Review Essay

Ethics from an Islamic Perspective: Basic Issues

Abdullahi Hassan Zaroug

Abstract
The purpose of this article is to show the complexity of the field of ethics and to point to the need for a comprehensive study in the discipline of Islamic ethics. It makes a preliminary attempt at tackling foundational issues on the subject, such as the possibility of morality; its importance, autonomy, nature, and scope; and the possibility of historical studies. It also reviews some contemporary works on Islamic ethics, especially the methods they used to study Islamic ethics, in order to show their points of strength and vulnerability. Finally, it gives a brief account of the contributions of the different Muslim schools of thought to ethics and recommends certain topics for further study.

What is Ethics?

The word "ethics" comes from the Greek word "ethos" meaning habit or custom, and the word "morals" comes from the Latin *moralis* meaning mores or customs.[1] The Qur'an uses the word *khuluq* in two verses:

And surely thou hast sublime morals. (68:4)

This is no other than *khuluq* (customary device) of the ancient. (26:137)

Al-Qurtubi interprets the phrase *khuluq al-awaliyyin* to mean their ancient customs and to mean religion, character, ideology, or doctrine (maḍhab).[2] Al-Ghazali speculated that morality, unlike other parts of philosophy, is not the invention of Greek philosophers but rather, philosophers borrowed it from revealed religions.[3]

Abdullahi Hassan Zaroug *is a professor in the Faculty of the Shari'ah, Department of Islamic Studies at Qatar University.*

If morality is identified with religion, then it will be identical to the Islamic worldview al-Qurtubi has mentioned: morality means customs. This may be the case with regard to certain communities where customary morality and not reflective morality prevails. On the other hand, a behavior may appropriately be described as a custom, such as eating with the hand or with a knife and fork — this is not moral behavior. Morality is usually considered to be more important than customs and moral principles are supposed to override customs. It must also be mentioned that morality is related to law but different from it, for although there are acts that are forbidden both by law and morality, such as theft and murder, there are acts that are morally bad but not punishable by law, such as not visiting a close friend who is ill, not replying to someone's greeting, or telling lies. There is disagreement, however, with regard to what actions should be punishable by the law. John S. Mill and to some extent Herbert Hart say that morality should not be enforced by the law. The law should enforce only acts that harm others. Homosexuality, for example, should not be punishable. There was a great controversy on this issue in the 1960s between Lord Devlin who advocated the enforcement of morals[4] and Hart who did not.[5] Mill and his followers argued that a person should not be punished on the basis that punishment will deter him from harming himself.[6] But Hart allows in some cases punishing those who would harm themselves on paternalistic grounds. The law deals with the obligatory, but morality deals both with the obligatory and supererogatory. Morality considers motives and intentions while the law of Islam does not. A person may pay zakat, which is an act of worship, but with the intention of obtaining people's praise and not for the sake of God. According to Islamic law his act is valid and he is not required by law to pay the tax again, but the act has no religious or moral worth. It is maintained that the law should be in agreement with the society's moral code; however, the law may be more progressive than the customs or moral laws of the community.

Defining ethics means distinguishing between moral and nonmoral behavior. We are told that moral judgments are sentences in which words such as "good," "bad," and "ought" occur. The problem with this definition is that these words may occur in nonmoral statements, such as "This is a good car," or "This bridge ought to be built from such and such material." Sometimes the context in which the statement is used shows whether the statement is moral or nonmoral. A second criterion of distinguishing what is moral from what is nonmoral is determining whether a statement is

intended to be *prescriptive* and action guiding. Examples of such statements are: You should respect your parents; you should fulfill your promise. But the property of being prescriptive is common among ethics, religion, and law. The third characteristic of moral judgment is that moral judgment is considered to be *overriding,* and more importantly, has priority over other judgments, such as aesthetic, legal, and religious judgments. However, this is not always the case, for religious prescriptions may override moral prescriptions. Values of a religious system (i.e., the Islamic system) whether spiritual, moral, or aesthetic are ordered by the Legislator (God) in such a way that we cannot generalize and say moral prescriptions are always overriding. The matter depends on the value in question. Another difficulty related to the criterion of importance this: How is this importance to be determined? Is it to be determined by the social conventions or by an outside observer? This difficulty is illustrated by Pojaman:

> Yet it can be immoral to disregard or flaunt etiquette. A cultural crisis recently developed in India when American tourists went to the beaches clad in skimpy bikini bathing suits. This was highly offensive to the Indians and an uproar erupted. There is nothing intrinsically wrong with wearing skimpy bathing suits or with wearing nothing at all for that matter but people got used to certain behavioral pattern and it is extremely insensitive to flout those customs especially when you are a guest. It is not the bathing suits themselves but the insensitivity that is morally offensive.[7]

Pojaman is judging moral importance from outside the system and seems at the same time describing the system in question.

The fourth characteristic of a moral judgment is *universality.* Moral judgments must apply to all people at all times and in all circumstances. It can be argued that differences of time, place, and people as such should not be reason for different moral judgment. The phrase "all circumstances" must be qualified by saying "in similar circumstances." In any case, moral statements must be in some sense universal. A full discussion of the issue of universality involves a discussion of relativism and general principles versus contextual consideration and will also involve a discussion of personal morality. In addition, in Islam there are moral principles that apply only to the Prophet Muhammad.

The fifth characteristic is that the moral judgment should be *public* and not private. This condition generally holds. The morality of *tasawwuf* may be an exception, for the Sufis claim that their behavior cannot be made pub-

lic. If it is, it will be misunderstood. The sixth condition is that the action should be made *voluntarily*. This condition is viable; however, it will exclude a determinist's system of ethics. The seventh condition is that it should be done according to a certain *intention*. An unintended action and an action not done with a good intention are not moral actions. This condition may rule out utilitarian ethics as a type of ethics, for utilitarian ethics considers only the consequences of the action and not the motive behind it. The eighth condition is that the action must be *other regarding*. This condition may exclude egoistic ethics.

The ninth condition is that the action must be related to someone's *satisfaction, happiness*, or well-being. This condition may exclude Kantian ethics. The tenth condition is that it must require an *effort*, i.e., it must not be done according to natural inclination. According to al-Ghazali a really good action is done with ease, with *spontaneity,* and without difficulty. However, good behavior may require training and effort before it becomes a natural disposition and hence, easy to do.

The eleventh condition is that an action should be done in accordance with *reason*. This may exclude customary and unreflective morality and may exclude instinctive moral behavior and behavior based on revelation and God's commands. The twelfth condition is that the action must be associated with certain types of feelings such as guilt, shame, remorse, or the *feeling* of approval or disapproval.

The thirteenth condition is that the ethical must be *practical*. An Islamic ethical system must satisfy at least conditions 2, 4, 6, 7, 12, and 13. It is not possible to elaborate on this statement; however, we should not define ethics in a way that will exclude any system of ethics that differs from our own. We must allow for comparative study and intercultural dialogue. There may not be common property processed by all systems but only family resemblances.

The Importance of Ethics

Ethics lost much of its importance in modern societies for several reasons. Some of them are the challenges traditional morality had to face or the way ethics has recently been conceived, i.e, as meta-ethical discipline. Normative ethics should not be the concern of the moral philosopher. Judgments on ethical issues are left to religious preachers, politicians, parents, and the public. Social and natural scientists made a distinction between facts and values. As a rational discipline, science should not deal

with values — it should only deal with facts, for values are subjective and rest on feelings, emotions, and personal liking and disliking. Investigations in science should be carried out objectively.[8] Some maintain that values are inseparable from facts and scientific activity. Therefore, it is better to state them openly and clearly at the beginning of any scientific inquiry. However, we believe that a science that does not involve itself with values will either be trivial and not interesting or would assume things that should be subjected to argument and criticism. It is not enough to state these values and bring them to the open for they may be inadequate and hence, the system based on them will be inadequate too. In addition, we maintain that values can be rationally and objectively investigated and that the distinction between facts and values is highly questionable. Propositions about values can be supported by argument and evidence: facts about human nature, about what constitutes the well-being of man, about harms and benefits and basic goods and needs, about God and the truth of religion. A full discussion of this issue leads to the discussion of subjectivism and relativism,[9] as well as epistemological and ontological issues, which we cannot deal with here.

The importance of ethics can be shown in its relation with social sciences. Law, politics, and economics are soulless and insignificant if detached from ethics.

Ethical concepts such as equality, justice, freedom, and rights are central to legal discourse. Issues in jurisprudence such as the enforcement of law, justification of punishment, legal obligation, minimal state, and disobeying the law are ultimately moral issues.

Amartya Sen has shown that moral philosophy and welfare can contribute to mainstream economics and that the misuse of the assumption of self-interested behavior has harmed the quality of economic analysis. Sen has demonstrated that there occurred a serious distancing between economics and ethics, which brought about one of the major deficiencies of contemporary economic theory.[10]

The foundation of Sen's arguments rest in the view that economics, as it has emerged, can be made more productive by paying greater and more explicit attention to the ethical considerations that shape human behavior and judgment.[11] Sen indicates that while the richness of the modern literature of ethics is much greater than has been accommodated in economics, the extremely narrow assumption of self-interested behavior in economics has impeded analysis. Mainstream theory, however, identifies rational

human behavior with internal consistency of choice, and further, with maximization of self-interest. But as Sen notes, there no evidence for the claim that self-interest maximization is the best approximation to actual human behavior, or that it leads necessarily to optimum economic conditions — duty, loyalty, and good will have been extremely important for the achievement of individual and group economic efficiency.[12]

Hence, moral philosophy literature on egoism, altruism, utilitarianism, and public interest are extremely important to the study of economics. Normative questions regarding rights, justice, freedom, and goodness, must be settled before determining what goods and services to produce and consume and how to distribute them. In general, questions of value emerge when deciding economic policy and economic goals.

The relation between ethics and politics is more evident than the relation between economics and ethics. At times the two seem to be indistinguishable. Questions about lifestyle, justice, freedom, pluralism, rights, the character or virtues required of the politician, and political corruption are central in both disciplines.

The question, How should we live? relates ethics to all spheres of life, i.e., to science and technology, medicine, journalism, education, the arts, and all professions, in addition to family and social relations. A long list of moral issues related to these fields can be provided. Strangely enough, people became interested in the part of ethics that is related to their professions. People should be interested in all ethical aspects of their life, not just one aspect. Perhaps people became concerned with professional ethics because the success of their business depends on observing the ethical code of the profession. Today, many universities teach applied ethics in the various disciplines. The objectives, the methodology, the content, and the output of teaching it may not be satisfactory, but the importance and attention given to applied ethics is commendable.

The Scope of Ethics (Branches of Ethics)

Textbooks on ethics divide the discipline into three fields: descriptive, normative, and meta-ethics. Descriptive and normative ethics can be divided further. The former can be divided into descriptive, explanatory, and predictive ethics and the latter into prescriptive ethics and ethics of justification. Another branch that may be considered very important is control ethics.

Descriptive ethics reports the actual moral principles that govern the behavior of individuals in a certain society, i.e., what that society considers to be good or bad, what ought to be done, and what ought not to be done, without making any judgment or evaluation of those principles and ways of behavior. The investigator does not ask whether those ways of behavior are right or wrong. This type of inquiry is usually carried out by anthropologists, sociologists, historians, and psychologists. Being able to describe the ethics of a certain society presupposes that the investigator knows what constitutes ethical behavior, i.e., knows what ethics is.

Explanatory ethics is concerned with explaining behavior and requires finding the motives or causes for the action in question. These motives may be nonmoral, immoral, or moral. An example of a nonmoral cause is: He did it because he was unconscious or because he was compelled. And an example of an immoral motive is: He killed him in order to take his money. An example of a moral motive is: He did it because he promised to do it. The inquiry into the explanation of behavior lies within the discipline of psychology. This type of inquiry is considered to be part of the inquiry into ethics because it is related to moral education and behavior control and to the question of influencing the behavior of other people. If it is true that human behavior is determined by the environment, then it would follow that if we want to change someone's behavior we have to change his environment. If what makes one behave in a certain way are his motives, needs, and beliefs, then our methods of influencing his behavior will be different. On the other hand, our understanding of human nature influences the normative moral theories we adopt. It is generally believed that actions are determined by psychological factors, heredity, and environmental factors such as family, peers, school, and society at large. This may include fear of punishment by the law or fear of public opinion. People's behavior may also be explained by their tendency to imitate and follow others. The cause of certain behavior may be the feeling of shame, guilt, or remorse. One's actions may be manifestations of what is innate (*fitrah*) in that person as well as sentiments such as mercy, love, or hate. Actions may be caused by certain cognitive states or explained by one's desires, wants, and preferences. Behavior may also be explained by the agent as actions performed with the intention to obey God. Obedience to God may be motivated by fear or love. One's behavior may be the result of unconscious motives or of factors outside one's control, such as God's will. An act may be the result of a decision and choice and an expression of one's will. Human behavior

is very complex and hence on many occasions difficult to explain. Even explaining one's own behavior is difficult.

Predictive ethics is concerned with the prediction of human behavior. It is based on knowledge of the laws or quasi-laws that govern the behavior of an individual and society and knowledge of some initial conditions. It is difficult to predict human behavior, for knowing how a person is going to behave depends on knowing the agent's abilities, attitudes, desires, intentions, and beliefs, in addition to the external factors that influence his behavior. Moreover, one's beliefs and intentions may change upon deliberation.

Normative ethics includes a *prescriptive* part as well as a *justifactory* part. The prescriptive deals with what we ought to do and what we ought not to do. When it is stated that one should behave in such and such a way, the question: Why? immediately arises. Different theories attempt to answer this question. The principle of behavior may be justified by its consequences (i.e., happiness or satisfaction), by its "universalizability" (Kant, Hare), by saying that it is a result of a contract (Rawls), by its being in accordance with God's commands, or by its being in accordance with a natural law.

How can one make oneself or others act in the right way? Control ethics aims at preserving good moral character, protecting individuals from doing wrong acts, helping them to abandon bad deeds and improving and developing them. The word "control" may give the impression that methods used to preserve or affect change are only coercive by nature (i.e., enforcement by the law); however, they need not be. These methods can use all sorts of legitimate means — through strengthening faith and through education (i.e., by giving reasons for the prescribed acts); by training the agent to make ethical judgments, moral decisions, and solve ethical problems; and generally by developing critical, analytical, and creative abilities in the moral agent or through creating in him a moral consciousness and moral sentiments or sense of duty. Change can also be realized through spiritual and psychological therapy, through creating a conducive environment, and through solving social and economic problems.

Control ethics should not be confused with applied ethics. For the most part, applied ethics is concerned with applying general ethical theories, such as utilitarian or Kantian theory to specific issues, such as abortion, in an attempt to decide whether the practice is right or wrong. It does not deal with its explanation and its causes or with the means to combat it if it is

found undesirable. Ethics has been concerned with meta-ethics, then with normative ethics, and more recently with applied ethics. Moralists may make use of work done in counseling, social work, and planning. Sufi Islamic literature is also very useful in this respect. This branch of ethics is sometimes refered to as analytical or critical ethics. Meta-ethics tries to ask questions like the following: What is the meaning of the word "good"? How can ethical judgments be established or justified? What is the nature of moral statements? How can we distinguish between the moral and the nonmoral?

An ethical discourse may be addressed to people having different levels of education and different specialization. It may be addressed to ordinary people, schoolboys, university students, people belonging to different professions, philosophers, scientists, or social scientists. The level of sophistication and complexity differ with regard to the different groups. The Qur'an addresses people of different levels. It has a common message that can be understood by all, but the learned or reflective person can understand more than the ordinary person.

Thus we may conclude that there are mainly two approaches to ethics: virtue ethics and action ethics. In the case of virtue ethics, a consideration is given to the moral agent, his character and dispositions, rather than his action or what he does. Action ethics considers the moral agent's action — its nature or its consequences, or the principles from which it derived. Virtue ethics may be considered to include ethics as a way of life and Sufi ethics. The Sufi considers ethics to be an activity of purifying the soul (*tazkiyyah*) and hence, developing and improving the character of man. Ethics as a way of life does not consider single separable actions, it considers all actions, principles, the type of community and its ethical and social relations, and its institutions; therefore, objects of ethical inquiry may include actions, the person or his character, consequences of actions, feelings, emotions, sentiments, motives and intentions, institutions, principles, codes of behavior, ways of life and things, states of affairs, and values.

Islamic Ethics

The Qur'an and Hadith, which are the main sources of Islam, attach great importance to ethics. Ethics is considered by these sources to be the main objective of Islam. The Prophet Muhammad was sent to preach a message that is essentially moral. The Qur'an says:

We sent you not but as a mercy for all creatures. (21:107)

Another verse in the Qur'an says:

> The word of the Lord does find its fulfillment in truth and in justice. (6:115)

The Prophet Muhammad said, "I was sent to complete morals."[13] He also said, "Those who have perfect faith are those who have better moral character."[14]

There are few books on the subject of ethics compared with those written about fiqh and 'aqidah. Although Ibn Khaldun made reference to all the disciplines in his *Muqadimah,* he did not mention ethics. Ibn Sa'id al-Andalusi did not mention ethics in *Tabaqat al-Umam.*[15] Philosophical books about ethics do not focus entirely on ethical issues in their discussions — they include metaphysical and psychological issues as well. However, there is a vast literature on ethics in the books of fiqh and *tasawwuf.*

As we have mentioned, few books have been written on ethics compared with the number of books written on politics, economics, law, 'aqidah, or fiqh. This may be due to the following reasons. Ethics has been relatively neglected by contemporary Islamic movements. Some movements emphasize the issue of 'aqidah, or the intellectual aspect of Islam; others emphasize the political and legal. Political movements maintain that Muslims generally perform their worship, go to mosques, and believe in Allah and His messenger Muhammad, but they are not governed by the Shari'ah and its legal, political, and economic systems. The intellectual movements maintain that the crisis of the Ummah is an intellectual crisis, so priority should be given to reforming what the Ummah thinks. They see the problem as one of finding the right methodology and the adequate epistemological system. Recently, these movements have described reform as civilizational and requiring *tarbiyyah* (education).

The 'aqidah movements maintain that reform should start with instilling the right 'aqidah in the Muslim mind, that we must purge our society of *bid'ah* (unauthorized innovation). Although these movements recognize the role of morality in Islam, they do not give it the consideration and the attention it deserves. The second reason why ethics lost its importance in the Muslim world is the influence of Western culture. There is a tendency recently among Muslim intellectuals to consider morality as a private matter; as subjective and not objective matter, it should be left for preachers and imams.

In general, the study of Islamic ethics is of two types: the historical study and the study that aims at using its findings to guide actions and to solve contemporary moral problems whether they are social, economic, political, or professional. The historical study must satisfy basically two conditions. It must mirror the contribution of Muslim scholars and the depth and significance of their ideas. The study of history must help us to develop an ethical system which is relevant to our contemporary situation. Our historical study must be of some relevance and interest to the contemporary mind.

Historical studies may be made by those who belong to the culture in question, by those who do not belong to it, by those who belong to it by birth but do not believe in its appropriateness, or by those who accept an aspect of the culture that is not representative of it. The question was raised as to whether it is legitimate for a person who belongs to a certain culture to study another culture that is alien to his own. Peter Winch contends that the historian or sociologist must have some religious feelings if he is to make sense of the religious movement he is studying and understand the consideration that governs the life of its participants.[16] Some social scientists who have been influenced by the works of Thomas Kuhn and Paul Feyerabend maintain that cultures are not comparable. We cannot deal with this issue here in detail but we believe in intercultural dialogue and that ethical systems are comparable because Islam is a universal message, universal in nature.

Intercultural studies, however, may be biased or unfair or may fail to show real understanding of the other culture. While it is not necessary to actually participate in the other culture or be a member in it, there may be high costs for that and the investigator may have moral reasons that compel him not to participate in it. What is needed is a fair understanding and a fair hearing of the culture under investigation. The investigator can keep a distance and look critically at the culture in question. He need not lose his identity; however, he may eventually adopt the worldview of a foreign culture or accommodate some aspect of it in his system.

There may be different objectives for studying the Islamic culture. The person may just want to know about it or let others know. He may want to know to create an understanding or cooperation between his people and its people. He may think that he can benefit from it. He may also learn it to criticize it and create doubts regarding it, and he may even want to know it in order to dominate its people. He may try to interpret it in a way that agrees with his own culture and select items that will confirm that, with the

intention of making it acceptable to his people or with the intention of making its own people look at it in the way he wants them to look at it. He may try to be neutral and objective. He may find it profitable to teach or write about it. And so on.

There are different studies of Islamic ethics; some of them, as I have mentioned, are historical and some are not. The studies which I consider to be of some importance are by Abdallah Draz, Abd al-Haq al-Ansari, Toshihiko Izutsu, Fazlur Rahman, Hourani, Majid Fakhri, Ahmed Abd al-Rahman Ibrahim, Ahmed Mahmud Subhi, Rafiq Issa Beekun, and Danniel H. Frank. Abdallah Draz wrote a book titled *Dastur al-akhlaq fi al-Qur'an*[17] that is a milestone in contemporary studies of Islamic ethics. There are some similarities between his views and those of Kant. He aimed at constructing a system of morality that is directly deduced from the Qur'an.[18] He also enriched his study by making a comparative study of the Qur'anic system and the ideas of Muslim scholars and Western philosophy.[19] He identifies five main moral concepts, namely, obligation, responsibility, moral sanctions, intention and motivations, and effort (*juhd*). The most fundamental concept is the concept of obligation. He bases his concept of obligation on the light of reason or *fitrah* (innate ideas), revelation, and freedom,[20] and the reconciliation of these three concepts. He also considers the issue of applying moral law to real situations. Abdallah Draz maintains that there is a kind of indeterminacy in the situation of applying the moral law but that this indeterminacy does not violate the moral law.[21] Abd al-Haq al-Ansari's short article, "Islamic Ethics: Concepts and Prospects,"[22] is a good introduction to the contribution of Muslim scholars (philosophers, theologians, Sufis, jurists, as well as political and economic writers). In an unpublished article titled "Islamic Ethics," he deals with the concept of ethics as derived from the Qur'an and Sunnah. He analyzes basic moral concepts in the Qur'an, the concept of duty, different kinds of rules, and the conflicts between duties.

Fazlur Rahman maintains in "Law and Ethics in Islam"[23] that a genuinely Qur'anic system consists of principles and rules that are derived from the entire Qur'an.[24] He also maintains that priority rules are needed to systematize these values.[25] He believes that in this way we will be able to manage differences of opinion.[26] He accuses Muslim scholars of focusing on details at the expense of the general requirements of the Qur'an.[27] He tells us that the Qur'an must be understood as a unity and not as so many isolated commands and injunctions.[28] One may agree with Rahman that to understand

the Qur'an as a whole is legitimate and necessary; however, according to our present knowledge it seems difficult to find *a priori* rules. Constructing a system consisting of one (i.e., utilitarian principle, principle of *maslaha*, or principle of justice) or multiple rules (i.e, principles similar to Ross's *prima facie* rules) will not rid us of our differences. But we are careful of asserting that the so-called general principles can override particular commands. To many it may be unacceptable. It is also not true that Muslim scholars have treated the Qur'an as isolated commands.

What is needed is a tentative system coupled with situational judgments. "We should not wait for a general foundation. One need not make progress at the most fundamental level to make progress at all. We can continue to work for a foundation while exploring the superstructure, and the two pursuits should enhance each other."[29]

Toshihiko Izutsu's aim and method of studying Islamic ethics may be of some interest because his methodology seems to influence later scholars. Toshihiko's aim, like that of Fazlur Rahman, is to systematize the teaching of the Qur'an and morality. His method is to "let the Qur'an speak for itself."[30] He seems to hold a relativistic view of morality and to rely heavily on a linguistic approach and on a specific theory of language. He maintains that man approaches reality culturally and historically conditioned.[31] "A person has a creative act of seeing subjectively the thing as a thing from [a] certain perspective."[32] In the Qur'an, a large number of words recur. By gathering the instances of a word together in one place, comparing them, and checking them against one another, we have a good chance of getting an original word-thing definition of the Arabic word.[33] Imitation or a mere duplicate of the original reality and the symbols do not correspond exactly to the forms of reality; rather, they are ideational forms.[34] Toshihiko rejects certain methodologies of understanding the Qur'an. He says, "We have good dictionaries, much philosophical work has been done, and in the domain of Qur'anic exegesis in particular we are provided with authoritative commentaries. For theoretical reasons, however, our methodological principle forbids us to rely too heavily on these secondary sources ... we must not forget that they may prove more misleading than enlightening."[35]

Let me make the following brief comments: First, if we let the Qur'an speak for itself it will say that it is a universal religion. The Qur'an rejects relativism.[36] Second, the claim that the Qur'an is sufficient for its own understanding is not correct and is a divination from the wisdom that has been accumulated throughout our history. The Qur'an itself tells us that the

Prophet Muhammad will explain it. Muslim scholars have set a proper criteria for understanding the Qur'an. The criteria can be stated briefly as follows: (1) the Qur'an explains itself; (2) the Sunnah of the Prophet explains the Qur'an; (3) the circumstances in which the Qur'an was revealed (*asbab al-nuzūl*) are very important to its explanation; (4) understanding the Arabic language and its logic is essential to understanding the meaning of the Qur'an; (5) the interpreter must have knowledge of the verses that have been abrogated (this condition is controversial); and (6) the interpretation must be consistent with reason and experience.[37] (On the other hand applying the Qur'an and making a fatwa take into consideration the nonlinguistic dimension of reality.) We have a wealth of commentaries, which the author describes as misleading. They are not sacred but no doubt it is useful and we cannot do without them. It is not true and could not be true that the Qur'an has not yet been discovered, as Fazlur Rahaman maintains.[38] Ahmed Ibrahim's book, which is titled *al-Faḍa'il al-khuluqiyyah fi al-Islam*,[39] makes a good contribution to Islamic virtue ethics. Ahmad Mahmud Subhi's book titled *Al-Falsafah al-akhlaqiyyah fi al-fikr al-Islami*[40] is a good study of the contributions of theologians, Sufis, and philosophers. The book does not deal with the ethics of Islamic jurisprudence.

Hourani wrote a useful book on Islamic ethics titled *Reason and Tradition in Islamic Ethics*[41] that mainly deals with the question of whether moral truth can be known independently of revelation. Hourani does not consider his book to be a complete treatment of Islamic ethics. He tells us that it discusses only theological and philosophical ethics (i.e., analytical or meta-ethics and not normative ethics).[42] The treatment also does not deal with the Shi'a position and only makes incidental reference to Sufism.[43] It seems that Hourani considers meta-ethics more valuable than normative ethics.[44] Contemporary moral philosophers used to hold a similar view. It may be that this is what motivated Hourani to focus his study on analytical ethics. However, the situation has recently changed, for now there is more interest in normative and substantive ethics, especially after works like those of John Rawls.

Hourani maintains, like Toshihiko before him, that "a truer understanding of the Qur'an can be obtained by looking at it not through their (commentators of the Qur'an) eye glasses but directly in its own historical and philosophical context. For a more detached interpretation of words and sentences the translations and notes of three modern Orientalists, Arberry,

Blachere, and Paret are helpful.[45] We have already rejected a similar view held by Toshihiko.

The second methodological issue relates to the best method to understand Qur'anic concepts such as *'adl* and *zulm*. Hourani maintains that there are objective meanings (found in dictionaries) of *zalama* in classical Arabic, one or the other of which makes good sense in every use of the verb and its derivatives in the Qur'an.[46] He rejects the reduction of the meaning of *'adl* by al-Shafi'i to "obedience to divine commands."[47] It is not sufficient for understanding the meaning of *'adl* or any other concept used in the Qur'an to formulate a theory regarding it by looking it up in Arabic dictionaries. The meaning of the concept of *'adl* to a great extend depends on Qur'anic philosophy and the Qur'an as a whole in addition to other things, such as the Sunnah and *asbab al-nuzūl*. The meaning of a Qur'anic concept may oppose linguistic conventions. The following three meanings of *'adl* may be derived from the Qur'an.

First, *'adl* may refer to the virtue that a good and rational man may determine. "God commands justice," i.e., in the absolute and unspecified sense. Second, it may refer to a meaning governed by a general criteria derived from the Qur'an, such as the criteria of need or merit, rectification or retribution. Third, it may refer to a specific rule such as rules of distribution of inheritance and charity (zakah). It is not sufficient to know the meaning of *'adl* in the Qur'an to know the particular uses of it and its derivatives in the Qur'an. The meaning of *'adl* is understood by understanding the commands of God in general and it is realized by the obedience to these commands. I cannot clarify this point further in this limited space.

Majid Fakhry gives a useful classification of Islamic ethics (scriptural morality, theological ethics, philosophical ethics, and religious ethics) in his book *Ethical Theories in Islam*.[48] But he has not dealt with the ethics of Islamic jurisprudence, which is the most fertile area in Islamic ethics. He also has not dealt with Sufi ethics in detail, for he believes that there are no Sufi works that deserve to be studied with the exception of al-Ghazali's works.[49] In fact, Sufi ethics is a very promising area of study.

Frank's chapter "Ethics"[50] is restricted to a certain issue in philosophical ethics, namely, the nature of the human good and its relation to political order. Although the chapter is useful, it is not as comprehensive as one might expect in a book on the history of Islamic philosophy. Rafiq Issa Beekun's book *Islamic Business Ethics*[51] is a useful contribution to Islamic

applied ethics; however, the part dealing with Islamic ethical theory requires improvement.

Islamic Ethics: Muslim's Contributions

There are four main sources of Islamic ethics: (1) the Qur'an and Sunnah; (2) the Muslims' heritage; (3) the human heritage; and (4) reason and experience. The following section provides a brief account of the main ideas of Muslim schools of thought on ethics. Jurists' contribution is mainly in the field of action ethics. An action is right if it is done with good intention and in accordance with the Shari'ah. An action accords with the Shari'ah if it is stated or directy derived from its sources, which are the Qur'an, the Sunnah, consensus (ijma'), custom ('urf'), deduction from a proper *principle* (such as the principle of *maslaha* [utility]), in accordance with an appropriate *inferential rule* (such as *qiyas* [argument by analogy]), or in accordance with *legal rule* (*qā'idah*) (such as: don't get harmed and don't cause harm to others, any personal harm can be sacrificed to avoid public harm, or urgent needs provide an excuse for forbidden means). The rightness of actions is also determined by its *agreement with a valid contract or direct intuitive apprehension* of the right moral judgment. But if all of these ways of determining the rightness of an action are not able to help one reach a decision, one can *consult his heart* and perform *du'a al-istikharah* (a supplication that helps the believer to make the proper choice). What we referred to as sources, principles, and inferential rules are referred to in books of *usūl al fiqh* as principles of Islamic jurisprudence. Lumping them together may create a confusion in the mind of the modern reader.

Theologians discuss mainly metaphysical issues such as free will and determinism and meta-ethical questions such as the meaning of ethical words,[52] the nature of morality, and the justification of moral judgments. They also discuss the determinants of human actions and human motivation. Mu'tazilites believe that man is free. They advocate the rationality and objectivity of morality. A moral obligation can only be justified when it agrees with reason. We can know moral truth by reason. Mu'tazilites disagree with each other with regard to what actually motivates people. Some say people are motivated by benefits and harms associated with actions. Others believe that people act rightly because it is right to do so.[53]

Sufis are concerned with realizing good character and a good way of life. A good way of life is a spiritual life and a life of virtue. It is the life of having faith and trust in Allah, a life of worship, *dhikr* (remembrance), of hope, love, contentment, renouncing worldly pleasures, and of seclusion. It is a

life, according to some Sufis, in which the Sufi ultimately experiences extinction (*fana*) and union with God. Having good character is attained through *mujahadah* (struggle) against one's desires and through *riyaddah* (training) of the soul. The Sufi way begins with vigilance and then *muraqabah* (watching one's deeds) and *muhasabah* (accounting for one's deeds); repentance, patience, *tazkiyyah* (purifying one's soul), worship, and abiding with moral principles, being sincere, and acting for the sake of God. The Sufi tries to acquire self-knowledge and looks for his own faults and not those of others. He looks inside himself and tries to detect the illnesses of his soul, such as arrogance, fear, anger, selfishness, hypocrisy, and showing off and tries with the help and guidance of his teacher to cure himself from those illnesses. If his soul becomes healthy he tries to protect it and tries to develop it to higher stages of perfection.

Philosophers such as al-Farabi and Ibn Miskawayhi approach ethics from a virtue-ethics approach. Muslim philosophers were influenced greatly by Aristotle's views on the topic. The philosophers' ethical system consists of a theory of human nature, a theory of value, and a theory of virtue. Man is basically a rational being and the ultimate value is happiness, and ultimate happiness is realized through the activity of contemplation. Virtue is a disposition that causes actions.[54] Virtuous actions are voluntary actions. The real virtuous act is done spontaneously and without thought or deliberation.[55] Virtue is gained through training and habit.[56] A person acts virtuously when his rational power controls his desires[57] and, consequently, the person acts moderately.[58] At first, character formation requires deliberation, thought, struggle, and repetition of the moral acts until they become permanent within the disposition and character.[59]

I recognize that there is much to be done in order to understand not only the rich Islamic heritage on ethics but also to develop Islam's ethical potential within the present context. This article was designed not to provide a comprehensive review of Islamic ethics, but to emphasize the need for such a comprehensive study. I hope that the article will provide a good starting point for further research.

Notes

1. Thomas Mautner, *A Dictionary of Philosophy* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), 137.
2. Abi Abdullahi al-Qurtubi, *al-Jami' li ahkam al-Qur'an*, vols. 13–14 (Beirut: Dar al-kutub al-'ilmiyyah, no date), 85.
3. Abu Hamid al-Ghazzali, *Al-Munqith min al-dala* (Dar al Andalus, 1981), 110.
4. Patrick Devlin, *The Enforcement of Morals* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970).

5. Herbert Hart, *Law, Liberty and Morality* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1963).
6. J.S. Mill, *On Liberty* (London: J.W. Parker, 1859).
7. Louis Pojaman, *Ethical Theories* (London: Wadsworth, 1995), 4.
8. Roger Triqq, *Understanding Social Science* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993), 105–106.
9. See Abdullahi Hassan Zaroug, "Manahij al-dirasat al-falsafiyyah fi al-fikr al-gharbi," *Islamiyyat al-Ma'rifah*, (October 1998).
10. Amartya Sen, *On Ethics and Economics* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990), ix.
11. Ibid., x.
12. Ibid., xi.
13. Narrated by al-Bukhari in *Al-Adab al-mufrad*.
14. Narrated by al-Tirmithi in *Al-Ruda' bab ma ja' fi haq al-mar'ah 'ala zawjaha*, no. 1162; and Abu Da'ud, no. 4682.
15. Ahmad Mahmud Subhi, *Al-Falsafah al-akhlaqiyyah fi al-fikr al-Islami* (Cairo: Dar al-Ma'arif, no date), 13.
16. Roger Triqq, *Understanding Social Science*, 62.
17. Abdallah Draz, *Dastur al-akhlaq fi al-Qur'an*, translated by Abd al-Sabur Shahyn (Beirut: Ma'asasat al-Risalah, 1982).
18. Ibid., 8–9.
19. Ibid., 17–18.
20. Ibid., 16.
21. Ibid., 130.
22. Abd al-Haq al-Ansari, "Islamic Ethics: Concepts and Prospects," *The American Journal of Islamic Sciences* 6, no. 1 (1989).
23. Fazlur Rahman, "Law and Ethics in Islam," in *Ethics in Islam*, edited by Richard G. Hovannisian (Malibu, Calif.: Undena Publications, 1985).
24. Ibid., 9.
25. Ibid.
26. Ibid., 10.
27. Ibid., 12.
28. Ibid., 11.
29. Thomas Nagel, "The Fragmentation of Value," in *Moral Dilemmas*, edited by Christopher W. Govans (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), 183.
30. Toshihiko Izutsu, *Ethico Religious Concepts in the Qur'an* (Montreal: McGill University Press, 1966), 3.
31. Ibid., 8.
32. Ibid., 9.
33. Ibid., 25.
34. Ibid., 11.
35. Ibid., 15.
36. Abdullahi Hassan Zaroug, "Manahij al-dirasat al-falsafiyyah fi al-fikr al-gharbi."
37. Abdullahi Hassan Zaroug, *Al-Islam wa al-'ilm al-tajribi* (Khartoum: Khartoum U3iversity Press, 1993).
38. Fazur Rahman, *Law and Ethics in Islam*, 11.
39. Ahmad Abd al-Rahman Ibrahim, *Al-Faḍa'il al-khuluqiyyah fi al-Islam* (Cairo: Dar al-wafa'il tiba'ah wa al-nashr, 1989).
40. Ahmad Mahmud Subhi, *al-Falsafa al-akhlaqiyyah fi al-fikr al-Islamic* (Cairo: Dar al-ma'arif, no date).
41. George F. Hourani, *Reason and Tradition in Islamic Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985).
42. Ibid., 4.
43. Ibid., 4–5.
44. Ibid., 15.
45. Ibid., 26.
46. Ibid., 30.

47. Ibid., 17.
48. Majid Fakhry, *Ethical Theories in Islam* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1991).
49. Ibid., 8.
50. Daniel H. Frank, "Ethics," part II of *History of Islamic Ethics,* edited by Seyyed Hossein Nasr and Oliver Leaman (London & New York, Routledge, 1996).
51. Rafiq Issa Beekun, *Islamic Business Ethics* (Herndon, Va: International Institute of Islamic Thought, 1997).
52. See al-Qadi Abdal-Jabbar, *Al-Mughni*, vol. 14, edited by Mustafa al-Saqa (Cairo: al-Mu'asasah al-masriyyah al-'amah, no date).
53. Ibid., vol. 6, 222–224.
54. Ibn Miskawayhi, *Tahthib al-akhlaq*, edited by Ibn al-Khatib (al-matba'ah al-Makiyyah wa Maktabah (no date), 41.
55. Ibid.
56. Ibid.
57. Ibid., 24.
58. Ibid.
59. Ibid., 41.