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Recapturing the Meaning of *Akhlāq Islāmiyyah*: An Analysis of the Article “Akhlak” in the *Encyclopedia of Islam*

Amilah binti Awang Abd Rahman*

Abstract

This paper will analytically study the Islamic meaning of *akhlāq* as portrayed by two Western writers in the article entitled “Akhlak” published in the *Encyclopedia of Islam*. The author highlights the contribution of Western scholars especially Walzer and Gibb to the understanding of history of the development of Islamic thought and disciplines. By employing the qualitative methodology, the author uses textual analysis and comparative method on the writings of both thinkers and others. Findings indicate that there are several weaknesses in the writing that include limiting the scope of *akhlāq* to practical ethics of selected virtues, the lacking of clear detachment between *akhlāq* and ethical thought, and others.

Key words: Ethics, *Akhlāq*, Philosophy, Islam, Encyclopedia of Islam.

Introduction

Akhlāq is an important dimension of Islam that represents ethics or morality in the religion. In a famous prophetic tradition (*ḥadīth*) known as “*ḥadīth Jibrīl*,” *akhlāq* is represented by *ihsan* and is described as “to worship Allah as if you can see Him and if you cannot see Him, He can see you.”¹ Other than *ḥadīth Jibrīl*, the importance of *akhlāq* in Islam is

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¹ On the authority of ‘Umar (r.a.) who said: One day while we were sitting with the Messenger of Allah, there came before us a man with extremely white clothing and extremely black hair. There were no signs of travel on him and none of us knew him. He sat next to the Prophet. He supported his knees up against the knees of the Prophet and put his hand on his thighs. He said, ‘O Muhammad, tell me about Islam.’ The Messenger of Allah (p.b.u.h.) said, ‘Islam is to testify that there is none worthy of worship except Allah and that Muhammad is the Messenger of Allah, to establish the prayers, to pay the zakat, to fast [the

affirmed by numerous prophetic traditions, the most pronounced being the narration that states that the sending down of the Prophet is to improve human behaviour: “I have been sent to complete the culmination of high moral standard.”¹ Hashim Kamali is of the opinion that morality is the second theme of the Qur’ān after faith (*īmān*) by looking into the number of verses related to the subject matter.²

In fact, *akhlāq* can be considered as the first theme of importance in the Qur’ān if the general aim of grooming self is considered as the highest end of the religion. In this sense, verses related to faith and law are also part of *akhlāq* because strengthening the faith and imposing the law are meant to achieve the very aim of the creation of human beings, i.e. being good vicegerents of God through good actions. A quick glance of the Qur’ānic verses will find that the most vivid and repeated message is insisting and motivating man to execute good action, which begins with the fulfilment of the rights of Allah followed with the rights of fellow human beings. Indeed, *akhlāq* is the dimension of Islam that enlightens man with his main duties as Allah’s vicegerent on this earth which covers all spheres of responsibilities.

Definition and Role of *Akhlāq*

The literal meaning, the word *akhlāq* is a plural noun to *khulq* which comes from the root alphabet of ‘*kha*’, ‘*lam*’, and ‘*qaf*’. Its pronunciation is *khuluq* instead of *khalq* which can also read from the same root alphabet. *Khuluq* means innate peculiarity; natural disposition, character, temper, nature as compared to “*khalq*” which means creation, making,

month of] Ramadan, and to make pilgrimage to the House if you have the means to do so.’ He said, ‘You have spoken truthfully [or correctly].’ We were amazed that he asks the question and then says that he had spoken truthfully. He said, ‘Tell me about Īman (faith).’ He [the Messenger of Allah (p.b.u.h.)] responded, ‘It is to believe in Allah, His angles, His books, His messengers, the Last Day and to believe in the divine decree, [both] the good and the evil thereof.’ He said, ‘You have spoken truthfully.’ He said, ‘Tell me about al-Īhsān (goodness).’ He [the Prophet (p.b.u.h.)] answered, ‘It is that you worship Allah as if you see Him. And even though you do not see Him, [you know] He sees you.’ He said, ‘Tell me about [the time of] the Hour,’ He [the Prophet (s)] answered, ‘The one being asked does not know more than the one asking.’ al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī* 1:19; Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, 1:36.

¹ Narrated by Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal in his *Musnad*, 3, p.80.

² Hashim Kamali, *Shariah Law: An Introduction*, (Oxford: Oneworld Publication, 2008), p. 12.

origination, physical constitution.¹ It is interesting that the difference between *khuluq* and *khalq* can be opposite and at the same time, complementing each other, which will highlight the meaning of *akhlāq* as a value system of Islam with a unique understanding and expectations in accordance to that particular religion.²

The role of *akhlāq* that covers the whole tasks of human beings in life is reflected by the interpretation of the word *khuluq* in the Qur'ān. Zaroug narrates that al-Qurṭubī interpreted the word *khuluq* in verse "This is no other than *khuluq* of the ancient" (26: 137) as religion, character, ideology, or doctrine.³ All the meanings cover a very wide scope of life. It is also interesting to note that *akhlāq* is also defined by Ḥamdī 'Abd al-'Āl as religion as a whole and that it is the correlation between the two that provides man with the true path in life.⁴

However, writings on *akhlāq* in Islam are scanty and limited by number and content. Compared to the writings on other major disciplines of Islam, the writings on *akhlāq* are less in number, even among the Muslim writers⁵. Abdul Haq Ansari and Siddiqui consider that the discipline of *akhlāq* so far lacks a proper framework for a balanced and comprehensive study.⁶ Instead, the discussions on the subject seem to be secondary since exposition to it is generally done through other disciplines namely, philosophy, theology, jurisprudence, Sufism, and modern disciplines. Such fragmented presentations of *akhlāq* can affect the holistic image of this discipline in the religion. Zaroug agrees with this notion and considers it to be the main reason for the lack of interest in further development of the discipline:

¹ Hans Wehr, *A Dictionary of Modern Written Arabic*, ed. J. Milton Cowan, Beirut: Maktabah Lubnan, 1974, p. 259.

² Al-Ghazālī appreciates the complementary of both words. See *Ihyā' 'Ulūm al-Dīn*, (Beirut: Dar al-Khayr, 1993), 3, p.179.

³ Abdullah Hassan Zaroug, "Ethics from an Islamic Perspective: Basic Issues." *The American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences*. vol. 16, no. 3 (1999), p. 54.

⁴ Ḥamdī 'Abd al-'Āl, *Al-Akhlāq wa mi'yāruhā bayna al-Waḍ'īyyat wa al-Dīn* (Kuwait: Dar al-Qalam, 2002), p.13.

⁵ M. Abdullah Draz, *The Moral World of the Qur'an*. tr. Danielle Robinson and Rebecca Masterton, (London: I. B. Tauris, 2008), p. 12 ; Aḥmad 'Abd al-Raḥmān Ibrāhīm, *Al-Faḍā'il al-Khuluqīyyah fī al-Islām* (Manṣūrah: Dār al-Wafā', 1989), p.15.

⁶ Muhammad Abdul Haq Ansari, "Islamic Ethics: Concept and Prospect," *The American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences*, Vol. 6. No. 1, (1989): 81; Ataullah Siddiqui, "Ethics in Islam: key Concepts and Contemporary Challenges" *Journal of Moral Education*, (Routledge: Taylor and Francis Online, 2007), p. 423.

The challenges traditional morality had to face or the way ethics has recently been conceived, i.e. as meta-ethical discipline. Normative should not be concern of the moral philosopher. Judgments on ethical issues are left to religious preachers, politicians, parents and the public. Social and natural scientist made a distinction between facts and values.¹

The abovementioned quandary has opened doors for other researchers to offer their views, which in turn, serve as the main references of ethics in Islam. This paper thus aims to review the contribution of Western writers in introducing *akhlāq* in Islam. Their effort to inquire into another religion should be given credit. However, scrutiny should be done in order to ensure that they are done in line with the true spirit of Islam. And, this paper is an attempt to provide the checking to what extent their writings have contributed to the real understanding of Islam.

This paper chose an important ready-reference to ethics of Islam, entitled “akhlak” in- the *Encyclopedia of Islam: A Dictionary of the Geography, Ethnography, and Biography of Muhammadan People* published by Brill. (*The Encyclopedia of Islam* will be referred to as *EI* here onwards). This article appears in *EI* since its first edition² to represent morality in Islam. The article is co-authored by Richard Rudolf Walzer (1900–1975) and Hamilton Alexander Rosskeen Gibb (1895–1971). The article which is originally in English, is also translated into Arabic. The article appears in printed and online versions of *EI*. This paper will only focus on the first part of the article under the sub-topic of “Survey of Ethics in Islam”.

Walzer and Gibb are two big names in classical philosophy and its relationship to Islam. Walzer specialises in the understanding of Greek thought, its use, and its development in the hands of medieval Muslim thinkers. His writings that relate to the subject are *Greek into Arabic: Essays on Islamic Philosophy*³ and *Arabic Transmission of Greek Thought to Medieval Europe*⁴. Gibb was a Scottish historian on Orientalism who focuses on Oriental history and civilisation,

¹ Abdullah Hassan Zaroug, “Ethics from an Islamic Perspective: Basic Issues.” *The American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences*. vol. 16, no. 3 (1999), p. 54.

² Richard Walzer and H.A.R Gibb, “Akhlak”, in *Encyclopedia of Islam: A Dictionary of the Geography, Ethnography, and Biography of Muhammadan People* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1913-1938), 1, pp. 325-329.

³ Richard Walzer, *Greek into Arabic: Essays on Islamic Philosophy*, (Oxford: Bruno Cassirer, 1963).

⁴ Richard Walzer, *Arabic Transmission of Greek Thought to Medieval Europe*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1945).

especially Islam. Among his writings are *Modern Trends in Islam* (1947), *Mohammedanism: An Historical Survey*¹ retitled as *Islam: An Historical Survey*,² *Islamic Society and the West*,³ and *Studies on the Civilization of Islam*.⁴

A Brief Exposition to the Content of the Article “Akhlak”

Several points from the article can be appreciated.

1. The authors consider *akhlāq* as a developed discipline or realm of practice and influenced by older traditions. This idea is noted in the first paragraph of the article:

In Islam, ethics appear in their matured state as an interesting and on the whole, a successful amalgamation of a pre-Islamic Arabian tradition and Kur’anic teaching with non-Arabic elements, mainly of Persian and Greek origins, embedded in or integrated with general-Islamic structure.⁵

The authors also describe ethics in Islam as a product of assimilation of various influences:

Their ideas of moral perfection are drawn from widely different sources, although all of them, in various ways, try to conform to the basic standards of Islam (which are in themselves not static); hence the process of assimilation and eventual integration of these different and sometimes conflicting trends extended over a considerable time.

The praise of, and value attached to, good character (*husn al-khuluq*) is common enough among traditionalists, mystics, philosophers, and those writers who aim at giving practical advice to rulers and civil servants.⁶

¹ H. A. R. Gibb, *Mohammedanism: A Historical Survey*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1953).

² H. A. R. Gibb, *Islam: A Historical Survey*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975)

³ H. A. R. Gibb, *Studies on the Civilization of Islam* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1960).

⁴ H. A. R. Gibb, *Studies on the Civilization of Islam* (New York: Routledge, 2008).

⁵ Richard Walzer and H.A.R. Gibb, “Akhlak”, *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*, (Leiden: E.J Brill 1972), 1, p. 325.

⁶ Ibid.

From the above statements, the readers can infer that Islamic morality is a lively discipline which is not isolated from human experience and other existing value systems.

In relation to that the authors also relate the external influence with several Muslim figures. They relate Islamic ethics to Persian moral thought, preceding the statement with its acquaintance with Greek ethics, mainly through Ibn Muqaffa' (d.759), Ibn Qutayba (d.889). They describe the work of *'Uyūn al-Akhbar* of Ibn Qutayba as:

..the first comprehensive manual of Islamic ethics, brought together and to a remarkable degree integrated the Kur'anic, hadith, pre-Islamic and Persian contributions, and by excluding the irreconcilable elements of the two latter, practically defined and standardized the component elements of the orthodox morality in its pre-philosophical and pre-sufistic stage.¹

It is observed that however, the authors are over-highlighting the issue of influence to the extent that, the message that goes through the mind of the readers can reduce the role of Islamic system of morality as original and major contribution. They deny that the ethical system produced during the time was new and original, but rather a process of absorbing and adjusting to what were available.

It would be erroneous to assume that the different kind of morality which found literary expression in successive periods from the age of the pre-Islamic poets to the 5th/11th century present a cumulative process, in the sense that each new type as it emerged replaced or suppressed the earlier types. On the contrary, they co-existed for a long time, in varying strength. The tribal sunnah of the pre-Islamic Arabs, based on usage and custom, described by I. Goldziher (*Muhammedanische Studien*,i) and others (e.g. B. Fares, *L'honneur chez les Arabes avant l'Islam*, Paris 1932), by no means died out with the advent of Islam; and since pre-Islamic literature eventually became part of the accepted Arabic humanities, the values expressed in it were never entirely forgotten.²

¹ Ibid.

² Ibid., p. 326.

While narrating about the Mu‘tazilah and their relevance to the theory of human freedom, the authors made a remark that the group is about the connection to Greek thought and Christian-Hellenistic apologetic works. They also consider the Mu‘tazilite’s reaction towards the orthodox reaction as their reception of Greek philosophical ethics. It appears that each time the authors mention about Islamic ethics, they relate to how it benefits from external influences and made it to be very obvious.

2. The authors have put the references of *akhlāq* into correct sequence. The Qur’ān is mentioned as the first source, followed by the practices of the Prophet and his Sunnah. The third source is interpretation of Muslim scholars. Even in the case of external influence, the role of Qur’ān is acknowledged.

. . . a successful amalgamation of a pre-Islamic Arabian tradition and Kur’anic teaching with non-Arabic elements.¹

The religious ethics of the Kur’an was subsequently expanded and pointed in immense detail by the traditionists in the form of hadiths, professedly based upon and expounding the sunna, or model behavior, of the Prophet, but frequently supplementing this source by traditions of the Companions and by adaptation of materials from the cultural traditions of the older religions.²

3. The authors also highlight that Islam came with radical change in moral values and sanction:

The preaching of Muhammad obviously produced radical change in moral values as well, based on the sanctions of the new religion, and fear of God and of the Last Judgement: kindness and equity, compassion and mercy, generosity, self-restraint, sincerity, moral fellowship of the Believers are among the new virtues to replace tribal morality, and to become the pillars of an ethical society or, at least, the programme for such a society.³

¹ Ibid.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

4. The article manages to capture three main trends of thinking in ethics: the traditionists (*ahl al-hadith*), the theologians, and the mystical movement-all of which the authors consider as anti-intellectual.
5. Islamic ethics is lacking in theoretical and philosophical framework and treatment:

Unlike the Greek world, in which popular ethics were refined and reshaped by philosophical reasoning without any breach between them, and with no perceptible influence of any foreign doctrine, so that eventually philosophy came to express the moral values by which the lives of the educated classes were governed.¹

A Critical Analysis

The article is an analytical exposition to ethics in Islam from the thought of two known scholars of philosophy. Through careful observation, the authors of this paper note that although the writing denotes a critical and comparative approach to ethics in Islam, it bears several major weaknesses in representing ethics as a whole. In short, it does not portray a holistic and balanced understanding of *akhlāq* in Islam. These shortcomings are addressed as follows:

Imbalance Treatment of the Meaning and Root of *Akhlāq*

One of the weaknesses of the article is that, on one hand, *akhlāq* is majorly adopted from other previous traditions and practices. The ideas they have forwarded are pointing to one message, that is, *akhlāq* takes benefit from previous or existing traditions and a product of cumulative process. Virtues in Islam, namely high sense of personal honour (*ʿird*), courage (*ḥamāsa*), loyalty to one's tribesmen (*qabīla*), hospitality (*ḍayf*) endurance (*ṣabr*) are described to be existed before the Islamic period among the Arabs. The writing continues with how *akhlāq* was benefited from other traditions. On the other hand, there appears a short sentence that reads "the preaching of Muhammad obviously produced a radical change in moral values as well based on the sanctions of the new

¹ Ibid.

religion, and fear of God and of the Last Judgement”¹ which shows the original contribution of *akhlāq* and is quite contradicting to the first idea. Indeed, the different concept of sanction as brought by Islam one of the most important underlying principles and distinguishing characteristic of a system of ethics, and hence underscores to originality of Islamic system of ethics. The external or internal sanction is a major component that determines major feature of an ethical system.²

It is observed that this article has taken virtues as major feature of ethics and put aside other fundamental aspects in describing a particular philosophy of ethics, which turn to be inaccurate, especially when ethics in Islam is concerned. Islam has taken concepts such as worldview and sanctions as important fundamental aspects in describing system of ethics.³ Good practices are seen by Islam as the product of an ethical system and not the whole scope of *akhlāq*. Islam can expect common good practices with other traditions. Acknowledging the common values between Islam and previous traditions show that Islam recognizes them as common good. As a religion that fulfils the natural needs of man, the value system of Islam does not reject the universal good that can be derived by man through reason. Values that agreed by all are also acknowledged by Islam as well as by other religions, such as the values of respecting others, sympathy, mercy, and the prohibition of cheating, stealing, and depriving others from their rights.

Human experience is part and partial of religious experience. The relationship is therefore harmonious, and not contradicting Islam came to restore good practices and emerged as a whole, new system of human action, not necessarily to reject the existing good action and values. In describing the contribution of the Qur’ān, Draz again depicts that instead of saying that the Qur’ān consolidated the legacy of the ancients, it actually extended completely new and highly progressive chapters, which led to a complete system of ethics.⁴

Study on *akhlāq* should take the discipline as a whole, and only its true root can be traced. The most fundamental aspect is about worldview which is clearly coming from divine source. Major concepts such as the concept of obligation and responsibility and sanction can also be traced from the

¹ Richard Walzer and H.A.R Gibb, “Akhlak”, in *Encyclopedia of Islam*, 1: 325.

² Syed Abul A’la al-Maudoodi, *Ethical Viewpoint of Islam*, (New Delhi: Markazi Maktaba Islami Publisher, 2009), pp. 24-33.

³ Ansari, *The Ethical Philosophy of Miskawaih*, p. 25.

⁴ Ibid., p. 4.

revelation. When it comes to practices, many are there in the Qur’ān and prophetic traditions, but many others are yet to be discovered through human experience. It is based on these proper framework that *akhlāq* is seen to have original contributions to the general ethical system.

In many writings, Muslim scholars including Ibn Miskawayh (d. 1030) and al-Ghazālī (d. 1111) may be seen to benefit from the framework of Greek philosophy,¹ and therefore the *akhlāq* is mainly benefiting from other traditions as its main source. This conclusion is another backfire to the understanding of *akhlāq*. As a divine system, *akhlāq* or its discipline should come from the root of divine message. Any understanding that ethics in Islam is sufficiently explained by the development of ethical thought by Muslim figures is wrong. Ethical theories in the hand Muslim scholars are attempts to develop the system into a proper framework. They are subject to change in accordance to different context and even different point of view. On the contrary, the gist of *akhlāq* from the Qur’ān and prophetic traditions is permanent and open for further enquiries and studies at all times and places.

In addition, the underlying principles of Islam which are not apparent are intact in their ethical thought, especially when it comes to the role of worldview which determines among others the ultimate end, meaning of obligation, responsibility, and sanction.² In fact, these elements are the most important underlying principles of ethics in Islam which makes “the theory of self” and “means” took its unique understanding. Al-Ghazālī also insisted that the source of placing virtue at its mean state is not only decided by reason but also by revelation. This explanation may not be able to totally defend the originality of Muslim philosophers’ theory of self, but at least shows that the theory is not the main contribution of Islam to ethics. A lot can be explored through-out different phases of time for the course of human action.

The Place of the Qur’ān

In discussing the various influences of the ethical system of Islam, the authors affect negatively on the role of the Qur’ān as sole and primary reference to the system. Their writing appears to imply that the Qur’ān only plays the role of endorsing and adjusting what was already available. In other words, the place of the Qur’ān as purely revealed

¹ Maḥmūd Ḥamdī Zaqqūq, *Muqaddimah fi ‘Ilm al-Akhlāq*, (Cairo: Dar al-Fikr, 1997), p. 97.

² Al-Maudoodi, *Ethical Viewpoint of Islam*, pp. 18-25.

message as believed by the Muslims is not accordingly valued by the authors. As implied in their work, the uniqueness of the Qur'ān as the direct speech of God is not sufficiently appreciated, and the authors seem oblivious about the nature of the teachings of Islam as a revealed religion with a revealed book that is not altered until today.

In the article, the idea that appears in the other writings of the authors continues to take place. Gibb, for example, is known with his conviction that Islam is a man-made religion originated from Muhammad in his book previously entitled *Mohammedanism: A Historical Survey*, before he later changed the title to *Islam: A Historical Survey*. And Walzer also is known to be expert in studying the influence of Greek thought in Islam which bypasses the original contribution of Islam into human civilization.

Studies on the Qur'ān show that the book is proven to possess various miracles including bringing tremendous change in the mind and action of the Arabs and therefore, has been acknowledged for its role in changing human behaviour. Izutsu (d. 1993), for example, contends that

Islam represents undoubtedly one of the most radical social reforms that have ever appeared in the East, and the Koran, the earliest authentic record of this great event, describes in vividly concrete terms how in the period of crisis time-honored tribal norms come into a bloody conflict with new ideals of life, begin to totter, and after desperate and futile efforts to resist, finally find themselves forced to yield the hegemony to the rising power.¹

The result of the sending down of the Qur'ān is described by several writers, among whom is Alparslan:

The world history was about to witness an exceptional event right at the advent of the seventh century to which no equal had yet taken place since the human existence on earth. This is the rise of Islamic civilization which is a miracle phenomenon with respect to many of its aspects.²

In highlighting the same concern, Asad (d.1992) expresses his admiration of Islamic civilisation:

There is nothing whatever in common between the

¹ Toshihiko Izutsu, *Ethico-Religious Concepts in the Qur'an*, (Kuala Lumpur: Islamic Book Trust, 2002) p. 17.

² Alparslan Acikgenc, *Islamic Scientific Tradition in History*, (Kuala Lumpur: IKIM, 2014) p. 95.

Islamic and the Roman Empires beyond the fact that both extended over vast territories and heterogeneous peoples-for, during the whole of their existence, these two Empires were directed by utterly different motive-forces and had, so to say, different historical motive-forces and had, so to say, different historical purpose to fulfil. Even on the morphological side we observe a vast difference between the Islamic and the Roman Empires. It took the Roman Empire nearly one thousand years to grow to its full geographic extent and political maturity, while Islamic Empire sprang up and grew to its fullness within the short period of about eighty years.¹

Draz in his magnum opus “*La Morale du Coran*”² explores the dynamism of the Qur’ānic foundations to ethics. The Holy Book according to him is able to address the concerns of the modern ethics in a proper sense. Notable teachings of the Qur’ān have made *akhlāq* a purely individual realm of endeavor for one to achieve his or her highest aim and fulfill the expectations of society. As Draz points out, the Qur’ān not only addresses the issue of duty between idealism and realism, but also provides a comprehensive meaning of sanction, impact of intention, and areas of effort. From this understanding Draz considers the Qur’ān as able to bring prodigious effect in the system of human action. In another writing, Izutsu coins the slogan “Let the Qur’ān Speak by Itself” to elaborate the meaning of virtues in Islam which are very rich, dynamic, and comprehensive by nature.³

The same theme was presented by Ansari who emphasizes the relationship between rules and values in ethics and proves its dynamic role⁴. Ansari also highlights the important concept of worldview that underpins the philosophy of ethics in Islam, which makes the system unique and original contribution⁵. In another view, Maududi (d.1979) also has a critical exposition to the role of ethics in Islam by comparing between the main themes of the Western and Islam, and finally to come with the specialty of Islam.⁶

¹ Muhammad Asad, *Islam at the Crossroads*, (Kuala Lumpur: The Other Press, 1999), p. 23.

² “*La Morale du Coran*” was Draz’s Ph.D. thesis and has been translated into many world languages including English (*The Moral World of the Qur’an*) and Arabic (*Dustūr al-Akhlāq fī al-Qur’ān*).

³ Izutsu, *Ethico-Religious Concepts in the Qur’an*, p. 4.

⁴ Abdul Haq Ansari, “Islamic Values in a Changing World”, *Islam and the Modern Age*, vol. 4 (1974), pp. 24-27.

⁵ Ansari, *The Ethical Philosophy of Miskawaih*, p. 25.

⁶ Al-Maudoodi, *Ethical Viewpoint of Islam*, pp. 18-25.

Morality, Ethics and Ethical thought

Islam maintains its content and feature by adhering to the teachings of the revealed text: the Qur'ān and prophetic traditions. Accordingly, scholars of Islam have made a distinction between the clear teaching of the revealed text and what is developed by human thought based on the revelation. The differences between these two realms are referred among others as "religion," and "religious thought." In Islam, what is developed by man or human '*ijtihad*' (personal reasoning) in solving problems that do not have direct answer from the revelation does not affect truth as brought by clear messages of the Qur'ān and prophetic traditions. However, it does not mean that religious thought is not important, in fact, it is needed especially in the hands of scholars and knowledgeable people with the spirit of '*ijtihad*' to relate the gist of Islam with the reality and changes occur in human experience. Even though religious thought in Islam is merely about human effort to relate things with the true teaching, Islam really encourages and appreciates the spirit and in fact, has made it as a duty of Muslims especially those who are knowledgeable.¹

In relation to this, there are two distinct aspects in relation to *akhlāq*, namely *akhlāq* and '*ilm al-akhlāq*' which is found not to be properly introduced in the article and leads to inaccurate exposure to the Islamic understanding of ethics. *Akhlāq* is morality in the sense that it is about belief and understanding inheres in one's mind such as general expectation, right and wrong, which is translated into practices and behaviour. In this sense it has been agreed by the Muslim philosophers such as al- Ghazālī as "established state of the soul". In this sense, it is about every one's quality of inner self which is reflected from one's belief and conviction towards religion, ideology or culture as expected by the Qur'ān and prophetic traditions. Muslims in general have the capability to comprehend the ethical expectations towards them from the scripture, and the earliest generation of Muslims were able to practice morality in a righteous and excellent way, even though without established ethical thought and theories. Indeed, the ethical message in the revelation is well-receptive to everyone, masses, and elites, and therefore, is sufficient as guidance for the Muslims to live their lives.

'*Ilm al-akhlāq*' is about expositions to the understanding of *akhlāq*. It is human who develop its principles as a result of their articulation of

¹ This is portrayed by the verses of the Qur'ān for example on *ulul albāb*, importance of wisdom, encouragement of thinking and reflecting. See 38: 29; 3: 191; 2: 269 and many others.

certain understanding about morality and ethics. It is about attempts of producing framework of *‘ilm al-akhlāq* which addresses main issues of ethics such as ultimate end, sanction etc. ideas of ethics can be in pieces and not comprehensive. It is in this sense that certain aspects of *akhlāq* have been developed into disciplines or theories, and other theories or ideas are sometimes benefited by the Muslim scholars and philosophers on their way to explain and elaborate about Islam, especially when they found that the concepts are inherent in the teachings of Islam. The opinions and theories in the disciplines are known as religious thoughts based on human expositions, which are not infallible and do not affect the main body of religion.

The distinction between these two aspects of morality in Islam need to be made clear, and the failure to do so will affect the whole understanding of Islam and its disciplines. The article written by Walzer and Gibb is about the development of *“ilm al-akhlāq”* instead of *akhlāq* because the writing is about the development of ethical thoughts in Islam. With the latter topic, the writing has more freedom to discuss any ethical thought in Islam without directly affecting the real meaning of ethics in Islam. Ethics in Islam as presented by Walzer and Gibb are seen to be more on ethical thoughts consisting of available opinions or trends of thought. The discussion does not begin with the understanding from the subject’s primary source especially the Qur’ān, which leads to the discussion on the ethical thought as expressed by the Muslims and their practices.

The current presentation of ethics in Islam lacks of philosophical foundation but is not necessarily that ethics in Islam does not contain that. In fact, the ethical conception of Islam is able to contribute to human quests answers for a proper foundation of ethics.

It is to be reiterated that the foundation and main principles of *akhlāq* should be understood from divine revelation, and the Prophet (p.b.u.h) was the best way to translate the verses into practices. Even though the proper discipline of ethics emerged later than did other disciplines of Islam, the Muslim ethicists have consistently seen many excellent features of the Qur’ān that can facilitate the understanding of universal ethics. Draz contended that the Qur’ān is unique; it’s wisdom is “so effective in its prodigious effects in man’s ethics in which it attains three-fold perfection which is difficult to find elsewhere: softness within firmness, progress within stability and nuance within unity.”¹

¹ Draz, *The Moral World of the Qur’an*, p. 10.

This conclusion was arrived after he compared the Qur'ānic ethics with the philosophy of many Western theories, such Immanuel Kant (d.1804) and Bergson (d.1941). Toshihiko Izutsu also draws the attention of the Muslims to the Qur'ānic ethics with his slogan "Let the Qur'ān speaks by itself."¹ Hence, instead of being an "unfinished project," *akhlāq* is open to be further explored and developed into a theoretical aspect by extracting invaluable gems from the divine revelation.

Given the above points, it is inappropriate to limit the study of *akhlāq* via its writings without directly accessing to the Qur'ān and prophetic traditions. What makes a study on *akhlāq* influenced by the other writings is the limited number of writings on the subject and the portrayal of imbalance discussion on the field. Works that report *akhlāq* from the Qur'ān and prophetic traditions have failed to envisage the real spirit of *akhlāq* in the Holy Book. Draz again says, "We will find essays have been produced throughout the nineteenth century which extract the Qur'ān's moral precepts, but the framework of these essays is often very restricted and far from accurately reflecting the true Qur'ānic doctrine."²

Abdul Haq Ansari also expresses his dissatisfaction towards the same nature of writing: "Unfortunately most of the writings on the ethics of the Qur'ān and the Sunnah do not make any effort to study those injunctions of the Qur'ān and Sunnah that bear upon various ethical issues, nor do they penetrate into metaphysical ideas which build and nourish in the early Islam. Their best achievement is an exposition of the moral life in the early Islam. And that too, is very selective."³

It can be said that that the available exposition to *akhlāq* is a reduction approaches of *akhlāq* from its real meaning: theoretically, into philosophical, mystical or theological; or practical advices, absolutely devoid from underlying philosophy. Indeed, Islam does not acknowledge the demarcation between different scopes of ethics into meta-ethics, applied and normative ethics. Islam emphasizes about internal quality of man who acts as individual responsible agent *cum* societal member, acknowledging the role of God and reason as well as experience in action, without segregating any important aspect from another. Under the concept of *tawhid*, *akhlāq* values one and the only the holistic system of human behaviour that it carries.

¹ Izutsu, *Ethico-Religious Concepts in the Qur'an*, p. 6.

² Ibid.

³ Ansari, *The Ethical Philosophy of Miskawaih*, p. 25.

Limiting *akhlāq* into values

Walzer and Gibb have limited the meaning of *akhlāq* into a set of values and deprived it from other aspects of the term¹. The first sentence of the article appears as a short statement defining *khuluq* as “inner disposition”; however, no discussion is provided thereafter to reflect that meaning of the term in the article. The authors later on came with a list of practical values which represent the core aspect of *akhlāq*,² whereas, the inner disposition is the most direct meaning to “*khuluq*”. Numerous figures of Muslim philosophers on ethics including al-Ghazālī and Ibn Miskawayh have established the understanding that *khuluq* is about “established state of human soul,” which determines the external aspect of human action. The most important aim is then to groom one’s soul, which determines his or her actions, and a good intention can turn to be bad with bad intention. The good or excellent state of a soul also does not necessarily produce action, and to elucidate this notion, Al-Ghazālī describes a generous man who gives away his wealth, especially in a situation that he has nothing to give but still has the inclination to sympathise and understand the hardship.³

Thus, *khuluq* takes the inner side of man; it comprises the spiritual, intellectual, and emotional state of man as its main subject matter. A good soul will continuously look for good actions, but good actions do not necessarily come from a good soul. Grooming the *khuluq* is more than a mere determination of “right” and “wrong”; it involves a larger scope of endeavours and higher expectations.

Human inner personality is complex and everyone is different in his or her capacity. *Akhlāq*, therefore, does not expect a similar pattern of personality to which everyone has to conform. Emulating the morality of Prophet Muhammad (p.b.u.h) does not mean to exactly imitate his conduct but rather to take his conduct as a guide towards an idealistic personality. In fact, a normal Muslim will not be able to be at his standard. The best way of inculcating good behaviour in Islam is more appropriately exemplified by the way the companions of Prophet Muhammad (p.b.u.h.) with individual variety and even sharp differences, but striving for Islamic idealistic expectations of good individuals. The Prophet was fully conscious of individual divergences and has provided for them in his saying, “My companions are like

¹ Richard Walzer and H.A.R Gibb, “Akhlak,” in *Encyclopedia of Islam*, 1, p. 325.

² Ibid., 1, p. 326.

³ Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī, *Iḥyā’ ‘Ulūm al-Dīn*, 3, p. 177.

various stars, whomsoever you follow, you will certainly be led along the right path.”¹

Akhlāq comprises many sections and not limited to the knowledge of good and bad. An affective scope of *akhlāq* comprises a much bigger area than what is ever expected. This scope involves aspects such as motivation, intention, and effort in the making of established behaviour in man which determines a person's success or failure. *Akhlāq* does not limit its concerns to the visible aspect of human action. In fact, the invisible or inner side of actions is more important than producing action because not all good efforts will end up with the fruit for which a person strives. It is in this sense that a good intention and preliminary effort in executing certain major tasks are more expected than a specific action at one particular time. In fact, the whole process of *takhallī* (freeing one's self from bad attributes) and *tahallī* (equipping with good actions) is about efforts that may be invisible by nature. Draz is true in explaining the concept of effort not only as defensive (on the basic requirements of eliminating bad), but also to execute creative efforts which is striving for certain goals in life which is found to be more valuable in the current context.²

Limiting *akhlāq* only to practical advices of specific good and bad will jeopardize its holistic understanding. *Akhlāq* is not static by nature; it involves a high level of decision making and a rich foundation of theoretical and philosophical aspect as the underlying principles of the discipline. Also, *akhlāq* is not about a straightforward answer of good and bad. More and more Muslim writers such as Izutsu, Ansari, and Draz have not only shown their admiration of the theoretical aspect of *akhlāq*, but also come to say that the philosophical aspect is more important and must be understood to really comprehend the meaning of *akhlāq*, especially when the ethics of the Qur'an is concerned.

The concept of worldview is one of the examples of theoretical or philosophical foundation of *akhlāq*. It is the worldview that determines the ultimate aim, sanction, and the concept of responsibility of man. In discussing the different aspects of morality, Izutsu shows that the attitude towards God is part and partial of an Islamic concept that distinguishes it from other ethical systems. He also includes that God's dealing with man is included as a category of ethical concepts, and in fact, a man's action is actually a reflection of God's attributes. Ansari highlights the importance of worldview to

¹ Ansari, *The Ethical Philosophy of Miskawaih*, p. 27.

² Draz, *The Moral World of the Qur'an*, pp. 249-258.

understand the difference between Muslim ethicists namely al-Ghazālī and others from Greek figures.¹

Conclusion

Literature on *akhlāq* is surprisingly very limited in number and coverage of subject matter. Western exposition to it is therefore a major contribution and should be appreciated. However, as portrayed by the article “Akhlak” in the *Encyclopedia of Islam*, it must be critically analysed because there are obvious misconceptions on ethics in Islam from the Western point of view. The misconception may not be realised because it is related to the understanding of philosophy of religion. Among others, the unique role of the Qur’ān is not fully comprehended, which leads to the unacknowledged contribution of Islam in the field of ethics. The difference between religion as clearly expressed by the Qur’ān and religious thought is another factor for inaccurate representation of *akhlāq* in Islam. As a result, *akhlāq* is normally described as sets of values and practices hence carries limited meaning as a broad discipline responsible for the whole concept of human action.

It is high time for Muslims to seriously delve into the real meaning and roles of *akhlāq*. Other than correcting the inaccurate meaning of *akhlāq* in available literatures, more critical writings on *akhlāq* should be produced. The current situation that witnesses all sorts of problems in the life of Muslims, which mainly rooted from lack of ethics and morality, should be seriously remedied.

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¹ Ansari, *The Ethical Philosophy of Miskawaih*, p. 25.

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