and texts. Rather, we should listen, and at times be able to present our position in a rational way so it can be understood and welcomed by others as well¹.

1. For my own PhD studies I chose to study ethical relativism which looks at whether values are universal or whether they vary. In the history of the United

The *Qur'an* states:

And they will say, had we listened or applied reason, we would not have been among inmates of the Blaze. (*Qur'an* 67:10)

Allah has given human beings two proofs: revelation and intellect. If both are used then a person will be utterly successful, and if not then he may suffer.

Islamic moral philosophy

When we wish to discover the Islamic view on a particular matter, then we must refer to Islamic sources at their origins, as far as this is possible. For someone that is not a scholar, the views of experts should be sought. This approach would convince other Muslims, but not non-Muslims.

It is therefore necessary that we back up our arguments and positions with rational arguments. For example, when we wish to establish what makes an action good is it the impact of that action on a person's self-development, or closeness with God? If this is

States, there was a time when the attitude towards slavery was different in the northern states as compared to the southern states. This was due to the large number of farms in the south and their need for cheap labour. According to ethical relativism, both northern and southern states were right in their positions, and thus it was not possible to produce a single true morality. Of course Islam does not believe this and I argued accordingly. If anyone considers my thesis and removes my name, I believe it would be difficult to conclude that the author of this paper is a Muslim, due to the use of philosophical arguments, which is a common language across all people. Furthermore, my book *Islamic Relativism* was reviewed by the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) who commented that the Catholics should welcome this book. Thus, a common language will make sure that arguments cannot be limited to any one tradition.

Islam's position we should be able to argue this. Such an approach would be termed as Islamic moral philosophy.

Indeed, we require both of these approaches: one for Muslims and the other for non-Muslims.

Further classification of normative ideas

Philosophers have classified ethical theories according to their meta-ethical and normative ideas. At this juncture we wish to delve deeper into normative ideas.

Different views exist amongst philosophers on how some actions become right/wrong, good/bad. Essentially, there are three major theories:

1. The teleological view. From the Greek word *telos* (meaning end/purpose), this theory states that an action is good based on its end, i.e. when it leads to a good outcome. And the outcome should be borne in mind in order to judge the action. Some critics of this theory argue that it produces a circular argument, as it defines good by bringing the term and notion of 'good' into the definition.¹ In response, it can be argued that it is not a circular argument because the meaning of 'good' in the first instance is not what is meant by 'good' in the second instance. In the first instance 'good' refers to that which is morally good, whereas the second mention (referring to the result) is what is good in reality. For example: someone claims the ultimate end of a certain action is welfare;² for this person, every action that leads to

1. For example, when trying to define 'yellow' someone says: 'Yellow is the colour of every yellow car.'

2. It should be noted that what one considers to be a legitimate and positive end depends upon their worldview.

prosperity and welfare will be considered to be good. Another question arises: how can we tell whether this act has produced welfare? This is a consideration that has no relation to the science of ethics. Instead it is something that can be empirically measured.

2. The deontological view. This theory claims that an action is good or bad regardless of its results and outcomes. Emmanuel Kant held this view. For example: a shopkeeper should be honest with his clients, whether it is good for him personally or not, rather than someone arguing that they will be truthful to their clients so that in the long run a trust and rapport is built, ultimately resulting in more business. Thus, the intention should be selfless, not to gain profit or to avoid loss; the motive is moral obligation.
3. Virtue ethics. Whilst most of great western philosophers of the twentieth century believed in the above two theories, in the second half of the twentieth century, i.e. the sixties and seventies, there occurred a revival in an Aristotelian approach to ethics, which became known as virtue ethics. In this theory, an action is good if it is produced by a virtue. For example: generosity is a virtue and charity is a form of generosity, therefore it is good. Virtue ethics highlights the qualities of the soul, whereas the associated actions receive secondary attention.

Criticism of the teleological view

4. The proponents of the teleological view disagree on two points:
 - a) The definition of 'good outcome'; some proponents say that the good outcome should be something material such as welfare, security, peace, etc. that can be measured. Other opinions suggest pleasure, or self-realisation, or happiness, or nearness to God. For example: the issue of

abortion – how does one decide whether the outcome is to be classed as good or bad? Someone that believes in the welfare of others as a result of reduced population may argue abortion is a good thing, whereas another person concerned with actualisation of human potential may argue it is a bad thing.

- b) To whose benefit the ‘good outcome’ should be; is the good outcome for the doer of the act, or for the recipient, or for someone else completely, or for a mass of people? There are three further views in this regard:
- i. Egoism: every actor should only be concerned with himself.
 - ii. Altruism: whatever is best for others should be done.
 - iii. Universalism: the act should result in a good outcome for everyone or for a greater number of people, regardless of whether the actor is one of them or not.

Conclusion

First, when it comes to the soul, ethics and morality are the foundations of the soul upon which faith may be built, and these two aspects of a person’s being assist one another in their development.

Second, scholars believe that the soul is the foundation of a human being and that actions stem from that foundation. Therefore, the science of ethics should deal with both actions and traits of character, the latter being more fundamental and important.¹

1. However, there are times when one action can be so decisive that it can change history. An example of this is the stroke of Imam ‘Ali’s sword in the battle of Khandaq: he remained the same person in terms of his character traits, but had he failed to inflict that stroke then the situation

Third, it is important to note that the science of ethics discusses the actions that are voluntary and are subject to influence by a person's intention. So, for example, breathing and blinking are not included in the science of ethics. And this same principle applies to the traits of character: so 'being a human' is not discussed in the science of ethics, but 'how to develop one's humanity' is discussed.

This approach to ethics is somewhat different to the western behaviourist scholars who have opined that the science of ethics was confined to the study of actions.

Muslim ethicists can either follow a descriptive study of ethics by studying and quoting texts and scholarly opinions; this would be beneficial to other Muslims. Or they can follow a rational and intellectual path and argue why something is right or wrong, good or bad, proving that Islamic values are universal and can be applied to anyone.

Lastly, we can say for sure that selfishness has no place within Islam, in the sense that an actor wishes to bring about good outcomes for himself only, and to deny or be indifferent to the rights of others. However, for someone to say that he is not concerned with his own self or that of his family, is also not a position that Islam supports.

Islam encourages its adherents to think about the short and long term consequences of their actions. In the short term it may be that an individual's immediate needs are fulfilled at the expense of others; however, in the long term, by thinking of others and showing mercy and compassion to them, it is beneficial for them and for the actor in the long term.

of the world would have been different. The same can be said for Imam Husayn's sacrifice in Karbala. There were many pious people alive at that time who missed that moment and that opportunity.

Therefore, Islam supports every individual to be concerned for themselves and pursue improvement of the self by observing the needs of others. For example: a fire-fighter that has given his life to save others has not harmed himself in the long term, i.e. the Hereafter, in fact he has gained something greater. This is not selfishness, nor is it denying a person any concern for himself.

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