THE CAMBRIDGE COMPANION TO

CLASSICAL ISLAMIC THEOLOGY

Edited by Tim Winter

8 Ethics

STEFFEN A. J. STELZER

The end of action is to serve God.

(Ibn Ḥanbal)

Following the Aristotelian example in the field of metaphysics, it is often preferable not to accept received wisdom as to what a discipline is, but, after inquiring into the possibility of its existence, to go instead in search of it. This is certainly advisable in a field like Islamic ethics, where the very concept of such a science has not originated in the place in which one looks for its manifestation. In this case, instead of insisting on an already established understanding of ethics gained from ancient Greek philosophy and from its interpretations in the course of Western philosophy and then transplanting these into Islamic theologies of ethics, one should rather go so far as to risk their failure. Such failure can, of course, attain the concept of the ethical itself. But the price paid can be a gain when it opens the ear to an unheard-of version of ethics. If one prefers, however, to begin from a common root, then there will be two minimal assumptions to be made: that ethics is a science, a knowledge, in the Greek sense of the word, and that the object of this science is human action.

That much said, when one starts to inquire into Islamic ethics, one will soon notice where ways begin to part. Any knowledge, any "science" in Islam, as well as the initiative and the ways to practise it, must be derived from the Holy Qur'an, the Word of God, and from hadith, the reports of the sayings of the Prophet of Islam. The body of rules formulated from both is called *Sharī'a*, commonly translated as "Islamic law". *Fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence) and *kalām* (theology) are, thus, not so much original sources of knowledge as ways (*madhāhib*) of taking from the original sources. Both are born of a precarious situation where authority passes from someone whose actions and words are believed to be unquestionably true because his knowledge is not derived from himself, but from the source of all knowledge, from God, to one whose

qualification consists in two things: his following of the former authority to the highest degree of perfection possible for a human being and his best use of the instrument that God gave him for the purpose of "measuring for Him", that is, reason (*'aql*). But because there is always the possibility that reason may lose sight of the limits imposed on her as an instrument of knowledge and mistake herself for both the chief subject and object, not only the sources of knowledge but also the procedures of knowing must be formulated on the grounds of divine and prophetic authority. In other words, reason may not always be able to determine by herself whether she "follows reason".

The event that accounts for the necessity of *fiqh* and also, though to a lesser extent, *kalām*, is the "death of the Prophet". It should, however, be immediately added that this expression is not unproblematic, because "death" should be understood here from two angles: from the perspective of prophecy, and also from that of humanity, where each angle effects a change in meaning.

Islam as (a) "religion" (*dīn*) describes a situation where human beings cannot know themselves through themselves; where, thereby, the end of their actions is not in their reach; where, in addition, both the command to know their end and the means for such knowledge are not issuing from themselves; and where, lastly, they accept this situation as true and binding. As such the "death of the Prophet" refers first of all to the absence of a human being who, when alive, was accepted as absolutely trustworthy (*amın*) in matters of knowledge about human existence in its relation to the divine. It means, in other words, the absence of an advisor in divine matters whose closeness to the source of divine knowledge was beyond compare.

To give advice (*naṣıha*) is, according to a prophetic saying, "religion" (*al-dın nāṣıha*).[1] To be an advisor is, however, difficult, because it requires a very high degree of sincerity (indicated in the use of *nasaha* in Qur'an 9:91). The important characteristic of "advice" understood in this way is that it makes interpretation superfluous. When an advisor with such authority is thought no longer to be available, then not only other advisors but also other modes of advice must be sought. What offers itself readily as "another mode" is one's own reason. But there is more that changes with this change than just a mode. Islamic legists and theologians were quite aware of this.

The most striking differences between the various schools of jurisprudence as well as between the main schools of theology lie in their views about the sources of knowledge concerning human action. It has often been stressed that both *fiqh* and *kalām* are responses to attempts

at breaking up the unity of the community of believers, the *umma*, which occurred quite early in the history of Islam. This is certainly correct. But it should not be forgotten that the political events were born of and took advantage of an element that lies dormant in the very for-mulation of religion as we find it in Islam. This is indicated by many prophetic sayings concerning authority, which warned of the events that were coming to pass.

In this sense, *fiqh* and *kalām* can be understood as attempts to answer two kinds of insecurities. In the case of *fiqh*, once the ground-work for the assessment of human actions has been laid (through the *Sharī'a* derived from the Qur'an and the *sunna*), there remains the task of applying these guidelines to particular actions and situations and, thereby, establishing the means available and acceptable for formulating particular rulings. *Kalām*, on the other hand, can be seen as an attempt to answer a basic insecurity regarding knowledge of the nature of acts themselves. This insecurity is born of a tension inherent in the ascrip-tion of acts. The Qur'an names as agents of acts both God and man and, furthermore, ascribes responsibility for acts to man. This situation of tension is quite testing for any believer. As long as he understands responsibility only in terms of ownership, that is, as long as he can conceive of being responsible only for that which is his, in this case, his own acts, he lives in this tension without being able to resolve it. Faith will not contribute to its solution, but it allows him to carry the weight.

It becomes, then, important to join to the question which Aristotle sees as central to ethics, that is, the question about the end of (human) action, another one, namely: who acts? In view of one's usual awareness of oneself, this question certainly sounds odd and, perhaps, it cannot ultimately be answered by a human being. It is, then, all the more puzzling that we are able to ask it.

According to the dominant view among Western specialists, Islamic ethics, where it went beyond the mere listing of virtues and vices, was first of all concerned with evaluation and assessment. The "values" for such an evaluation were given in the authoritative texts, the Qur'an and the collections of the prophetic sayings, and consequently, tools had to be devised and applied to particular acts in order to determine the cat-egory under which they should fall. Yet such a search could proceed only within given parameters, that is, within *hudūd Allāh*, the limits set by God. These can be in the most general way described as His commands. The divine commands, very much like the two types of qur'anic verses, namely, the "clear ones" (*muhkamāt*) which should be taken as given, and the "ambiguous ones" (*mutashābihāt*) which invite interpretation,

are of two kinds: those which, simply given, are to be followed as given and for the mere fact that they are given, and those which invite the use of reason and reflection (*'aql* and *fikr*) in order to arrive at an under- standing which leads to their acceptance. The first kind of command refers, broadly speaking, to acts, which address that which is beyond human perception and conception. Such are all recognisable acts of worship. Prayer, pilgrimage and recitation of the Qur'an are examples. The second kind of command refers, again broadly speaking, to acts that address the apparent (*zāhir*). Here, man is invited to use his *'aql*, that is, the means he was given by God, and to do so for the purpose it was given, namely, mindfully to direct his actions in such a way that through them he realises or serves God.

Two things become clear. First, we are in the midst of a subtle play of rotation between "the apparent" (*zāhir*) and "the hidden" (*bātin*) around the axis of the Unseen. It is essential that this configuration be kept firmly in view in any serious reflection about religion, as it lies at the heart of faith itself. If one can say that ethics in a religious context is concerned with actions as acts of worship, then it must take account of both apparent acts of worship and hidden ones. Secondly, the use of what is often called "independent reason" is here not the result of a "free" decision. It follows the divine permission to do so and it is to be exer- cised "to measure for God and not to measure Him" (Ibn 'Arabī). Per- missions are, however, double-edged swords and sometimes more of a trial than of a blessing. They let loose while holding back, a fact which in the original enthusiasm about being able to run on one's own feet is easily overlooked. Reason is no exception. Once it is allowed to indulge in the exercise of its capabilities and grows strong through it, it easily becomes its own object of enjoyment, its own pride and measure. In other words, it forgets, and this forgetting expresses itself as conflict.

Accordingly, the main positions in both *fiqh* and *kalām* as they had crystallised in the so-called "classical period" of Islamic civilisation are seen by many scholars as revolving around the two poles of "reason" and "revelation", or "reason" and "tradition". Although both formulations situate the two poles in different ways and places, they share the terms as marks around which the various theological and jurisprudential schools are grouped.

The main schools of Islamic theology which are of relevance for the discussion of classical Islamic ethics are the Mu'tazila, the Ash'arīs, and, to a certain extent, the Māturīdīs. However, these are not as clearly distinguishable from one another as the names suggest. There are rep- resentatives for each school who are known to have changed affiliations,

d sometimes the outlines of a particular school have become apparent
y through its critical description by another. Perhaps this could serve
as an incentive to shift attention from the distinguishing of one group
from another and the weighing of one against the other to more relevant
considerations, such as: to what extent are all theological schools
deposits of one faith? And what significance is there in the fact that,
whatever the theological differences and alliances, each text on the
matter of ethics begins with the glorification of God and the Holy
Prophet?

The interpretations of Islamic moral thought which to this date have
shaped the most prominent view of ethics in Islam begin from the
assumption that ethics occurs in Islamic theology first and foremost as a
matter of the assessment or the evaluation of acts; this differs from
Western philosophical thought where the ethical occurs first of all in
regard to the constitution of an act. Accordingly, in Islamic moral
thought "ethical" refers to a knowledge which allows us to locate a
particular act on a predefined scale of categories, while "ethics" denotes
the science which defines the means for such a localisation. The scale
is distilled from the Qur'an. Whatever the particular categories are, be
they "*hasan*" and "*qabīh*" ("good, acceptable" and "detestable"), or
"obligatory" (*wajib*), "recommended" (*mandūb, mustahabb*), "permis-
sible" (*mubāh*), "offensive" (*makrūh*), and "unlawful" (*harām*), they are
always acceptable or non-acceptable to someone, and that someone is
not myself, but God. The central question for this interpretation of
Islamic ethics is, therefore, not only "What does God want me to do?",
but also, and perhaps more importantly, "Which means do I have to find
this out?"

Once the question about the means of evaluating action is asked in
this systematic way, another one follows inevitably for the rationalist
discourse: what mode of existence does the "value" of a particular action
have, or, more precisely, where does it reside? If the value resides in the
action itself, then reason is capable of knowing it. If it does not reside in
the action, no amount of reasoning will be able to detect it. It has to be
sought in its place of residence which, in the case of Islamic ethics, is the
divine will, and by means conducive to hearing this will. G. F. Hourani
calls the former position (where value resides in the action itself)
"objectivism" and the latter (where it does not) "ethical voluntarism"
or "theistic subjectivism", and identifies the former with Mu'tazilī
theology and the latter with Ash'arism.[2]

It should be noted that the aforementioned classification is based on
a certain concept of reason, one that sees reason as that which recognises

what is present in its object and is, thus, capable of "evaluation". The name of this presentation, or rather, re-presentation, is "rationalism", and thus Mu'tazilī theology is seen as rationalist. Secondly, the concept of "evaluation" originates in nineteenth-century Western ontologies which interpret being as "value". This ontology implies an evaluator in front of or over against the thing to be evaluated. To be truly evaluating, or, precisely, to be "objective", this evaluator must be "in control", that is, must speak in such a way that in its evaluation the object of its "evaluation" speaks for itself. It is highly doubtful if such a situation can be unproblematically assumed for Islam and for Islamic theology because it implies a degree of sovereignty that is hardly possible for a "servant of God". It is thus only fair and necessary to ask which possibilities a religion offers to evaluate, be it one's own acts, be it those of others, or those of God. The question, if the predicament from which the theological debates between the two main theological schools of medieval Islam (the Mu'tazilites and Ash'arites) resulted was a matter of evaluation, is therefore not settled but open.

Ash'arite theology, on the other hand, while being recognised as the most widely accepted school of Sunnī theology, does not provide such a clear-cut picture. The reason for this does not lie in any obscurity of its theological tenets, but in the fact that it brings to the fore a concept central to Islamic ethics which is difficult to understand in a purely rationalistic way (the concept of "obligation"), which, furthermore, it presents in quite an uncomfortable way. Within the scheme of this classification, Ash'arite theology is registered under "theistic subjectivism". It holds, in other words, that values are not just "objectively" present in human actions and readily available to reason, but that they are the result of the divine will. Such a will cannot be known by reason, or not to an extent that would allow the formulation of judgements based on such knowledge, but must be taken from the sources through which this knowledge speaks: divine scripture, prophetic saying. The function of reason, in the Ash'arite approach, is to see that in referring to these sources their status is respected in the best way possible. The ideal will always be "to say what He says", "to command what He commands", because, in the end, the correct interpretation of a divine word is known only by the divine speaker Himself.

For the rationalist discourse on Islam the significance of Ash'arite theology can best be seen in the fact that, against Mu'tazilite "rationalism", it pointed to the relevance of "tradition" or "revelation". This view helps to sustain a certain idea of Islam, or, for that matter, religion in general, which allows the discrimination of "forward-looking"

(rationalist) from "backward-looking" (traditionalist) theologies, the assignment of a "value" to each, and then offering a choice between the two. However, theology in general, and Ash'arite theology in particular, is more interesting than that. It is, for instance, conceivable that the Ash'arites stress "tradition" or "revelation" not only because they see that these are *per se* to be preferred over reason, but because reference to tradition and revelation is of theological relevance, that is, of relevance for faith and its unity, for the unity of the fellowship of believers, the *umma*. In this sense, Ash'arite theology has more to offer than just a "position", and the question of why this theology should have become the main representative of Sunnī Islam turns out to be less mystifying than it appears to its rationalist interpreters.

Ash'arite theology is of particular relevance for the discussion of Islamic ethics, not so much for its advocacy of tradition as because it contributes to this discussion in two ways which point to the heart of the matter: it directs attention to the nature of human action in a universe characterised by divinity, and it stresses obligation. These two points are, of course, connected. If the "value" of human action for the apparent agent (the human being) is decided by the evaluation of "another", if "permissible action" means "as found permissible by someone else", if "disliked" means "disliked by someone else", and so on, then anyone who considers himself as the owner and origin of his action may wonder what exactly his role in this action might be. Who is the agent of my action? In which sense can I take it to be "my" action? In which sense can I think that I "act" at all? If, furthermore, one is bound to such an "action" and held responsible for it, then what means does one have to understand such an obligation?

Comparing Aristotelian philosophical ethics and Islamic theological ethics, scholars of Islam have pointed out that the most noticeable difference between the two lies in the prominence that obligation as the main criterion for ethical action gains in the latter over "the end of man" in the former. This prominence is due to the fact that humans are seen in Islamic ethics, or in Islam generally, as standing before the law. Ancient Greek philosophy places humans before themselves and thus makes them concerned with their own end rather than with their obligation towards God.

This comparison implies that, for Islam, humans who want to know the "value" or the quality of their actions are placed in front of the divine law with two "gifts", one in each hand. They may either use the gift of reason to understand how the law defines their actions and, thus, how it wants them to act, or they may refer themselves to "the divine

commands" as documented in the Qur'an and hadith. The Mu'tazilite position favours reliance on reason. It bases this on the view, justifiable through certain verses of the Qur'an and through our common perception of ourselves, that we are the agents of our actions. The ontological (though not theological) equivalent to this position assumes that the "value", that is to say, the "being", of an action lies in the action itself. The Ash'arite position, on the other hand, favours reliance on "the divine command", justifying its position through other verses of scripture and through a belief in a creator of whom one may have an intuition but no perception. To accommodate the perception of oneself as agent of one's actions to the view of God as the creator of one's actions, Ash'arite theology derives from qur'anic sources the concept of *kasb*, of "acquisition". In this view, humans "act", though not as agents or creators of their actions but as "receivers". Again, the ontological translation/interpretation of this theological position states that the "value" of an act lies not in itself but in the decree of a divine will ("ethical voluntarism").

There are, of course, various intermediate positions; as many, in fact, as the spectrum of reason allows. However, they all share a shortcoming inherent in their basic construction, namely, that attention is so strongly focused on humans that the divine law occurs only secondarily, only with respect to humans. The rationalist discourse on Islamic ethics implies correctly that, according to Islam, humans are "before the law" and, therefore, in relations of contract, punishment, reward and retribution, and that they are thereby distinguished from the "man" of Greek philosophy; but it does not really deal with the particularity of "the divine law". This has two consequences. First, such a view does not reach into the heart of Islamic ethics. Secondly, it places Islamic moral thought further away from Greek philosophical ethics than is needed or may be fruitful.

To gain a perspective on the matter of the divine Law and to derive from it a standpoint which may benefit an inquiry into Islamic ethics, it is useful to refer to the mystic Ibn 'Arabī's description of *tanzīl al-kitāb*, the "descent of the Book", or the "descent of the divine Word". This description is of particular relevance because it does not just repeat the principle that the Qur'an is the inspiration of all learning in Islam and that all Muslim sciences must take their knowledge from it and then leave these sciences to themselves. On the contrary, Ibn 'Arabī's description of the "descent of the Book" sees them as particular manifestations of the divine Word; it keeps them "in the company" of that Word. Furthermore, it stresses that the descent of the divine Word is not

a historical process but an ever-recurrent epiphany. Finally, it roots the law, and thus ethics, firmly in the Word.

According to Ibn 'Arabī, the divine Word on its descent manifests first as "throne" ('arsh), then further on as "footstool" (kursī), and then splits into "ruling" (ḥukm) and "report" (khabar). Each "foot" of these pairs splits again into two: the "ruling" into "command" (amr) and "prohibition" (nahy). The various branches of the two categories of "ruling" finally form all the categories of "evaluation" of the Sharī'a.

What one should learn from this description is twofold. First, the divine law is a manifestation of the divine Word. The implication of this statement for ethics is that the human being as an ethical being is a being of the word. Secondly, because "ruling" and "report" form in this descent the first duality, the Law can be described as the (divine) Word of, or in, the world of opposition. Its characteristics as well as the sciences of the law themselves give ample proof of this. Humans can therefore not be adequately understood in their ethical dimension as already constituted beings "before the Law" who are then asked to find out by which means they will reply. Or rather, they can be understood in this way only because the law as a particular manifestation of the divine Word constitutes them *by way of word*. This dimension is altogether absent from the rationalist analyses of Islamic ethics, and it needs to be detailed here further.

In order to understand how humans are constituted "before the law", one must take into account that the law as a particular stage of descent of the divine Word marks one of three levels of the manifestation of divine "unity" (tawḥīd). In reverse order, the third level is the level of "the unity of acts" (tawḥīd al-af'āl), the second the level of "the unity of names" (tawḥīd al-asmā'), and the first the level of "the unity of essence" (tawḥīd al-dhāt). It appears from this description that "ethics", insofar as it is "a science of action", has its object in the third level. But ethics cannot be *understood*, if one remains on the level of actions. To become a science, a knowledge, one must move it to the next, higher level, that is to say, to the world of names. For the world of actions is, according to Islamic cosmogony, only a crystallisation of the world of divine names or attributes which, in the Qur'an's teaching, God taught humankind so that they could call upon Him. Ibn 'Arabī's description of the ethical situation of humans is based on this step. He says: "What in fact takes place is that one divine name prescribes the Law for another divine name, addressing it within the locus of an engendered servant. The servant is then called 'the one for whom the law is prescribed' (mukallaf) and the address is called 'prescribing the law'."[3]

The prescription of the law is first of all a linguistic event. It introduces "address". Without address there would be no one who could be held responsible for his actions or any possibility of knowledge regarding such actions: that is, there would be no ethics. Secondly, the addressee is not a particular human being or mankind in general, but a divine name. The law does not address "me". Or, to put it differently, I am addressed by the Law only because "I" is the place for this address from name to name. This is the meaning of *taklīf*, of ethical responsibility. Therefore, one's ethical responsibility does not lie in one's capacity to answer (the rulings of) the law through one's actions or in finding out which means are the most appropriate to that answer. Rather, any action or any responsibility on one's part lies in shouldering the address. It should be added that the role of reason is, thereby, not diminished; on the contrary, it is made clearer.

Accordingly, the schools of *kalām* should be seen as manifestations of concerns for the divine Word that appear once this Word reaches on its descent the stage of multiplicity, duality, opposition and thus what is called "the world of human actions". Insofar as the knowledge of these schools is situated on this stage, and to the extent that they are fixed in it, they must bear its marks. That is, they must be multiple and fixed in opposition to each other. When the Ash'arites regard another group of Muslims as "Mu'tazilites", meaning "seceders", when they argue back and forth against one another, each one claiming to know better regarding the matter of actions, then this is an expression of their station. As Ibn 'Arabī has remarked, each position on this level is both "right" and "wrong" (or "blind"). Furthermore, each school bases its own position on certain verses of the Qur'an which it accepts without interpretation and then proceeds to interpret the verses on which the opponent bases himself. When the Mu'tazilites say that man is the agent of his acts, this accords with one's perception of oneself and is to this extent correct. This perception is, however, "blind", not because it sees something that is not true, but because it does not see what it sees. It does not recognise that the reason for perceiving oneself as the agent of one's acts lies in the fact that one is created "in His image" ('alā sūratih). In a similar way, the Ash'arite theologians who hold that God is the creator of one's acts are also correct because such a view can be substantiated both by scripture and by one's thought. At the same time, the Ash'arites are "blind" because they do not witness this. They say something that reason "tells" them, namely, that there must be a creator, a "maker", behind all that is made. Yet they do not *see* this, because reason can show them only what is not the

creator. In other words, both opponents are locked within their positions and within the level of the divine Word they share. Ibn 'Arabī's critique of the term *kasb* can be understood from this angle. Once the Ash'arites had stated their position, that "one's acts are created by God", they still had to accommodate the perception one has of oneself as agent of one's actions. They did this by saying that humans "acquire" what God creates. Such a formulation may indeed satisfy the rational mind, but for Ibn 'Arabī it contains "a darkness towards knowledge which no one sees but the insightful: well, there is no relationship between what is built from that and what is realised of His essence – Majestic, High and Great!"[4]

The "darkness towards knowledge" lies here in two things. First, the concept of acquisition, while seeming to open to man in a world where actions are basically God's creation a way to contribute to these actions, in fact fixates the human element on itself through giving in to the human desire for priority, and thereby closes the possibility of humans' openness towards their creator. Secondly, the "human being" of *kasb* cannot recognise his shortcomings by himself. This can be best illustrated by the particular vicissitudes the main protagonist, reason, undergoes.

The human being who is accountable for his or her deeds is called in Islamic law *'āqil* (usually translated as "reasonable" or "endowed with reason"). The Arabic root *'QL* means "to bind", "to tie", "to tether". Reason is understood as that which allows a creature, here a human being, to bind himself, to hobble emotions which otherwise might sweep him away and thereby to become capable of "sane", "reasonable" judgement and action. This understanding is implied in the rationalist interpretations of Islamic ethics which see the main argument of the various theological schools as one of identifying the principle which should take the leading role in determining the validity of one's actions: reason or revelation, reason or scripture. But, as employed in rationalist discourse, "reason" and "revelation" cannot really fulfil the function of decisive players in this argument because they are *both* born of the same concept of reason. Furthermore, as long as the assumption of reason as "tie" does not lead to the next question, namely, What should this reason (*'aql*) which ties be tied to? or in other words, What is the reason of reason?, it is quasi-suspended, left to itself. One ends then with a false duality: one (1), as *'āqil*, as a morally responsible person, ties (via reason) (2') oneself to reason (2"). It is obvious that this is not a true duality. It seems that the doubling of reason fulfils a requirement for triplicity which can be seen as the basis of "relation" in general and of ethical

relation in particular ("one (1) binds oneself (2) to reason (3)"), but it is equally apparent that it allows it only falsely and as a false triplicity, that is, that it rejects it in reality. This falseness becomes clear when Ibn 'Arabī states that the 'āqil is "the one who binds himself to Allah", thereby producing a true rational triplicity: one (1) binds oneself (through reason: 2) to Allah (3).

The correction of this false duality (inherent in all thought based on the classical subject–object dichotomy) is ethically important because, besides clarifying the ethical position of a human being "before God", it introduces a distinction between thoughts in view of their sources. Ibn 'Arabī says that the 'āqils, those who bind them-selves to God, to "His command and His prohibition, and [to] what God has dictated in [their] innermost self ... distinguish among the incoming thoughts of their hearts, between the ones which are from Allah and those which proceed from their own selves, or the sug-gestions of angels, and the suggestions of Satan". And he adds that those are the "[real] human beings".[5]

Obviously, such a view does not criticise or minimise the validity of rational deliberation in ethics. No theological school in Islam has done this. It points, however, to the necessity of anchoring reason. For without such an anchor, reason is easily bandied about by the very thing from which she claims to be most distant, namely, emotion, while remaining fully convinced of her "reasonableness". And because this "reasonableness" is won from a doubling, from an insistence on itself, from a kind of stubbornness, the matter soon becomes insoluble. The danger outlined here is present both in Islamic moral thought and in the "rationalist" descriptions of this thought. In the former this is, however, recognised and mitigated by the fact that the founders of kalām were usually firmly rooted in one of the four traditional madhhabs (the four main schools of Sunnī jurisprudence); moreover, the founders of these madhhabs in turn consulted spiritual advisors. In a word, the propon-ents of the various schools of ethical thought in Islam knew very well that their "science" marked only a particular stage in the descent of the divine Word and that in order to be of any scientific relevance this science could not disrupt its connection with previous links in the chain of descent. Such disruption, or rather erosion of the previous stages, has occurred only in modern Islamic theologies.

The rationalist interpretations of Islamic ethics, on the other hand, are very ill prepared to counter this danger, and the more they find their value in themselves or in their own rationality, or the less they are aware of any other possible instance of knowledge, the more vulnerable to this

danger they are. A good illustration for this is supplied by the term which stands in the very centre of Islamic ethics, namely "obligation".

Echoing from afar Kant's discussion of "duty" as the principle of ethics, obligation addresses the issue of "binding". In other words, recognition of the value of one's action, be it through reasoning or through revelation, is ethical only if it binds one to act in accordance with this recognition. Hence the challenge becomes the quest for a principle of self-binding. Kant's asking whether there is a reasonable principle in which and through which reason can oblige herself is echoed in the question about "whether one can ever have an obligation towards one-self".[6] It is significant that "obligation towards others" is perceived as much less problematical. This perception can be explained by the fact that reason's fascination is with herself, or put differently, by the fact that she is ever in search of a concept that can found her. For Western scholars, the benefit of positioning "obligation" in the centre of Islamic ethics lies in its assumed capacity to supply a pre-Islamic, "rational" basis for Islamic ethics in a historical perspective. Of course, if it founds Islamic ethics, it must then, in a certain way, be "before" Islam. If this can be shown, then the centre of gravity of Islamic ethics would lie both inside and outside of it.

The rationalist thesis is this: most humans may not be able to explain why, but they are very much aware that they feel "obliged" without anyone telling them so. They do not need sacred scripture to inform them about the existence of obligation. It is, therefore, remarkable that religion repeats in her own terms (revelation, Word of God, etc.) what one, as a human being, already knows. And it proves both religion, through the fact that she accords with our thinking, and us, through the fact that we always thought what she says. This gives the rationalist interpretation of Islamic ethics a much-needed historical perspective, because through it Islam can be believed to provide an illustration of the "anteriority" of reason to herself, that is, of an arch-reason located before its split into (religious) reason and revelation. There is one particular act which thus becomes the act of all acts, or *the* ethical act, namely "thanking the Benefactor" (*shukr al-mun'im*).[7]

Why, of all possible actions, this one? Why "thanking the Benefactor"? The main reason seems to lie in its capacity to lend itself to constructing a continuity between a pre-Islamic, pre-revelational mindset and Islam (or revelation) itself. If the terms of this act (*shukr al-mun'im*) could be found in pre-Islamic usage, then it would be sufficient simply to follow the changes in meaning they received in the various stages of Islam, and one would have thereby established a fair

understanding of Islamic moral thought as a continuation of pre-Islamic *rationality*. Or, if it turns out that the terms involved in the act are terms central to Islam itself, one would have managed to "place" it, to confirm it as a religion.

Central to the act of "thanking the benefactor" is that it involves "obligation". The pre-Islamic usage, or, as it is called, the usage of "Arab humanism", is reconstructed in terms of *ni'ma* (benefaction, kindness; *al-mun'im*, the benefactor, is an active participle), as meaning "sparing a person's life". *Shukr*, thanking, is taken to mean "publicly to acknowledge the benefaction". The stress lies here on the "public" aspect of this acknowledgement. It implies that thanking is done not so much to the particular individual who spared my life without having to do so, as to or for "the public". The other, quite important, aspect of this matter is that "the refusal to recognise that obligation was, in pre-Islamic times, called *kufr*".[8] Now, *kufr* is commonly translated as "unbelief". The implications are not difficult to draw: *īmān*, faith itself, although not mentioned in this context, must then be found in the neighbourhood of this public acknowledgement of having been spared. In other words, religion, or more precisely Islam, translates the meanings these terms have "before revelation" into revelation: the Arab humanist, or human benefactor, certainly the one who gives life but, as we may assume, more relevantly the one who spares my life, is inflated until he becomes "The Benefactor", "God"; and "belief in God", or "religion" becomes the "public acknowledgement of having been spared" on a larger scale, that is, with God as the public.

The inerrant instinct with which rationalist-historicist discourse about Islamic ethics targets Ghazālī's view of "obligation" and "thanking the benefactor" permits us to recognise, however, that the historical construction of rationality, that is, here, of a logic of continuity from pre-Islamic rationality to Islamic rationality, is not unproblematic. The following quotation from Ghazālī is interesting here:

> Gratitude to a benefactor is not necessary by reason, contrary to the Mu'tazilite. The proof of this is that "necessary" [*wajīb*] has no meaning but what God the Exalted has made necessary [*awjabahu*] and commanded with threat of punishment for omission; so if there is no revelation what is the meaning of "necessity"? This argument is confirmed as follows: Reason should make gratitude necessary either for some benefit or for none. It is impossible that reason necessitates it for no benefit, for that would be useless and foolish. If it is for a benefit, it must be either for the One served, but

that is impossible, since He is too Exalted and Holy to have ends, or for the servant. The servant's benefit must either be in this world or in the next. But there is no benefit to him in this world, rather he is [only] wearied by study and thought, knowledge and gratitude, and deprived by them of desires and pleasures. And there is no benefit [known by reason] in the next world, for Reward is bestowed as a favour from God, and is known by His promise and His announcement; and if He did not announce it how would it be known that there is to be Reward?[9]

Hourani's reply to Ghazālī's critique of reason as a valid means for recognising "obligation", that is, as the source of ethics, is essentially that Ghazālī misses the point. Accordingly, the Mu'tazilite theologians would not have to prove that reason can see the *benefit* of acts for agents, but only their "obligatoriness". There seems to be a divergence, then, as to the function and status of reason. Whereas for Ghazālī the function of reason is precisely to measure benefits in this world ("obligation" lying beyond reason's scope because it is not a matter of benefit or not a matter of benefit as reason can conceive it), for Hourani reason is nobler than that: it can conceive "obligatoriness". What exactly is introduced with this divergence?

Alternatively, what precisely is the status of "thanking the Benefactor"? Is it such a central, self-contained element that one could build the whole edifice of Islamic moral thought upon it? The following lines from the Sufi writer Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī (1207–1273) give a more intricate and exciting taste of Islamic ethics:

If outwardly I neglect to thank you or express my gratitude for the kindnesses, favours, and support you give both directly and indirectly, it is not out of pride and arrogance, nor is it because I do not know how one ought to repay a benefactor in word or deed, but because I realise that you do these things out of pure belief, sincerely for God's sake. And so I leave it to God to express gratitude for what you have done for His sake. If I say that I am grateful, and acknowledge my admiration for you in praise, it would be as though you had already received some of the recompense that God will give you. Humbling oneself, expressing gratitude, and admiring another are worldly pleasures. Since you have taken pains in this world to bear the burden of monetary expense and social position, it would be better for the recompense to be wholly from God. For this reason I do not express my gratitude, as to do so would be this-worldly.[10]

Several things appear from these lines. First, the matter of "thanking the Benefactor" is certainly of relevance for Islamic *akhlāq* (manners) but it is *per se* not constitutional. Secondly, gratitude can be expressed "in word or deed". To express it in one way or in the other is of itself not decisive. More decisive than this word/deed distinction is the issue of *who* expresses gratitude and *to whom* such gratitude is expressed. As it is put here, actions done "out of pure belief" for the sake of God gratify God. It is not only humans who are "thanking", be it pre-Islamically as an announcement to the public, or Islamically, as belief in God. God Himself may "express gratitude" and does so, in fact, when the action is truly ethical, truly done for His sake.

It follows from these observations that "expressing gratitude" by itself does not constitute an action as "ethical" or "moral". If it is possible to express gratitude, be it to another human being or to God, as "a worldly pleasure", then the ethical dimension of this gesture is not constituted by the act itself but by its *address*. The fact that reason may itself have a concept of obligation, or "obligatoriness", does not constitute an ethical dimension for Islam, nor does it raise reason into the touchstone for recognising the ethical validity of actions. Rūmī even goes so far as to say that the best measure for assessing the ethical validity of actions could very well be "not to express my gratitude in word or deed". If, however, one should express gratitude and should thank the benefactor, or The Benefactor, *in this world*, then this is so not because reason informs us of the obligation but because God *commands* us to do so: "and as for thy Lord's blessing, declare it" (Qur'an 93:11). Thanking, declaring your Lord's blessings in this world, is described in Islam as a matter of "courtesy with God" (*adab ma'a'llāh*) and it constitutes a major ingredient in the knowledge of God. Herein, in *adab*, lies a truly significant and little-explained feature of Islamic ethics. It appears, for instance, in the command, difficult to understand on rational grounds, to ascribe "bad" (*sharr*) to oneself and "good" (*khayr*) to Allah, although one is told that everything occurs by divine leave.

Worth noting in terms of thanking the benefactor is that in Islamic teaching "the One who gives thanks" and "the Benefactor" are divine attributes. Accordingly, one would have in "thanking the benefactor" – as Ibn 'Arabī noted – the address of a name to another name in the locus of the engendered servant. The "engendered" or created servant is the place that allows the address of one name to another. The servant is neither the addresser, the one who thanks (*al-shakūr*), nor the one thanked (*al-mashkūr*). He/she serves the address, the names. And in

order to do that, one must allow each name its full weight, which is to say that one must "abide by the Law".

It seems that the rationalist interpretation of Islamic ethics which takes "thanking the benefactor" to be its central principle is more interested in the one who thanks than in the benefactor. And the one who thanks is, in this interpretation, most likely not God. God is tied by this way of thinking, bound to the gratitude of the one who thanks. Or, so it appears, because this is, of course, not possible. And, thus, the same "false" duality seems to be at work again.

What if one were to ask: what is the character of the ground on which it is established that the ethos of a religion (here Islam) is rational? Is it itself rational? In other words, is what tells me that "I am obliged to the one who spares my life" really so rational, or might it not resound from different recesses? Further, is that which makes one *recognise* this voice as the voice of reason itself so rational? These are not very sound grounds on which to base ethical thought. Rūmī's description of "not thanking the benefactor" hints at this grey zone and displays a deeper wisdom in dealing with it. It hints, thereby, at an Islamic ethics that, discovering the treacherousness of the so-called rationalistic foundations, proposes not to leave the circle of reason but, on the contrary, to deepen it.

Immediate effects of such a deepening include what one might call the "freeing of realms to themselves", or, in Islamic terms, the "giving everything that has a right what is its right" (*ītā' kulli dhī ḥaqqin ḥaqqah*). Reason in this world is, thereby, freed from its admixture with metaphysical elements and becomes clearer and more astute. Traditional Islamic sciences like *fiqh* and *kalām* illustrate this. What belongs to heaven, on the other hand, is returned to heaven, and both are allowed "to be good neighbours", as the Taoist phrase goes.

All ethics is, in the end, moved by the question formulated by Plato and repeated by Aristotle: "Can virtue be learnt"? If the answer is that "unlike the *technai*, *aretē* [virtue] is not teachable" and that "traditional ethical and moral customs are based not so much on teaching and learning as on taking someone as an example and emulating that example",[11] then one would like to know what happens "after Socrates". How did Plato become virtuous? If being in the company of Socrates made him good (and, maybe, the Platonic dialogues are more than anything else a sign of this), then what happened "after Plato"? We might remember that the same issue, the "death of the Prophet", led to the formulation of Islamic jurisprudence and, eventually, theology. Should one not ask, then, what happened to the companionship of those who

became virtuous through being in the company of the Prophet (ṣaḥāba)? It is strange that such a patent fact, the necessity of companionship for becoming an ethical, virtuous human being, escapes one although one knows it so well. Indeed, the more deeply entrenched one is in one's "rationalities", the less one is aware of the role of company (suhba) in ethics. The more sensitive interpretations of Islamic ethics or of the transmission of knowledge in a traditional Islamic context acknowledge at least the significance of the divine Word and, therewith, of all words. But although the Prophet of Islam is reported as saying that every prophet had a miracle, and his miracle was the Qur'an, it seems that even these interpreters cannot comprehend that words are not only something transmitted "from line to line, or mouth to mouth", but also, and most importantly, "from breast to breast".

Further reading

Abdullah, M. Amin, *Kant and Ghazālī: The Idea of the Universality of Ethical Norms* (Frankfurt, c. 2000).

Fakhry, Majid, *Ethical Theories in Islam* (Leiden, 1991).

Frank, Richard M., "Moral obligation in classical Islamic theology", *Journal of Religious Ethics* 11 (1983), pp. 204–23.

Gardet, Louis, and Anawati, George C. *Introduction a la théologie musulmane: essai de théologie comparée* (Paris, 1948).

Gimaret, Daniel, *Théories de l'acte humain en théologie musulmane* (Paris, 1980).

Hourani, George F., *Reason and Tradition in Islamic Ethics* (Cambridge, 1985).

Jackson, S. "The alchemy of domination? Some Ash'arite responses to Mu'tazilite ethics", *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 31 (1999), pp. 185–201.

Reinhart, A. Kevin, *Before Revelation: The Boundaries of Muslim Moral Thought* (Albany, 1995).

Sajoo, Amyn B., *Muslim Ethics: Emerging Vistas* (London, 2004).

Winkel, Eric, *Islam and the Living Law: The Ibn 'Arabī Approach* (Karachi, 1997).

Notes

1. Bukhārī, Īmān, 42; Muslim, Īmān, 94.
2. George F. Hourani, *Reason and Tradition in Islamic Ethics* (Cambridge, 1985).
3. Muhyī al-Dīn Ibn 'Arabī, cited in William C. Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge: Ibn al-'Arabī's Metaphysics of Imagination* (Albany, 1989), p. 208.
4. Eric Winkel (tr. and ed.), *Mysteries of Purity: Ibn al-'Arabī's Asrār al-tahārah*, (Notre Dame, 1995), p. 178.

5. Winkel, *Mysteries of Purity*, p. 511.
6. Hourani, *Reason and Tradition*, p. 14.
7. A. Kevin Reinhart, *Before Revelation: The Boundaries of Muslim Moral Thought* (Albany, 1995), p. 109.
8. Ibid.
9. Ghazālī, *Mustasfā*, quoted in Hourani, *Reason and Tradition*, p. 156.
10. Wheeler M. Thackston, Jr (introd. and transl.), *Signs of the Unseen: The Discourses of Jalaluddin Rumi* (Boston and London, 1999), p. 114.
11. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *The Idea of the Good in Platonic-Aristotelian Philosophy* (New Haven and London, 1986), p. 46.