

## Does Morality Require God?

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**Abstract:** A series of arguments have been offered in favour of a God-based ethical and moral system by convincingly refuting parallel, competing systems like secularist, relativistic and situational ethics which advocate the alleged superiority of their standards devoid of God or religious concepts and precepts. Specifically, the article has examined (i) popular theories of Western ethics, (ii) religious ethics, particularly that of Islamic ethics and its sole dependence and reliance on God and religion, and (iii) an overview and an enunciation and articulation of Islamic perspective on morality. This perspective is provided in the context of modern ethical theories by comparing secular theories with Islamic ethics wherein morality is inextricably linked with religion.

Among the major consequences of the scientific worldview is the illusion that humanity is slowly progressing and “evolving” towards a highly advanced state of being - the zenith of “civilization,” hitherto unseen, with scientific and technological endeavour and blind scepticism toward anything “sacred.”<sup>1</sup> While an elite minority has improved in its material quality of life, mankind as a whole has sullenly witnessed a decline in the quality of the human beings and their relationships. The pride of those who rejoice in the achievement of modern man is only matched by their indifference to the serious ethical and moral crisis and suffering that plagues humanity as a whole.

The grim statistics of the twentieth century makes a harrowing reading. It has witnessed over 100 million deaths - the “collateral

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damage” of the wars waged for global domination. Almost 3 billion people live on less than \$2 per day, while the world’s richest 225 people have a combined wealth of over \$1 trillion, which is equal to the combined annual income of the world’s 2.5 billion poorest.<sup>2</sup> Ten million hectares of ancient forest are destroyed every year.<sup>3</sup> In “the year of the millennium,” the U.S. society alone witnessed 2.18 million violent crimes including homicide, rape, robbery and aggravated assault; 1.37 million adult and 203,900 juvenile drug arrests; over 1 million victims of abuse by intimate partners; 879,000 confirmed child victims of sexual, physical and psychological abuses; over 30,000 suicides; and 17.8% of all households victimized by theft or burglary.<sup>4</sup> The U.S. has over 12 million alcoholics with 104 million alcohol users; over 14 million illicit drug users; between 16-25 million people living at or below the federal poverty level; over 2 million people homeless at some point during the year (with at least 444,000 homeless on any night); over 1.9 million prisoners in crowded jails and prisons; 46,000 new AIDS cases with over 13,000 deaths annually; and an estimated 22% of the adult population suffering from a diagnosable mental disorder in a given year.<sup>5</sup> And such grim statistics are only the tip of the iceberg.<sup>6</sup> Regardless of whether one considers moral deficiencies to be the root or an outcome of such problems, it is undoubtedly a moral problem when one turns a blind eye toward them.

No society, in human history, has ever been without at least some standards for what is considered “right” and “wrong.” In fact, it would be difficult if not impossible to think of any aspect of life that does not have an ethical dimension. Economics, politics, education, family life, socialization, health care, war, peace, science and technology, all have moral and ethical implications. Prior to the “Age of Enlightenment,” the source of such moral and ethical standards for much of the world was primarily religious teachings.

The last two hundred years, however, is roughly the first period where the dominant worldview has advocated the superiority of moral and ethical standards *devoid of God or religious influences*. Such notions had their roots in seventeenth and eighteenth century Europe, during the so-called age of Enlightenment, where the scientific and technological revolution began to question and supplant the belief system and authority of the Church. Secular ideologies were, nonetheless, predictable reactions to the Catholic Church, with its

increasingly authoritarian role in not only religious affairs, but also political and economic, as well as its discrimination against non-Catholic segments of society. The “Free Thought” movement of the nineteenth century in America and Western Europe continued to make it more “acceptable” to reject the dogmatic ways of the Church. Finally, in the Age of Science and Information, catalyzed and spread by capitalist globalization, it is not surprising that such a major paradigm shift has occurred.

This article attempts to: (1) examine popular secular theories of ethics, (2) analyze religious ethics, particularly that of Islam, and the dependence of its morality on God, and (3) provide an overview of Islamic perspective on morality.

### **Is Morality Relative or Absolute?**

Morality and ethics are terms that are often used interchangeably. Some distinguish the two terms by defining ethics to be “the philosophical study of morality,” including the systematic reasoning behind morality, others designate ethics more narrowly to principles of a particular tradition, group, or individual,” such as “the moral Christian ethics or Aristotle’s ethics.”<sup>7</sup> In any case, while the field of ethics and morality is vast and has numerous branches, it is really the study of what constitutes goodness, right action, responsibility and its motivational factors. Included within the concept of goodness is the criterion of the ultimate source of goodness, morality and ethics.

To understand whether morality is dependent on God, the pivotal question of ethical relativism or subjectivism must first be addressed. No system of ethics, sacred or secular, can be discussed until the challenge of relativism is dealt with, for it undermines the very notion of “meaningful ethics or morality.” Modern Western civilization is, in fact, characterized by an “absolutization” of the relative as well as the hegemony of secularization. Ethical relativism denies any objective or absolute moral values that are common to all people and times, and instead promotes the individual as the only source and criterion of moral judgments.<sup>8</sup> The philosophical theory of existentialism, which emphasizes the freedom and uniqueness of each individual, also promotes a type of relativist and subjective ethics. Thus, any moral value, such as marital fidelity, is considered meaningful only for the holder of such a value, and not necessarily for others. Proponents of

ethical relativism often use cultural variability to support their theory, and argue that culture usually defines morality. The renowned American psychologist, B.F. Skinner, stated:

What a given group of people calls good is a fact; it is what members of the group find reinforcing as the result of their genetic endowment and the natural and social contingencies to which they have been exposed. Each culture has its own set of goods, and what is good in one culture may not be good in another. To recognize this is to take the position of "cultural relativism." What is good for the Trobriand Islander is good for the Trobriand Islander, and that is that. Anthropologists have often emphasized relativism as a tolerant alternative to missionary zeal in converting all cultures to a single set of ethical, governmental, religious, or economic values.<sup>9</sup>

Relativists, thus, argue that all moral values, and even values in general, are largely determined by circumstances or social environments. They also point to the many differences and controversies that abound in the field of ethics.

While ethical relativism may initially sound appealing, it is mired by serious flaws. Its conclusion that there is no "objective truth" in morality does not follow from its premise that different individuals, cultures and societies have different moral codes. For example, many people in the past believed that the earth is flat – does this mean that the earth is not spherical (roughly), or that there is no objective truth in the matter? We may disagree about various laws of physics, but that does not mean there are no fixed laws of physics. Just as it is possible to be mistaken in beliefs, it is also possible to be mistaken in moral beliefs or unaware of objective moral truths. We must, therefore, distinguish between our opinions of morality and morality itself.

Another significant problem with relativism is its utter impracticality. While many claim to be ethical relativists, almost none can live accordingly. Do we not hold persons responsible for their actions, judge actions according to right and wrong, and even try to impose our own values on others? Are there societies that are without laws, including laws governing the domain of morality and ethics? The very fact that most of us engage in debate over right and wrong also implies there must be an objective and common morality. There can be no absolute goodness or absolute evil in a relativist society. Nor can there be any meaningful criticism, reform or progress of moral practices in a relativist

society. It is not surprising, then that many people advocate ethical absolutism, which affirms that there are at least some moral values which are independent of individual opinions, and are fixed, objective realities valid for all people and as some argue, all times. Greg Krehbiel summarizes the argument for moral absolutes as follows:

Let's say you have two people in a room who are examining the fact that every time they jump up in the air, they fall back down. One of them believes that gravity is a universal, *real*/thing. The other believes that the fact that they fall is just a particular—it may or may not apply in another room, or at another time, but for now it certainly applies. These two people could agree that they are likely to fall when they jump. But if we ask them if they will fall tomorrow, or if they would fall in the next room, what answers should we expect from them? The one who believes that gravity is *real* says that he will fall tomorrow, and the next day, and at any time, and his belief in gravity justifies that claim – it provides warrant for his belief. But the one who believes that falling is a particular wouldn't be able to say that. In order to be consistent with his belief that gravity is a particular, he'd have to say that he doesn't know if he'd fall tomorrow, or the next day.<sup>10</sup>

This is the problem of the atheist. His humanity compels him to make universal moral claims, but his philosophy provides no warrant for them. The one who believes that morality is a *real* thing has a philosophical justification for his belief that things are right or wrong. The one who believes that morality is just a particular – the way people in this society feel, or something like that – has no justification for applying his belief outside that particular. All he can say is, “such and such people regard this as evil.”

This issue provides a powerful argument for the existence of God. As humans, we can't avoid making general, universal moral statements. It is simply a part of who we are. And only theism provides the philosophical warrant for those claims.

### **Secular Ethics – Hedonism and Perfectionism**

Having discussed the issue of relativism and meaningful ethics, one is still faced with an array of ethical systems that provide for what constitutes goodness and its motivational factors. Thus, we shall now provide an overview of ethical systems which avoid any religious derivations, such as hedonism, perfectionism and secular humanism to further bolster our argument.

According to the theory of hedonism, pleasure (or happiness) is the only intrinsic good in life, and maximizing pleasure is the only criterion for right action.<sup>11</sup> Its chief exponent was the Greek philosopher Epicurus. Although hedonism often conjures images of endless sensual gratification, what hedonistic philosophers had in mind was various forms of philosophical and intellectual pleasures. This view not only asserts that it is morally obligatory to seek pleasure, but also that persons naturally seek pleasure whether they realize it or not. The primary motivation behind all action is the prospect of either present or future pleasure. Hedonists can be further divided into ethical egoists and utilitarians. Ethical egoists measure actions according to the pleasure derived for one's self, while utilitarians focus on maximizing pleasure for people or society as a whole.

As one might expect, hedonism has serious flaws. It derives from human nature or the way people act "in reality"— however, because they act in a certain way, does this make it "right"? In other words, how can a "should" be derived from an "is"? Furthermore, although people act with their pleasure in mind, it is highly questionable whether this is the only motivating factor in human nature. In fact, some activities purposely target suffering. Are ascetic monks seeking pleasure in their retreats? Do fire-fighters seek pleasure as they rush into a burning inferno? Not only actions are not motivated by pleasure, but it is also dubious whether the best way to achieve pleasure is to seek it. Certain unavoidable activities, like raising children or working can provide pleasure without necessarily intending to seek pleasure. Hedonism's definition of "pleasure" is also problematic (similar problems occur with Aristotelian notions of "happiness"). Some hedonists argue that pleasure is defined relative to the individual or society. If it is for the sake of individual, then how does one morally justify selfish pleasure to the detriment of others? What about those who claim to derive pleasure from seemingly immoral acts like killing or stealing? How does one judge between different types of pleasure? Are spiritual pleasures considered as pleasurable as physical ones? Is the pleasure of intellectual discourse superior to that of eating chocolate or are they equal? Yet another problem concerns the pain and affliction that can follow pleasure. One can imagine the suffering that can follow recreational drug use or overeating. Is one to maximize long-term or short-term pleasure? If one opts for the long-term, then what about religious believers who act in the interest of eternal pleasure in the

## afterlife?

Not all forms of ethics assume that we naturally seek a good life. Theory of perfectionism maintains that goodness is inherently worthy of pursuit. Its ardent supporters are Plato and Friedrich Nietzsche. Plato's theory of "forms" postulates that goodness is a truth or form that is independent of human beings, but can be discovered by some of them, and after discovery, it is followed by them. Constituting goodness or virtue are other forms, such as that of life, truth, justice, happiness, pleasure, knowledge, virtue, friendship, beauty and harmony. Thus, while paintings, sculptures, flowers and peacocks are considered beautiful to the extent that they "imitate" or "participate" in beauty, the form of beauty itself is eternal, changeless and incorporeal. Plato regarded such forms as only being perceptible through pure reason or thought.

Plato's theory of "forms" assumes that everyone who fully utilizes their intellectual capabilities will eventually realize the same essences or forms constituting goodness and that they will all act accordingly. However, we are aware of exceptions to this, such as other philosophers who have exhausted their intellectual capabilities come up with vastly disparate conclusions, or even those who continually choose to lie, cheat and steal despite fully knowing that such acts are wrong. Other thinkers, like Aristotle, had problems understanding how an independent world of forms can exist—claiming that the form and matter of entities are different aspects of the same object.

Without delving into Plato's theory, perfectionism is also faced with subjectivity in not only what qualities are inherently worthy of pursuit, but also with what activities, behaviours and thoughts they consist of. The virtue of benevolence, for example, can be taken to an extreme where fairness is compromised, just as justice can be followed so strictly that benevolence is compromised? Moreover, if justice is inherently worthy of pursuit, is capital punishment part of justice? Does the virtue of knowledge include "knowledge" of movie trivia? Eventually, we are forced to revert to the authority of human beings, whether individually or collectively, as the source of determining what constitutes goodness, and differentiating moral from immoral behaviour.

## Secular Humanism

In modern age where vague notions of democracy, secularism, freedom, tolerance and independence have virtually become infallible deities, many agnostics, atheists, secularists and some modernists feel that morality does not require God or religion. Secular humanism has emerged as a popular doctrine intertwined with a secular political outlook which holds that ethical and “humane” standards should be developed by society without interference from specific religious dictates. It is akin to ethical relativism in that it rejects any dependence of morality on God or religion, but is different in exalting particular societies or humanity as the source of moral values, as opposed to the individual. According to the Council for Secular Humanism, the core principles of its worldview include, but are not limited to:

- (1) A conviction that dogmas, ideologies, and traditions, whether religious, political or social, must be weighed and tested by each individual and not simply accepted on faith, (2) commitment to the use of critical reason, factual evidence, and scientific methods of inquiry, rather than faith and mysticism, in seeking solutions to human problems, (3) a conviction that with reason, an open marketplace of ideas, good will, and tolerance, progress can be made in building a better world.<sup>12</sup>

Arguments supporting secular humanism are: (a) it is superior because it is not motivated by rewards of an afterlife, (b) human beings can lead moral and ethical lives without God or religion, (c) human beings can have purpose and meaning in life without God or religion, (d) a free, secular and democratic society requires tolerance and collective decision-making, and, therefore, must relinquish any notion of absolute truth or morality, and (e) a diversity of religious moral ideas exists, which means that relativism already exists. Let us briefly examine these arguments.

(a) Humanists argue that secular humanism is superior because it is not motivated by reward in heaven. They argue that moral virtues are inherently worthy of pursuit without resorting to heavenly rewards. As Kai Nielsen says, a person who can steadily pursue a course without deluding oneself into illusory ideas of hell or heaven should be commended. “Moral integrity, fraternity, and love of humankind are worth subscribing to without a thought of whether or not such virtues will be rewarded in heaven.”<sup>13</sup>



It is true that many religions consider heaven and hell an inevitable part of human destiny; it is not true that the primary motivation for all religious followers lies therein. The primary motivation for believers is to obey, love and submit to God as Creator, with heaven being a secondary reward and a blessing from God. What is so irrational to obey the Creator who is Infinite in Knowledge, Wisdom, and thereby, knows what is best for His creation? This is because of human behaviour being purposive or teleological, and no moral values can be “inherently worthy of pursuit” unless they are considered universal forms or gods in and of themselves. In practice, acts that are considered moral are often motivated by selfishness with expectations of reciprocal compensation. Religion is the only force that truly encourages the importance of absolute moral behaviour without ulterior selfish motives. Moral deeds ought to be pursued for the pleasure of God, and without further expectation. One cannot submit to God without fulfilling the rights of one’s self as well as other creation.

(b) Secular humanists like to point that atheists, agnostics, secularists can be “good” people who lead ethical lives, which prove that morality does not require God. While it is plausible that those who do not believe in God can perform “good” deeds and have some semblance of moral standards, it does not follow from this that morality does not require God.

Firstly, most theists argue that the very reason atheists and agnostics can behave “morally,” is because God is the Moral Law Giver who has imbued within human beings an inherent moral conscience. Not everyone necessarily follows their conscience, but it indicates that this innate sense of morality exists, and is the reason why some moral principles have remained common across all ages and peoples. John Henry Newman (1801–1890) wrote “If, as is the case, we feel responsibility, are ashamed, are frightened, at transgressing the voice of conscience, this implies there is One to whom we are responsible, before whom we are ashamed, whose claim upon us we fear.”<sup>14</sup>

The sceptic’s claim that such a moral conscience is merely a product of socialization and acculturation does not hold weight mainly because there have been countless reformers, saints, and Prophets throughout history who have diametrically opposed external influences to follow their “calling within” and obliterate evils, such as slavery, racism, oppression, and paganism. In fact, it is this inherent moral conscience

that has provided some semblance of ethics to societies and preserved the human race. Secondly, most theists would argue that if the goal is not merely to be “good”, but to become virtuous in the highest sense, then God *is, in fact, necessary* to bestow this quality upon people who strive with sincerity to obey Him, without which neither atheist nor disingenuous theist has any hope of attaining it. In other words, God is necessary to exhibit “godly” character. While we have a moral conscience, God is still necessary to maximize and actualize the potential within us. History bears testimony that only the Prophets, Messengers, and select devotees of God have truly attained the highest level of virtue and morality. This highest level does not simply consist of charity and volunteer work, but tireless service to humanity, such that whatever one desires for one’s self is wished for everyone else and with no expectations in return.<sup>15</sup> It is only the likes of Jesus who could have turned the other cheek to forgive his most ardent enemies. It is only the likes of Joseph who could have forgiven his jealous brothers who dropped him into the bottom of a well only to be taken away by a caravan. It is only the likes of Muhammad (SAS) who worried about the welfare of a Jewish woman who used to daily throw garbage on him, when one day because of sickness did not do so. While the Prophets and Saints of God are remembered by billions across the world, hundreds of years after, for their magnanimous natures and extraordinary characters, no atheists or agnostics are even remotely remembered in a similar fashion.

(c) There are those who do not believe in God or religion but have some semblance of purpose and meaning in life; they are also offered by some as proof that morality does not require God. Kai Nielsen in support of this argument says that if somebody has a life plan, he will achieve it regardless of whether one believes in God or not. And one can have all the purposes in life even though life is purposeless and meaningless: “Life does not become meaningless and pointless if you were not made for a purpose.”<sup>16</sup>

This frail argument is analogous to the notion of a little girl who thinks she can do whatever she wants, with or without her parents. She is free to think, but this does not mean that she is correct in believing so or that she can prove such a belief. Rigorous proof of her point would require determining whether she could do as she pleased if her parents were not present. Thus, in order for moral relativists to prove

their point, they would have to argue that God does not exist, which cannot be proven.

Nonetheless, it is important to understand that there is no logical contradiction between a Supreme God and the material success of those who choose not to believe. By His Mercy, Love and Wisdom, God has left us to empirically determine the outcomes of exercising our free wills so that we may recognize our strengths and fallibilities and submit to a higher, infallible authority. God is not a vengeful being sitting on His Throne preventing those who do not believe in Him from fulfilling any worldly desires. In fact, God has gifted us with such intellectual capability and will-power that those who desire to become doctors will become doctors, those who want wealth will often get wealth, desire fame will often get fame, and those who desire power will often get power – regardless of belief or disbelief. Such is the Way of God. Such is His munificence and beneficence.

However, it is those who realize that there is purpose *to* life who can transcend such worldly desires to realize what is truly important. Thus, the prince and pauper can be equal when they realize they were created for the same purpose of worshipping God, not worshipping wealth or fame. Those who suppose there can only be purpose *in* life cannot be equated with those who believe there is purpose *to* life, to borrow Nielsen's terms. There is surely a world of difference in the motivation behind actions in each of these cases.

Another major flaw in this argument is that it equates all purposes "as long as I see meaning in what I do"; it is worthy and commendable of pursuit. But are not some purposes better than others? Is a thief equal to a saint? Is a bartender equal to a doctor? The fact is that when we realize the purpose and meaning of life as a whole, the career paths we take and the decisions we make can all be judged to the extent that they fulfil this overall purpose. It is not surprising that atheists and agnostics have resorted to arguments of altruistic egoism or the idea that it is better to live in harmony with others without "harming them" to further one's own interests.

(d) Another popular argument is the notion that free, secular and democratic societies require moral relativism in order to properly function. Dogmatism and absolute morality are regarded as obstructive forces in a "progressive" society. Is it logically necessary, however,

that there should be a contradiction between a free society and moral absolutes? Firstly, one can fully believe that there are moral absolutes and still believe that there is value in reaching conclusions through an open discussion, dialogue or debate. Just as relativists need to present their case to reach consensus, so too can theists use open discussion and debate. The fact that I may believe in moral absolutes for the betterment of society does not mean that I also believe in coercion or that everyone has to agree with me. While the exclusivists and extremists of various religions have created the perception of incompatibility between religious absolutes and freedom and tolerance, it is clear that there is no such inherent contradiction between these concepts and principles.

Secondly, there is no such thing as a *completely free* society. There is no society on earth that does not have some form of binding laws and regulations, including the United States of America. Such laws do not simply involve the prevention of “harming others” as some suppose, but also considerably infringe upon personal and moral rights. While it is claimed that moral absolutes derived from religion infringe upon the rights of those who do not believe in a particular religion, do not the laws developed by fallible, secular politicians infringe upon the rights of believers in God?

Yet another problem with the original argument is its implication that decisions reached by the majority will always be correct and binding. History, however, has provided numerous instances to the contrary. The majority can be wrong! Just because the majority of Americans at one time advocated and implemented the wholesale slavery of Africans does not make it right. Just because a particular society condones gambling, drinking of alcohol and night club dancing does not make it right. A related illusion of modern democracies is the idea that “the people” are responsible for policies and laws thereby implicating that everyone has an equal share in the decision-making process. Quite to the contrary, the extent of influence on policy is directly proportional to the magnitude of financial contributions and influence of special interest groups.

(e) This brings us to the next question of why there is no consensus among believers regarding moral principles if all of them acquire such principles from the same source, i.e., God. This question boils down to a question of why there is disobedience since it is human beings who

have evolved multiplicity in religion and ethics, not God. God has been fully consistent in the content of His Message to humanity, which includes moral principles. It is true that the application of principles has differed to some extent through the course of history, but the principles have remained the same.

Moreover, acknowledging that certain differences in religious ethical systems exist does not necessarily mean that all systems are correct. The existence of different views of biological evolution does not mean they are all correct. We cannot abandon scholarly research in distinguishing what is “religiously human” from what is “religiously divine.” The point, however, is that even acknowledging the existence of moral diversity between and sometimes even within religions, does not invalidate the authority and reliability of God as the source of morality.

### Religious Ethics

Traditional Judaism, Christianity and Islam are all in basic agreement regarding the fundamental and essential belief in God as the ultimate source of morality. God is believed to be the only objective source of a universal morality that can transcend the inherent human limitations of space, time and ego, and is considered the only Being that can provide complete justice and accountability for moral and immoral acts. Similarly, God provides the ultimate sanction and accountability that works under all conditions and settings. The effect of all other moralities is there for every one to see whereas modern societies are moving in the direction of disaster or oblivion. Just as children cannot be relied on to devise an optimal code of behaviour without their parents, so too human beings must rely on God as the objective Creator whose Infinite Knowledge and Wisdom provide the ultimate moral authority. Within this general agreement, there are three kinds of theistic moralities with respect to how we actually acquire moral and ethical truths from God.

The first, sometimes called the “Divine Command” theory, considers moral principles to be communicated by God to mankind through some form of Scripture or the teachings of a Messenger. Most believers of various faiths rely on at least some form of written Revelation or message of a Prophet for moral guidance. It is reasoned here that God is the only objective source of morality that transcends human

limitations, and must therefore be followed. Once this idea is accepted, one only has to determine where the genuine Message of God is to be found, and how to practically apply it.

Another theory is that of “Natural Law,” developed by St. Thomas Aquinas. Aquinas believed that God has provided various moral principles through revelation but that human reason can be used to discover moral standards in nature and can confirm and even provide supplementary details to divine commandments. In this way human reason can participate and share in the eternal and perfect Reason of God in a manner prescribed by God.

Many religions also advocate that human beings possess an innate and inherent moral conscience that is part of human nature. Since human beings are created in God’s image and imbued with His Spirit, they possess this innate moral sense. For example, it is claimed that every sane being knows intuitively that it is wrong to kill innocent children. Everyone knows what it is like to experience a sense of guilt or responsibility when one has done something wrong. Not all moral standards are necessarily considered inborn, but it is claimed that certain principles are.

Of course, several criticisms have been levelled at theistic moralities. Many, for instance, question why religion can sometimes sanction commandments that they consider morally questionable (according to human standards). Can God command something that is simply wrong, such as killing children or ordering oppression? Furthermore, how is one to evaluate the claims of various religions on ethical and moral issues? Sceptics also claim that “moral conscience” is merely an outcome of parental, societal and cultural influences. The atheist, Kai Nielsen, has levelled another criticism of religious ethics by arguing that everyone has pre-existing moral standards by which we judge whether God is Perfectly Good or not, and hence, feels that everyone’s morality cyclically reverts back to their own human understanding. Responses to such criticisms will be made from an Islamic perspective in the remainder of the article.

### **The Foundation of Islamic Ethics**

In order to answer the primary and related questions implicit in the title of this article from an Islamic perspective, the fundamental worldview of Islam concerning the nature of God, the nature and purpose

of humans must be explicated.

Islam does not simply regard God as a nebulous but powerful Being that created the universe and later on ceased to take any interest in it. Islam subscribes to the principle of an active God having Perfection and Unity of all Attributes described unto Himself through scripture and the message of the Prophets. Everything begins and ends with God. Thus, God is not only the Creator, but is also Perfect in being the Merciful, the Knower, the Wise, the Just, the Sustainer, the Loving, the Forgiving, and the Righteous. Among the Attributes of Allah (SWT) that are relevant to our answer are the attributes of *al-Ḥādī* the Perfect Guide, and *al-Rashīd*, the Guide to the Straight Path. With these Attributes in mind, it is blasphemous to regard God as having created human beings without providing some form of guidance to differentiate right from wrong. Furthermore, if God is truly *al-Ḥakam*, the Judge, and *al-Ḥāsib*, the Reckoner, then there cannot be but accountability and reckoning for our deeds in this life. The believers are firmly implanted in their heart the conviction that God will account for their actions and that there is no escaping or deceiving the Judgment of God.

It is, thus, easy to understand why Islam considers God as not only the Master of the Natural, Physical, and Spiritual Orders, but also Master of the Moral Order. Indeed, most adherents of various religions believe in God as the Moral Law-Giver and source and foundation for morality and ethics. It is mainly because of this reason, then, that most detractors of divine ethics are champions of atheism and agnosticism. Ultimately, the rejection of God as the source of morality in favour of human beings reverts to a disbelief in God: a reversion to the ultimate sin of Satan – arrogance. As long as human beings only recognize their own perceived authority and refuse to admit their limitations, any systems of ethics they devise are bound to fail. It is a peculiar aberration of modern societies that most “citizens” are proud to submit to the “rule of law” but not to the “rule of God.” They willingly submit to ministers, prime ministers, presidents and patriarchs, but not to God. Until there is reliance on the only Being who can transcend the limitation of space, time and ego, secular ethics will always be mired in social decay, unrest, and injustice.

## Does God Command Immoral Acts?

What about the common criticism of sceptics that religious ethics based on God can sometimes sanction what they consider immoral or morally questionable? The answer to such a question is muddled by the facts that certain religions have at times sanctioned morally questionable acts, and violence has been perpetrated in the name of all religions, including Islam. Sceptics often note that the Old Testament is replete with examples of commandments from God ordering the complete destruction of entire populations of men, women and children, and even animals.<sup>18</sup> Without getting into the details or contexts of particular passages, the key is to differentiate between what human beings consider Divine commands and what truly are Divine commands. What is required is an objective analysis of the source of the teaching in question – if there is conviction in God as the source, then it must be followed, regardless of what is commanded.

At the same time, for a Muslim, there is absolutely no possibility of God sanctioning what is “immoral” since there is complete conviction that Allah is the Creator whose Infinite Love, Knowledge, Wisdom and Guidance make it blasphemous even to think that Allah would command what is against our welfare, much less “immoral.” There is complete unanimity among the Muslim Ummah in considering the Qur’ān and Sunnah of Muḥammad (SAS) as authentic and reliable primary sources of Divine Guidance.

It is worthwhile to consider two examples from the Qur’ān, which include acts that would likely be considered “immoral” by the common sceptic. In the case of Prophet Ibrāhīm (Abraham), he saw in a vision that he was ordered to “offer thee (his son) in sacrifice” (37:102). Another relevant example concerns an encounter between Prophet Moses and Khidr, another Messenger of God, described at length in the Qur’ān (18:60-82).

Such incidents are conveyed to illustrate the Divine Order and purpose that continually works “behind the scenes,” and which can easily be misunderstood by common human sensibilities. The human mind, with its inherent limitations, simply cannot fathom the infinitely complex web of phenomena, and their inter-relationships, throughout the universe. Thus, once again, the morality or immorality of any commandment is to be determined by God, not our own limited



judgments. Nor does God ever will for His creation what is contrary to their well-being.

### **The Trust of Moral Responsibility**

Despite our inherent limitations, there is a great deal we have to be thankful for. We are unique in a number of respects within the spectrum of creation. We have been blessed with the power of consciousness, the gift of limited free will, the ability to process emotions, and the discernment to know our Creator. We have been bestowed the ability to question who we are and where we are going. Such gifts, however, come at the cost of responsibility. Animals, plants, fungi and even angels do not have a choice in their affair – it is human beings who have the power of limited free will, and the consequent moral responsibility.

Moral responsibility is more than simply knowing right from wrong, however. Human beings have been created to serve and to submit to the Will of God.<sup>19</sup> In doing so, we have the potential to fulfil our cosmic roles as vicegerents of God on earth, thereby reflecting Divine Attributes in our own character and behaviour.<sup>20</sup> We are also indebted to God for having brought us into existence and for sustaining us. We existed in the abyss of nothingness and now we are partaking of the treasure and gift of existence. As Shaykh Fadhlallah Haeri states, “We were created to know the original love of the Creator, with Whom we were before creation, with Whom we are during the experience of existence, and with Whom we will be forever.”<sup>21</sup> Prophet Muḥammad (SAS) was once asked by a companion why he continuously prayed for so long that his feet became swollen while he is sinless and forgiven. He answered, “Should I not be a grateful servant?”<sup>22</sup> Moral responsibility is, thus, about gratefulness to our Lord and is part of the trust refused by heavens, earth and mountains from the Lord to become His vicegerent on earth, thereby fulfilling the purpose with which we were created. In this sense, morality is all about fulfilling our greater purpose on this earth. Thus, the magnitude of the importance of morality and ethics is reflected in Qur’ānic āyah like, “Allah will not change the condition of a people until they change what is within themselves” (13:12). To help us in this enormous mission, God has not only provided Guidance through the external messages of Scripture and the Prophets, but also through the internal faculties of spiritual intuition and unveiling. The endless

debate over the nature of human nature has been answered clearly by Islam.

Islam teaches that to follow the path of submission to God is to be faithful to one's very nature. Man is not "half good, half evil" as many presume. Our primordial nature is inherently inclined towards good, though we have the potential to sin (unlike the Christian belief in "original sin"). Islam considers all human beings to have acknowledged Allah as our Lord (*Rab*) before we were created (7:172). We are favoured by Allah with His covenants to which we agree to obey since Allah knows the secrets of our hearts (5:7). So anyone who purifies his soul succeeds and the one who fails corrupts it (91:7-10).

Hence, we have already testified that Allah is our *Lord* and that we will obey Him before our physical existence in this world. Disbelief is a conscious denial of our original nature and signifies ungratefulness. Thus, regarding the purity of our creation, Prophet Muhammad (SAS) stated, "Every child is born according to primordial nature (*fiṭrah*), then his parents make him a Jew, Christian, or Zoroastrian."<sup>23</sup> This primordial nature is a result of the spirit which was blown into every being by God Himself.<sup>24</sup> The greatest proof for God's existence, then, is already within us!

Of course, sceptics have long denied any aspect of human nature that could transcend its material nature. For them there is no spiritual intuition, insight or intellection, nor a universal conscience because these realities are not in the empirical domain. In so believing, they fail to realize a number of points. If human beings were merely a creature of animal instinct in an evolutionary game of survival, there simply would not be any acts of utter selflessness or self-denial, such as firemen risking their lives to save unknown victims or monks taking vows of celibacy. The fact is that there is an undeniable facet of our nature that spans all peoples and all times which seeks to transcend corporeal limitation and return to our Origin, just as rain drops eventually return to immerse in the ocean. If humans were merely an advanced byproduct of physico-chemical evolution, consciousness would never have arisen, for that which is immaterial cannot arise from pure materiality. If persons were merely a product of societal, cultural and environmental influences, there would never have arisen any reformers or Divine Messengers, like Abraham, Jesus and Muḥammad (SAS), who radically challenged and strove to eradicate the deviations and infractions of their times

and succeeded in doing so.

Finally, it is important to reiterate the Islamic view of the motivation underlying moral behaviour. The motivation is not, as many sceptics argue, promises of heavenly bliss and rewards. Rather, the primary motivation for morality is the pleasure and subservience to God, which is sought because of the Transcendence and Immanence of His Attributes. This is not to deny the reward and punishment of God and its role in influencing the behaviour of believers, but to state that it is not the primary desire to obey God.

It is apparent by now that the Islamic system of morality includes the following underlying principles: (1) Allah (SWT) is the Law-Giver or source of morality, (2) moral behaviour is part of fulfilling our purpose on earth, i.e., submission and obedience to the Will of God, and (3) God has created us with an inherent moral tendency towards good and we are imbued with both a material and spiritual nature. It is, thus, easy to understand that the Islamic definition of morality is a subset of the overall concept of submission and worship of God and the eventual goal of establishing an ethical and moral society.

### **Conclusion: The Uniqueness of Islamic Ethics**

One can distinguish at least four features that single out Islamic ethics among ethical systems, namely, that it is *tawhīdic*, that it conforms to and is in harmony with the natural human disposition, that it is universal in scope, and finally that it encompasses all aspects of human life. These features are explained as follows:

#### ***Tawhīd* as a Basis for Ethics**

The Islamic worldview of *tawhīd*, the unity and supremacy of Allah (SWT), provides the foundation for a successful ethical and moral system. Islam's view of God as the one and only power necessitates God as the source of ethics. God cannot be considered the Master of the Natural and Physical Orders without being the Master of the Moral and Spiritual Orders. God has not left humanity hanging in the wakes with no guidance to conduct ourselves.

The Islamic view, firstly, stands in stark contrast to all secular ideologies. For example, many of the ancient Greek philosophies elevated and even deified humans to the extent that the Greek gods

and goddesses not only exemplified all virtues, but also vices. Human beings were taken as the ultimate criteria for all that is. Relativism does not allow for any meaningful criticism, reform or progress of society since it must treat all forms of ethics as equal. Secular societies are facing a growing crisis of morality affecting all walks of life, which is becoming increasingly difficult to solve since it cannot resort to "religious ethics." Materialism's chaotic game of "survival of the wealthiest" is also at odds with morality, for it pits us against one another in the proverbial "rat race."

Ultimately all proponents of such secular ideologies fail most miserably in one area – in recognizing their own frailties and limitations. The debate of secularists over the source of ethics can be likened to the argument of paintings with their painter. While God has blessed us with remarkable capabilities of reason and discernment to discover aspects of "natural law," we cannot forget their inherent limitations within our particular space-time confinements and our dependence on God for ultimate guidance. Our rational faculties can and should be used to complement, support and strengthen our understanding of the universe and God's existence, but we must ultimately depend on Divine guidance for understanding God and His Moral Ordering of the universe. Any scepticism the secularists or agnostics have regarding an objective source of moral knowledge is answered in Islam through Divine Scriptures and Messengers. Scepticism regarding our ability to be moral is answered in Islam by affirming our inherent goodness and rejecting any notions of "original sin." Scepticism regarding the outcome of moral behaviour is answered by the promise of Allah to reform society when we decide to reform ourselves and the promise of complete Justice in the Hereafter. The endless search of philosophers for individual and collective "pleasure," "happiness," "virtue," and "freedom" is answered in Islam by obedience to God, which automatically encompasses and leads to all such treasures.

As for the basis of other religious ethical systems, there is indeed a great deal in common with Islamic ethics, including the belief in God as the Moral Law-Giver, the importance of following His commandments, and the consideration of others' rights as importantly as our own. However, while other religions may have started with genuinely Divine origins, they have suffered from extensive and continual human intervention in the guidance from God. Thus,

homosexual priests, adultery and pre-marital sex are tolerated or accepted in modern Christianity; theft, lying, and cheating of gentiles is permitted in the Talmud of Judaism; and systematic discrimination against the “untouchables” is permitted and persists in Hinduism. Islam has, therefore, gone to great lengths in strictly prohibiting any modern innovations in its guiding principles – hence, the enormous difficulty in “reforming” Islam. The specific applications of principles may change with variables of time and place, but the principles themselves cannot be changed. While non-Muslims may initially disagree with certain Islamic teachings, it must be remembered that an objective evaluation of the truth of particular moral principles must revert to the authenticity and reliability of such teachings as commandments from God, and not our own biased opinions, beliefs, whims or fancies.

### **Harmonious Conformity to the Natural Human Disposition**

Islam is the *religio naturalis* that affirms the purity of the primordial nature with which we have been created. Islam alone recognizes human nature as it is and promotes the attainable goal for morality as being the representative or vicegerent of God on earth. Although we have been created with limited free will to obey or disobey, our nature is inherently inclined towards good. We have been created with a clean, pure slate – it is only later that we learn to sin. According to Islamic belief, this is why it was possible for the most extraordinary individuals amongst us, i.e., the Prophets and Messengers to live infallible, sin-free lives.<sup>25</sup>

Consider the beauty and uniqueness of the Islamic conception of human nature in relation to the Christian view. Modern Christian thinkers have sought to give the doctrine of “original sin” credibility by pointing to the undeniable sins and imperfections of human beings and their selfish and egoistic loci. In the words of Faruqi, “there must be a predicament so absolute that only God could pull man out of it.”<sup>26</sup> Islam rejects such notions outright. While Islam acknowledges that we *can become* sinful, it is an altogether different matter to claim that we have been *created* sinful. It is no wonder that there are some Christians who see no contradiction between their faith and habits such as alcoholism, gambling and sexual promiscuity. Unlike the Christian emphasis on faith over deeds, Islam maintains a perfect balance between the necessity of both faith and deeds, with each being

insufficient without the other.

Yet another facet of Islamic ethics which recognizes the true nature of man is its maintenance of a harmonious balance between the physical and the spiritual, the worldliness and the non-worldliness. There is no contradiction between its promotion of worship ('*ibādah*) and the fulfilment of physical needs, for such fulfilment is itself considered worship when conducted with the sincere intention of pleasing Allah. Islam promotes the *control* and channelizing of physical needs, not their renunciation. Thus, Prophet Muḥammad (SAS) warned against celibacy, excessive seclusion, excessive fasting, pessimism, and cynicism, while encouraging the cleanliness of the body, brushing of the teeth, marriage, rest, and physical activities such as swimming and horse riding. The institutions of priesthood and monasticism are both unheard of in Islam. Muslims do not face a choice between being ascetic hermits and worldly, indulgent persons. A Muslim can fully engage in worship while simultaneously fulfilling all worldly or material responsibilities. At a time when non-Muslims are increasingly inclined towards either crass materialism or spiritual renunciation, it is especially worthwhile for non-Muslims to consider the beauty of the Islamic implementation of this principle.

### Universality

History confirms that, on the whole, it is only Islam that has been able to provide a truly universal civilization. Islamic history bears ample testimony to the fact that despite everything it has been the greatest levelizer of all social distinctions. Islam's conviction in the Unity of God and corresponding Unity of Truth and the universal human nature necessitates that moral and ethical obligations are equally incumbent upon all. As Faruqi stated, "Just as the patterns of God in nature apply to all of creation, thereby making creation an orderly cosmos, so His will for man applies to the whole of mankind."<sup>27</sup> The Qur'ān is very clear that "We have not sent thee (Muḥammad (SAS) save as a blessing for all mankind" (21:107). Unlike prior Messengers and Prophets whose messages were confined to their particular peoples, the message of Islam conveyed by Prophet Muḥammad (SAS) has always been open to all of humanity, and never been limited to any particular people, nation, tribe, race or social class. A famous saying of Prophet Muḥammad (SAS) proclaimed, "All men issue from Adam and Adam

issued from dust. Therefore, no Arab may claim distinction over a non-Arab except in piety and righteousness.”

While Islam has certainly had its share of racist and morally bankrupt followers, it nonetheless maintains the cleanest record of all religions in fairly applying its ethics to everyone, without regard to the common discriminants of race, colour, social status, religion and national origin. The Qurʾān, however, does speak of distinguishing between those who are God-conscious (*muttaqīn*), and those who are not; which is necessarily so, for God must judge His creation to the extent that they fulfil their purpose of creation, i.e., obedience to Allah, which is inclusive of moral behaviour. For ultimate justice to reign the oppressor cannot be equal to the oppressed and the knower cannot be equal to the ignorant.

Modern societies are still tainted with the evils of tribalism, nationalism, racism and aristocracy. Jewish history has never overcome a strand of elitism that not only considers Jews “the chosen people of God,” but also attempts to bind and restrict God’s favour to themselves. Similarly, Hindu history has always been plagued with the curse of the caste system, which still differentiates between Brahmin, Kashatriya, Vaishya and Shudra in most aspects of society. Modern Muslim societies have also forgotten their religious teachings and fallen prey to ethnic and sectarian divisiveness. To cure such ills, people must overcome their misconceptions of Islam and realize that the world has much to gain from the principles and application of Islamic ethics.

### Comprehensive Nature

Moral behaviour in Islam is considered part and parcel of worship and submission to God, as discussed earlier. It is sometimes difficult for non-Muslims to understand the all-encompassing nature of Islam.

Unlike other religions, “worship” or more closely *‘ibādah*, governs every aspect of life. According to Faruqi, “In Islam, ethics is inseparable from religion and is entirely built upon it.”<sup>28</sup> There are no artificial divides between the secular and the sacred or the Church and the State. Secular theories of ethics, such as hedonism, perfectionism, egoism and humanism, fall considerably short of providing clear moral guidance for many specific situations. Islamic law, on the other hand, provides concrete, specific guidance for all situations based on the Qurʾān,

traditions of Prophet Muḥammad (SAS), or deductions from the principles therein.

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## Notes

1. Another casualty of the emergence of the scientific world view has been the drastic and disastrous decline of the moral and spiritual ordering of the universe which was considered an essential part of traditional Judaism and Christianity. The emergence of the scientific worldview in seventeenth century Europe heralded the conflict between science and Christianity which continues unabated, in one form or another, until today. Current sociological trends indicate that as scientific and technological dominance continues to increase, the moral and spiritual ordering of the universe will almost cease to exist, since practically no one will believe in it anymore. For an excellent discussion of these points, see Rodney Collin, *The Theory of Celestial Influence: Man, Universe and Cosmic Mystery* (London: Arkana, 1993) and W.T. Stace, *Religion and the Modern Mind* (New York: J.B. Lippincott, 1960), especially chapter three entitled "The World as a Moral Order."

2. Global Policy Forum, [www.igc.apc.org/globalpolicy/soecon/gates99.htm](http://www.igc.apc.org/globalpolicy/soecon/gates99.htm)

3. Green Peace, [www.greenpeace.org/forests](http://www.greenpeace.org/forests)

4. For further information, see U.S. Dept. of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics, [www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs/](http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs/); National Institute of Mental Health, [www.nimh.nih.gov/research/suifact.htm](http://www.nimh.nih.gov/research/suifact.htm).

5. For details, see U.S. Dept. of Health & Human Services, [www.samhsa.gov/oas/NHSDA/2kNHSDA/highlights.htm](http://www.samhsa.gov/oas/NHSDA/2kNHSDA/highlights.htm); The Urban Institute, [www.urban.org/new/pressrel/pr000201.html](http://www.urban.org/new/pressrel/pr000201.html); U.S. Dept. of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics, [www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs/](http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs/); Center for Disease Control, [www.cdc.gov/nchs/fastats/aids-hiv.htm](http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/fastats/aids-hiv.htm); [www.my.webmd.com](http://www.my.webmd.com); [www.anxiety-disorder.net](http://www.anxiety-disorder.net).

6. The statistics cited refer generally to the United States. Nevertheless, they are of much wider significance in as much as the US is considered to be the "most advanced country in the world" and, rightly or wrongly, very widely seen as a kind of an ideal society. At the same time it should be noted that such figures are constantly fluctuating and they have been cited only to illustrate the main point of widespread moral decline. Social problems are multiplying around the world and were one to examine such statistics for other countries, no doubt, there would be differences, but today such problems would not be entirely absent anywhere. In addition, nearly every society in the world suffers from ethical and moral decline.

7. Joseph Runzo, *Global Philosophy of Religion – A Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oneworld Pub., 2001), 173.



8. Ed Miller, *Questions That Matter: An Invitation to Philosophy*, 4th ed. (New York: McGraw Hill Inc., 1984), 403.
9. B.F. Skinner, *Beyond Freedom and Dignity* (New York: Bantam Books, 1972), 122.
10. Greg Krehbiel, [www.crowhill.net/atheists/html](http://www.crowhill.net/atheists/html)
11. Robert Audi, ed., *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1995), 311.
12. See [www.secularhumanism.org/intro/what.html](http://www.secularhumanism.org/intro/what.html)
13. Kai Nielsen, "Ethics Without God" in *Does God Exist—The Debate Between Theists and Atheists*, eds. J.P. Moreland and Kai Nielsen (Amherst, New York: Prometheus Books, 1993), 109.
14. J.H. Newman, *A Grammar of Assent*, ed. C.F. Harold (London: Longmans, 1947).
15. Prophet Muḥammad (SAS) stated on the authority of Anas bin Mālik that: "None of you truly believes until he wishes for his brother what he wishes for himself" (narrated in *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī* and *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*).
16. Kai Nielsen, "Ethics Without God," 104.
17. See Chap. 1 for Immanuel Kant's moral argument for the existence of God and Chap. 3 for elaboration on the concept of Divine Justice.
18. See Joshua, Chaps. 6, 8, 10, 11; Deuteronomy, Chaps. 2, 3, 21; Numbers, Chaps. 21, 25, 31; Genesis, 6, 7.
19. "I have created jinns and mankind only that they may serve Me" (51:56).
20. "Behold, your Lord said to the angels, 'I will create a vicegerent on earth'..." (2:30, 6:165).
21. Fadhlalla Haeri, *Decree and Destiny*, 5.
22. *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, Book 39, No. 6773.
23. Ḥadīth narrated in *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, Janā'iz, 80, 92, Tafsīr 30:1; *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, Qadar 22–24.
24. See Qur'ān 15:29, 32:9, and 38:72.
25. Islamic doctrine holds that all genuine Prophets and Messengers of God (peace be upon them) are free of sin, though not necessarily minor mistakes.
26. Ismail al-Faruqi, *Tawḥīd: Its Relevance for Thought and Life*, first ed. (Kuala Lumpur: IIFSO, 1983), 72.

27. *Ibid.*, 113.

28. *Ibid.*, 73.