

CONFRONTING THE THREAT OF RELATIVISM

Views from Islamic philosophy

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Abstract

Today the issue of ethics and most importantly moral values are being seen as merely based upon opinions and emotions. This has led towards a relativisation of moral values and thus towards the erosion of values amongst societies. This paper would analyze and suggest ways of preserving values for the structuring of developmental ideas for thinkers in developing countries. Coming from an Islamic standpoint the ideas of virtues have to be rooted within the transcendent or the Absolute. Such defense of virtues are definitely beyond the grasp of usual western philosophy as the philosophy that is propagated by Islam is not a mere intellectual exercise but a transformative exercise which connects the profane to the sacred, the outer to the inner and the physical world to the spiritual world. The loci or the focus point is the human being thus developing the idea of being human via the inculcation of and preservation of virtues is of utmost importance. The virtues most important in Islam such as justice, moderation or temperance have been discussed by various muslim philosophers. These virtues are rooted in the Absolute and through His presence in the various levels of existences are they known. For Using ideas from malay cosmology and soteriology based upon the writings of Malay scholars, this paper would highlight ways to preserve and ensure Malay society does not fall under the threat of relativism of moral values.

Introduction to the problem

The various approaches in ethics prevalent in modern contemporary consciousness originates from the philosophical discussions in western philosophy as to what constitutes right, wrong, virtuous vice etc. We can roughly divide the ethical approaches to three main distinct approaches deontological, teleological and virtue based ethical theories.

Deontological meaning knowledge of duty or responsibility is famously represented by Immanuelle Kant (d.17..)¹ and his many interpreters in this modern period. This theory basically says that ethics is done for the sake of fulfillment of a certain duty and that duty is never based upon selfishness but upon goodwill of the doer without any expectation of reward. The duty is outlined by our reasoning which makes it a categorical imperative which every rational human being should undertake. The good action is that action which is done in fulfillment of duty and done without the expectation of any reward or any gains whatsoever (goodwill).

Teleological ethics on the other hand measures the goodness or badness of an action based upon the end result of the action. As Berkeley said and echoed later by John Stuart Mill², an action is good if it provides a good outcome for the doer of the action. Such belief which can be traced back to Epicurus back in the 4th century before the common era, rest upon the mistaken view that human beings are pleasure seeking animals who are constantly 'running away' from pain. This view leads to the attitude common amongst the people today of 'you scratch my back I'll scratch yours' 'or always looking after no.1' meaning you have to always look after yourself in spite of the rest or even the attitude of constantly seeking enjoyment or pleasure in whatever that people do. So what is right or wrong is not defined according to any fixed criteria or even definition but based merely on what advantage the action would procure for the individual acting upon it.

Virtue based ethical theories however are based upon the teachings of Aristotle. In his book which was written to his son Nichomachea³, Aristotle talked about the good life and how one can achieve it. To Aristotle the good life or eudemonia is achieved via action in our daily life which has to be based upon the principle of the mean. The mean is the middle position between vice which is due to lack of the value and with the vice which is

¹ Especially in his *Groundwork for the metaphysics of morals*

² John Stuart Mill, *On What Utilitarianism is*

³ Aristotle, *Nichomachean Ethics*

due to the excess of the value. This mean position for any particular value in ethics is what Aristotle named as virtue. Therefore not all moral values are virtues but all virtues are necessarily moral values. To achieve eudemonia one has to practice the mean position in action which is the virtue.

In the face of all these approaches there is a new approach in western philosophy which have become more prevalent in this post-modern world that we live in today and that is the position of moral relativism or ethical relativism⁴. It is the view that there are no universally valid moral principles and values. The validity of all moral principles is relative to culture or individual choice.

This position as proposed by quite a few western philosophers cannot be analyzed adequately in a paper of this sort however the position can also be summarized as the position of no position i.e. there are no absolute values what exist are mere subjective opinions by these various philosophers (mentioned above). To talk about universal values is to presuppose that there is a set of values or virtues that is accepted by a majority of people in the world today and that cannot be accepted but based upon religion and its teachings or metaphysical foundations. A note has to be said here and that is on the issue of tolerance. Tolerance of other people's cultural views doesn't mean that we accept the position of moral relativism. It merely means tolerance and accommodation of the different cultures and religion. Tolerance of other culture and religions has somehow led some anthropologist to accept the position of moral relativism⁵.

What are the views of muslim scholars or philosophers in regards to these ethical issues? How does Malay thought or philosophy approach these issues? How is it that we achieve happiness in life according to Malay muslim philosophy? These are some of the issues studied to an extent in this paper.

According to al-Kindi (d.866 CE) the aim of philosophy is:

“Philosophy is the language of the reality of things within man's possibility because the philosopher's end in his theoretical knowledge is to gain truth and in his practical knowledge is to behave in accordance with the truth”

⁴ For a very informative overview see Mohammad Ali Shomali, *Ethical Relativism*, London:ICAS, 2002.

⁵ See the discussion on this issue in Muhammad Ali Shomali. *Ethical Relativism*, London: ICAS, 2002, pg.

This ‘reality of things’ echoes the Prophetic supplication *Allahumma arini ashya’a kamā hiya* (O God I beseech you to give me the knowledge of things as they are). This view of the aim of philosophy is followed throughout the ages by subsequent muslim philosophers. Of course philosophy had begun as a reaction to the Greek intellectual corpus which the muslims found in Alexandria however as time passed muslim philosophers themselves had begun to bring forward their own theories and findings. Of course muslim philosophers were aided in their quest with the insights from the Qur’an and the teachings of the Holy Prophet as recorded in muslim traditions. The total reliance on reason for seeking universal truths or finding out what the true reality of things were found wanting which resulted muslim philosophers from Ibn Sina onwards to move towards the realm of direct comprehension or witnessing of the Absolute Truth (*al-Haqq*). This is achieved via spiritual exercise and spiritual science known in muslim tradition as *tasawwuf*. As a result philosophy in Islam is no more a mere intellectual exercise but a mixture of rationality and spiritual insights. Later muslim philosophers summarized the aims of philosophy as:

“Philosophy is the perfecting of the human soul through the cognition of the realities of existents as they truly are and through judgments about their being ascertained through demonstrations and not grasped through conjecture or blind imitation, to the measure of human capacity”

So philosophy has become a knowledge by which human beings can perfect their soul. For perfection of the soul would necessarily produce the perfect human being which is the aim of ethics.

By acquiring good ethics or conduct the individual has power over his faculties in the Islamic sense the soul controls the body. In Islamic thought and philosophy the soul is the loci of all abstract attributes e.g. good character, reason or the intellect. The body is the loci of all gross attributes. Thus for the soul to have power over the body is to mean the higher abstract attributes are more in priority if compared to the gross physical attributes and all that is connected to it. From the individual point of view, it means he/she is in full control of his bodily appetites and has not succumbed to their temptations. This controller is always mentioned as the soul or sometimes the intellect controlling the body. By having control over the bodily appetites does not mean eradicating desires but it means

controlling and fulfilling it according to what is permitted and preventing it from committing the forbidden. When these are in control the effects would be a moral individual and thus society. The individual would achieve success or salvation in this world and the next.

This view of human being's ability to achieve the perfection is shared by the Malay thinker Shams al-din Sumatra'i (d.1634)⁶. In his many works he elaborates on this view of human being and its potential abilities. He and his mentor Hamzah Fansuri had talked about the theory of the perfect human being in many of their writings.

The way of fulfilling this potential is by acquiring the traits of God which is the divine names of God. These traits are the virtues which are rooted in the Absolute who is transcendent. Of all of God's creation, it is only mankind that is endowed with the divine names as the Muslim scripture (the Qur'an) tells us:

“And He taught Adam the names all of it then presented them to the angels; then He said: Tell me the names of those if you are right. They answered: Glory be to Thee! We have no knowledge but that which Thou hast taught us; surely Thou art the Knowing the Wise. He said: O Adam ! Inform them of the names. Then when he had informed them of their names, He said: Did I not say to you that surely I know what ghaib in the heavens is and the earth and (that) I know what you manifest and what you hide?” [31:3] ⁷

⁶ A short concise overview on Shams al-Din Sumatra'i is available see A.H.Johns, *Reflections on the Mysticism of Shams al-Din al-Samatra'i* in Jan van der Putten and Mary Kilcline Cody (editors), *Lost times and untold tales from the Malay world*, Singapore: NUS, 2009, pp. 148-63.

⁷ Al-Baqarah 31-3, translation of M.H.Shakir. This verse had been commented by Sunni and Shi'i commentators alike. The loftiness of the station of man is due to the fact that he/she has the secret of the divine names. This privilege knowledge is not known to the angels. However there have been tendencies in the Shi'i commentaries to indicate that the names are in actual fact the names of plants, trees, mountains and other things created by God. See tafsir al-Ayāshī, Maktabah Ilmīyyah al-Islāmīyyah, 2 vols., see vol.1, pg. 32; Majma' al-Bayān, Dar Ihya' al-Turāth al-ġArabī, 5 vols., see vol. 1, pg. 75, Tabarsi however includes that these things are those which are connected to the commands of religion and the world. He also included a report from Ibn 'Abbas, Mujahid and Sa'id ibn Jubayr who said that these things are the names of the languages of people from Adam's sons and their progeny. Interestingly he also quoted from a Mu'tazili scholar, Abu 'Alī al-Jubba'i who said that God had made speech a miracle for three Prophets i.e. Adam, Isma'il and Muhammad (s.a.w). Mulla Ṣadra's famous student and son in-law Mawla Muhsin or Mulla Muhsin Fayd' Kashānī had also followed his master's interpretation of this verse to mean

According to various commentators of the Qur'an such as Ibn Kathir, Fakhr al-Din al-Rāzi and the Tafsir al-Jalālain these names are the divine names of God. God had given human beings this divine secret which even the angels do not possess knowledge of. This is also why human beings are God's vicegerent and thus command the respect of even the pure angels.

Although human beings are endowed with this divine knowledge and come close to God, the human being is still but at the level of slavehood. As Shams al-Din says:

“Martabat insan kamil itu martabat hamba..”

(The level of the Perfect Man is the level of the servant (of God))

Ibn 'Arabī (d.1240 CE) an influential figure in Islamic thought and philosophy, regarded the divine names as the character trait which is the foundation for man's vicegerency. He says:

“No existent thing is named by all the divine names except man, who has been charged to assume the names as his own traits. That is why he was given the vicegerency and the deputyship, and the knowledge of all names. He was the last configuration within the cosmos bringing together all the realities of the cosmos”⁸

the names of God or the asma' al-husnā which are seen in the loci of their manifestation in this world, see Tafsīr al-Šāfi, Dar al-Murtaḍ'a li al-Nashr, Mashad, 5 vols., see especially vol. 1, pg.96. In the sunnī tafāsīr we find an almost the same discussion in regards to these verses. The traditional commentaries similar to the traditional commentaries of the Shi'ī also mentioned the names as being names of things (ash'ya) of which had made Adam worthy of being prostrated to. Thus this verse shows the loftiness of man if compared to the angels, see Ibn Kathīr, Abū al-Fida' Isma'īl, Tafsīr Qur'ān al-Azīm, Dar al-Hadīth: Qāhīrah, 1993, vol.1, pg. 70; see also Tafsīr al-Jalālain, Dar al-Ma'rīfah: Beirut, undated, pg. 8. al-Razī mentioned many aspects of interpretation of this verse beginning with a more theological approach by mentioning the views of Ash'arī, al-Jubbā'ī and al-Kačbī in regards to the names being necessary knowledge ('ilm al-d'arrūrī), see Tafsīr al-Kabīr, vol. 1, pp. 161-3. Amongst the Šūfī tafāsīr, we see Ibn 'Arabī takes it for granted that these names as being the divine names of God and he ties it with the discussion on the *imago dei* hadīth that God had created Adam in His image to mean that Adam and sons of Adam as a whole has the potential to realize the divine names in them thus are suitable for vicegerency and deputyship. See Qaiser Shahzad 'Ibn 'Arabī's Contribution to the Ethics of Divine Names', *Islamic Studies* 43:1 (2004), pg. 10-12.

⁸ See Qaiser Shahzad's article mentioned in the note above, pg.11.

Therefore the inculcation of good character traits according to Islamic philosophy is rooted in the understanding of the attributes or the names of God. The names of God are in turn mentioned in the primary sources of Islam i.e. the Qur'an and the hadith. So teaching the divine names and attributes are essential in the educational philosophy of the muslims. As Islam teaches the path towards achieving *saadah* or happiness ⁹ through coming close to God thus the first step in studying religion in Islam has to be in teaching the divine names and attributes of God i.e. the knowledge of God. This is also mentioned in the famous tradition from the Holy Prophet of Islam who had said: The beginning of religion is the knowledge of God. The first step in studying this deen or religion has to be through the teaching of the knowledge of God. The knowledge of God is taught in order for the students to know God's attributes and how they relate to his essence and also most importantly for the students to inculcate the divine attributes in their daily conduct.

How is it that we know of the attributes of God? And how are they virtues i.e. how did they come to be virtues?

According to the muslim philosophers or hakim, the world is an endless manifestation of God as he presents Himself through various manifestations or presences.

Shams al-Din al-Sumatra'i is explicit when discussing this point:

"Surely all the Verifiers had named it as presences because God's essence and existence pervades all the worlds which in turn are His self-disclosure (*tajalli*) and places of His self-manifestation (*zuhur*) from eternity without beginning (*azal*) to an eternity without end (*abad*). As God says in the Qur'an: "Is it not enough (O Muhammad) that your Lord does witness all things?" [41:53]"¹⁰

God as he is understood here self-discloses to the verifiers or those endowed with knowledge. As Hamzah Fansuri says so elegantly in his poetry:

⁹ See his The Meaning and experience of happiness in Islam, *Prolegomena to the metaphysics of Islam, An exposition of the fundamental elements of the worldview of Islam*, Kuala Lumpur: ISTAC, 2001, pp. 91-110.

¹⁰ For a thorough study of this and further excerpts from Shams al-Din, see Mohamad Nasrin bin Mohamad Nasir, *A study and critical edition of the Haqq al-yaqin of Shams al-Din al-Sumatra'i*, unpublished thesis, International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilization, IIUM, 2008. I am at the moment working in transforming this study for the sake of publishing it in the near future by IIUM Press.

Tuhan kita itu yang bernama Aliy
Dengan sekalian sifatNya sentiasa Baqi
Ala jami' al-alamin atharNya jadi
Daripada sittu jihat- sebab inilah khali

Cahaya atharNya tiadakan padam
Memberikan wujud sekalian alam
Menjadikan makhluk siang dan malam
Ilal abadi abad tiadakan karam¹¹

Translation:

Our Lord is He who is exalted
With all His attributes forever abiding
Upon the universe entire His effects take form
From the sic directions-hence He is alone

The light of His effects will never die out
Giving existence to the universe entirely
Creating creation day and night
Forever and ever will never cease¹²

As God who is transcendent descends and reveals himself to the world the virtues come to be. In the understanding of Islamic philosophy God the transcendent reveals or self-discloses himself through various stages of which he is present.

As God reveals himself through self-disclosures His knowledge also comes about in what can be seen as the permanent archetype. According to Shams al-Din: "The first of the seven levels is the level of Non-Entification, self-disclosure and self-manifestation. The six other levels are levels of Entification, self-disclosure and self-manifestation. Two of the six levels are called inner self-disclosure and inner self-manifestation i.e. it is the presence of God's predispositions or divine states and it that presence whose world are the immutable entities. The (other) 4 levels (are called) outward self-disclosure and outward self-manifestation which are the presence which has

¹¹ Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas. *The Mysticism of Hamzah Fansuri*. Kuala Lumpur: University Malaya Press, 1970, 236

¹² Ibid. pp.356-7

as its worlds the world of spirits, imaginal world and the world of bodies, and world of the perfect man or world of man-animal.”¹³

It is the third level that concern us here and that is according to Shams al-Din: The third divine presence: The level of Inclusive-Unity (which is) unseen. The world is the world of the immutable entities which are within the world of God. Hence everything in this level is the objects of knowledge which are both specific (*muayyan*) and relatively differentiated (*mufassal*)

This is the level of the immutable entities which is the object of His knowledge. These entities are the divine names and attributes of God as such are the objects of His knowledge. It is through these names that we come to know God and His attributes. It is here that Islamic cosmology tells us that God is present everywhere in the cosmos. As God is known as the names itself and these names teach us regarding how the universe comes into existence.

By rooting their everyday practices in the divine names muslims would be better able to deal with the modern world. As the divine names are transcendent i.e. are attributes of God therefore believing in them and actualizing them in conduct and behaviour the muslim would be able to escape the relativism that has plagued modern contemporary philosophy.

By understanding and practicing the divine names in daily conduct would ensure happiness as our philosophers had discussed above. However what is happiness? According to the contemporary Malay muslim philosopher Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas, happiness in islam is not only this secular life but also in the hereafter. Furthermore happiness in this life is not an end in itself and that the end of happiness is love of God. This love of God is basically the glue which binds the muslim to God. This is the concept of *asyik* (lover) in traditional Malay sufi writings. It is through love that one moves towards becoming more in character with the beloved. It is like the love of a student to a respected teacher. This love would lead the student to become more (imitate) like the teacher in mannerism, ways of talking etc. Thus by being in love with God one would like to resonate more with God via imitating the attributes via the divine names.

For the sake of this paper we would like to focus on one of the main virtues emphasized via the writings of the muslim philosophers i.e. the virtue of justice.

¹³ Mohamad Nasrin bin Mohamad Nasir, *A study and critical edition of the Haqq al-yaqin of Shams al-Din al-Sumatra'i*, Chapter 3.

Justice as a virtue

Justice means the ability to put things in their rightful place. This ability would bring about a way of doing things or responding to things in its proper measure. Justice or al-“adl is one of the divine names of God as such a virtue in the eyes of Islamic philosophy. To be just in islam would necessitate acting in the correct way or manner. This acting in the correct manner is wisdom and one of the divine names of God is the Wise (al-Hakim). The individual who gives everything its proper place is a courteous person. Such is the connection between the divine names and the ethos of Islam that being a muslim who practices justice would necessitate that person being courteous (*adib*). As Ibn al-‘Arabi says:

“The man of courtesy is he who brings together all noble character traits and knows the base character traits without being described by them. He brings them together all the levels of the sciences both those which are praiseworthy and those which are blameworthy since in the eyes of every intelligent person, knowledge of a thing is always better than ignorance of it. Hence courtesy brings together all good.”¹⁴

Furthermore he becomes the perfect man. The concept of *al-insān al-kāmil* or the perfect man is an Ibn ‘Arabī conception of man which has been used by various muslim thinkers and philosophers. Basically the idea is that man is the microcosm which contains within him the macrocosm and thus the divine names. It is only if man realizes his potential that he will achieve this station of the perfect man. This potential is realized by the act of ‘assuming the character traits of God.

According to William Chittick: “the Divine Names must be actualized in the proper relationships, the names of beauty preceding those of wrath, generosity dominating over justice, humility taking precedence over magnificence and so on. The perfect equilibrium of the names is actualized by the perfect assumption of every trait in the form of which human beings are created i.e. perfect equilibrium is to be the outward form of the name “Allah”, the Divine presence”¹⁵

¹⁴ See William Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge*, State University New York Press, 1989, pg.175.

¹⁵ Ibid. pg. 27. According to Takeshita, Ibn ‘Arabī was the first exponent and user of this term, see Masataka Takeshita, *Ibn Arabi's Theory of the Perfect man and Its place in the*

This acting would not come about without knowledge. For someone to act in a correct manner he or she needs to have correct knowledge for correct knowledge leads to correct action and correct action is nothing other than acting according to the principle of justice.

Correct knowledge comes from the full rounded individual i.e. the individual who are given knowledge of the seen and the unseen. For it is stated in the Qur'an that those who are conscious of God (*muttaqīn*) are given the knowledge of seen and the unseen.

Conclusion

We have thus discussed in brief how virtues are to be rooted in the divine names or in the telos in order to escape nihilism which is the result of secularism. By acquiring the divine names as part of the moral and ethical life of individual, muslims would be fulfilling their potential of being. God is presence in this world through the various divine presences as discussed by the various muslim theosophers indicates the coming to actuality of His many attributes and objects of knowledge thus rooting the virtues in His attributes which are permanent and stable. To act in a just manner would produce a perfect human being who is also moderate. ❖

history of Islamic Thought, Institute for the Study of Languages and Cultures of Asia and Africa, Tokyo, 1987, pg. 49. Other studies apart from the articles mentioned above on Ṣadrā which mention this concept see Zailan Moris, *Revelation, Intellectual Intuition and Reason in the Philosophy of Mullā Ṣadrā (An analysis of the Hikmah al-Arshīyyah)*, Routledge Curzon, London, 2003, pg. 57-61, S.H.Nasr, *Sufi Essays*, ABC International Group Inc., Chicago, 1999, pg. 111. On the concept of the perfect man from the school of Ibn 'Arabī, see R.A. Nicholson, *Studies in Islamic Mysticism*, London, 1921, chapter 2; "the Perfect Man is the total theophany of the divine names, the whole of the universe in its oneness as seen by the divine essence", Annemarie Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*, University of North Carolina Press, 1975, pg. 272