



Being a “Good Person” Is Not Enough: Why Ethics Need Islam

OVAMIR ANJUM

YAQeen[™]
INSTITUTE FOR ISLAMIC RESEARCH

Author Biography

Dr. Ovamir Anjum is the Imam Khattab Endowed Chair of Islamic Studies at the Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies at the University of Toledo. His work focuses on the nexus of theology, ethics, politics and law in Islam, with comparative interest in Western Thought. Trained as a historian, his work is essentially interdisciplinary, drawing on the fields of classical Islamic studies, political philosophy, and cultural anthropology.

He obtained his Ph.D. in Islamic Intellectual history in the Department of History, University of Wisconsin-Madison, Masters in Social Sciences from the University of Chicago, and Masters in Computer Science and Bachelors in Nuclear Engineering and Physics from the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Before higher education, his Islamic training began at home while growing up in Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and the United States with a broad range of scholars including his remarkable grandmother, and continued as he studied *fiqh* with South Asian Ḥanafī and *Ahl-e-hadīs* scholars and *usūl al-fiqh* and *qirā'āt* of the Quran with scholars from Egypt's Al-Azhar and Syria. He is the author of *Politics, Law and Community in Islamic Thought: The Taymiyyan Moment* (Cambridge University Press, 2012). He has translated *Madarij al-Salikin (Ranks of Divine Seekers)*, Brill 2020) by Ibn al-Qayyim (d. 1351), one of the greatest Islamic spiritual classics, which is the largest single-author English translation of an Arabic text. His current projects include a survey of Islamic history and a monograph on Islamic political thought.

Disclaimer: *The views, opinions, findings, and conclusions expressed in these papers and articles are strictly those of the authors. Furthermore, Yaqeen does not endorse any of the personal views of the authors on any platform. Our team is diverse on all fronts, allowing for constant, enriching dialogue that helps us produce high-quality research.*

Copyright © 2022. Yaqeen Institute for Islamic Research

In this essay, we present how:

- *The Prophetic ﷺ declaration that he had been sent “**only to perfect noble traits of character**” confirms our empirical experience that although the ethical impulse—the love for what is good—is natural to all human beings, we need revelation to guide and perfect it.*
- *Disagreement and confusion about the goal and nature of good character are rampant, and misguided ethical beliefs have inspired the most horrific evils in human history.*
- *Secular modernity, which claims to provide ethics without revelation, has tried to “smuggle” in religious values, but has failed in providing meaning to individuals and restraint against exploitation. Today’s ecological crisis is an irrefutable judgment against modern hegemonic ethics of capitalism, secularism, and liberalism, and the Islamic alternative is urgently needed.*
- *Divinely revealed norms are confirmed and enhanced by rational ethical reflection.*
- *To fail to acknowledge and thank the Creator is a great ethical failure.*

Introduction

It is wrong to tell lies, torture animals, and kill or harm innocent people. It is good to be kind and charitable, grateful, courageous, patient, just, and wise. These principles are called ethics or morals and are referred to as *khuluq* (sing.) or *akhlāq* (pl.) in the Qur’an and the Prophetic teachings.

All human cultures recognize good traits and virtues in some elementary form. Yet, both in real-life situations and upon further reflection, people begin to disagree about what is good. Some prioritize mercy over justice or vice versa. Some preach forgiveness and pacifism toward all, even (or specially) vis-a-vis the powerful.

Others fight for equality even if it compromises freedom, or the other way around. Others prefer choice to life. Others swear by the principle of maximization of measurable happiness. Yet others believe only in instant gratification in an uncertain world. Rather than furnishing us with a solid edifice of ethical imperatives, the shared human ethical impulse melts in the heat of seemingly endless human diversity and disagreement. To complicate matters further, the world is not a museum or a seminar room for discussion, but a battleground between good and evil, and the champions of evil ever seek to convert, dominate, and hoodwink others, driven by greed, pride, and self-worship, thus corrupting our desires, perception, and even language by naming what is evil as good and good as evil. To be good, then, requires us not merely to make an intellectual choice, but a commitment to and struggle for what is true and good.

Modern challenges: Epistemic and economic imperialism and climate change

The question is endlessly asked in a secular world: Can we be ethical without religion? Surveys tell us that the answer to this question depends on who is being asked: for the majority of humankind, who are both poor and religious, the answer is overwhelmingly no; for the rich, secularized minority, or those brainwashed by aggressive secular regimes, the answer is usually yes.¹ People's ethical styles also vary. Wealthier people of the global North fare better in what we may call corporate morality: interpersonal skills necessary to function in man-made organizations such as being on time, truth-telling, and transparency (in accordance with the needs of a managerial society), just as traditional folk fare better in familial and communal virtues such as altruism, honoring of parental and family ties, and generosity. Furthermore, people inhabiting regions devastated by

¹ Christine Tamir, Aidan Connaughton, and Ariana Monique Salazar, "The Global God Divide: People's Thoughts on whether Belief in God Is Necessary to Be Moral Vary by Economic Development, Education and Age," Pew Research Center, July 20, 2020, <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2020/07/20/the-global-god-divide/>. Note that the data doesn't support the authors' claim that economy is the explanation for this divide: Turkey (75%), US (44%), Canada (26%), and Eastern European countries (ranging from 14–50%) suggest that the story is more complex.

colonialism and failing political and economic orders are likely to have compromised ethical conduct due to low trust, cynicism, and need for survival. Such surveys about ethics hide crucial, structural truths, however. First, the secular overlords of the world have altered, and continue to alter, what counts as being good, and the perceptions of the masses are often shaped by propaganda. Just a century ago, for instance, serving one's parents would have been universally deemed among the most important ethical virtues throughout the world from Europe and the Islamic world to China and India. Today, secular, liberal societies have dropped this virtue, if not turned it into a vice. Greed, similarly, had always been recognized as the greatest of evils, and its particular form, usury or interest, the most hated crime, in all cultures and all history, until modern capitalism began to consider it both a virtue and a necessity.² This points to a deeper problem than economic exploitation and increasing inequality: it is our very sense of right and wrong that is mass manipulated by the elite. This I call *epistemic imperialism*—the colonization of knowledge-production, meaning, and values by certain key global institutions. Since the rise of globalism in the 1980s, these institutions are no longer merely “Western,” but have extended to include the ultra-rich “global” elite in the global South, joining hands against the majority of people everywhere.

Debates about ethics and ideologies tend to be endless. Is there perhaps a scientific, empirical way to judge the conduct of the successful overlords of the world, the modern, secular, democratic, and wealthy global North? Do we just have to wait for the afterlife, when it is too late to change, to see who was right? Faith is part of the test, so, in a sense, yes, but God mercifully sends signals. It is not without irony that the greatest sign of the moral bankruptcy of the modern secular lifestyle is offered by modern empirical science itself: climate change. Consider this example. There are many styles of parenting: traditional and modern, authoritarian, lax, authoritative, attachment-leaning or discipline-heavy. But imagine if the parents sell off and consume the only house where their children could live, every brick and piece of furniture, deliberately and out of reckless greed, leaving their young children to starve, beg, and freeze on the streets as they voraciously consume

² David Graeber, *Debt: The First 5,000 Years* (New York: Melville House Publishing, 2011), 315, 344.

everything. All parties can agree that this is a truly odious parenting style. The modern, secular, capitalist lifestyle, science tells us, has been precisely that kind of parent to the world. An endless barrage of scientific papers, books, and documentaries furnishes evidence of the coming environmental collapse. As a university professor who occasionally teaches environmental ethics, I start the course with three facts to help see the big picture:

- (1) Since the Industrial Revolution in the 19th century, within 200 years, humans have consumed nearly all of the fossil fuels that it took natural processes 200 million years to deposit into the earth, and the indices of atmospheric carbon, deforestation, and species extinction all have taken an unsustainable “hockey-stick” shape within this period;³
- (2) by a conservative estimate, nearly 5% of the world’s population consumes 35% of the world’s resources,⁴ which means if we all lived like modern Westerners, 80% of humans on earth would need a different planet, so secular modernity is the road to massive extermination of entire peoples, regions, and cultures;
- (3) and no, the main culprit is not population growth but lifestyle. To understand this, note that starting in 1890 the world population over a century multiplied by 4, but water use by 9, world economy by 14, and energy use by 16.⁵

All this to say that secular modernity—recall that the 19th century is precisely the time when Western populations began to embrace modern values—has killed the

³ James G. Speth, *The Bridge at the Edge of the World* (Yale University Press, 2008), xx-xxi, 50. The author, former dean of Yale Forestry and a leading environmentalist, summarizes leading authorities on the subject and concludes that nothing short of a complete overhaul of the current Western lifestyle, capitalism, and even consciousness is needed, and recommends turning to a deeply community-centered and spiritual lifestyle (199).

⁴ There are many ways to bring these facts home. This figure is cited in John L Seitz, *Global Issues: An Introduction* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley Blackwell, 2001). Another framing is given here: “Use It and Lose It: The Outsize Effect of U.S. Consumption on the Environment,” *Scientific American*, September 14, 2021, <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/american-consumption-habits/>. It states that “a child born in the United States will create thirteen times as much ecological damage over the course of his or her lifetime than a child born in Brazil.”

⁵ Speth, *Bridge at the Edge*, 50.

planet Earth. Even as the poor masses, including the majority of Muslims, of the world are being pressured to modernize and secularize, leading scientists and scholars are suggesting, in so many words, that the traditional, communal, and altruistic ethics they are leaving behind are necessary for humankind to survive.

This is just the story of the material loss of this earth: we have not even broached the deeper problem of the loss of faith in God, the spiritual and psychological crises, the very meaning of life and goodness. As Allah Most High promised in the Qur'an, the two are connected: "Whoever turns away from My remembrance, his will be a straitened life; and We shall raise him blind on the Day of Resurrection" (20:124).

Ethical questions

Deflating the claims of modern progress and the epistemic imperialism of the secular world allows us to appreciate the urgency of Islamic ethics. You do not have to be a believing Muslim to see the need for an alternative to the darkness of today's hegemonic models. How can we determine what is right and what is wrong? Are ethical norms, such as 'killing an innocent person is bad' and 'helping someone in need is good,' simply conventional norms that make our lives easier (and hence, have no objective foundation), or based on the nature of things themselves (such that they can be known by reason alone), or assigned and revealed arbitrarily by God (and hence, known only through revelation)? These are called metaethical questions. Muslim scholars, as we shall see, have debated these questions and have adopted versions of each of these answers, but always centered around divine revelation.

Then there are questions of how ethics are organized into a system of priorities. Which of the many desired behaviors and virtues are more important than others, and what do we do when they conflict with each other? Here, all Muslims agree on the right of God to define this system in the law, or Shariah.

More flexible and varied are the answers to the questions of ethical pedagogy, what Muslims call *tarbiyya*. What is the right way to acquire or teach the desired virtues: love or fear? Upbringing by unconditionally loving parents, or hard discipline by discriminating wardens? Philosophical reflection of the sages, or advice of the most successful and powerful people? The heat of the battle or the quiet of the library?

Most important of all, however, is the question of purpose or teleology. What is the end-goal of life, and hence of individual conduct and social life? Is the purpose to maximize pleasure and individual liberty, group power for the sake of domination, or to please God? Regardless of the answer to the big question, those who reflect on the nature of good and seek it are likely to be better humans and more likely to achieve what is true and good. By making us better, more beautiful human beings, ethical reflection has the power to cut through even the propaganda, sectarianism, and prejudice of our birth cultures. Those given to deep ethical reflection were the first to come to Islam and remained the best of Muslims.

This introductory essay on Islamic ethics is a response to the aforementioned questions in three parts. First, I present the key Prophetic statement that forms the foundation of the approach adopted in this series. Next, I show how philosophical reflection on ethics has often led to its source, God Almighty, but also to the limits of rationality and the need for divine guidance. Finally, I show how Islam is not only in harmony with reason, but it also requires us to develop rational understanding of good conduct as part of its holistic guidance.

This is how the Blessed Messenger of Allah ﷺ summed up his entire mission, as reported on the authority of Abū Hurayra,

I have been sent only to perfect noble traits of character.⁶

⁶ The hadith *innamā bu'ithtu li-utammim makārim al-akhlāq* (some versions replace *makārim* with *ḥusn* and others with *ṣālih*, without altering the meaning) is reported by Imam Mālik in his *Muwattaʿa* (Kitāb Ḥusn al-Khuluq) without an *isnād*, by Imam Aḥmad b. Hanbal in *Musnad* (no. 8952; ed. Shuʿayb al-Arnaʿūt), by al-Bukharī in *al-Adab al-Mufrad* (no. 207), and was graded *ṣaḥīḥ* by numerous scholars including al-Albānī, Ibn ʿAbd al-Barr, and others.

The Messenger of Allah ﷺ affirms in this remarkable statement that people already do recognize and possess noble traits; the revelation has come only to complete and perfect these traits. The exclusive particle “*innamā*” could be interpreted in two ways, and both are correct:

(1) “I have come not to invent but only to perfect good character.”

(2) “I have come for no other purpose but to complete noble character traits.”

The first means that human beings are often in possession of knowledge and appreciation of good character, some more than others, even before access to direct revelation. This is confirmed by numerous other revealed texts, as well as rational evidence and empirical observation. This meaning is further confirmed by a report in which the Prophet ﷺ remarks upon meeting al-Ashajj of the tribe of ‘Abd al-Qays, who had come to embrace Islam, “You have two traits that God loves, forbearance (*hilm*) and gentleness (*anāt*).” Obviously intelligent, the man inquired, “O Messenger of God, are these traits that I practice or has God made them my nature?” The Messenger said, “Rather it is God who has given them to you by nature.” Al-Ashajj gratefully exclaimed, “Praise to God who bestowed on me traits that Allah and His Messenger love!”⁷ This tradition further explains that certain traits are naturally given by God to some more than others, and others may be acquired by nurture and training. Another hadith states, “Peoples are like metal ores, the best of them in pre-Islamic time are the best of them in Islam, so long as they acquire understanding.”⁸ Ibn Hajar, in his explanation, points to three dimensions of this hadith: noble character, which is the stable nature granted by God (hence the reference to metal ore), acceptance of Islam, upon which ultimate success lies, and the effort to acquire knowledge of religion. The best of humans are those who possess all three, but if someone rejects Islam, all other gifts become void. With faith, all natural gifts shine even further to the extent that one makes an

⁷ *Sunan Abu Dawud*, no. 5225, graded *ṣaḥīḥ*; the first part of the hadith is also reported in *Sahih Muslim*, no. 17.

⁸ *Sahih al-Bukhari*, no. 3493.

effort to acquire knowledge and understanding of revelation.⁹ Nothing is of use to those who reject faith, no matter how high their character and how charitable their works otherwise: “A similitude of those who disbelieve in their Lord: Their [good] works are as ashes which the wind blows hard upon a stormy day; they have no control of anything that they have earned. That is the extreme failure” (14:18).

The second meaning, too, is correct since the foremost purpose of the Prophet’s mission, the worship of the true Creator and Benefactor, is also the greatest virtue, as it is an expression of gratitude to the Creator and acknowledgment of truth, and there is no greater injustice than to reject God’s signs (6:21, 32:22). Thus, his ﷺ mission was nothing but to perfect all virtue.

In sum, Islam perfects moral traits in three ways:

- 1) by giving these virtues the right purpose or teleology: Allah Most High;
- 2) by providing a higher and lasting level of motivation; and
- 3) by providing the right meaning and balance among competing values through the revealed Law, the Shariah.

Philosophy and its limits

The unexamined life is not worth living, said Socrates, who is believed by many to have been the first ethical philosopher. The good life is a life spent in knowing, loving, and seeking the moral good. Philosophically, universal ethics (that is, the idea that all humans have some rights) and monotheism (the belief that all humans have one supreme God) strongly entail each other. Consider the statement that “an unexamined life is not worth living.” It is itself merely a claim: is life not worth living for ferns, cockroaches, or butterflies? What makes this question about the nature and purpose of life possible and necessary is our very ability to reflect, evaluate, and judge. But where does this ability come from? Where does life itself

⁹ Ibn Hajar, *Fatḥ al-Bārī* (Beirut: Dār al-Maʿrifā, 1379), 6:529, in explanation of *Sahih al-Bukhari*, no. 3493.

come from? Socrates was not alone; much of human philosophizing across time and space points to the human quest to know the answers to these questions. But Socrates and his likes, despite their brilliance, could not proceed beyond their *thought* of one God to either the *worship* of one true God or to balanced, feasible ethics. Recall that it was Socrates who suggested, in Plato's famous *Republic*, that all must be governed by one all-wise philosopher, and that women and children are to be communal property rather than individuals within their families, that children should be separated from their parents at birth and placed according to their natural capacities so as not to receive undeserved love, and so on, effectively proposing a plan for the most racist and loveless society imaginable.¹⁰ How could the man known to be the first and greatest philosopher of ethics come to a conclusion that, by all accounts, appears the most deplorable and unethical? Because the human mind, even at its best, cannot be trusted to play god; only God is above blind spots and errors. In fact, humans intuitively know of their imperfection and have an unquenchable thirst for seeking what is infinitely good and perfect. We all seek God even when we do not know it.

A typical book on the history of ethics will teach you that the philosophical discipline of ethics was born in ancient Greece precisely to wrestle with the kinds of questions we have listed above. But this is merely a secular, Eurocentric narrative: humanity has never existed without divine guidance and hence ethics. Allah created the first human being with the ability to know right from wrong and the imperative to follow divine guidance when it is sent through divine messengers. The Almighty addressed our father Adam thus, "When guidance comes to you from Me, whoever follows My guidance—there will be no fear concerning them, nor will they grieve" (2:38). Divine guidance, we learn, was not sent haphazardly or post hoc when the human experiment went awry but was from the beginning part of the divine plan. Given this, humans never lived without the benefit of divine guidance. Humans can be divided into two kinds, however: those blessed like the *ummah* of the Final Prophet ﷺ who have clear access to it in

¹⁰ Stephen Halliwell, *Plato: Republic Book V* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 3–4, 16.

unaltered form, and those for whom the guidance had been forgotten except in distorted and partial forms.

The lynchpin of that guidance has always been to recognize the truth of one God, to worship Him alone, and to be good to one another. Logically, the Almighty could have limited His religion to worshipping Him alone, but out of His perfect mercy and wisdom, He has made goodness to the creation part of faith in Him, placed goodness to others and all creation in our nature, and reinforced it through His revealed guidance. But humans are forgetful, both as individuals and as communities. Human history is filled with cycles of human forgetfulness and divine reminder. Over time, that guidance would become dim, lost, or adulterated to the point that people would fall back into polytheism and mutual oppression.

We must, therefore, reject the Eurocentric fiction that Greek philosophers of sixth to fourth century BCE invented ethical reflection, for it is possible that the pagan Greek philosophers or those who influenced them had access to some remnants of revelation in the same way that the pagan Arabs did. And just the same way that there were *ḥanīfs*—monotheists who searched for divine guidance—in pagan Arabia before Islam, some charitable interpreters classify the likes of Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle as monotheists of sorts.¹¹ Historical evidence suggests that without denouncing polylatry (worship of many gods) in practice, these philosophers' search for truth led them to *conceptual monotheism*.¹² Hindu philosophers of the Upanishads, similarly, while remaining polylatrous, had gestured toward conceptual monotheism in the same way that pre-Islamic Arabs attributed ultimate power to Allah while justifying idolatry.¹³ This means that either

¹¹ See for instance, Stephen Mitchell and Peter Van Nuffelen, eds., *One God: Pagan Monotheism in the Roman Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), in particular the contributions by Michael Frede and Alfons Fürst on pagan Greek and Roman monotheism without monolatry: that is, belief in one supreme deity along with the worship of many, lesser deities, a situation very similar to pre-Islamic *jahiliyyah*. Most of these philosophical monotheisms, however, entertained a deistic notion of God who has no power to intervene in the world, and that is compatible with idolatry, both of which notions Islam came to correct.

¹² My point is not to establish that these philosophers were indeed monotheists, as it remains a disputed claim. Those like Frede in the last footnote who make this claim (persuasive to this author) state only that Plato and Aristotle philosophized their way to the ultimate supremacy of one God, but they did not oppose idol worship.

¹³ For a Western perspective on Hindu monotheism, see Gavin Flood, *Hindu Monotheism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020).

through remnants of divine guidance or their own virgin thinking, humans naturally come to believe in one Ultimate Reality, but often cannot advance beyond this point without the benefit of divine revelation, devolving into endless disagreement and confusion. We need revelation to arrive at the attributes of the One True God and the right way to live that is pleasing to God.

To reiterate, then, although human reason may discover the truth of divine monotheism and ethical truths, it is likely to err; it is better equipped, in other words, to recognize the truth once it is presented than to know it outright. Imām Ibn Taymiyya makes this point by invoking Surah al-Mulk which tells us of the lamenting disbelievers who will declare in the afterlife, “If only we had listened (to prophets) or reasoned, we would not be among the companions of the Blaze” (67:10).¹⁴ But if human beings often fail to acknowledge and thank their Creator, how much more likely are they to neglect the rights of His creation?

Our contemporary empirical experience confirms both of these observations: the existence of the natural ethical sense (*fiṭra*) and its weakness. Even in our hyper-secularized, artificially mechanized, distant-from-nature, and unreflective lives, human beings cannot easily avoid asking these ‘big’ questions.¹⁵ Human life is impossible without confronting these issues, and our choice is to respond to the truth, neglect it, or deny it. This becomes the foundational moral choice upon which all else depends. We also witness, however, that when led by the self-serving elite rather than divine revelation, human reason degenerates into either endless disagreement and cynicism, absurdities such as atheism, or obscurantist cults that mimic true religion. Against the cumulative judgment of all known human societies, including most human beings today in favor of theistic ethics, a tiny hegemonic global elite produces agnostic or atheistic philosophy and culture, rejecting the truth of God yet ready to believe in the most fantastic tales; like the characters in *Alice in Wonderland*, they practice believing six impossible things before breakfast.

¹⁴ Ibn Taymiyya, *Majmū‘ Fatāwa* (Medina: Majma‘ al-Malik Fahd, 1995), 3:295.

¹⁵ Robert Coles, *The Spiritual Life of Children* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1990).

Without divine law, no line between good and evil is above philosophical contestation. Homosexual behavior had, until recently, been seen as the greatest immorality across cultures, but now the global elite have decided the opposite.¹⁶ Some have even taken to justifying incest. Not too long ago, eugenics and racist theories of human behavior justifying the dominance of some races and criminalization of others were mainstream science. Is killing animals (or even vegetables) for consumption really different from killing humans for consumption? Is killing unwanted babies really morally equivalent to murder? As the leading moral philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre of our time, a Christian, noted in his groundbreaking *After Ethics* (1984),

It is a distinctive feature of the social and cultural order that we inhabit that disagreements over central moral issues are peculiarly unsettleable.¹⁷

The reason, he contends, is the rejection by the Enlightenment thinkers of the monotheistic religious grounding of these values and its replacement with “secular morality” with which any rational person could agree. Originally religious concepts such as the sanctity of human life, fundamental equality of human beings before God, and so on, were now orphaned, because the warring philosophies could not agree on any basis for them. All values in such a secular culture depend on what feels good or bad, an ethical theory called *emotivism*.¹⁸ In an emotivist culture, ethical beliefs are merely based on manipulation of individuals by each other and of them all by the more powerful forces of political elites and capitalists.

In the nobly phrased US Declaration of Independence, Thomas Jefferson was telling only a half-truth when he wrote: “We hold these truths to be *self-evident*, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.” These truths were never self-evident, for the norm in human

¹⁶ Darel E. Paul, *From Tolerance to Equality: How Elites Brought America to Same-Sex Marriage* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2019), in which a leading historian argues how a small wealthy managerial class in the US has led the charge to alter America’s sexual morality.

¹⁷ Alasdair MacIntyre, “The Claims of *After Virtue*,” in *The MacIntyre Reader*, ed. Kelvin Knight (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1998), 69.

¹⁸ MacIntyre, “Claims of *After Virtue*,” 69–71.

experience in every respect is difference and inequality; the idea of equality could only come from the belief in a soul given from on high. Whenever access to revelation was lost, humans often returned to beastly existence.

How does post-Enlightenment Western society, defined by liberal philosophy, that MacIntyre labels emotivist, justify moral principles? An American constitutional scholar's answer is particularly apt: a kind of intellectual smuggling. This has prompted some scholars to accuse them of smuggling ethical values from major religions because they do not have a valid justification for their own.¹⁹

This truth was expressed more poignantly and much earlier by Russian novelist Dostoyevsky, whose protagonist in *Crime and Punishment* (1866) observes the consequence of this emergent late-19th century belief thus: "If there is no God, then everything is permitted."²⁰ In German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche's telling, who had himself experienced the consequences of losing his Christian faith, a madman observing the new Europe presciently proclaims what the loss of belief in God that was to overtake Europe entailed,

How were we able to drink up the sea? Who gave us the sponge to wipe away the entire horizon? What did we do when we unchained this earth from its sun? ... Is there still any up or down? Are we not straying as through an infinite nothing? ... God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him.²¹

With characteristic starkness, Nietzsche declares that when belief in God is shaken, nothing is comprehensible anymore; the moral world is shattered even though

¹⁹ Steven D. Smith, *The Disenchantment of Secular Discourse* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press: 2010), 38. I introduce the terms *liberal* and *secular* advisedly. The dominant ethical and political philosophy of our times is liberalism, which upholds the idea that individual freedoms and rights take precedence over any truth-claims. Secularism is the idea that religion should be removed from public life. Liberalism requires secularism but not the other way around, and there exist a number of nonliberal secularist societies like Russia, China, and some Middle Eastern dictatorships. Because of the hegemony of liberalism and secularism, these effectively atheistic attitudes toward ethical norms are often shared and championed by otherwise religious people.

²⁰ The phenomenon is explored in Vanderbilt University professor William Franke's "The Deaths of God in Hegel and Nietzsche and the Crisis of Values in Secular Modernity and Post-Secular Postmodernity," *Religion and the Arts* 11 (2007), 215.

²¹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science* [translation of the German original, *Die fröhliche Wissenschaft*] (Leipzig: E. W. Fritzsche, 1887), 181.

people will continue to shut their eyes to its consequences. “It is not the eyes,” says the Ever-living Lord, “but the hearts that are in their chests that become blind!” (22:46). God is Ever-living; what’s dead in truth is the culture that utters and celebrates such blasphemy.

Modern secularism as a polytheism of values

Another and far more mainstream contemporary of Nietzsche and the founder of modern social science, Max Weber foresaw the character of the coming age and, even as a secular person, could not resist worrying about modernity’s polytheism. “His vision of polytheistic reenchancement,” writes one scholar about Weber, “is rather that of an incommensurable value-fragmentation into a plurality of alternative metanarratives, each of which claims to answer the same metaphysical questions that religion and science strove to cope with in their own ways.”²² The so-called “death of God” has resulted both in a haunted universe but also the return of gods and demons who “strive to gain power over our lives and again ... resume their eternal struggle with one another.”²³ Modern secularism, ostensibly atheistic or agnostic, is indeed a kind of polytheism in numerous palpable ways.²⁴ As monotheism declines in modern society, humans tend to regress to old-fashioned superstitious obscurantism, as increasingly evident today.²⁵ Human beings have been created to worship, and when they fail to acknowledge and worship God, they invariably fall into worshipping many gods, including the gods of desire and power. As the Almighty declares:

Have you seen he who has taken as his god his own desire: Allah has sent him astray knowingly, setting a seal upon his hearing and his heart, and

²² Sung Ho Ku, “Max Weber,” in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, August 24, 2007, updated November 27, 2017, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/weber/>.

²³ Max Weber, “*Science as a Vocation*” in *From Max Weber* (Oxford University Press, 1946 [1919]), 149.

²⁴ Mirza Safwat, “Why Modern Atheists Are Mushriks,” *Islam 21C*, October 25, 2021, <https://www.islam21c.com/islamic-thought/why-modern-atheists-are-mushriks/>.

²⁵ See: Biana Bosker, “Why Witchcraft Is On the Rise,” *The Atlantic*, March 2020, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2020/03/witchcraft-juliet-diaz/605518/>. But more generally, this has been the case since the rise of modern Enlightenment, as studied in Jason Storm, *The Myth of Disenchantment: Magic, Modernity, and the Birth of the Human Sciences* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017).

putting over his vision a veil? So who will guide him after Allah? Will, then, you not heed!? (45:23)

Why must revelation guide our ethics? Hitler also had ethics!

Muslim children are often taught how terrible the pre-Islamic Arabs were. They had no redeeming virtues. After all, burying baby girls alive was to them a normal practice! What could be worse? But this naive perspective blinds us to the fact that the murder of children was common in many societies under different guises; in some polytheistic societies, children were offered in ritual sacrifice to the gods.²⁶ Let us set aside the fact for now that the murder and exploitation of non-Western peoples, far from being seen as an ethical flaw, is a feature of the current imperial world order. In modern liberal societies, where human rights are worshipped, many advocate similar rights to kill unborn babies in the name of sexual freedom, choice, or other reasons.²⁷ The pre-Islamic Arabs were only different insofar as they were technologically behind and had to wait for the children to be born before killing them. Like any society, however, they did have many virtues: they practiced and valued generosity, chivalry, courage, and so on. Nevertheless, the poor among them would bury their daughters alive for “fear of starvation” (17:31). They may have individually felt this to be wrong, but they lacked belief in the God-given inviolability of life. Many tribal and pagan societies, for instance, did not accord sanctity to human life, and practices such as child sacrifices, the killing of widows

²⁶ “Peru: Ancient Mass Grave of 140 Sacrificed Children Found,” Aljazeera, April 4, 2018, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/4/28/peru-ancient-mass-grave-of-140-sacrificed-children-found>.

²⁷ An exceptional case is documented here: Nat Hentoff, “A Professor Who Argues for Infanticide,” *Washington Post*, September 11, 1999, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/opinions/1999/09/11/a-professor-who-argues-for-infanticide/cce7dc81-3775-4ef6-bfea-74cd795fc43f/>. A more typical justification is offered here: “Abortion is the cornerstone of women’s existential equality, an inalienable part of which is sexual freedom.” Judith Levine, “Hillary Clinton and the Unqualified Right to Abortion,” October 31, 2016, <https://bostonreview.net/articles/judith-levine-hillary-clinton-abortion/>.

upon the husband's death, and of strangers who stepped into one's territory were widespread.²⁸

More generally, let us imagine a scientist, who is moved by nothing but rational argument, who has fitted the entire earth with nuclear devices, and you are the poor assistant on his spacecraft, horrified by the plan, with the urge to offer him some reason to dissuade him. You tell him that killing innocent humans feels utterly horrible, and he reminds you that you had no problem exterminating the entire cockroach population in your kitchen a year earlier. How is human life on earth different from the roach infestation?

Such questions pertaining to the value of human life, or any other moral value, cannot be philosophically resolved. In the absence of a transcendent authority, human societies are left with mere opinion. Today's modern Western ethical theories, as noted earlier, are based on beliefs and concepts "smuggled" from the Abrahamic tradition—ideas have been copied without acknowledging their foundations. In Islam, as in the revelations before, human rights were *ḥuqūq al-ʿibād*, literally, the rights of God's servants. The danger of such groundless ethics, which float in the air like dry leaves on a windy day, is clear when one scrutinizes 20th-century atrocities. It is estimated that millions were killed by modern states, for the sake of modern ideologies such as progress, Marxism, and colonialism, in the two world wars and afterward. Contrary to popular belief, most horrific acts occur not due to a lack of morality, but rather in the name of some supposedly moral goal.

Hitler, for example, rightly considered the epitome of evil in modernity, was driven to commit genocide by virtue of his strong commitment to his particular moral beliefs. Inspired by the ideology of Darwinism that had encouraged atheism, the eugenics movement was widely accepted among the intellectuals and scientists of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Accordingly, Hitler sought only to take to their logical conclusion the moral-scientific beliefs that the queasy

²⁸ See Jared Diamond, *The World Until Yesterday: What Can We Learn from Traditional Societies?* (New York: Penguin Books, 2013).

intellectuals and philosophers were too weak to.²⁹ In fact, if it were not for outrage at the massacres committed by the Nazis as a direct result of such beliefs and the rise of religious ideas, such ideas could easily be in vogue today, and there are signs that they are on the rise once again not only in Europe and the US but have spread to newly “modernized” states such as China and India. The pursuit of a greater ethical good was also the justification behind Mao’s communist transformation in China in the 1950s. Tens of millions of people starved to death in the man-made famine of the Great Leap Forward, but such a tragedy was considered necessary to achieve a more economically equal society and future poverty reduction. Can one rationally argue that this mass murder was wrong? Doesn’t China’s global dominance and the current population of one billion justify it? Why do such ends not justify the means?³⁰

“What about ISIS?” you might ask. This terrorist outfit, born out of two decades of war and sanctions by the United States, murdered some 33,000 people, mostly Muslims in Iraq and Syria, in fact helps us make our point clearer. Its actions were so horrible that even its mother organization, Al Qaeda, condemned it.³¹ Nearly all Muslim authorities have agreed that this group’s actions were against the Shariah.³² No ethical system can determine human actions. What counts is that regardless of the actual reasons that motivate terrorist groups like ISIS, which include a combination of visceral revenge and modern ideologies, and most of all, the absence of a properly constituted Islamic *ummatic* authority like a caliph, what counts is that Muslims overwhelmingly recognized the un-Islamic nature of this

²⁹ Richard Weikart, *Hitler’s Ethic: The Nazi Pursuit of Evolutionary Progress* (New York: Palgrave, 2009). See also, Michael Rosenwald, “Hitler Hated Judaism. But He Loathed Christianity, Too,” *Washington Post*, April 20, 2019, www.washingtonpost.com/history/2019/04/20/hitler-hated-judaism-he-loathed-christianity-too/.

³⁰ Jonathan Glover, *Humanity: A Moral History of the Twentieth Century* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2012). The estimates are that the Soviets killed sixty-two million people (237). In China, apart from the regime’s purges, famines caused by the “noble” idea of the Great Leap Forward killed between twenty and thirty million people (284), and for the Cultural Revolution, estimates vary between several hundred thousand and twenty million.

³¹ “Al-Qaeda Disavows ISIS Militants in Syria,” *BBC*, February 3, 2014, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-26016318>.

³² See, for instance, the various letters dispatched to the IS leader al-Baghdadi, “Scholars’ Open Letter Adds to Chorus of Muslim Leaders Condemning ISIS,” *Slate*, September 25, 2014, <http://slate.com/news-and-politics/2014/09/muslims-scholars-open-letter-to-isis-baghdadi-caliphate-s-actions-against-quran-islam.html>.

group's tactics. Compare this to US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright who, when asked about the death of half a million children as a direct result of US war and sanctions against Iraq, conditions that are directly responsible for creating ISIS, said with a proud, straight face on television: "We think the price is worth it!"

³³ Albright was voted in as a US senator soon after this interview. The world's oldest democracy and champion of human rights, in other words, believes that half a million innocent Muslim children could be legitimately killed to protect its strategic interests. This is the history of secular liberalism writ large.

By saying that for those who do not acknowledge God or an ultimate reality, there is no sound basis for declaring a moral good, I, and the many philosophers who hold this view, do not mean that such people cannot have moral conduct or conjure some philosophy of morality. The moral sense, *fiṭra*, is God-given. The failure to acknowledge God does not eliminate it; it merely confounds and misleads it in myriad ways. The ethical impulse that we all have, in short, drives us all in wildly different ways, but if not guided by the truth of God and disciplined by God's commands, has often led humans to commit greater atrocities than any beasts have ever committed.

Who can say it better than the one given the most eloquent speech ﷺ: "I have been sent only to perfect noble traits of character."

Following right (*fiṭrī*) reason

Let us now turn to reason once again, but this time to *right reason* that responds to, rather than rebels against, God and truth.

The first thing we discover upon reflection, and must discover, is that only He who gave us life could give it value. If we entertain the absurdity that there is no such source and life is a mere blind accident, then there can be no value: no grounds for

³³ Rahul Mahajan, "We Think the Price Is Worth It," *FAIR*, November 1, 2001, <https://fair.org/extra/we-think-the-price-is-worth-it/>.

good or evil, no right and wrong. Put differently, if there is no God, there can be no ethics, for ethics is fundamentally an exercise of seeking God.

The ultimate good then, is God. Divine revelation fills in the details in this natural line of reasoning. God being the Creator and Sustainer of all life, the only life worth living is one that seeks the Creator. The Creator, and this is the most central message of all revealed religions, is not a blind force. Far from a nameless energy or inert reality, He is a being with a will, who knows and loves His creation, and loves what is good. All good actions must seek God, or else they cannot be good.

Life has value, and morality exists, because Allah Almighty honored the human being, and breathed His breath into the human being to create life (Qur'an, 15:29; 38:72; 32:9). If the soul is nothing but God's breath, emanation, and gift, then what other than Him could make it happy?

Is God's command arbitrary or rational and ethical?

Shariah commands goodness and justice

The Qur'anic account of the Prophet's message emphasizes its rational nature, insofar as God has commanded us to do what is known to human nature to be right and beneficial. God has the absolute right to command what He wishes, and He had indeed tested certain earlier communities with commandments that were merely a test rather than being good or desirable in themselves. Such commands were removed from the perfect Law given to the Prophet ﷺ, thus perfecting it:

He will enjoin on them that which is right and forbid them from that which is wrong, making lawful for them all good things and prohibiting for them only the foul; relieving them of their burden and the fetters that they used to wear. Then those who believe in him, and honor him, and help him, and follow the light which is sent down with him, they are the successful ones. (7:157)

This verse makes the monumental declaration that the Shariah given to the Prophet ﷺ, the standard of what is right and what is wrong before God, is accessible to

human nature, and that its norm is to remove arbitrary burdens and facilitate a good life.

We remarked earlier that classical Muslim scholars have disagreed about whether ethical verities are accessible to human reason unaided by revelation. All scholars agree about the reasonable and beneficial nature of the divine command, but this theoretical disagreement is pertinent to reproduce here only to help us remember how profoundly and deeply our scholars debated ethical philosophy in service of God's revelation. Of the four theological schools, three, the traditionalists, Māturīdiyya, and Mu'tazila, argued that ethical truths are indeed known to human reason, whereas one, the Ashā'ira, disagreed.³⁴ The Ashā'ira did not deny that human reason can know what is beneficial or harmful, but they differentiate that from the knowledge of what is good or evil in the sense of incurring reward or punishment by Allah in the afterlife. To safeguard divine omnipotence, they hold that there exists no order of good or evil before and apart from God's revelation, in which Allah Most High commands and prohibits freely as He desires. Others hold that the knowledge that Allah has placed in human nature and accessible to human reason is in agreement with the revealed norms, even though all agree that in case of perceived disagreement, the explicitly stated revealed norms have indisputable superiority. The difference, then, is consequential only in cases when the revelation is silent, and those details are beyond the scope of our essay here. Suffice here to state that the Ashā'ira, like Imām al-Ghazālī, do not question that the Islamic legal norms in the form of the Shariah are indeed beneficial and hence rational. All schools, then, are effectively in agreement that the law of Allah is both beneficial and rational in this life and the standard of success or failure in the afterlife. The traditionalist school is summed up powerfully by Imām Ibn al-Qayyim:

Verily, the Shariah is founded upon wisdom and welfare for the servants in this life and the afterlife. In its entirety it is justice, mercy, benefit, and wisdom. Every matter which abandons justice for tyranny, mercy for cruelty,

³⁴ The four theological schools in Islam are explained brilliantly and evenhandedly in Sherman A. Jackson, *Islam and the Problem of Black Suffering* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

benefit for corruption, and wisdom for foolishness is not a part of the Shariah even if it was introduced therein through an interpretation.³⁵

This means that even beyond the explicit commands and prohibitions of Allah, which capture the essence of all goodness and prohibit the essence of all that is evil, the ‘*ulamā*’ extend the rational meaning through analogy and by considering the purposes and objectives of the law. This is the realm of jurisprudence, *fiqh*.

But even beyond *fiqh*, there is a need for training the intentions and habits through inner reflection, training (*tarbiyya*), and inner purification (*tazkiyya*), reforming habits, and rational evaluation of our actions in order to extend the charitable acts that are left in *fiqh* as merely recommended or neutral.

Some 200 times, Allah commands us to “do good deeds” in the Qur’an without specifying a particular form or group of recipients. Allah does not restrict ‘good works’ to the carrying out of a set of specific commands or rituals of worship.

The Qur’an and the Prophetic role-model leave no doubt that we are encouraged to be good to one and all in every way, to perform good works for God’s sake without expecting gratitude or worldly reward, as God says of the righteous,

We only feed you for the pleasure of Allah, wanting neither reward nor gratitude in return (76:9).

Numerous verses make it clear that good works are not limited to Muslims, nor conditional upon someone accepting Islam; the Qur’an specifically speaks of the charity and kindness that is due to unbelieving parents, relatives, and the needy. Nor are good works in Islam limited to benefit others in the afterlife; we are asked to give comfort and show compassion to the simple earthly existence of humans and even animals. God is good and compassionate and loves benevolence and compassion and rewards us for every sincere action we do, so long as it accords with the Prophetic guidance.

³⁵ Ibn al-Qayyim, *I’lām al-muwaqqi’in* (Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyya, 1991), 3:11.

In other words, we must as believers seek to do, love, and make a habit of doing all that is good, starting with the duties but then going beyond what is explicitly stated in the divine revelation and beyond what is found in norms of *fiqh*. **This precisely is the realm of the science of *akhlāq* and the related disciplines of spiritual and ethical purification to which we turn in the remaining essays of this series.**

Worship of One God as the first ethical imperative

Returning to the concept with which we began, we reiterate that the bonanza of good deeds that Islam urges is built on one ineluctable foundation, without which the concept of good becomes incoherent, and without which the natural human love for righteousness, and the goodness God places in the character of all of His servants in different forms, all become corrupted. That foundation is the acknowledgment of and submission to the ultimate Truth, *al-Ḥaqq*, Allah. When not grounded in the ultimate truth, good deeds become mere dust and ashes (14:18).

To understand this, we must recognize that Islam is nothing but the right thing to do vis-à-vis the Creator. As such, Islam is a quintessentially moral way of life—one that demands not merely the appeasement of a deity for the fulfillment of our secular needs, but a total response to the one true God, who, in the impending, eternal afterlife, rewards the good and punishes the wicked. **However, the association of religion and worship to morality has been lost on many peoples, past and present, who worship their deities and perform spiritual exercises or rituals not for moral reasons such as participation in truth and expression of gratitude, but to satisfy their secular needs, ranging from the ancient desire for children and good harvest, to modern concerns for stress relief, calm, and balance.** Secular scholars speculate how the terror of death, the great unknown, and the human desire to appease the tumultuous forces of nature, have been the main impulses for religiosity throughout history. In reality, these feelings are merely the signs and reminders that Allah has placed in this world and in our hearts in the form of a primordial urge for perfection and eternity, which in other words is

the urge for God. The perversion of this urge is how Satan misguides humans, as he did with our father Adam: a promise of eternity and angelic perfection (e.g., 20:120; 7:20).

The very first chapter of the Qur'an, *al-Fātiḥa*, tells us three primordial facts before addressing our instinct to worship and seek help: that Allah is deserving of praise because He is the most Merciful (*raḥmān, raḥīm*), the Sustainer of all things (*rabb*); and the Master of the ultimate moral judgment. Only then are we taught to devote our worship to Him exclusively, and to turn to none but Him for help for He alone *deserves* to be worshipped and begged. The idea of *right* or *desert* (*ḥaqq*) is a fundamentally moral idea. The *surah* then ends with an earnest plea for guidance to the right path—again, a moral concept. As humans, we need protection and comfort, but the instinct to feel secure by securing the pleasure of the Ultimate Power is sandwiched in this *surah* between two equally primal *moral imperatives*. The first is to recognize the awesomeness and goodness of the Creator and Master (based on the virtues of open-minded observation, truthfulness, and gratitude), and the other to beg that Awesome Master for moral rectitude and guidance.

Islam, therefore, is first and foremost concerned with the moral truth, with right and wrong: one ought to submit to and worship none but the one true God and follow God's chosen Messenger. Unlike the secular worldview that has emptied the world of meaning and beauty today, Islam does not pry apart the *fact* of existence from the *purpose* of existence—these two questions must be asked and answered together. Separating the purpose and the fact of life is the essence of secularism, and once the two are separated, the secular interests inevitably take over and manipulate the moral purpose of existence. We cannot, in other words, take life for granted, deciding how to best live based on our desires and opinions, relegating the question of life's purpose and meaning to the privacy of our homes and temples. Rather, we declare from the outset that the Creator created life with a purpose and that fulfilling that purpose is the foundation of all ethics and truths, public and private.

Why, then, does God let those who deny Him, from the Pharaohs of ancient Egypt to the colonialist West to today's endlessly exploitative global powers, to thrive and dominate the earth even as the believers who hold on to God's truth suffer? Before modernity's truly immoral nature became evident, in particular before the first world war, some naïve and frustrated Muslim authors attributed Europe's military superiority to their moral superiority. This defeatist reasoning is patently false. The Qur'an speaks of many such struggles. The Israelites were the people of God who were repeatedly taken to task at the hands of the unbelieving powers when they failed to uphold God's message, and rejected parts of the divine teachings that they found inconvenient (e.g., 2:85). God's patience is incomparably greater than ours, and hence, God is far more patient with those who are unjust toward Him than with those who are unjust toward each other, even though the former is a greater sin than the latter. This is the meaning of the famous saying of the scholars that "God gives respite to the unbelievers who possess the virtue of justice but not to those who are believers but who are mutually unjust." For it is fitting that those who possess God's guidance be taken to account in this world to remind them to wake up to their duty to God and to humankind, and that those who do not have access to God's message be given time until the message is brought to them. And Allah knows best.

Looking ahead: The Yaqeen Ethics Series

The struggle to ground our life choices in a profound sense of right and wrong, ethics or *akhlāq*, and to root those ethical standards in revealed guidance, has never been more urgent in a world dominated by secular consumerism and instant gratification. Our urgent questions about whether we need revelation to be good, whether the old *fiqh* rules are just outdated norms, and why we should not just follow what feels right by the contemporary standards all stem from the more general set of questions about the nature and purpose of life and how we define right and wrong in the first place. As believers in God's promise of an incomparably more consequential afterlife, we know that the moral rhythms of our actions here echo in eternity. Correctly understanding the foundation and direction

of our ethics is therefore fundamental to determining not only our behavior in this world, but also our destination in the next. What is equally important beyond understanding what is good is loving it and making it part of our character.

The forthcoming essays in this series will offer a comprehensive explanation of Prophetic ethics or *akhlāq* as the proper framework for our lives as Muslims today. They tackle both practical questions such as how to develop Prophetic character and theoretical questions such as the relationship between law and ethics, the continued relevance of divine law (Shariah and *fiqh*) to modern life, and how to respond to situations where religious law might appear to be unethical, and how an *akhlāq*-centered perspective helps us fulfill the divine command best by keeping our sense of right and wrong in accordance with revelation and reason both. Is Islam all about law, with love as only an afterthought, or all about love, with law being an obstruction? Finally, these essays will also explore the challenge of diversity of human cultures across time and space, and show how Islamic norms are characterized by flexibility that allows for, tolerates, and even celebrates the great human diversity.

Next article: “Prophetic صلى الله عليه وسلم Ethics as the Core of Islamic Character: ‘For those who seek God and the Hereafter’”