

A Theory for a Virtue Ethics-Oriented Interpretation of the Qur'an

Rehan Rafique

Department of North African and Middle Eastern Studies, Al-Akhawayne University, Ifrane, Morocco

Email: rehan_07@hotmail.com

How to cite this paper: Rafique, R. (2024). A Theory for a Virtue Ethics-Oriented Interpretation of the Qur'an. *Open Journal of Philosophy*, 14, 602-608. <https://doi.org/10.4236/ojpp.2024.143040>

Received: May 8, 2024

Accepted: July 28, 2024

Published: July 31, 2024

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Abstract

The nature of Islamic ethics has long been a topic of debate amongst Muslim scholars. Islamic ethics was, and continues to be, instrumental in negotiating the dynamics and relation between the Muslim practitioner of the law and the values of human beings. Thus, the interpretive framework through which authoritative Islamic sources are interpreted determines or, at least, influences, the normativity and ethical outlooks gained from the texts. I propose a virtue ethics framework because it aligns with Islamic principles and values. Virtue ethics is an ethical approach that prioritizes cultivating virtuous behavior in the practitioner through engaging in certain rituals and actions. Another way of conceptualizing this is that certain rituals and actions are instrumental in cultivating virtuous dispositions in the practitioner. In this essay, I argue that a robust virtue ethics framework can be interpreted from the Qur'an because will contribute to our understanding of the aspirational nature of the Qur'an. This is done in reference to Shariah as the "path of God." My argument is proposed by first, highlighting the concept of Shariah; what it is, and how its essence may be understood. Second, I engage in textual analysis of the Qur'an in light of virtue ethics, while substantiating that analysis with secondary material.

Keywords

Islam, Islamic Ethics, Qur'an, Virtue, Virtue Ethics

1. Introduction

The nature of Islamic ethics has been a critical topic of debate amongst Muslim scholars for much of Islamic history and continues to be instrumental in negotiating the dynamics and relation between the Muslim practitioner of the law and the values of human beings (Hallaq, 1997). A critical component of this inter-

pretive process is the moral, philosophical framework espoused for analyzing authoritative sources. I observe that the frequent categories employed are the deontological and consequential positions. Deontological ethics is the understanding that certain actions are good in and of themselves, irrespective of their consequences. On the other hand, consequential ethics is the understanding that actions are not in and of themselves good or bad, but may be deemed as such when considering their consequences (Anscombe, 1958). Regarding the Islamic tradition, what is the moral message outlined in the Qur'an? Are actions good or bad because God says so? Or, ought actions to be pursued based on their outcomes? I propose a virtue ethics framework because it aligns with Islamic principles and values. Virtue ethics is an ethical approach that prioritizes cultivating virtuous behavior in the practitioner through engaging in certain rituals and actions. Another way of conceptualizing this is that certain rituals and actions are instrumental in cultivating virtuous dispositions in the practitioner. In this essay, I argue that a robust virtue ethics framework can be interpreted from the Qur'an because this framework will produce a normative, virtue ethics framework that will contribute to our understanding of the aspirational nature of the Qur'an. This is done in reference to Shariah as the "path of God." My argument is proposed by first, highlighting the concept of Shariah; what it is, and how its essence may be understood. Second, I engage in textual analysis of the Qur'an in light of virtue ethics, while substantiating that analysis with secondary material.

2. Why Is Shariah Important?

Prior to assessing what Shariah is, it is important to clarify why understanding what Shariah is has pertinence. Understanding what Shariah is has pertinence to my argument for two main reasons: first, because consideration of Islamic ethics requires reflection on what it is that God wants. In other words, it relates to the question of what it means to be ethical in the Islamic conception of the relationship between God and humans. For this, having a conception of what Shariah is essential. And Shariah serves as a useful conception as it has been described as the "path of God," or, what God, presumably, wants of humans.¹ Second, the Shariah (path of God) critically intersects with ethics in the sense of Shariah being a path of ethics and morality, reflection on which is intended to lead to excellent human conduct. Wael Hallaq, who researches the intersection of Islamic, ethics, politics, argues this very point in his paper (Hallaq, 2009). After critiquing the shortcomings of several theories for their assumption about the Qur'an's lack of a role in the early formation and implementation of Shariah, Hallaq argues that, in the historical moment of the Qur'an, the division between law and morality was not as pronounced as the modern world, or from the historical period of the enlightenment onwards. Because of this lack of separation between the legal and moral in early Islamic history, the legality of the Qur'an, which

¹In this paper, I use Shariah as referring to "the path of God." What this path consists of is clarified later in the paper; but, it behooves readers to have this short definition in mind when the term Shariah is employed in this paper.

consists of 500, or so, verses, is equally moral (Hallaq, 2009).² Describing the equation of law and morality in early Islamic history, Hallaq proposes that the Qur'an offers a moral cosmology. In other words, Qur'anic cosmology is constructed out of a moral fiber. This implies that everything the universe contains entails moral accountability for humans (Hallaq, 2009). With this in mind, linking the Qur'an, Shariah, and ethics, is reasonable for proposing a normative theory of ethics in Islamic thought. I now seek to provide a conception of Shariah with some of its salient features.

3. What Is Shariah?

Shariah can be understood as the path of God. Treading this path, and the implications thereof, are critical to understanding ethical behavior and living a life congruent with seeking the divine. One of the leading experts on Shariah, Dr. Khaled Abou El Fadl, who has written several works on Shariah, its aspirational nature, and Islamic legal reasoning and ethics (Abou El Fadl, 2001), describes Shariah in its legal context as, "God's eternal and immutable path. Shari'ah is God's eternal and immutable law—the way of truth, virtue, and justice. In essence, Shari'ah is the ideal law in an objective and noncontingent sense, as it ought to be in the divine's realm" (Abou El Fadl, 2014, 2017).³ Abou El Fadl notes that theologians, ethicists, and jurists claimed the meaning of Shariah is the way or path. As such, the path of God is intended to aid the practitioner in thriving in "well-being" and "goodness." Any path that fails to uphold these effects and produces the opposite cannot be the path of God.⁴ Second, Shariah is "the way of truth, virtue, and justice (...) the ideal law in an objective and noncontingent sense" (Abou El Fadl, 2014). Because in the Islamic tradition, Shariah

²Hallaq critiques the work of Joseph Schacht, Harold Motzki; N.J. Coulson; and, S.D. Goitein. Schacht, in Hallaq's view, tends to over-reliance on hadith as the foundational source for the development of Islamic law, and degrades the role of the Qur'an and Qur'anic norms to a much later period with insufficient evidence. Motzki's proposal gives an earlier role to the Qur'an's development of law, which is a step forward for Hallaq; however, Motzki, like Schacht, still does not consider the substantive role of the Qur'an and Qur'anic norms. Hallaq criticizes Coulson's Austinian framework for assessing law in early Islamic history. This framework consists of a stringent conception of law as command and coercive enforcement. Finally, Goitein, generally agreeing with Coulson seeks historical precision of the legal turn in the Qur'an. For Hallaq, though, Goitein, like Coulson, adopts the same problematic stringent understanding of law as distinct from ethics. Ibid. Also, for more on the close link between Islamic law and Islamic ethics see Reinhart (1983) "Islamic Law as Islamic Ethics." *The Journal of Religious Ethics* 11, no. 2: 186-203. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40017705>.

³Abou El Fadl's full quote it as follows: "In the linguistic practices of Islamic theologians, ethicists, and jurists in the Islamic tradition, the broad meaning of Shari'ah is the way or path to well-being or goodness, the life source for well-being and thriving existence, the fountain or source of nourishment, and the natural and innate ways and order created by God. In the legal context, Shari'ah is God's eternal and immutable law—the way of truth, virtue, and justice. In essence, Shari'ah is the ideal law in an objective and noncontingent sense, as it ought to be in the divine's realm. As such, Shari'a is often used to refer to the universal, innate, and natural laws of goodness."

⁴For an overview of various theories and conceptions of Shariah by classical and modern Arabic lexicographers see, M. Kamal Hassan (Hassan, 2018), ch. 1 "Shariah and its meaning in Islam" in Rashid, Khairuddin Abdul, Kiyoshi Kobayashi, Sharina Fariyah Hasan, and Masamitsu Onishi, eds. *Concept and application of Shariah for the construction industry: Shariah compliance in construction contracts, project finance and risk management*. World Scientific, 2018.

is ideal and objective in a complete sense; and humans are limited and imperfect; none can claim to have fully realized and achieved the potential of Shariah. Rather, human attempts to tread the path are aspirational, meaning, one aspires to tread the path in a lifelong engagement. With this understanding, we can turn to how one follows this path and the implications of doing so. To address this, I focus on Shariah being a path to cultivate virtue.

4. Shariah as a Path to Virtue

I now turn to virtue ethics in the Qur'an. In a virtue ethics framework, actions and practices are not ends in and of themselves, meaning that actions and practices are not simply done for the sake of doing them. Instead, in my conception of this framework, actions are intended to cultivate virtuous dispositions in the practitioner in order to achieve a certain higher objective.⁵ Regarding Shariah, the objective in an Islamic virtue ethics framework is to tread the path of God. This objective can be extrapolated from Islamic scripture, the Qur'an, by examining its verses and assessing the merit of an action or practice in light of the text on two fronts: its effect on the practitioner and how that effect may facilitate following the path of God. And with this objective, and interpretation, one can produce a robust virtue ethics framework from the Qur'an.

The question I seek to address here is: how is cultivating virtue as key to following Shariah substantiated by the Qur'an? To understand the Qur'an as a book rooted deeply in moral fabric, consider Wael Hallaq's notion of the Qur'an outlining a "moral cosmology" (Hallaq, 2009). This cosmology, as mentioned earlier, is conceptualized as actions having universal consequences, for which, humans are morally accountable (Hallaq, 2009). With an understanding of this moral universe, the verses of the Qur'an may be assessed in light of this universe and the implications thereof. To demonstrate this, consider passage 51:56-58 in the Qur'an: "I [God] did not create jinn and humans except to worship me; I seek no provision from them, nor do I need them to feed me; Indeed, Allah, alone, is the Supreme Provider—Lord of all Power, Ever Mighty" (Qur'an 51: 56-58).⁶ The passage begins with God stating that human purpose is to worship God; however, the intended objective worship is not to, in some way, elevate God, or make God greater. Instead, as the passage continues, explicit mention is made that God does not require, nor gain, anything from human worship. As such, the value of worship cannot be said to be determined by its effect on God. And considering that the dynamic of worship involves the human practitioner and God, the ultimate effect of worship directly pertains to the human.⁷ What is

⁵For an explanation of the intersection of virtue and law, see Lawrence B. Solum (Solum, 2003), *Virtue Jurisprudence: A Virtue-Centred Theory of Judging* (Metaphilosophy 34, no. 1/2, 2003), 178-213. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24439232>.

⁶Translation is from <https://quran.com/en/adh-dhariyat/56-58>.

⁷Consider the following example: an important practice for Muslims are the five daily prayers to attain nearness to God. If the point is to simply engage the action for its own sake, then, one can perform the practice, while thinking about other daily affairs, thereby, achieving essentially nothing. If one does not believe that action must, necessarily, have an effect on the practitioner, then, such engagement is acceptable. This position seems erroneous to me in light of the Qur'an. In the Qur'an, practices are mentioned in relation to attaining nearness to God. And, mere commission of an action, without aspiring to nearness to God, does not achieve this. Hence, I conclude, the former approach is, at the very least, inconsistent with the Qur'an.

that effect? That is the second point: as mentioned above, Shariah is the path of God, or, the path that leads one near to God. Humans are obligated to seek this path. Describing this notion of Shariah, Abou El Fadl states, “In essence, Shari’ah is the ideal law in an objective and noncontingent sense, as it ought to be in the divine’s realm. As such, Shari’a is often used to refer to the universal, innate, and natural laws of goodness” (Abou El Fadl, 2014). So, actions and worship ought to produce an effect on the practitioner, and that effect, are actions and worship conducive to following the path of Shariah. And, because Shariah is the way of “truth, virtue, and justice” actions ought to foster and promote these qualities in the practitioner (Abou El Fadl, 2014).

M. Ashraf Adeel in his book, “Epistemology of the Qur’an: Elements of a Virtue Approach to Knowledge and Understanding” (Adeel, 2019) assesses virtues in the Qur’an in light of what the author calls, “epistemic conscientiousness” which seems to be employed as an umbrella term for the virtues extracted from reflection on knowledge and understanding. Adeel points to several Qur’anic verses as examples; one such verse is 6:11, which reads, “Had We sent the angels to them, made the dead speak to them, and resurrected all things before their very eyes, they still would not believe unless God willed it to be so. But, in fact, most of them are ignorant” (Qur’an 6:11; Adeel, 2019).⁸ Adeel extracts from this verse the virtue of openness to evidence and the acknowledgement of the truth. Also, verse 33: 72 which reads, “Indeed, we offered the Trust to the heavens and the earth and the mountains, and they declined to bear it and feared it; but man [undertook to] bear it. Indeed, he was unjust and ignorant” (Qur’an 33:72; Adeel, 2019) is interpreted by Adeel to refer to the virtue of recognition of one’s limitations (Adeel, 2019). Adeel lays these verses out as substantiating a virtue centered approach to Qur’anic verses in relation to knowledge and understanding.⁹

This leads to my final point: virtue ethics and Islam. Classical Islamic scholars have theorized on virtue ethics before;¹⁰ however, for my intents and purposes here, two aspects of an Islamic theory of virtue ethics is important to consider: first, as has been noted by premodern and modern authors, the qualities, or attributes, of divinity permeate creation.¹¹ These qualities include: love; mercy;

⁸Translations are taken from Adeel’s work.

⁹Other verses mentioned along with their interpretation by Adeel are: 49:6: deciphering information and the virtue of diligence with information; 2:67: the importance of social responsibility and the virtue of rationality to evaluate ideas and situations; 6:35: patience in gathering in gathering information in order to avoid ignorance; 39:64: openness to truth; and, 11:46; 12:33; 12:89; 25:63; 28:55: all of which, Adeel interprets as the virtue of self-restraint, see Adeel, 2019.

¹⁰See ‘Adud al-Din Al-Iji (2022), trans. Feryal Salem, ‘Adud al-Din al-Iji’s Ethics: A Translation of al-Akhlaq al-Adudiyya and Some Notes on Its Commentaries, Mysticism and Ethics in Islam; Bucar (2018) “Islamic virtue ethics.” The Oxford Handbook of Virtue (2018): 206-223; for Al-Farabi and Ibn-Sina’s theories of virtue see Butterworth, Charles E. “Medieval Islamic philosophy and the virtue of ethics.” *Arabica* 34, no. 2 (1987): 221-250.

¹¹Mulla Sadra (Sadra, 2022), trans. Sayyed Aamir Raza, *Tafseer-ul Quran* (Independent Publication, 2022); Chittick (2020) “Ibn Arabi”, The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Spring 2020 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2020/entries/ibn-arabi/>; Abou El Fadl, *Qur’an and Ethics*, 7-28. A similar idea has been explicated by Islamic philosophers as early as al-Farabi (d. 950 CE) and Ibn-Sina (d. 1037). al-Farabi claimed that religion is, fundamentally, based on a proper understanding of the universe. His understanding was that things existing in the universe inform humans of their ultimate perfection. Similarly, Avicenna explains that the order of the universe provides the framework for reflection on human being and their affairs. See Butterworth, Charles E. “Medieval Islamic Philosophy and the Virtue of Ethics.” *Arabica* 34, no. 2 (1987): 221-50, 235 and 238. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4056939>.

compassion; justice; generosity; wisdom etc.¹² Because, in Islamic belief, humans are a creation of God, humans intrinsically possess these qualities. And so, if Shariah is the Godly path, and the qualities of divinity permeate creation, humans ought to strive to manifest these virtues in their lives by assessing actions by way of their conduciveness to cultivate these virtues in the practitioner and the world. With this in mind, Shariah may be conceptualized, in essence, as an inextricable link between divinity and creation anchored in divine qualities. By reflecting on this relationship, and striving to cultivate the virtues, one follows Shariah, or draws nearer to God. And by opposing so, one draws further from God. For an example of this, one only needs to examine the life of the Prophet Muhammad, whose character and etiquette are exemplary of the relationship between divinity and creation. In fact, in the Qur'an, it states, "And you [Prophet Muhammad] are truly 'a man' of outstanding character". (Qur'an 68:4)¹³ To sum up, virtues are derived from divinity, and humans, as a result of being a creation of God, intrinsically possess such virtues. Because Shariah is the path to God, cultivating such virtues is what enables one to follow the path to God.

5. Conclusion

To conclude, several conceptions of Islamic ethics exist: one may deem actions simply as derived from text and committed, irrespective of context and other pertinent factors for consideration; others make a utilitarian commitment; however, in this essay, I sought to demonstrate a different approach—a virtue ethics framework. I argued that when assessing the Qur'an and the concept of Shariah, one can interpret a robust virtue ethics framework, in line with Qur'an ideals and its aspirational nature. To argue this, first, I focused on Shariah, mentioned its relevance to my argument, noted its aspects as a path of well-being, and thriving existence, and the notion of Shariah as an aspirational path. Second, I turned to the Qur'an and examined passage 51:56, and interpreted it as a commitment to Shariah by way of cultivating virtues with the objective of seeking nearness to God. Last, I explained what the virtues are and proposed that virtues are derived from the divine attributes of God, and further explained the dynamic between God, humans, and divine attributes.

Acknowledgements

Thank you to my good friend, historian Reese Hollister, for his insightful comments regarding the research of this paper.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

¹²For a treatise on the attribute of God, see Abu Hamid Muhammad Al-Ghazali (*Al-Ghazali, 1999*), translated by, David B. Burrell and Nazih Daher, *THE NINETY-NINE BEAUTIFUL NAMES OF GOD* (United Kingdom: Islamic Texts Society, 1999).

¹³<https://quran.com/en/al-qalam>.

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