

## Exploring Ethical Foundations: From Ancient Philosophy To Contemporary Islamic Perspectives

Qudsia Firdous<sup>1</sup>, Hafsa Bano<sup>2</sup>, Fariha Fatima<sup>3</sup>, Zahid Yasin<sup>4</sup>, Muhammad Ayaz Rafi<sup>5</sup>

### Abstract:

*This article delves into the multifaceted sphere of ethics, which evolved from archaic Greek philosophy to the most recent Islamic perspectives. Ethics, as philosophy's moral investigation, examines human personality and the standards that control our behavior in society. Emphasizing the difference between morals and ethics, the study explains the components of ethics, including meta-ethics, normative ethics, and applied ethics. Meta-ethics as a framework involves a scrutiny of the approaches like cognitivism and objectivism, whereas normative theories such as utilitarianism and Kantian deontology are explored for understanding the moral judgment. Applied ethics <sup>1</sup>deals with practical ethical questions acting as a bridge between theoretical model and practical solutions. Instead of giving specific and prescriptive advice as the classical era, modern ethical perspectives are concerned primarily with philosophical analysis. The article ends with an examination of Islamic ethics derived from Quran's principles and the teachings of Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) that are characterized by completeness, realism, and equity. The blending of the divine guidance and practicality yields Islamic ethics which serve as guiding principles that transcend the complexity of human behavior and social interactions.*

**Keywords:** Ethics, Morality, Western Paradigm, meta Ethics, Normative Ethics, Islamic Ethics.

### INTRODUCTION:

“The term ethics is derived from Greek word ethikos, whose literal meaning is “custom” or “usage”. Aristotle (384-322 BC) applied the term to include both idea of “Character” or disposition, personality and inclination (Reese, 1980). Ethics is, therefore, defined as the philosophical study of moral life. Here, morals mean habitual conduct or behavior of a society, moral sanctions and principles imposed on people in a society (Grooten & Steenberger, 1972). According to the Oxford Dictionary, ethics is defined as: (1) a system of moral principles by which human actions may be judged as good or bad, right or wrong; (2) the rules of conduct recognized in respect of a particular class of human actions.

Ethics is a branch of philosophy that is concerned with actions and behavior of man in the society. Ethics can be defined etymologically as coming from the Greek word **ethos** meaning character or personal character. It is, therefore, an investigation into the nature of a virtuous life or the right way of to live.

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<sup>1</sup>Senior Lecturer Department of Islamic Studies, Riphah International University, Islamabad

<sup>2</sup>PhD Hadith Sciences AIOU, EST, Govt Miss Fatima Jinnah M. B Model Girls High School, Gujrat

<sup>3</sup>Lecturer Department of Islamic Studies, Riphah International University, Islamabad

<sup>4</sup>Senior Lecturer Department of Islamic Studies, Riphah International University, Islamabad

<sup>5</sup>PhD History Student, Department of History, Government College University, Faisalabad

Ethics is concerned with understanding or evaluating the character of individuals. It studies moral values and standards by which we ought to live. Therefore, ethics seeks guidelines for human conduct. It evaluates human conduct in terms of what is good or bad.

**Morality** comes from the Greek word **mores** that means social habits, customs & manners.

### **Difference between Morality and Ethics:**

Morality concerned with habits, manners & social manners, While ethics is a Philosophical study of how man behaves. Therefore, morality is the material object of study. Hence, ethics is a discipline that studies morality.

### **Branches of Ethics:**

There are three main branches of ethics.

1. Meta-ethics
2. Normative ethics
3. Applied ethics

### **Meta Ethics:**

“It consists of the attempt to answer the fundamental philosophical questions about the nature of ethical theory itself.” e.g. if we have ethical theory that lying is wrong then to judge this ethical theory, we have meta-ethics. There are 4 forms of meta-ethics.

#### **4. Cognitivism:**

It is the view that the moral judgments are capable of being true or false. According to it ethical values itself decide whether they are true or not.

#### **5. Non-Cognitivism:**

This is the view that the moral judgments are not capable of being true or false. According to it we cannot change the statements of ethical judgments ever. They are like sacred commands or revelations. E.g. lying is always wrong.

#### **6. Subjectivism:**

According to it, moral truths are subjective. It means that moral truths are always dependent on subjective truth/ attitude. They differ from person to person and depend on individual thought. E.g. According to some people, lying is sometimes good but according to the others, lying is always bad.

#### **7. Objectivism:**

According to it, moral truths are objective so they are based on facts that are independent of the attitudes, values, desires and beliefs of any individual. Moral values are same to all.

### **Normative ethics:**

“It is the study of what makes actions right or wrong, what makes situations / events good or bad and what makes people virtuous or vicious.” There are three main forms in normative ethics.

#### **1. Axiology:**

It is the study of goodness and badness. In axiology some important theories are:-

- **Hedonism:**

The theory that pleasure and the absence of pain are the only things that are good in and of them. According to them, the basic goodness is in pleasure and in absence of pain.

- **Desire Satisfaction:**

According to it, the satisfaction of someone’s desire is the only sort of thing that is good in and of itself.

- **Non- Naturalism:**

Being good is a simple property that is irreducible or indefinable in terms of anything else. Goodness is in nature and nature cannot be changed.

## **2. Ethics of Behavior:**

It is the theory of right or wrong. Some of the important theories are: -

- **Egoism:**

According to it, an action is right if and only it has best consequences for the person doing it. E.g. Drug smuggling, if it is good for the person doing it then it is right.

- **Utilitarianism:**

According to this theory, an action is right if its consequences are optimal (can be seen) so if the action produces goodness over badness then it will be considered good.

- **Kantian deontology:**

According to it, an action is right if the person performing that action constantly wills that the action should become a universal law. E.g. homosexuality is a bad thing but some people are making an effort to legalize it and to make it a universal law so their effort / action would be considered as right or good because they are representing a group of people.

## **3. Virtuous theory:**

It is the study of what makes a person's character praise worthy among the people.

### **Applied ethics:**

It consists on the attempt to answer difficult moral questions that people face in their life. E.g. is abortion always morally right or wrong?

### **Conclusion:**

Normative ethics studies what features make an action right or wrong while applied ethics attempts to figure out in actual cases whether certain actions have those features or not. E.g. if we agree that slavery is wrong then what features make slavery wrong are under normative ethics. If you study practically that slaves are not in a better condition or why slavery is wrong then it is under applied ethics. To examine something is normative ethics but to examine practically, it's applied ethics.

### **Modern ethics:**

Modern ethics can be defined as that branch of philosophy which applies analysis to moral theory.

As, classical ethical theories are characterized by their efforts to answer two questions: what is good life for men? And how ought men to behave? If we examine such question from different perspectives we might interpret them as requests for advice by people who are puzzled by daily aspects of daily living. And various answers which the classical theories give can be regarded a statements of advice to the individual. But in recent year's philosophers has become to realize that many of these questions and answers are not clear at all; that before we can give an answer to them we must find out precisely what they mean.

**“The process of clarifying the meaning g of question s and answers is called philosophical analysis”.**

The use of this process persistently in modern ethics causes it to differ enormously from ethics pursued in the classical tradition. The main different is that one can engage in philosophical analysis without necessarily being committed to giving any sort of advice for living. For

instance one may analyze a theory like utilitarianism without necessarily advocating that doctrine.

If any philosopher responsible for this revolution in approach to moral philosophy it is G. E. Moore who claimed in his "Principia Ethica" published in 1903 that the classical theories were attempt to deduce moral precepts from theological. Metaphysical or scientific premises and that such argument are fallacious since one cannot argue from premises of one logical type to a conclusion of different logical type.

Modern theories are now commonly classified in three different ways:

- Subjectivist or objectivist
- Naturalistic, non-naturalistic or emotivist
- Motivist, deontological or consequence theories.

### **Subjectivism:**

Subjectivism is the philosophical theory that ascribes to the individual mind or subject and its sensations,, ideas, attitudes, feelings, emotions, and beliefs a privileged or preeminent status in the world order and in our knowledge of that order. The subjectivist theory has been influential in several philosophical disciplines, especially the theory of knowledge and value theory.

n the theory of knowledge, or epistemology, subjectivism asserts that all knowledge starts with the private sensations, ideas, or sense data of the individual mind. The restriction of the knowing mind to the closed circle of its own sensations and ideas, with which alone it is immediately acquainted, has been called the "egocentric predicament," from which, according to the extreme subjectivist or solipsist, there is no escape. Less extreme subjectivists, however, admit an indirect or inferential knowledge of the external world and of other minds.

The subjectivist theory was widely held in the early modern period, particularly in the 17th and 18th centuries, and was shared by most of the major philosophers, including Galileo, Thomas Hobbes, Rene Descartes, John Locke, George Berkeley, and Gottfried.

### **Objectivism:**

Objectivism is one of several doctrines holding that all reality is objective and external to the mind and that knowledge is reliably based on observed objects and events.

Objectivism is the philosophy created by famed writer and political thinker Ayn Rand in the mid twentieth century.

The main tenets of Objectivism are that the main moral purpose for one's life is the pursuit of one's own happiness or self interest and to assert individual rights to make this possible. The philosophy of Objectivism is controversial among many scholars.

### **Naturalistic, non-naturalistic or Emotivism:**

According to this theory, moral judgments do not function as statements of fact but rather as expressions of the speaker's or writer's feelings. According to the emotivist, when we say "You acted wrongly in stealing that money," we are not expressing any fact beyond that stated by "You stole that money." It is, however, as if we had stated this fact with a special tone of abhorrence, for in saying that something is wrong, we are expressing our feelings of disapproval toward it.

### **Motivist, deontological or consequence theories:**

According to this theory, the consequences of an action determine its moral value. A key question in this theory is how to measure the moral worth of the consequences. And according to deontological theories the rightness/ wrongness of an action should be judged on whether or not it conforms to a certain duty.

### **Islamic Concept of Ethics:**

As for Islamic ethical values are concerned, the Quran does not accept local, tribal, regional or territorial origin of ethical values. It is important to note that Islamic Ethical values are Divine, Universal and Absolute. Ethics, in the Islamic context, means principled human action, motivated and guided by the Divine Guidance and the model behavior (uswah) of the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh).

From an Islamic point of view, ethics is related to several Arabic terms. These terms are as follows: ma‘ruf (approved), khayr (goodness), haqq (truth and right), berr (righteousness), qist (equity), ‘adl (equilibrium and justice), and taqwa (piety). Good actions are described as salihat and bad actions are described as sayyi’at. However, the term that is most closely related to ethics in the Quran is akhlaq (Beekun, 1996).

#### **(1) Enjoining good: al-Ma‘ruf:**

“And from amongst you there must be a party who call people to all that is good (khayr) and will enjoin the doing of all that is right (ma‘ruf) and will forbid the doing of all that is wrong (munkar)...”. (Al-Quran 3:104)

#### **(2) Virtue: berr**

“Righteousness does not consist in turning your faces towards the east or the west, true righteousness consist in believing in Allah and the Last Day, the angels, the Book, and the prophets and in giving away one’s property, in love of Him to one’s kinsmen, the orphans, the poor and the wayfarer , and those who ask for help, and in freeing the neck of slaves; and in establishing Prayer and dispensing the zakah; [true Righteousness is attained by those] who are faithful to their promise once they have made it by those who remain steadfast in adversity and affliction and the time of battle (between truth and falsehood) Such are the truthful one’s who have been true, such are the Allah fearing.” (Al-Quran 2:177)

#### **(3) Ethics in Social Life:**

“The believers, both men and women are guardians of one another, they enjoin good, forbid evil, establish prayer, pay zakat, and obey Allah and His Messenger. Surely Allah will show mercy to them, Allah is All Mighty, All Wise.” (Al-Quran 9:71)

#### **(4) Ethics in Food Habits:**

“O people eat of the lawful and pure things in the earth and follow not in the footsteps of the Satan, for surly he is your open enemy” (Al-Quran 2:168)

#### **(5) The Ultimate Truth: Al Haqq:**

“O Mankind! The Messenger has come to you bearing the truth from your Lord. Believe in him: It is best for you. (Al-Quran 4:170)

“And when the truth came to them from Us, they said’ indeed this is plain sorcery!”

(Al-Quran 10:76)

### **ISLAMIC PERSPECTIVE ON ETHICAL ISSUES:**

In Islam, ethics can be defined as the good principles and values based on the Islamic sources (Mohammed, 2011). These ethics are consistent with the ability of human beings (Al-Ghazali,

2001). It also covers all aspects of life (Al-Qaradawi, 1994). It is important to highlight the importance of ethics in Islam when discussing ethical issues. Islamic worships, which can be defined as religious deeds and actions ordered by Allah (s.w.t) to get His acceptance are designed to improve and protect ethics (Al-Qaradawi, 1994). Prayer refrains one from indecency and evil. Allah (s.w.t) says: “And establish regular prayer, for prayer restrains from shameful and unjust deeds” (Al-Quran 29:45). Zakat is taken from the rich to be given to the poor in order to sanctify the former and clean them from their sins. Allah (s.w.t) further says: “Of their goods, take alms, that so thou mightiest purify and sanctify them” (Al-Quran 9:103). Fasting teaches Muslims how to live with ethical principles and values. The Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) said: “Whoever does not give up false speech and acting upon it and does not give up offensive speech and behaviour, Allah has no need of his giving up his food and drink”. Allah (s.w.t) also says: “Fasting does not mean abstaining from food and drink only; rather it is also abstaining from lying, falsehood and idle speech” (Al-Ghazali, 2001). The pilgrimage (Hajj) trains Muslims to develop characteristics like patience, endurance, and altruism. Allah (s.w.t) says: “For Hajj is the months well known, if anyone undertakes that duty therein, let there be no obscenity, nor wickedness, and nor wrangling” (Al-Quran 2:197). In sum, the Prophet (pbuh) indicated that the main purpose Allah sent him to the people is to improve their ethics. He said: “I have been sent to accomplish the best of the morality” (Al-Ghazali, 2001).

Ethics is related to faith (iman). Iman is the religious feelings that result from following what Allah (s.w.t) asks Muslims to do. Iman is the power that improves and protects ethics (Al-Qaradawi, 1994) and Iman is not acceptable in the eyes of Islam without connecting it with good deeds (Al-Ghazali, 2001). It means that strong faith generates a good character and weak faith results in a collapse of morality. The Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) connects faith (iman) with ethics. He mentioned “None of you (truly) has faith until he loves for his brother what he loves for himself” (Yaken, 2006). The Prophet (pbuh) was told about a woman who prayed and fasted constantly, but she used to hurt her neighbors with her words. The Prophet (pbuh) said that the woman would go to hell in the hereafter (Al-Ghazali, 2001). The Prophet also said “Let he who truly believes in Allah and the Last Day speak good or be silent” (Al-Qaradawi, 1994). The Prophet asked his companions “Do you know who the bankrupt is?” His companions replied, “The bankrupt among us is the one who has neither money with him nor any property.” The Prophet (pbuh) said, “The real bankrupt of my ummah would be he who would be resurrected with much of his prayer, fasting, and sadaqah. But he will still find himself bankrupt on that Day as he will have exhausted the funds of virtues because he reviled others, brought calumny against others, unlawfully devoured the wealth of others, shed the blood of others, and beat others; so his virtues would be credited to the account of those who suffered at his hand. If his good deeds fall short to clear the account, their sins would be entered in his account and he would be thrown in the Hellfire (Yaken, 2006). The Prophet (pbuh) said “The most complete believers in iman (faith) are those who are best in character” (Al-Ghazali, 2001).

In Islam, the essential rule in business is honesty and fair dealing, and a businessman should, as a result, be a person of high ethical principles. The market should be free and not subject to manipulation and where individuals engaging in trade and commerce should act fairly. Dealing in stolen goods is forbidden (Al-Qaradawi, 1994). Advertisement is not encouraged when the intention is to force up the price in times of scarcity and so profit at the expense of others. Because Islam has several characteristics (for instance, comprehensive, realistic, and balanced), ethics in Islam are naturally influenced by these characteristics. The next section will discuss the characteristics of Islam.

#### **CHARACTERISTICS OF ISLAMIC PRINCIPLES:**

(Ahmad, 2003) defines Islam as a set of norms, values and laws that make up the Islamic way of life. The main components of Islam are iman (faith), akhlaq (ethics), and fiqh, which is the legal rulings that govern the acts of human beings. The first two components i.e. iman (faith) and akhlaq (ethics) are permanent and fixed at all times and for all societies. In contrast, the last component that is fiqh may be modified and changed consistently with time and place. Islam offers systems in various areas of science, finance, and society. Islam is also flexible and applicable in the environment of changing times (Yaken, 2006).

### **Comprehensive**

Islam is very clear in everything related to this world. Islam provides guidance for Muslims in every situation. The Quran is the book that guides people because it is from Allah (s.w.t), who has created this world and who knows what is the right and wrong (Yaken, 2006). Allah (s.w.t) told His Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) that Quran is comprehensive covering all aspects of life. He said: “We have sent down to thee the Book explaining all things” (Al-Quran 16:89). Ethics from an Islamic viewpoint are not simply religious morality reflected in the performance of some practices such as praying, not eating pork, and not consuming alcohol. But ethics cover all aspects of life, physically, morally, spiritually, in secular form, intellectually, emotionally, individually, and collectively (Al-Qaradawi, 1994).

There are at least three types of ethics in society: ethics that are related to individuals, family, and society. Ethics related to individuals include things such as Muslims must take care of themselves by eating and drinking without wasting. Allah (s.w.t) says: “Eat and drink: But waste not by excess, for Allah loveth not the wasters” (Al-Quran 7:31). Honesty, restraint and self-purity, trust, truth, chastity, modesty and integrity, are examples of individual ethics (Mohammed, 2011). In addition, there are ethics related to family. For example, a husband must treat his wife in a polite and ethical manner. Allah (s.w.t) says: “Live with them (your women) on a footing of kindness and equity” (Al-Quran 4:19). Islam strongly advises children to take care of their parents. The Quran (46:15) says: “We have enjoined on man kindness to his parents”. Islam prohibits parents from killing their children for fear of poverty as Allah (s.w.t) says: “Do not kill your children for fear of poverty: We shall provide sustenance for them as well as for you, the killing of them is a great sin” (Al-Quran 17:31). Respect of parents, showing kindness to little ones, and justice in dealing with children are examples of the ethics related to the family. Furthermore, there are ethics related to society in general. For example, Islam provides guidance on the etiquette of entering other people’s house. Allah (s.w.t) says: “Do not enter others’ houses until you have asked permission and saluted those in them: that is best for you, in order that you may heed” (Al-Quran 24:27). With regards to economics, Allah s.w.t says: “Woe to those that deal in fraud. Those who, when they have to receive by measure from men, exact full measure. But when they have to give by measure or weight to men, give less than due” (Al-Quran 83:1/2/3). In politics and government, Allah (s.w.t) says: “Allah command you to render back your trusts to those to whom they are due; and when you judge between man and man, that you judge with justice” (Al-Quran 4:58). The virtue of cooperation, protecting the privacy of others, refraining from gossip, prohibition of robbery, prohibition of fraud, prohibition of injustice, spreading brotherhood, friendship, and love among all members of society are examples of ethics related to society in general.

In Islam, the Quran is the main course of judgment. However, because the Quran generally speaks about general concepts, the specific details of them are spelled out by the Sunnah. In the case of ethics, the detailed practicality of what ethics is embodied in the Prophet’s action and behavior. Indeed, the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) explained the purpose of his mission. He said: “I was sent only to perfect the moral excellence of human beings” (Al-Ghazali, 2001). Hence, to know how ethics should be applied, Muslims need to look no further than to the Prophet himself.

### **Realistic:**

Being realistic is one of the characteristics of Islam. The Islamic principles take into account people's ability to implement things. From the ethical point of view, Islam takes into account the capacity that people have because Allah (s.w.t) has knowledge of the weaknesses and strengths of mankind (Al-Qaradawi, 1994). In Islam, justice is a fundamental principle, as the Quran (42:40) reports: "The recompense for an injury is an injury equal thereto (in degree)", however, Muslims are encouraged to forgive those who did wrong to them and be patient, as Allah (s.w.t) says: "but if a person forgives and makes reconciliation, his reward is due from Allah, for (Allah) loves not those who do wrong" (Al-Quran 42:40). Moreover, Allah (s.w.t) says: "And if you do catch them out, catch them out no worse than they catch you out: But if you show patience, that is indeed the best (course) for those who are patient" (Al-Quran 16:126).

Islam recognizes that different people have different degrees of iman (faith). The Quran (35:32) says: "Then we have given the book of inheritance to such of our servants as we have chosen: but there are among them some who wrong their own souls; some who follow a middle course; and some who are, by Allah's leave, foremost in good deeds; that is the highest Grace." In addition, Islam considers and takes into account special circumstances that allow Muslims to engage in acts that are originally prohibited under normal circumstance such as lying to mislead the Muslims' enemy during a wartime. Another example is that Islam also allows a Muslim to drink alcohol if he has no other viable choice such as when he is likely to die when surrounded in a desert and there is no water available.

### **Moderation or Balance:**

Islam takes a moderate approach in ethics as opposed to the ultra-idealists who see a human being as an angel and the ultra-realists who perceive a human being as an animal. In the eyes of Islam, human beings are created with both the need of body and spiritual soul (Al-Ghazali, 2001). Also Islam has a moderate view of this life as opposed to those who deny the existence of hereafter, and those who deny inhabiting and developing this life. Islam recognizes that there is life to be lived in this world as well as life in the hereafter, but goes further by saying that this life is the way to the life in the hereafter; and life in the hereafter is far more important than life in this world. Nevertheless, Muslims believe that living his/her life by working hard is the purpose of the creation of human beings, and worship of God (Allah). The Quran (2:201/202) says: "And there are men who say: "Our Lord! Give us good in this world and good in the hereafter, and defend us from the torment of the fire. To these will be allotted what they have earned; and Allah is quick in account".

### **CONCLUSION:**

In conclusion, ethics is defined as what is right and wrong. Several theories define ethics based on different standards. Every theory has a single viewpoint with regard to ethical issues like action, character, religion, or culture. The Western concepts and understanding of ethics are incomplete in explaining what is right and what is wrong. In contrast, Islam has a comprehensive perspective regarding the ethical issues because the lawgiver for all systems, including the ethical system, is Allah (s.w.t), who knows everything and what is best for all human beings. Ethics in Islam are defined as the good principles and values based on the Islamic sources. The Islamic sources are the only standards for identifying what is right and what is wrong. The Islamic ethics and Islamic sources have different characteristics that make the Islamic perspective more appropriate to explain ethics. These characteristics are comprehensiveness, realism, and balance. Ethics in Islam are consistent with the ability of human beings and they cover all aspects of life. Ethics, a multifaceted inquiry into moral life, traverses various philosophical landscapes, from classical to Islamic perspectives. While



Western theories provide valuable insights, Islamic ethics offer a comprehensive framework rooted in divine guidance and universal values. By embracing realism, balance, and practicality, Islamic ethics provide timeless principles to navigate the complexities of human behavior and societal interactions.

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