University of
St Andrews

St Andrews Encyclopaedia of Theology

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First published: 24 June 2025

https://www.saet.ac.uk/Islam/Ethics

Citation

Khalil, Atif. 2025. 'Ethics in Islam', *St Andrews Encyclopaedia of Theology*. Edited by Brendan N. Wolfe et al. https://www.saet.ac.uk/Islam/Ethics Accessed: 1 October 2025

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ISSN 2753-3492

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Atif Khalil

It may be argued that religion, in its most elemental form, comprises two dimensions: (1) a worldview or *weltanschauung*, that is to say, a conception about the nature and structure of reality (i.e. 'what exists?'), and (2) a conception about the nature of the good, that is to say, a code of ethics that reflects beliefs about human meaning, purpose, and teleology (i.e. 'what ought to be?'). In Islam, the second of these was addressed, in overlapping ways and to differing degrees, by the exponents of dialectical theology (*kalām*), philosophy (*falsafa*), Sufism (*taṣawwuf*), and law (*fiqh*).

Given the breadth, scope, and internal diversity of the intellectual tradition of the faith, summarizing the essential features of an 'Islamic ethics' is a daunting task. The principal building blocks behind the various historical formulations of such an ethics, however, may be retraced to the Qur'an, specifically to the metaethical template of Divine Names it offers as a blueprint or guide to the qualities that must be internalized in the soul as part of the 'good life', mediated through the example of the Prophet Muḥammad, and to certain moral sensibilities which it summons the believer to cultivate, centred around such virtues as compassion, justice, God-consciousness, and gratitude. Through their rich, complex, and sometimes contrasting interpretations of the fundamental ethical message of the Qur'an and hadiths, generations of Muslim thinkers committed to competing theological schools (some of which were heavily indebted to the Greek legacy but all of which were united by their assent to the principle of *tawḥīd*) sought to respond to the fundamental question, '*what* ought to be', and beyond that, '*why* must it be'? In the process of formulating their answers, they factored in, to various degrees, the historical conditions in which the Qur'an was revealed, its revaluation of pre-Islamic values, the relation of human to divine ethics, the precise role of the Prophet and his *sunnah* in the ethical transformation of the self, intentionality and the interior dimensions of human behaviour, the extent to which we are truly free and therefore morally culpable, the ontological foundations of the good, and perhaps most importantly, the epistemological question of how, as human beings, we can distinguish right from wrong, virtue from vice. All these themes shall be examined below in our attempt to outline the contours of the nature and character of ethics in Islam.

Keywords: Ethics, *akhlāq*, Predestination, Free will, Sufism, Islamic theology, Divine names

Table of contents

1 Semantic considerations

Ethics is usually translated by the Arabic word *akhlāq*, from the triliteral *kh-l-q* root, which means to create, originate, or design. To speak of 'Islamic ethics' is therefore to speak of *al-akhlāq al-islāmiyya*. The precise meaning of the term, however, denotes 'character traits'. In its singular form, as *khuluq* (or *khulq*), we may discern its close semantic relation to *khalq*, 'creation'. Both are written the same orthographically, in the Arabic custom of transcribing words without short vowels or diacritics. In the Qur'an we read, 'Our Lord is He who gave everything its creation (*khalq*)' (Q. 20:50). If what distinguishes one being from another on the ontological plane is its *khalq*, what distinguishes one person from another on the moral plane is their *khuluq*. And in the same way that God as *khāliq*, or Creator, fashions the *khalq* of each creature, we as human beings fashion our *khuluq* through the innumerable ethical choices we make, since to be a human being is to be a moral agent (Chittick 2011; Moosa 2008).

The salient place of ethics, virtue, and moral transformation in Islamic piety is underscored by the well-known hadith, or saying, of the Prophet Muḥammad, 'I was sent to perfect good character (*ṣāliḥ al-akhlāq*)' (al-Bukhārī, *Al-adab al-mufrad* 14, *ḥusn al-khuluq*), a sentiment reiterated on another occasion, when he said, 'Those of you most beloved to me are those of most beautiful character' (al-Tirmidhī, *al-birr* 71, *Bāb mā jāʾa fī maʿālī*). For Muslims, the prototypical model of such ethical perfection naturally lies in the Prophet of Islam, about whom the Qur'an states, 'You are of a tremendous character (*khuluq*)' (Q. 68:4). The emulation of his wont, or *sunna*, which occupies an indelible part of the tapestry of everyday Muslim life, requires paying close attention not only to how he performed specific rites and rituals, or to what he refrained from and observed, but also to his ethical demeanour and disposition. And although there developed various competing schools of ethics in Islamic history, none could escape having to account for how the moral qualities and *akhlāq* of the Prophet, as the proponents of that school envisioned them, fit into their broader system. Naturally, there were accents placed on different aspects of his personality, in keeping with what the partisans of each school saw to be most important, but they were united by a common veneration for him as a moral exemplar. After all, the Qur'an states, 'You have in the Messenger of God a beautiful example' (Q. 33:21).

2 Ethics in the Qur'an

2.1 A metaethics of the divine names

The foundations of the Prophet's ethics are themselves rooted in what Toshihiko Izutsu has described as divine ethics. In his *Ethico-Religious Concepts of the Quran*, Izutsu singled out three primary ethical relationships in the revelation of Islam (2002). The first of these involved God's interactions with the human being, mediated through His

names. God is ‘the Merciful’, ‘the Just’, ‘the Benevolent’, and ‘the Forgiving’, to use but a few examples, which means that He acts towards the human being in mercy, justice, benevolence, and forgiveness. This is simply another way of saying that in each moment the human being encounters God through a divine name (or cluster of them). Now, since ‘to God belong the most beautiful names’ (Q. 7:180), it follows that the human being must also comport himself beautifully, which is to say, ethically – beauty and ethics being closely intertwined.

This brings us to the second relationship, one that pertains to the human being’s interactions with God. To quote Izutsu, ‘the very fact that, according to the Qur’anic conception, God is of an ethical nature and acts upon man in an ethical way, carries the grave implication that man, on his part, is expected to respond in an ethical way’ (2002: 17). The human being has, in this light, a set of obligations to his Creator, and these are modelled, at least partially, on God’s own activity towards him. To give a simple example, God is the Oft-Re/turner (*al-Tawwāb*), but what does this imply? It means that just as God reveals Himself to the human being in *tawba* (re/turning), the latter too must for his part approach Him in *tawba*, with the turning of God being one of guidance and forgiveness, that of the human being in repentance (Khalil 2018). Similarly, God is Grateful (*Shākir*), which is to say that He receives in full knowledge and gratitude, in *shukr*, all that the human being offers Him by way of piety, virtue, devotion, and good deeds. In turn, the human being must never become unthankful for the blessings God confers on him, both inward and outward, both manifest and hidden. Or to use yet another example, God is Patient (*Ṣabūr*) with the human being in the face of his insolence and sinfulness, and so he too must, in return, exercise patience with God for the trials and hardships through which He tests him. Naturally, not all divine names are to be internalized or embodied, ethically speaking, by the creaturely servant (*ʿabd*) because of the line that separates the two orders of reality, the one divine, the other human. The former is by nature independent and self-subsisting, while the latter is, in its essence, impoverished and contingent. To assume qualities of power, magnificence, and lordship before God is to set oneself up as a rival, as a co-partner. It is to prepare the stage for one’s inevitable ruin. Moreover, the precise manner in which the names are to be manifest – when it is ethical to do so, and this, it must be stressed, is not always the case – naturally differs between the human being and God. Nevertheless, the metaethical template of the divine names provides a rudimentary blueprint for one’s comportment with one’s Maker.

As for the third relationship, it involves interpersonal interactions. These exchanges are also to be modelled on the pattern of divine ethics, for just as God is generous, clement, just, and forgiving, humans should likewise internalize and embody these qualities with one another, and beyond that, in their inter-sentient relationships with His creatures, forming in effect an ecological ethics. And in the same manner that certain qualities are not to be exercised towards God, there are names that should not be exercised towards

others, such as *tawwāb* (repentance being directed towards God alone). This third set of relationships, also modelled on the divine names, came to define the social ethics of the faith and was developed, as far as the rules regulating interpersonal relations were concerned, most fully by the jurists (*fuqahāʾ*) (Izutsu 2002: 18). However, the precise knowledge of how to embody these names, both with God and others, was drawn from the teachings and example of the Prophet, and in this respect, he acted as a necessary intermediary between divine and human ethics, without which the former would be too vague and abstract to serve as a concrete model for human behaviour. This is why he was instructed in the Qur'an to inform his followers, 'If you love God, then follow me' (Q. 3:31), with the emulation and love of God being intimately bound to that of the Prophet.

While the dialectical theologians, in their desire to preserve and safeguard divine transcendence, deemphasized the notion of divine ethics, focusing their attention, like that of the jurists, on the pattern of the Prophet alone, they could not entirely escape the notion since it animates Muslim revelation. It would be left to the mystics of Islam to draw out the full implications of such an idea in their theological anthropology, particularly through their doctrines of the Muḥammadan Reality (*ḥaqīqa muḥammadiyya*) and the Perfect Human Being (*al-insān al-kāmil*) – doctrines that would serve to bridge the gap between the divine and human orders (more on this below).

2.2 The historical context

When we turn to the ethics of the Qur'an from a historical vantage point, what we encounter in Scripture is a recasting and revaluation of values. In other words, the moral and ethical substrate of the Qur'an is drawn from the pre-Islamic Arabian context of Late Antiquity. From this substrate, certain qualities were brought to the centre, others were allowed to remain more or else where they stood, and yet others were left behind. There were, in short, continuities and discontinuities with the past that formed the recreation and remapping of the ethical landscape, wherever it was that the new faith was able to plant itself under the religious and later politico-religious leadership of the Prophet.

The tribal nature of pre-Islamic society played a significant role in determining the values of the culture out of which the faith emerged. At its heart lay *ʿaṣabiyya*, a kinship-based sense of solidarity that helped demarcate the lines between in-groups and out-groups, and which stood higher than any possible feelings of moral obligation, or to be more precise, which itself conditioned the very nature of moral obligation. One's primary loyalty (*wafāʾ*) was to the clan, then to the tribe of which that clan was a part, and then to other tribes with whom alliances may have been formed. The sentiment that summarized the ethos of such a socio-political context was, 'help your brother, whether he be the oppressor or the oppressed' (*unṣur akhāka ẓāliman aw maẓlūman*; Pakatchi 2018). The Prophet helped reforge these bonds so that religious ties centred around *tawḥīd* (divine unicity)

and an acknowledgement of his revelatory function replaced those of the tribe, with the caveat that such an allegiance could never overturn one's commitment to justice. He did this by reiterating the pre-Islamic sentiment, but with the qualification that to help the oppressor now required one to 'prevent him from oppressing others' (al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ, al-maẓālim* 46, *Bāb aʿin akhāka ẓālim aw maẓlūm*). This help lay in restraining him not only from violating the rights of innocents, but also in holding him back from exercising self-harm, since to wrong the other was in the end to wrong oneself. Thus, both the subject and object of the intended injury were to be protected (the latter materially, the former ethically). This theme would appear in Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī's (d. 505/1111) meditations on spiritual fraternity, as found in his *Iḥyāʾ ʿulūm al-dīn* (Revival of the Religious Sciences), in a discussion on the duties of loyalty (*wafāʾ*), where he is explicit: loyalty to a brother in faith cannot carry over into helping him in sin, since the tie that binds the two together is itself rooted in a higher principle, the betrayal of which would tear apart the fabric of that relationship. One may, however, remain in such a friendship if the intention is to lead him back to piety (1998: 300–303 [vol. 2]).

The cultural mindset and norms of behaviour of the pre-Islamic Arabs came to be identified after the advent of Islam with *jāhiliyya*, or 'ignorance', the pre-Islamic period described as being the 'Age of Ignorance'. In his lexicon of Qur'anic Arabic, al-Iṣfahānī (d. 502/1108) delineated three primary meanings of the *j-h-l* root from which this word stems: (i) an absence of knowledge, (ii) a belief about something contrary to fact, and (iii) to act in a manner that violates what knowledge demands, regardless of whether one's convictions about the matter are sound (2006: '*j-h-l*'). When the Qur'an states in verse 6:111 that the pagan Arabs would continue to deny the revelatory nature of the Prophet's message, even if angels were to appear to them from the unseen, or they were to be addressed by the dead, due to the stubbornness of their *jahl* (ignorance), it is this third meaning that the verse appears to draw attention to.

Yet beyond the rather straightforward connotations of ignorance, it was understood that *jāhiliyya* – a word that appears in the Qur'an on four occasions (Q. 3:154; 4:50; 33:33; 48:26) – also implied impulsive rashness, quickness to temper, vengefulness, and an absence of self-restraint. The Qur'an speaks, for example, of *ḥamiyyat al-jāhiliyya* (Q. 48:26), which is to say, the 'arrogance', 'haughtiness', and 'zealotry' of the pre-Islamic Arabs. It was this very quality that riled them to battle at the slightest provocation, prolonged their blood feuds, extended their tribal vendettas, and fuelled their antagonism towards the Prophet. The opposite of such a condition was not merely *ʿilm* (knowledge), but *ḥilm*, which may be defined as 'forbearance', 'forgiveness', 'gentleness', 'patience', and 'self-control'.

In Islamic literature, the historians often draw attention to this latter quality of the Prophet, particularly on those occasions when he had the right and power to punish yet pardoned

in a spirit of clemency, exemplified most famously in the Conquest of Mecca, when he forgave his most implacable enemies from the pagan establishment, those who had breached all bounds of decency (even by their own standards) in their treatment of the nascent religious community, as witnessed for example in the aftermath of the Battle of Uhud when the Quraysh mutilated the dead. Nor was it lost on Muslims that the Prophet's wet-nurse was a woman by the name of Ḥalīma (from the same *ḥ-l-m* root), implying, symbolically, that he was nourished by the milk of this very trait from childhood in a culture that embodied its antithesis. Nor for that matter was it insignificant that *al-Ḥalīm* stands as a name of God in the Qur'an, one most often coupled with the divine name *al-Ghafūr*, 'the Forgiving' (Q. 2:225, 2:235; 3:155; 5:101; 17:44; 35:41), only to be followed by *al-ʿAlīm*, 'the Knowing' (Q. 4:12; 22:59; 33:51). If pre-Islamic *jāhiliyya* was marked by ignorance and unrestrained vengeance, then Islam sought to remould such a society by moving *ḥilm* from the periphery of its value system to its centre. *Ḥilm* was not absent, but it did not play a key role in such a culture. We also cannot ignore that Abraham (Ibrāhīm), the revival of whose message was integral to the Prophet's own mission, is also described in the Qur'an by the same attribute (Q. 9:114; 11:75).

2.3 Some more key themes

Any attempt to extrapolate the most salient ethical concepts of the Qur'an is bound to be met with the accusation of subjectivity. Since each reader will discern in the text what stands out or speaks to them, it is only natural that there will be some measure of variation regarding what precisely those key themes are. With that said by way of a preliminary qualification, let us proceed, keeping in mind the limitations imposed by constraints of space, and developing what has already been outlined above.

If the *summum bonum*, or highest good, of the Qur'an is *īmān*, or 'faith', the key to salvation, then its *summum malum*, its greatest evil, or that which leads to damnation, is *kufr* (Izutsu 2002; March 2013). While the latter is usually translated as 'disbelief', etymologically it means to conceal or cover over, and in a pre-Islamic context meant 'ingratitude', since the ingrate, the *kāfir*, was someone who failed to acknowledge gifts by concealing acts of benefaction, either to himself or to the gift giver – or both. He failed, in short, to demonstrate *shukr*. It is significant that the Qur'an selected the *shukr-kufr* dichotomy on which to peg the key concepts of faith and disbelief, around which the entire edifice of its ethics would be built. The implication was that *īmān* was at heart an act of gratitude towards God for guidance, while *kufr* was inversely a state of hiding and thereby of denying God's supreme benefaction, a stubbornness for which one had no real excuse. At the time of the Prophet, some of this was due, from the Qur'an's own point of view, to the haughtiness and rebellious pride of the *kāfir*, a quality fostered by *jāhiliyya*. Some of it was also the consequence of a natural predilection humans have for being unmindful of gifts, for failing to recognize them, either due to heedlessness or because of the debts of

gratitude that necessarily follow. In a sense, ingratitude seems to be one of the cardinal vices in the anthropology of the Qur'an, one that it repeatedly draws attention to. 'Most people are not grateful', we read on more than one occasion (Q. 2:243; 12:38; 40:61. Cf. 10:60; 27:73); 'Little gratitude do you show' (Q. 7:10; 32:9); and 'Few of My bondsmen are truly grateful' (Q. 34:13). And near the end, we encounter the verse, 'Verily the human being is terribly ungrateful to his Lord' (Q. 100:6). The cultivation of *īmān* should, it is implied, foster a tendency to become more aware of blessings, since to become mindful of God and his revelations is to become mindful of His benefactions – the two being intertwined. Indeed, just as *kufr* means to hide and conceal, *shukr*, the other antonym of *kufr*, means to expose and reveal. The *muʾmin*, the person of *īmān*, does not hide or deny gifts of guidance, in the same manner that the *shākir*, the person of *shukr*, does not hide or deny gifts of benefaction (cf. Khalil 2015; Lumbard 2021).

Another prominent theme in Muslim revelation is the need to establish communal and social justice (*ʿadl*, *qisṭ*). The Qur'an states, for example, that messengers and scriptures were sent to bring about justice (Q. 57:25); the Prophet is commanded to judge with fairness (Q. 5:42); the believers are instructed likewise to be fair in their dealings with others (Q. 4:58, 135); the upholders of justice are mentioned alongside the prophets (Q. 3:21); and we are told that 'Surely God loves the just' (Q. 5:42; cf. Pakatchi 2018). The motif is so recurring that in his *Major Themes of the Quran* (2009), Fazlur Rahman argued that the revelation targeted what were in fact two intertwined aspects of Meccan society, its polytheism and its gross economic disparities, both of which reflected deep internal fissures within its social fabric. The unequal distribution of wealth coupled with the nature of tribal culture and the values promoted by its polytheistic cults led to the abuse of slaves, orphans, women, the poor, the powerless, and the tribeless. While Mecca was commercially prosperous, it had, in Rahman's words, 'a subterranean world of exploitation' (2009: 38). The attempt of the Prophet to remedy such a situation was inseparable from what he believed to be his larger mission, namely, to create a fair and equitable society by eradicating its maltreatment of the weak and the oppressed.

This concern can be discerned when we consider how frequently the Qur'an condemns *ẓulm*, or 'injustice', from the root *ẓ-l-m*, whose derivatives occur in Scripture on more than three hundred occasions. God, we are told, does not commit *ẓulm*, even to the weight of a mustard seed (Q. 4:40), and humans should naturally follow suit. Unfortunately, however, they are notoriously guilty of *ẓulm*, and the culture of *jāhiliyya* was seething with it. The need to pursue justice – individually and collectively, internally within the soul and outwardly within the social context – from the Qur'an's point of view remains part and parcel of the teleological function of the *khilāfa*, or viceregency of the human being as God's representative on earth, however much he may fail. We are told that when God created Adam, the angels recognized the bloodshed and violence he would bring about (Q. 2:30). Yet, despite their protests, God sent him to the earth, commissioning him to

rule with justice in accordance with His guidance. There is an element of mystery here as to why God entrusted him with authority and power, fully aware of his propensity for wrongdoing and corruption, alluded to at the end of the verse when He assures the angels, 'I know what you know not' (Q. 2:30). Adam had a redeeming quality, the precise nature of which the Qur'an remains ambiguous about, and which would later become the subject of extensive exegesis.

Another key ethical concept in Scripture is *taqwā*. In the words of Rahman, it is 'perhaps the most important single term in the Qur'ān' (2009: 28). If life in *jāhiliyya* was characterized by the unrestrained pursuit of passions, a failure to discern right from wrong, the consequence of an undeveloped moral imagination, *taqwā* implied both discernment and self-control. Stemming from an Arabic root (*w-q-y*), which means to 'guard', 'protect', 'shield', or 'fear', it is not an easy word to translate. It may mean 'God-consciousness', 'God-wariness', and 'God-fearingness', just as it can 'piety', 'virtue', 'holiness', and 'righteousness'. It may also be defined, following Reinhart, as a 'prudential concern for one's eternal welfare' (2004). The Qur'an praises the *muttaqūn* (the people of *taqwā*) in no less than forty-nine instances. If ethical activity for the pagan Arabs was inspired by the desire for tribal honour and social standing, in Islam it was to be motivated, at least in part, by *taqwā*, by a desire to protect the soul from the detrimental consequences of a morally reckless life, the full measure of which would only be encountered after death, on Final Judgment, when 'every soul will know what it has put forth and left behind' (Q. 82:5). *Taqwā* in this respect implied reigning in passions, controlling the lowest impulses of the soul, and cultivating moral discernment.

Yet the fear of God that accompanies *taqwā*, we are taught, should never allow one to become hopeless in the face of one's ethical and religious failures. Human beings are not angels, and the text is explicit, 'Do not ascribe purity to yourselves' (Q. 53:32). It is true the Qur'an does not promulgate a doctrine of original sin. It is also true that there is an essential goodness associated with human *fiṭra*, the soul's innate, primordial disposition (cf. Chittick and Murata 1994; Sells 1999). However, the human being is by nature prone to forgetfulness (*ghafla*), and in continuous need of remembrance (*dhikr*). Moreover, 'the human being was created weak' (Q. 4:28). It is only inevitable therefore that, despite his best efforts, he will remain unable to realize the ideal of moral perfection set before him by faith. Yet his failures, no matter how great or severe, should never render him despondent or lead him to lose sight of God's unfathomable mercy and compassion, His *raḥma*. As the Qur'an states, 'O ye who have been prodigal against your own souls, despair not of God's mercy, for God forgives all sins' (Q. 39:53).

If *taqwā* remains inseparable from a fear of God's justice, hope in His forgiveness is bound to His *raḥma* – a quality that far exceeds His wrath (*ghaḍab*). What is required of one is to turn to God in the wake of every wrong, whether it be of commission or omission, in

genuine repentance, the doors of which remain open until death. If, as Christian doctrine teaches, the blood of Christ washes away one's sins, in Islam such a 'cleaning of the slate' is realized by the tears of penitence accompanied by a conscious effort to rectify past mistakes through setting matters aright (*iṣlāḥ*). The Islamic mechanism of atonement centres around an act – *tawba* – the object of which is forgiveness mediated through what is in effect His greatest attribute (Khalil 2023). When the Qur'an states, 'Your Lord has inscribed upon Himself mercy (*kataba ʿalā nafsihi al-raḥma*)' (Q. 6:54), a verse that may also be rendered, 'Your Lord has constrained Himself by mercy', it draws attention to the unique rank of this quality, since there is no other attribute through which He imposes such limits on His own creative will and power. To despair of divine mercy on account of one's sins is, in the final scheme, to despair of God Himself (cf. Q. 12:87).

The defining place of this attribute in the divine ethics of the Qur'an is underscored by the well-known fact that each one of its chapters (except one) opens with the *basmala* – 'In the name of God, the Raḥmān, the Raḥīm' – a phrase that draws attention to the two divine names that encapsulate the reality of *raḥma*. Translators differ in how best to render the pair. Some opt for 'The Most Compassionate, the Most Merciful', others for 'The Merciful, and Benevolent', and yet others for 'The Most Kind, the Most Caring', with each choice having its own unique advantages. We can move closer to grasping the underlying meaning of this quality, however, by an etymological consideration: *raḥma* derives from a root (*r-ḥ-m*) from which we also get the word for 'womb', namely *raḥm*. In this light, *raḥma* may be best described as a maternal sentiment that reflects the emotions of a mother for what she carries and brings forth from within her own body. God's *raḥma* in this sense is analogous to a mother's sentiments for her child, defined by feelings of compassion, mercy, kindness, care, and benevolence. The idea of divine *raḥma* as a creative, nurturing, feminine, and maternal quality is echoed in the Hadith literature, in traditions where the Prophet explicitly likens God's compassionate care for human beings with that of mothers for their children (Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ, al-tawba* 50, *Bāb fī saʿat raḥmat Allāh*; cf. Sells 1999).

This theological feature of the God of Islam has profound ethical ramifications since the Prophet is also described by this very same quality in the Qur'an. 'We have not sent you except as a mercy to the worlds', we read in Q. 21:107, a verse frequently cited by Muslims in their meditations on the universal compassion he is believed to have for all people, not just those confined to his own religious community (al-Qāḍī ʿĪyāḍ 2000: 166–170). A similar idea animates the Hadith literature, as in when he said about himself that he is 'the prophet of mercy' (Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ, al-faḍāʾil* 43, *Bāb fī asmāʾihi*). To emulate the Prophet in his *raḥma* towards others is therefore to emulate, commensurate to the human being, the mercy of God – revealing yet again how human ethics is to be patterned on a prophetic ethics that is itself modelled on divine ethics. It is also to open the soul here below to a greater reception of divine mercy from above. As the Prophet once reprimanded a man who was reluctant to show affection to his children

out of a misguided Spartan sense of masculinity, ‘He who does not show mercy will not receive mercy’ (Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ, al-faḍāʾil* 15, *Bāb raḥmatihi*). To be devoid of mercy and compassion in one’s interactions with others is to be devoid of a virtue without which the ethical life remains incomplete.

Finally, it should be noted, despite a common misconception in the West, the Qur’an is anything but a book of law, at least in the conventional sense. Even by the most liberal counting, only about 500 of its more than 6,000 verses deal with ‘rules’ (Reinhart 2004: 68). Instead, Muslim revelation offers general guidelines for a godly life. One must fulfil one’s oaths (Q. 2:283), attend to those in need (Q. 51:19; 70:24), maintain family ties (Q. 47:22), observe filial piety (Q. 2:38), respect God’s creatures (Q. 6:38; 7:32), spend on orphans (Q. 76:8), and neither spy on nor speak ill of others in their absence (Q. 49:12), to give but a few examples (cf. al-Daghistani 2018: 3). Nor does the Qur’an proscribe elaborate rules for the observance of rites and rituals, often diverting one’s attention to the importance of faith, to the spirit behind worship, to the cultivation of virtue, and to the care for others, as in the famous *qibla* verse (Q. 2:177). In one passage, representative of the ethos of the Qur’an as a whole, we are reminded that it is not the flesh and blood of the sacrificial animal that reaches God, but the *taqwā* of the human being (Q. 22:30). ‘It is notable’, writes Reinhart, ‘that the Quran exhorts the Muslim to act virtuously but seldom specifies the exact form of that virtuous conduct. At most the Quran provides lists of good or bad acts that suggest the scope of morality, but do not define it’ (2004: 60).

3 Sufism and the ethics of interiority

3.1 The science of hearts

The most influential reflections on ethics in the Islamic tradition can be found in the manuals of Sufism, or *taṣawwuf*, although the percolation of these ideas into broader society often occurred through the oral instruction and embodied piety of scholars, preachers, spiritual masters, and, most importantly, holy men and women believed to be ‘friends of God’ (*awliyāʾ*), whether in West Africa or the Balkans, in China or the Indian subcontinent. Until the advent of colonization, modernization, and Westernization – three intertwined disruptions that reset the trajectory and unfolding of Islamic history – Sufism animated Muslim life for well over a millennium. It so deeply coloured the religious culture and climate of Islam, that even to separate it as a distinct phenomenon presents its own unique challenges.

Within Muslim tradition, *taṣawwuf* has often been identified with the dimension of the faith which deals with *iḥsān*. In the famous hadith of Gabriel (Jibrīl), the Prophet described *iḥsān* as a condition where ‘you worship God as if you see Him. For even if you do not see Him, He nevertheless sees you’ (al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ, al-īmān* 2, *Bāb suʾāl jibrīl*; cf. Chittick and Murata 1994). The virtues that an awareness of God’s ever-present gaze give

rise to for those who do not already witness Him include not only, as one would expect, *taqwā*, but also sincerity. After all, the implication of the above hadith is not only that God, as an omniscient being, is aware of what we do outwardly, He is also fully cognizant of our internal promptings, with a view that extends beyond our actions into the interior recesses of the soul. It follows that since God is acutely aware of our inner world, we cannot fool Him, no matter how outwardly pious our behaviour may be or how much we adorn ourselves with the paraphernalia of religion. We may succeed in deceiving others, we may even deceive ourselves, but not God, since 'whether you conceal what is within your chests, or reveal it, God knows it' (Q. 3:29). Elsewhere, we are told, 'God knows what lies in their hearts (*qulūb*)' (Q. 4:63).

Since Muslims understood that the moral worth of an action depended on the state of the heart (*qalb*) in which it was performed, there developed very early on in Islamic history a 'science of hearts' (*ʿilm al-qulūb*), the aim of which was to purify and maintain the soundness of this primary organ of spiritual perception. Although the foundations of such a science were present in the Qur'an and *sunna*, contrary to certain early Orientalist conceptions that continue to persist in the Western study of Islam (cf. Khalil and Sheikh 2019), its systematic development and formulation did not take place until after the death of the Prophet. In Muslim tradition, al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī (d. 110/728) was often credited with outlining its principles, although the first to write about it extensively appears to have been the moral psychologist al-Ḥārith b. Asad al-Muḥāsibī (d. 243/857), who drew attention to the critical distinction between 'actions of the limbs' and 'actions of the heart'. If the rules that regulated the former lay within the provenance of Islamic Law, those of the latter lay within what came to be later defined as *taṣawwuf*. This is why Abū Ṭālib al-Makkī (d. 386/996), in his *Qūt al-qulūb* (Nourishment of Hearts), described the masters of this science as *ahl al-qulūb*, the 'people of hearts', or the 'folk of the heart', since they understood the nature, inner-workings, and constitution of the *qalb* better than anyone else (Khalil 2012). This knowledge was itself the fruit of having purified and mastered the heart through a regimen of intense spiritual practice that formed 'the greater *jihād*' described in the well-known prophetic tradition (cf. Nasr 1982).

3.2 The states and stations

In the process of developing this science of the heart, a discipline that comprised the convergence of ethics, mysticism, and psychology, its masters outlined the virtues of that organ, or the qualities of the soul the internalization of which were necessary for the transformation and refinement of character (*tabdīl al-akhlāq, tahdhīb al-akhlāq*). These included (to name but a few) contentment, hope, gratitude, patience, repentance, love, and trust in God. The meditations on these qualities comprised a genre of Sufi literature which dealt with what are known as the 'states' and 'stations', stages of the soul in its journey to Paradise and, beyond that, to God. Many of the virtues were themselves patterned on the

divine attributes, bringing us back to the theme of divine ethics. A tradition often attributed to the Prophet, particularly in Sufi texts, which underscored this idea most explicitly was his exhortation to 'assume the attributes of God', or 'adorn yourself with God's character traits', i.e. His *akhlāq* (cf. al-Ghazālī 2008). While the Hadith specialists along with notable authorities such as Ibn Taymiyya (d. 728/1328) contested the tradition, many argued its meaning was nevertheless 'affirmed by external reports' (*ḥasan li-ghayrihi*) (Casewit 2020: 157–158).

For Sufis of a metaphysical persuasion, the ideal was to realize the station of the 'complete human being', or *al-insān al-kāmil*, modelled on the metahistorical 'Muḥammadan Reality' (*ḥaqīqa muḥammadiyya*). As the first entity created by God, this *ḥaqīqa*, or reality, later entered time (or so the belief went), travelling through each of the prophets and messengers of history from Adam onwards, before appearing in its fullness and finality in the figure of the Prophet Muḥammad (cf. Addas 2024; Chodkiewicz 1993). To realize this reality through an emulation of the *sunna* was to realize *kamāliyya*, not 'perfection', as it is sometimes understood, but 'completeness', since perfection in the purely moral sense remained, for the human being, outside of one's grasp. While it was acknowledged that one could be preserved from major sins (not a major accomplishment in itself), freedom from *all* sins, especially lapses of the heart and moments of inattentiveness to the divine presence, remained a virtual impossibility because of the unique conditions of the human state. As the Prophet said, 'every child of Adam is a sinner, and the best of sinners are those who turn to God in repentance' (al-Tirmidhī, *qiyāma*, 49). The completeness to be sought was not the result of a total protection from sin, but one that entailed returning to God in the wake of every slip, or as Ibn ʿArabī (d. 638/1240) would argue (somewhat provocatively), returning to God through a recognition of the beauty of the creative divine act in the very sin itself (Khalil 2006). However one conceived the precise nature of *kamāliyya*, the path to such a station lay in polishing and purifying the heart through the remembrance of God (*dhikr*), the refinement of character, ethical transformation, and the internalization of virtue.

3.3 Sincerity and self-deception

As noted, one of the most important virtues of the ethical life is sincerity, or *ikhlāṣ*, a concept also expressed by the term *ṣidq*, usually translated as 'truthfulness'. If the person of *ikhlāṣ* is sincere and genuine in word and deed, the person of *ṣidq* not only speaks the truth but also remains true, through their actions, to their inward state, so that there is a congruence between their outer and inner selves, between what they do and what they intend. This condition is contrary to that of the hypocrite, whose private and public selves are discordant.

A recurring motif in the Qur'an and Hadith literature is that the moral worth of an act depends (aside from being based on sound knowledge) on the motivation behind it. This belief is so central to the ethics of Islam that al-Bukhārī (d. 256/870) opens his collection of traditions with the famous hadith, 'Verily, actions are by intention', which is to say, the merit of a deed is contingent on the aim that guides it. Ideally, the act should have as its goal the pleasure and acceptance of God. Naturally, there is a soteriological felicity (i.e. Paradise) for which one also aspires with such an intention, but the focus, especially in the ethical literature of Sufism, is on single-mindedly directing one's attention towards that Being who is the ultimate origin and end of human existence, since 'from God we come and to Him we return' (Q. 2:156).

In the Qur'an, this idea is captured by the expression – unusual in English – 'for the face of God' (Q. 72:9; cf. Q. 2:272; 13:22; 30:30). As Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d. 606/1210) explains, to say in Arabic that something was done 'for the face of so-and-so' means it was performed solely for that individual, with no other intention in mind. This is unlike the expression *lahu*, 'for him', which can imply that an act was inspired by multiple, overlapping, and even conflicting motivations. When, however, one says, 'for his face', it precludes the possibility of any such convergence. Thus, when the Qur'an praises deeds performed for 'the face of God', at least one meaning, according to al-Rāzī, is that they have been carried out for His good pleasure with no co-partnering of intention. While he notes that the expression may also refer, more literally, to a desire for the beatific vision (Q. 75:22–23), the two interpretations are not mutually exclusive since the desire is still directed towards the same divine object of affection (al-Rāzī 1990).

Such a single-minded intention, however, is not easy to realize because of the propensity of the soul for deception, even self-deception. If one is not introspective enough, one will fail to discern how numerous motivations may coalesce to inspire even seemingly pious deeds – some worldly, for transient benefits, and some otherworldly. This is why al-Makkī writes, 'it may be that in a single act multiple intentions come together' (1995: 309 [vol. 2]), a theme al-Ghazālī develops in the *Iḥyāʾ* when he differentiates between four kinds of actions with respect to intentionality:

- A. There is, al-Ghazālī explains, an act that can have two motivating forces, one for God, the other for some worldly gain. Each of them may on their own be enough to bring about the deed, yet their combined power makes it easier for the moral agent to carry it out. The example he gives is of two men who help each other carry a heavy object which each one of them is capable of lifting on his own. Their shared strength, however, makes the task easier. While such an act is not without its own merit, it is not entirely sincere because of the polluting presence of the worldly motivation.

- B. Second, there is an act in which both the intention for God and the intention for the world is weak, but together their force is enough to produce the action. Using the previous example, it is like two men who desire to carry an object that is too heavy for each of them to lift on his own but which their shared power enables them to. Al-Ghazālī gives a more concrete illustration of how this might play out ethically. Consider an individual, he says, who will spend in charity when others are present out of ostentation and his own faith, yet not in private, since his faith is not strong enough to inspire him to part with his wealth when alone. Had he no faith at all, however, he would not give in public either. The motivation created by the covetousness for honour and his faith in God allows him to be charitable, but only when others are there to witness his giving. Such an act is worse than A, but not entirely without merit since a religious motive is not completely absent.
- C. Then there is an act in which the intention for God is strong, and where it is sufficient to bring about the deed, but it is aided or helped by a worldly intention, which makes it easier and more enjoyable to perform. The worldly motivation, however, is not strong enough on its own to move the act. An example of this would be of a man who performs his prayers with great devotion and gives abundantly in charity, yet whose deeds become easier for him when others are there to witness him. He would still carry these actions out in their absence, even with the same degree of commitment, yet the recognition and praise of people renders their performance sweeter and more pleasurable. Such a state is better than A and B, yet still not for al-Ghazālī fully sincere.
- D. Finally, there is that act which is moved solely by the desire for divine pleasure and nothing else. The example al-Ghazālī provides is of a man who is attacked by a beast of prey. His attempt to escape from the clutches of the wild animal is for one reason and one reason alone, to save himself from a terrible death. He has nothing else in mind. For al-Ghazālī the intention of the man in his flight is pure and sincere (*fa hādhihi al-niyya tusammā khāliṣa*), since it is not coloured by any other end or purpose. This is the kind of single-minded intention one should cultivate in all ethical behaviour. This act differs from the previous three, the underlying intentions of which were tainted to differing degrees, and their moral worth diminished accordingly (al-Ghazālī 1998: 113–114 [vol. 5]; cf. 2013: 14–15).

The ideal state as outlined by al-Ghazālī in example D is, needless to say, extremely difficult to obtain. Al-Makkī draws attention to this when, quoting an earlier authority, he writes, ‘purifying the intention for the deed is the most difficult of deeds’ (1995: 310 [vol. 2]). But how can such sincerity be brought about?

For the Sufi authorities, one method is to cultivate the remembrance of God – the very heart of prayer (cf. Q. 20:14) – since the fruit of such a spiritual exercise is the expansion of the invoker’s consciousness of his Maker, transposing, in effect, purely worldly

considerations from the centre of the heart to its periphery. The concerted practice of invocation will then begin to colour the moral agent's intentions, rendering him increasingly mindful of God, even as he moves outside of *dhikr*. And the more the inner state of remembrance spills over into everyday life, the more God will gradually come to occupy the focal point of his awareness.

Alongside *dhikr*, the moral agent should also subject himself to an introspective examination of conscience, a process known as 'self-accounting', or *muḥāsaba* (after which, incidentally, al-Muḥāsibī, who was known for the exercise, took his name). By shining the light of the mind into the inner chambers of the heart, the agent may then begin to discern his real motivations. A simple illustration, offered by al-Ghazālī, of how this might work would be if one's doctor instructed one to fast for medical reasons on a day which happens to fall on 'Arafa, a time when Muslims are encouraged to fast. Is one's intention here in abstaining from food and drink for God or for health? To answer this, one simply must ask oneself whether one would be just as inclined to fast had the physician not given him any such instructions.

By turning the eye of the mind inward to observe the 'movements of the heart', one can, the Sufi masters assert, begin to gradually recognize the underlying causes behind one's outward behaviour. The moral agent must simply habituate oneself to the practice of interiorization, since by doing so one will become more self-aware and self-conscious. It is not an easy process, particularly because of the mind's tendency towards dispersion and exteriorization, but it forms an essential component of ethical refinement and transformation. After all, it is not enough to act in a certain way; one must also have the right intentions. This is why for the Sufis, *taṣawwuf* conceived of as a science of the heart is not simply an appendage or sectarian expression of Islam, but an indispensable element of it, without which the faith stands at risk of becoming consumed by an exteriorized moralism. In this respect, Sufism embodies an ethos that, as we saw earlier, is present in the Qur'an, one that often directs its readers not just to the particularities of piety, but to the spirit behind it, and to the cultivation of an introspective and self-reflective consciousness of God.

4 The ontology and epistemology of ethics

One of the earliest debates in Islamic ethics, particularly in the field of *kalām*, or dialectical theology, centred around the nature of the good, or to be more precise, around two interrelated questions about its nature. The first of these was, is knowledge of the good obtainable through the intellect (*ʿaql*), or is revelation (*waḥy*) necessary? And the second was, is the good independent of God, or does He determine it? This latter question had been posed in a slightly different form much earlier by Plato in one of his dialogues, where he had his teacher Socrates ask his interlocutor, Euthyphro, 'is the pious (τὸ ὅσιον) loved

by the gods because it is pious, or is it pious because it is loved by the gods?' (*Euthyphro* 10a). The first question revolved around the epistemology of the good (i.e. 'how do we know it?'), and the second revolved around its ontology (i.e. 'what precisely is it?' or, in a theological context, 'what relation does it have to God?').

There were two general responses formulated to these overlapping questions. The first was offered by the Muʿtazilites, a school of theology that originated, according to the source material, with Wāṣil b. ʿAṭāʾ (d. 131/748–749) and ʿAmr b. ʿUbayd (d. 144/761). The former had for some period been a student of al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī (prominent not only in the development of Sufism, but also in Islamic theology) before he separated from his teacher over a point of doctrinal contention. It was in this act of separation (*iʿtizāl*) that the Muʿtazilites (or *muʿtazila*) acquired their name, although other theories have also been offered (El-Omari 2016: 133–134). For our purposes, the partisans of this school argued that the human mind could discern the moral value of an act independent of God's guidance. The good was rationally discernible, therefore, to anyone who had the intellectual capacity to do so. As proponents of ethical objectivism, the good was also, for them, in its essence, independent of God (Hourani 1985). Moreover, it had a reality that was universal, unconditioned by cultural variation. It was precisely its universality, in fact, that made knowledge of it accessible to every man or woman of intelligence. A true, uncorrupted religion simply confirmed and reinforced, in their view, what could be known through sound reasoning and reflection.

The second response was formulated by the Ashʿarites, a school that emerged largely in response to the Muʿtazilites, and which can be eponymously traced back to Abū al-Ḥasan al-Ashʿarī (d. 324/935-936), a figure who had for some time been theologically affiliated with the Muʿtazilites, being a close student of Abū ʿAlī Muḥammad al-Jubbāʾī (d. 303/915–916), one of their leading theologians. Unlike their adversaries, the Ashʿarites adhered to a doctrine according to which the mind was incapable of determining good and evil on its own, and which therefore stood in need of the light of prophecy and revealed law (*sharʿ*). In addition, the good was for them subordinate to divine will, which is to say, it was determined by God. As advocates of ethical subjectivism, they rejected the idea of objective values and espoused a divine command theory. This meant that the good (*khayr*) was simply what God instructed us to carry out and perform, while evil (*sharr*) was what He instructed us to leave and avoid. Moreover, had God so willed, He could have instructed us to do what He had prohibited and, conversely, prohibited us from doing what He had instructed. In either case, the good was simply His prescriptive command (*al-amr al-taklīfī*).

4.1 The merits of Muʿtazilism

Each of these two theological schools had their own unique strengths and buttressed their arguments through both rational and scriptural proofs. On the side of the Muʿtazilites, one

of the strengths of their ethical objectivism was that the moral intuitions that underlie many of our conceptions of right and wrong do seem, in fact, to have a basis in objective reality. After all, who in all sincerity can deny that killing an innocent child, lying for the benefit of one's own gain, or stealing the hard-earned wealth of another is intrinsically wrong? The notion that these actions are, in themselves, morally neutral seems counterintuitive. So powerful, in fact, are our intuitions on these matters that in Western ethics Immanuel Kant used them as an argument for the existence of God. Our knowledge and awareness of the good, he felt, must lead us to a being that is good in itself – an archetype, so to speak, of the Good, one that stands above the world of phenomena.

Moreover, for the Muʿtazilites it was clear that the Qur'an often appeals to the moral sensibilities of its audience, under the assumption that there are certain general notions of good and evil independent of prophecy that every individual is cognizant of. Historically, it was this appeal which made the ethical message of Scripture attractive to many early converts, especially those who felt socially and economically disenfranchised by Meccan society and who experienced the brunt of its injustices. Closely related to this, nor can one ignore that a common argument for the veracity of Muḥammad's prophecy, from the Islamic perspective, relies on his *akhlāq*, or character traits, qualities that include, for example, his honesty, generosity, and clemency. Now, if recognizing the virtuous nature of these traits – *as virtues* – is contingent on revelation, we are faced with a circular argument, since the values lauded by the revelation brought by the Prophet are needed for one of the proofs of his prophecy (i.e. his laudable *akhlāq*) to be operative.

Yet another strength of the Muʿtazilite stance was that it appeared to better account for the historical state of people whom an uncorrupted revelatory message did not reach. Each person, for the Muʿtazilites, could use his rational faculty to arrive at notions of good and evil for which he would then be accountable before God. No one could be morally absolved for 'not having known better', since every individual has a moral compass rooted in his *ʿaql* – a compass that functions (in its own right) as a type of prophecy, and which, in the presence of actual prophecy, is simply refined and reinforced. For the Muʿtazilites, therefore, God's justice encompassed everyone, not just those exposed to divine revelation. Every individual's life had moral meaning.

4.2 The advantages of Ashʿarism

As for the Ashʿarites, their system was also not without its own unique theological and philosophical advantages. For one thing, the underlying rationale behind their espousal of divine command theory served to preserve God's omnipotence, since to do otherwise would be to place Him ontologically below a conception of value He did not have control over. To return to Plato, if the pious is loved by the gods because it is pious, it follows that it has a certain measure of power over the gods, who are incapable of rendering

the pious impious. The pious, in such a scenario, stands as a principal above the gods, having ontological priority. On the other hand, if it is pious because the gods love it, then the determining power and privilege returns to the gods, whose love makes it pious. When transposed on to a monotheistic framework, the latter position safeguards divine omnipotence by retaining the subordination of ethics to God.

Another weakness of the Muʿtazilite thesis was that it grounded moral action not in a desire for God, but in a veneration of the good. This is evident, for example, in the thought of the Muʿtazilite theologian Mānkdīm Shāshdīw (d. 425/1034) who, when he outlined the conditions of repentance, was explicit that the regret (*nadam*) felt over an evil deed must be because of its evilness (*ʿalā al-qubḥ li-qubḥihi*) (Shāshdīw 1965: 791; cf. Al-Ashʿarī 1980: 105; Vasalou 2008: 39–40). It is not because one has disobeyed God or violated one of His commandments, since the commandments – qua commandments – are not a defining feature of Muʿtazilite ethics (Bājūrī 2002: 85). Despite the Muʿtazilite emphasis on divine unity, the theocentrism of Islam so prominent in the Qur'an becomes marginalized in their ethics. This feature is captured, for example, in the discussion above regarding the importance of intentions defined by a yearning for the countenance and pleasure of God.

The Ashʿarites also had good philosophical reasons for their ethical subjectivism, and which resonate in some respects with modern critiques of ethical objectivism. On the question of the ostensibly intellectual basis of values, al-Ghazālī, to use one example, argued that what we take to be objectively true moral intuitions are in fact the products of cultural conditioning and our own psychological propensities, with no basis in demonstrative reasoning. There are, in other words, no rational proofs for the intrinsic moral worth of any act. Our judgements on these matters, to quote al-Ghazālī, are such 'that if one were to confine oneself to pure reason, his faculties of estimation and sense, the mind (with the aid of reason and sense alone) would never arrive at any of them. Rather, the mind makes these judgements as the result of accidental causes that confirm and fix them in the soul' (cited in Marmura 2005: 267).

Among such 'accidental causes', al-Ghazālī includes a natural tenderness of heart (or sentimentalism) as well as self-interest. The latter is particularly important, since it often leads us to morally evaluate as fair and good what is in fact simply conducive to our own material wellbeing, however we may conceive it, while we then evaluate as undesirable and evil what is not so conducive. Thus, a nation may extol the merits of peace when nonviolence works to its advantage (usually when it is weak), just as it may laud the necessities of war when the prospects of conquest and the acquisition of wealth become alluring (usually when it is strong). In addition, al-Ghazālī argues that if certain ideas about what constitutes virtuous behaviour are repeated often enough, especially from childhood, they become ingrained in the mind so that one may simply take it as a given that this is how things are to be done, that they are 'good', 'proper', and 'pious', and that this is what

every rational person believes, or in the very least, should believe This is particularly the case for closed communities unexposed to other ways of life. Yet the diversity of values surrounding, for example, sexual mores and dietary restrictions reveal what appear to be fundamental differences in notions of good and evil. Moreover, even the prohibitions against lying, stealing, and murder are contextual, and sometimes these acts become necessary, which means they cannot be taken as objective absolutes to define human behaviour in all circumstances (Marmura 2005: 267–271). Interestingly, this last point has been used in modern philosophy as a critique of Kant's categorical imperative.

While al-Ghazālī's insights into the psychological (even psychoanalytic) construction of values, and his somewhat pessimistic view of human nature, prefigure in some interesting ways the arguments of Nietzsche (as articulated, for example, in his *Genealogy of Morals*), he was no moral nihilist. He simply felt that no system of ethics could have a rational basis. It must instead be founded on an uncorrupted prophetic message through which God guides humankind to its ultimate felicity, both in general and specific terms. Revelation should not, in this light, simply play second fiddle to reason, as Muʿtazilite doctrines implied, but must itself serve as the very source of values. This is not to suggest that reason is not to be accorded an important role in its own right; al-Ghazālī, and by extension the Ashʿarites, do not, it should be clear, espouse an unrefined ethical fideism. On the contrary, for them reason must function as a tool for the interpretation of Scripture. After all, no hermeneutic exercise can entirely escape the use of rationality, since to articulate a perspective is to make use of rudimentary principles of logic, such as the law of excluded middle. However, it must be kept in check through a recognition of its scope and limits. It is true that among later Ashʿarites, especially from the time of Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī onwards, the *ʿaql* came to occupy a more privileged position due in part to the disappearance of the Muʿtazilites from the intellectual landscape of Sunnī Islam and the gradual integration into Ashʿarism of their rationalizing tendencies (cf. Shihadeh 2006). Many of the central ideas of the Muʿtazilites were also adapted into Shīʿī theology, 'buttressed by the study of philosophy among Shi'i scholars', to quote Cyrus Zargar, 'and brought into line with the teachings of the Shi'i imams' (2017: 3; cf. Ansari and Schmidtke 2016). However, the basic principles of early Ashʿarism remained even in later articulations of the school.

4.3 The Māturīdī middle ground

So far, we have briefly explored the responses of the Muʿtazilites and the Ashʿarites to questions surrounding the ontology and epistemology of ethics. There was also, however, a third response. This was not that of the Ḥanbalī 'traditionists', or Atharīs, who eschewed rational theology and are therefore of no immediate relevance to our present inquiry, which is focused first and foremost on *kalām*. Instead, this third school comprised a group of thinkers who retraced their origins to a contemporary of al-Ashʿarī, Abū al-Manṣūr al-

Māturīdī (d. 333/944), after whom they were named. The seeds of their theological outlook, however, were planted much earlier by Abū Ḥanīfa (d. 150/767) (Rudolph 2015: 4–5), the founder of one of the four schools of Sunnī law with which they were most closely affiliated, in much the same way that the Ashʿarites tended to be associated with the Shāfiʿīs and the Ḥanbalīs, as noted, with the Atharīs.

Unlike the Ashʿarites, the Māturīdīs believed not only in objective values, but values which could be known through reason. However, human cognition of them was, in their eyes, rudimentary at best in the absence of revelation, varying considerably from one person to another due to differences in intellectual aptitude and purity of soul, as well as a range of environmental and social factors. Thus, prophecy was necessary for an ethical life. What revelation did, however, was awaken and make clear certain moral intuitions imbedded in human *fiṭra* (see Primordial Human Nature (*fiṭra*)), supplementing them with rituals, rites, and other non-rationally deducible religious obligations. Yet the Māturīdīs did not go so far as to suggest that God is incapable of creating another system of objective values. In other words, although they believed in universal moral truths of which we have rational intuitions, God could have created a world where those values and intuitions differed. In this respect, they were able to preserve (at least from their own point of view) divine omnipotence, because they did not subordinate God to a conception of the good that was independent of Him. Had the Māturīdīs gone so far, it is unlikely they would have come to comprise, along with the Ashʿarites and Atharīs, what would later be loosely recognized as Sunnī orthodoxy.

The relation between the Atharīs and the dialectical theologians of the Ashʿarites and Māturīdīs was, however, often an uneasy one. This was largely because the Atharīs sought to eschew the use of reason almost entirely on creedal and exegetical matters, and often accused the dialectical theologians of corrupting the meanings of revelation (*taḥrīf maʿānī al-qurʾān*) through their rationally inspired metaphorical interpretations of Scripture. While, as noted, the Māturīdīs did espouse a form of ethical objectivism, the ontological status of their values differed from that of the Mutʿazilites due to the possibility of their alteration. Nevertheless, the objective nature of values in their ethical system allowed them to appeal to the *akhlāq* of the Prophet as proof of his messengerhood, without falling into the kind of circular reasoning the Ashʿarites stood at risk of, were they to employ similar arguments.

In general, the Māturīdīs had more faith in the powers of reason than the Ashʿarites (particularly early exponents of the school), especially when it came to their views about the existence and unity of God. In this respect, the Māturīdīs occupied a middle ground concerning the status of those whom revelation did not reach. Recall that, for the Muʿtazilites, such people were accountable to God after death for their ethical decisions. They were also, in Muʿtazilite eyes, responsible for their belief, or lack thereof, in *tawḥīd*.

Generally, the Ashʿarites adhered to an opposing view. Thus, al-Bājūrī (d. 1276/1860) would explain that those who lived in between the descent of a new revelation and the corruption and loss of a previous one – the *ahl al-fatra* – or those whom revelation simply did not reach, were saved (*nājūn*) in the afterlife. This was because, for the Ashʿarites, there could be no obligation, or *taklīf*, moral or otherwise, in the absence of prophecy (2002: 85–86). Divine mercy, in their case, would have the final say. Such a contention, however, presented certain obvious problems, the foremost of them being the complete absence of any kind of accountability after death.

The Ashʿarites were not, however, without what they believed to be scriptural proofs for this position, drawing their main evidence from the Qur'anic verse, 'We do not punish until We have sent a messenger (*rasūl*)' (Q. 17:15), a passage also used by a group of Atharīs (*jamāʿa min al-ḥanābila*) for the same theological stance (Al-Nasafī 2000: 82–83; cf. Bājūrī 2002: 82). Curiously, the Muʿtazilites (no less reverential of the Qur'an than their adversaries) interpreted the *rasūl* in this verse as a reference to the *ʿaql*, or the proofs furnished by it, a faculty created by God and available to every sane adult (cf. al-Zamakhsharī, commentary on Q. 17:15).

The Māturīdīs, on the other hand, felt that those who fell into this category were responsible for *tawḥīd* and elementary moral principles, such as the near universal prohibition of theft, murder, and deceit, provided they were mature enough to reason and reflect. The Māturīdī theologian Abū al-Muʿīn al-Nasafī (d. 508/1114) explicitly states in his *Baḥr al-kalām* (The Ocean of Speech) that no one can be excused (*maʿdhūr*) for disbelief in God, drawing on the Qur'anic accounts of the Prophet Abraham and the People of the Cave, all of whom inferred through their own powers of reflection, without the aid of revelation, the existence of a single creator (Q. 6:78; 18:14; Al-Nasafī 2000: 82–83). The precise extent to which the Māturīdīs were willing to absolve those whom revelation did not reach of ethical obligations, however, remains difficult to determine in view of the wide range of circumstances those who fell into such a group might find themselves in, as well as differences among Māturīdīs themselves.

4.4 The ethics of Sufi metaphysics

A noticeable lacuna in the debates around ethics in *kalām* centred around the idea of divine ethics. It is rare, in fact, to find extensive inquiries into how God's *akhlāq* might serve as a metaethical template for human behaviour. While there were certainly traces of it among the Muʿtazilites, who conceived of divine goodness and justice along similar lines to human goodness and justice, generally the specialists of *kalām*, the *mutakallimūn*, emphasized the unique otherness and dissimilarity of God and, therefore, the ontological gulf that separated Him from humans. This was due to the pride of place they gave to reason. The Muʿtazilites, in fact, went so far in this direction they were accused by their

opponents of *taʿṭīl*, of 'divesting' God of His attributes altogether (because of their fear of anthropomorphizing God). While they rejected such claims as simplified caricatures of their own views, what the Muʿtazilites, Māturīdīs, Ashʿarites, and all who made use of *kalām* had in common was an impulse to press the differences that separated the divine and human orders of reality. And when they did speak of *takhalluq*, or 'assuming character traits', the traits they usually had in mind were not of God but of the Prophet (cf. al-Ṣāwī 1999: 434–435).

The problem, and a glaring one at that, in virtually ignoring divine ethics, or its relevance to human conduct, was that it meant overlooking a theme which, as we saw earlier, appears prominently in the Qur'an. While it is true that the Atharīs did not eschew the idea (largely due to their disinterest in rational theology), they did not develop it in any meaningful way, simply opting to assent, as they usually did, to the literal meanings of seemingly anthropomorphic and anthropopathic references to God in the Qur'an and Hadith, *bi lā kayf*, 'without (asking) how', a view shared in moderate form by the early Ashʿarites (cf. Al-Ashʿarī 1999). It would be left to the philosophically minded Sufis, particularly Ibn ʿArabī and his school (the 'Akbarians'), to fill in this lacuna. And they would do so by developing an ethical model premised on the idea of becoming divine-like through a realization of the primordial Adamic nature of the self, created, as the hadith states, *ʿalā ṣūratihi*, 'in His form', as an *imago dei* (Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ, istiʾdhān* 1, *Bāb badʿ al-salām*). In this conceptualization of ethics, the teleological end of the human being, which entailed a felicitous return to God, also entailed a return to one's theophanic nature, a repository of the divine names (cf. Ali 2021; Chittick 1993; Khalil 2020).

How was this nature to be realized? For the proponents of Sufi metaphysics, it involved an acquiescence to the injunction to 'assume the attributes of God'. While al-Ghāzālī discussed the pertinence of this tradition, he emphasized not the convergences, but the divergences that characterized the sharing of names between God and the human being. About a century later, however, Ibn ʿArabī would move in a different direction, particularly in a lengthy section on ethics in *al-Futūḥāt al-makkiyya* (The Meccan Revelations) within the context of a comprehensive survey of the states and stations. However, the theological anthropology he would formulate involved not a crude deification of the human being, an incarnationism, or what in classical Islamic texts was sometimes criticized as a belief in 'the indwelling of God' (*ḥulūl*), but a complex and paradoxical interplay of divine transcendence (*tanzīh*) and immanence (*tashbīh*) in the human self. In relation to *takhalluq*, this meant that the goal was to internalize and embody the names not as they are manifest in God, but in a mode commensurate to the ontological status of the human being, whose essential reality is that of need and nothingness, much like an empty mirror. As the Qur'an states, 'you are the poor in relation to God' (Q. 35:15). To aspire to anything else would be to risk vying with Him as co-partner. And the template of how to do this lay, it was argued, in an emulation of the Muḥammadan Reality as it was embodied in

the persona of the Prophet, which in a Sufi context meant traversing through the *sharīʿa* (law) and the *ṭarīqa* (mystical path) in order to reach the penultimate stage of the *ḥaqīqa* (the realization and knowledge of ultimate reality). This was a journey that brought with it the ethical refinement and beautification of the soul. *Iḥsān*, which according to the Hadith literature is the highest level of faith, after all means 'to beautify', and derives from the same *ḥ-s-n* root from which we also get the frequently employed Qur'anic term, *ḥasanāt*, 'beautiful deeds'.

For Ibn ʿArabī and his school, the significance of being fashioned in the divine form meant not only that there was a latent goodness in the human being, but also knowledge, *in potentia*, of how to live virtuously. However, the full actualization of such a state required prophecy, which outlined the specifics of how to pursue a godly, pious, and ethical life. In this respect, his position approached the Māturīdīs, who were not willing to absolve the human being of *taklīf* altogether in the absence of prophecy. Unlike the Māturīdīs, however, the Akbarian doctrine was predicated not on a particular conception of the nature of the ʿ*aql*, or its relation to the good, as much as it was on the very nature of human selfhood, one in which God breathed His Spirit (Q. 35:15; Ibn al-'Arabī 1980; cf. Khalil 2020). As for the dilemma posed by the *Euthyphro*, the Akbarian response would be to see a mistake in separating God from the good, since His love for the good was and is, in fact, a love for His own nature. The human being's yearning for the good is, in this light, a yearning for nothing other than God Himself.

5 Free will vs. predestination

One of the most contested issues in Islamic intellectual history centred around the nature of human volition: are we free moral agents, capable of acting according to our own will and choice, or are our actions determined at some fundamental level by God? Do we create our own deeds or are they created for us by God? Do we act autonomously or is there a divine will and power that acts in and through us? The essential problem centred around whether to give priority to God's omnipotence or to His justice.

The earliest exponents of free will were the Qadarites, named so because of their espousal of *qadar*, literally 'power', in this context the capacity of humans to decide their own fate. While we know very little about them, their historical origins appear to lie in a Basran *muḥaddith* (hadith specialist) by the name of Maʿbad b. ʿAbd Allāh b. ʿUkaym al-Juhanī (executed c. 80/699) and his most well-known student, Ghaylān al-Dimashqī (executed most likely between 105–125/724–743). Their theological activities lasted only about fifty-years, from the end of the seventh to the early middle of the eighth century of the common era, and seem to have been intertwined with certain anti-Umayyad political stances, although the details remain unclear. They appear to have shared no unifying

religious doctrine other than a conception of human volition based first and foremost on a theodicy that sought to protect God from the attribution of evil (Judd 2016: 44–47).

The Muʿtazilites would develop their views regarding human agency in much more sophisticated ways, as self-professed partisans of divine unity and justice (*asḥāb al-tawḥīd wa-l ʿadl*). Indeed, the second of their five cardinal creedal postulates was justice (*ʿadl*) and revolved precisely around the question of human volition. Thus, Wāṣil b. ʿAṭāʾ declared, without qualification, 'The Creator most High is Wise, Knowing. It is impermissible to ascribe to Him either evil (*sharr*) or injustice (*ẓulm*). He cannot desire from His servants other than what He prescribes'. In other words, the imposition of moral responsibilities would be pointless if we were deprived of the power to fulfil them. 'It is impossible', he said, 'for Him to enjoin upon the servant an act he is incapable of carrying out', adding, 'he who denies this has denied what is (logically) necessary' (Al-Shahrastānī 1998: 61). Their third principle, 'The Promise and the Threat' (*al-waʿd wa-al-waʿīd*), was in turn a direct outgrowth of their second one, according to which God is bound to reward the righteous with Paradise for their uprightness just as He is bound to punish the wicked in Hell for their sinfulness, unless of course one repented, in which case there were specific conditions that had to be met. God, in other words, did not determine the posthumous states of the soul arbitrarily, but through a causal system that was by and large intelligible to the mind, and that in turn imposed on the moral agent the rational obligation to live as virtuously as possible (Blankinship 2008: 49–50; Watt 1985: 50–53). Actions, both beautiful and ugly, had consequences which could not be easily overturned, even by God. These laws applied to everyone equally and the outcomes were to be judged, in the final scheme of things, impartially and fairly. This at least was how they viewed their own stance, with minor variations among their doctrinal exponents and internally competing factions. So adamant were they about reducing the effects of external supernatural forces on human behaviour, they denied demons (or the *shayāṭīn*) the power to influence decisions, interpreting the 'whisperings' of *khannās* and the jinn in Qur'anic verses 114:3–6 to lie in the internal promptings of the soul (Al-Nasafī 2000: 200). At heart, the Muʿtazilites were free-will libertarians (McGinnis 2019: 80).

On the other end of the spectrum stood the Jabarites, from the Arabic *jabr*, which means 'compulsion', 'coercion', or 'force', and for whom all human activity was fashioned by God. Their most famous representative in early Islam was Jahm b. Ṣafwān (d. 128/746). He argued, 'It is not permissible to ascribe the Creator, most High, with an attribute (*ṣifa*) with which creatures are also ascribed, because that would entail similarity (*tashbīh*)'. And since God is powerful, acting, and creating – being at once *qādir*, *fāʿil*, and *khāliq* – we, it stands to reason, cannot be (Al-Shahrastānī 1998: 97–98). Hence everything that ever was and ever will be is subject in its entirety, without qualification, to God's generative and creative will, rendering the followers of Jahm determinists in every sense of the term. Curiously, what may have troubled later commentators and heresiographers most about

these theological views was not their determinism as much as their denial of the eternity of reward and punishment in the afterlife. Since God is described in the Qur'an as both 'the First' and 'the Last', Jahm held that Paradise and Hell, along with their inhabitants, would eventually vanish, with only God remaining, as He had been before creation (Baghdādī 1998: 212; Al-Nasafī 2000: 220–221).

A middle course on the question of free will was adopted by the Ashʿarites, particularly in later, more developed formulations of the school. While they were adamant that God is the sole creator, the human being, in their eyes, had the mental and volitional power to acquire deeds, created by God, for which they would then be accountable (Abdel Meguid 2013: 176). It was this 'acquisition' (*kasb*) over which divine judgement would prevail after death. Expressed differently, while humans did not technically create their deeds, they were responsible for them because they had obtained and appropriated them through an interior act of the soul. On the surface this seemed like sophistry, a specious form of reasoning that did not ultimately solve the theological dilemma at hand. The Mālikī jurist and Peripatetic philosopher Ibn Rushd (d. 595/1198) hit the nail on the head in his critique of the school, when he asked who creates the mental act of acquisition to begin with? If it is God, then there could be no human will, and hence no moral responsibility. And if it was the human being, then we were left with two creators. Yet, the Ashʿarite response seemed, for all its shortcomings, the best one available to an essentially contested problem, a conundrum that entailed simultaneously assenting to two antinomian but compelling propositions: human freedom (and hence accountability and divine justice), on the one hand, and God's omnipotence (and hence His ontological primacy and overlordship) on the other. For al-Ghazālī, who recognized the scope and gravity of what was at stake, it was only in supra-ratiocinative states of mystical consciousness, made possible through inner-purification, rituals, and rites of askesis, remembrance, and divine grace that such a theological riddle could be unlocked. The human mind in its everyday mode of awareness could neither understand nor penetrate the mystery of destiny. Al-Ghazālī's response, at least according to his own testimony, was rooted not in an intellectual defeatism but in a direct experience of these truths through *dhawq* (tasting) and *mukāshafa* (unveiling). As he wrote in his famous autobiography, it was only by treading the path of the Sufis that many of the theoretical questions that had previously boggled his mind were answered to his satisfaction.

Attributions

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