

EPISTEMOLOGY OF MORAL JUDGMENTS ACCORDING TO THE HOLY QUR'AN

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The judgments passed on human actions as to their goodness and rightness or otherwise are called the moral judgments. These judgments are restricted to the actions of normal sensible human of these moral judgments because they can not exercise the rational process of discrimination between good and evil or between right and wrong. The same reason exempts the actions of insane persons from being judged morally. Even in case of the normal and same adult human beings there are two pre-requisites to be found in their actions before any moral judgment can be passed upon them. The first is that these actions should be voluntary and the second is that they must have some positive or negative bearing vis-ō-vis the moral values. That behaviour of a man deserves neither praise nor condemnation on which his volitions, choices or decisions have not made and even could not at any time; whether past or present, make any effect. Freedom to make a choice between the various possible alternatives; to do or avoid some act is a must for permitting a moral judgement to be made. But although freedom is a necessary condition for an act's moral evaluation yet it is not the only or the sufficient condition. An act may be voluntary and yet may not be an object of moral evaluation. Rather than being moral or immoral it may remain a moral. Take the example of two law-abiding and value respecting persons. One of the does not have to do much of physical labour and therefore he chooses out of his own free will to have a light

breakfast while the other person might opt for a heavier breakfast in anticipation of the hard physical labour that he has to perform in the hours to come. The act of choosing the kind of breakfast that each of these two gentlemen had was free and self-chosen. Yet neither of them can be morally eulogized or depreciated because their choices and the acts resulting there from come into the jurisdiction of morality only when, besides being voluntary and volitional, it has some bearing on the moral values such as Truth, Knowledge, Social Welfare, Justice, Health, Wisdom, Happiness, Courage, Honesty, Friendship etc.

The question of moral behaviour is therefore basically a question of the moral values. If our actions conform to the principles of morality and also further promote the cause of the values they are judged as right or good. To the extent they fail to do so they are condemned as wrong and evil. Moral judgment therefore means accepting a moral value as a standard and declaring whether the particular act on which the moral judgment is being made is in accordance with the principle or whether it promotes the cause of the value cherished by us or whether a negative effect is produced by it.

There are in Ethics some very lengthy discussions as to whether the moral values are known by the exercise of reason; whether they are inferred from the practical example of a law-giver or whether they are contained in the divine commands. In this article I have tried to give a brief description of Islam's contention regarding these sources of knowledge in respect of moral principles and values.

To begin with, the Kalam-Allah, i.e., the word of God has the supreme authority. Allah is Omniscient. His knowledge encompasses everything. Nothing is hidden from him. He knows all the secrets of the world. The nature and

wisdom of all the phenomena of the world, the laws inherent in the processes of change, evolution and revolutions as well as the needs and necessities of life are all fully known to Him. The Qur'an says:

ان الله لا يخفى عليه شيء في الارض ولا في السماء (آل عمران: ٤٤)

Lo! Nothing in the earth or in the heaven is hidden from Allah. (III:5)

ولله غيب السموات والارض (النحل: ٤٤)

And unto Allah belongeth the Unseen of the heavens and the earth. (XVI:77)

اتتاهم الله الذي لا اله الا هو وسع كل شيء علما (طه: ٤٤)

Your God is Allah, than Whom there is no other God. He understandeth all things in His knowledge.

Allah is not only *al-Aleem* i.e., the Knower but also *al-Hakeem* i.e., the Wise. His commands are full of wisdom and lead to the Truth.

انه حكيم عليم (الحجر: ١٥)

Lo! He is Wise, Aware. (XV:25)

انه حكيم عليم (الحجر: ١٥)

Lo! He is Wise, Aware

قد الله يهدي للحق (يونس: ١٥)

...say: Allah leadeth to the Truth. (x:35)

وانه عليم حكيم (الحج: ٤٤)

...And Allah is Knower, Wise. (XXII:52)

In His wisdom He has ordained only that which is for the welfare and betterment of the people. It is therefore

incumbent upon man to obey His commands and to refrain from that which has been forbidden by Him. To act otherwise would definitely lead away from the path of the Truth and Right-doing to the path of ignorance and evil-doing:

والذين كذبوا بآياتنا سنستدرجهم من حيث لا يعلمون (الاعراف: ٤٤)

And those who deny Our revelations – step by step we lead them on from whence they know not.

ومن لم يحكم بما انزل الله فاولئك هم الظالمون - (البائدة: ٤٤)

...Whose judgeth not by that which Allah hath revealed; such are wrong-doers.

ومن لم يحكم بما انزل الله فاولئك هم ارفاسقون - (البائدة: ٤٤)

...Whose judgeth not by that which Allah hath revealed; such are evil-doers.

The Holy Qur'an is therefore the supreme authority in Islam for the purpose of determining the moral values and principles. It is from this authority that we come to know that God is the source of all values. He created man as His Vicegerent upon earth. It is, therefore, man's duty to acquire godly characteristics as far as is humanly possible. A famous saying of the Holy Prophet (peace be upon him) further supports this view wherein he is reported to have said:

تخلقوا باخلاق الله

(Inculcate in yourselves the characteristics of Allah).

The characteristics of God are expressed in the Qur'an by the connotation of His various names (*Asma-e-Husna*) which are the sources of all higher values of life. Similarly His commands are the surest and un-faulty grounds for the

principles of morality. The basic and fundamental principles of morality ordained by Him in His Kalam i.e., the Holy Qur'an are eternal, unchangeable and irrevocable. The passage of time and the in-coming changes in the social set-up do not and can not make any difference to them. He is the Creator of this universe as the laws of all movement and change. In His great wisdom and knowledge therefore at the time of His revelations He was fully aware of all the future changes and the ever-new circumstances to be faced by man. The changes inherent in the development of the historical process and also the innovations in the field of economic and social relations and the scientific inventions were all known to Him. He has given us the most general and fundamental principles which are true for all times to come. The practical application of these general principles in the particular circumstance, however, is to be done with reference to the general spirit of the age concerned and the particular case. We might say that the moral laws and values as revealed by God are eternal but their comprehension, interpretation and casuistic applications are temporal.

The safest guide to Muslims and in fact to all human beings in understanding and comprehending the true import of the word of God is the precept of the Holy Prophet teaches the Muslims and makes them understand the wisdom contained in the Book of God. His teachings and personal example purifies the believers:

كما ارسلنا فيكم رسولا منكم يتلوا عليكم ايتنا و يزيككم و يعلبكم الكتب و

الحكمة و يعلبكم ما لم تكونوا تعلمون - (البقرة: ١٢٩)

Even as we have sent amidst you an apostle from amongst you, who rehearseth unto you our revelations and

purifies you and teacheth you the Book and wisdom, and teacheth you that which ye were not want to know. (11:151)

لقد من الله على المومنين اذ بعث فيهم رسولا من انفسهم يتلوا عليهم اياته و

يزكيهم ويعلمهم الكتب والحكمة وان كانوا من قبل لفي ضلل مبين- (آل عمران: ١١٤)

Assuredly Allah hath conferred a benefit on the believers when He raised up unto them an apostle from amongst yourselves; he rehearseth unto them His revelations and purifieth them and teacheth them and teacheth them the Book and wisdom, and afore they were in an error manifest. (III:164)

هو الذى بعث في الامتتين رسولا منهم يتلوا عليهم اياته و يزكيهم ويعلمهم الكتب

والحكمة- وان كانوا من قبل لفي ضلل مبين- (الجمعة: ٦)

He it is Who hath raised amidst the unlettered ones an apostle from among themselves, rehearsing unto them His revelations and purifying them and teaching them the Book and wisdom, though they have been aforetime in error manifest. (LXII:2).

According to the Qur'an the teachings of the Holy Prophet are for the betterment and welfare of the people. The Prophet teaches nothing that may be evil. To abide by the teachings of the Holy Prophet is useful and beneficial to man. We may or we may not be able to comprehend the rationale of the Prophet's teachings yet the fact is that the true following of the Prophet is in our own interest. Thus it is stated:

الذين يتبعون الرسول النبى الاقمى الذى يجدونه مكتوبا عندهم فى التوراة و

الانجيل يا مرهم بالمعروف و ينههم عن المنكر و يحل لهم الطيب و يحرم عليهم

الخبثُ ويضع عنهم مرهم والاعغل التي كانت عليهم فالذين امنوا به وعزروه ونصروه واتبعوا النور الذي انزل معه اولئك هم المفلحون-

Those who follow the messenger, the Prophet, who can neither read nor write, whom they will find described in the Torah and the Gospel (which are) with them. He will enjoin on them that which is right and forbid them that which wrongs. He will make lawful for them all good things and prohibit for them only the foul and he will relieve them of their burdens and the fetters they used to wear. Then those who believe in him, and follow the light which is sent down with him; they are the successful. (VII:157)

The Holy Prophet not only communicate the word of God to mankind but also acted himself in such a way that his life is the best possible example as to how the divine injunctions and prohibitions can be translated into human actions. He has been commanded by God to be the First Muslim and the Holy Prophet did completely surrender himself to God:

وامرت لان اكون اول المسلمين- (الزمر:٢٢)

...And I am commanded to be the first of those who surrender unto Him. (XXXIX:12)

That is why the first and the best example of how to obey God is furnished by the Holy Prophet Himself. It is stated in the Qur'an:

لقد كان لكم في رسول الله اسوة حسنة لمن يرجو الله واليوم الآخر واذ كر د الله كيثرا

(الاحزاب:٢١)

Verily in the message of Allah ye have a good example for him who looketh unto Allah and the Last Day and

remembereth Allah much. (XXXIII:21)

It is, therefore, incumbent upon Muslims to obey the Prophet and seek guidance from him. To ignore this sure guidance would definitely result in their going astray. Only those actions are right which are performed in accordance with the teachings of the Prophet while those are wrong which do not coincide with his teachings. The Qur'an says:

قل اطيعوا الله والرسول (آل عمران:٤٦)

Say: Obey Allah and the messenger. (111:32)

O ye who believe! Obey Allah and the messenger and render not your actions in vain. (XLVII:33) As compared with these unfortunate people, those who follow the Prophet will be fortunate enough in that Allah will have mercy upon them and will bestow upon them the real success.

واطيعوا الله والرسول لعلكم ترحبون (آل عمران:٤٦)

Obey Allah and the messenger, that ye may find mercy. (III:132)

ومن يطع الله ورسوله فقد فاز فوزا عظيما (الاحزاب:٦٦)

...Whosoever obeyeth Allah and His messenger, he verily hath gained a signal victory. (XXXIII:71) (Besides the Qur'an, therefore, the Sunnah of the Holy Prophet is an equally important and necessary determinant of moral values from the Islamic point of view. These two sources are imperative and indispensable. Neither of these can be ignored or avoided. Islam, however, gives due importance to reason also and many instances can be quoted from the Qur'an wherein stress has been laid upon the judicious use of reason. In some verses the inherent contradictions of those who

deviate from the path of righteousness are brought into fore and the verses are completed with the words, **ان لا تعقلون** i.e., do you not use your reason or do you not understand?

The nature and history contain many a thing which can enable a man to choose right, take a correct decision and act judiciously' should he exercise reason.

ان في ذلك لآيات تقويم يتفكرون - (الرعد: ٣)

Verily in these things there are signs for those who ponder. (XIII:3)

ان في ذلك لآيات تقويم يعقلون - (الرعد: ٣)

. . Verily in these things there are signs for those who reflect.

(X111:4)

The fore-sighted people have been asked by the Qur'an to draw lessons from the history of the past

فاعتبروا يا اولي الابصار (الحشر: ٣)

...So learn a lesson, O ye endured with insight. (LIX:2)

A sincere, impartial and dedicated use of reason for finding out the true spirit of the righteousness produces wisdom which is a great boon according to the Qur'an:

ومن يؤت الحكمة فقد اوتى خيرا كثيرا وما يذكر الا اولوا الالباب (بقره: ٢٤٦)

...And he to whom wisdom is granted receiveth indeed a benefit overflowing. (11:269)

In fact the role of reason in morality cannot be ignored. Morality is a matter of training, regulating and harmonizing the various impulses, urges and desires of the human self and subordinating them to the moral values and principles. This

can be done only by reason. Only reason can work as an arbiter between the mutually conflicting desires, wishes and emotions. Furthermore, occasions may arise where the believers have to exercise their own reasoning faculty in order to understand and act upon the true spirit of morality. In this connection the famous conversation between the Holy Prophet and his companion Muaz bin Jabal is a very pertinent example, Who the latter was appointed the governor of Yemen. The Holy Prophet asked him as to how he would judge the matters coming up before him. He replied that he would judge the matters according to the Book of God. The Prophet asked Muaz what he would do if the Book of God contained nothing to guide him in some particular matter. Muaz replied that in that case he would act upon the precedents of the Prophet of God. The Prophet again asked him what he would do if the precedents did not help him. The reply of Muaz was that in that case he would exert to form his own judgment in the matter. The Prophet was pleased with this answer and thanked God for guiding his disciples to adopt a method which he himself liked.

The above mentioned conversation between the Prophet and his companion may, in its context, seem to be relevant to the administrative and political matters yet the same is very much relevant in the matters of Ethics and Morality. This shows that the believers may come across with a situation wherein they may not be able to find a clear-cut injunction from the Holy Qur'an or the Sunnah of the Prophet and must therefore use their own reasoning faculty to arrive at a conclusion. The Prophet had no doubt taught and propagated the universal moral values and principles but he had done so in a specific society and a specific period of time. His methodology with regard to the particular applications of

the divine commands has therefore to be understood by us in the context of the environment that he lived in. The universal element has to be distinguished from the particular spatio-temporal elements of his methods and practices. This universal aspect of his methods and practices would then have to be adopted and applied by us intelligently and rationally in the context of the current circumstances. To do this would involve a judicious use of our reasoning. Hence the institution of Ijtihad in Islam which means to use the thinking, speculating and reasoning faculties in order to infer the true spirit of the law in a particular case. Yet the reason has to conform to the spirit of the Qur'an and Sunnah of the Prophet.

Another argument for the use of reason is that the demands of the different moral values are not always mutually complimentary. In special circumstances, they may be mutually conflicting so that the fulfillment of the demands of one value cannot be attained until and unless another value is at least temporarily set aside by us. We are confronted with the problem of making a choice between the two values. Both of these values are cherished by morality but in the given situation it may be that one of them has the priority over the other. To choose and prefer e.g., between forgiveness and punishment or truth-telling and saving a man's life we are in need of a judicious use of our intellect or the reasoning faculty. The Technical term used in Islam for this sort of the Judicious use of reason is 'Istihsan'. The literal meaning of this word is to consider something good or preferable i.e. what seems nearer to the spirit of the revealed truth contained the Qur'an and practiced by the Holy Prophet. In terms of jurisprudence it means to prefer any one of the two aspects of a problem on the basis of some rational

argument.

After the word of God and the Sunnah of the Holy Prophet, then, reason occupies an important position in the matters of morality. It may however be pointed out that the role of reason according to the Qur'an is secondary and subordinate to the word of God and the Sunnah of the Holy Prophet. The values and the principles given by the Qur'an and the Holy Prophet are absolute and cannot be changed or altered by the reasoning of any man howsoever intelligent he may be. Reason cannot frame and pronounce moral values and principles of its own. It has only two functions to perform. One is to understand, explain and elucidate the values and whenever there is a problem of deciding as to which of the two or more values is to be adopted and adhered to, it may choose between them according to the principle of Istihsan. Its second function is to exert in order to find out and decide the best possible course of action in such circumstances where the clear-cut injunctions are not available in the primary sources of values viz., the Holy Qur'an and the Sunnah.

Human intellect however has its limits. Though important yet it does not have an over-riding position. Its job is just to try to understand, and explain the true connotation of the will of God and also to make an effort as to how best can the principles already given by God and His Prophet can be applied to the new situations. Any attempt by reason to go beyond these limits would amount to an exercise which might cause man's deviation from the right path. That is why the believers are warned by the Qur'an not to prefer their own judgments and opinions to those of God and his Prophet. This warning tells human beings that they not being their own creators, can not know themselves fully hence they can

not depend on their reason only in respect of understanding good and evil. They do not know what is morally good and what is evil, unless they take the decision with reference to the Qur'an and Sunnah. Says Allama Iqbal,

آدمی اندر جهان خیر و شر
کم شناسد نفع خود را از ضرر

Man in this world of Good and Evil very rarely can know what really is beneficial to him what is harmful.