

<a href="https://doi.org/10.24035/ijit.28.2025.337">https://doi.org/10.24035/ijit.28.2025.337</a>			
Received:	06 March 2025	Accepted:	17 August 2025
Revised:	06 April 2025	Published:	15 December 2025
Volume:	28 (December)	Pages:	90-103
<b>To cite:</b>			
Müfit Selim Saruhan. 2025. Intersections of religion and ethics: A philosophical analysis within Islamic thought. <i>International Journal of Islamic Thought</i> . Vol. 28 (Dec.): 90-103.			

## Intersections of Religion and Ethics: A Philosophical Analysis within Islamic Thought

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### ABSTRACT

*This paper provides an in-depth exploration of the complex and multifaceted relationship between ethics and religion, offering a nuanced analysis of the various philosophical and theological views regarding their intersection and independence. It examines how religious doctrines, such as divine commandments, shape moral values like good and evil, justice, and virtue, while also considering perspectives that argue for the possibility of grounding moral principles outside of religious frameworks. The paper contrasts different schools of thought from both Western and Islamic traditions, including Kantian ethics, which emphasizes duty and the necessity of belief in God to uphold moral principles, as well as ethical theories that assert the sufficiency of reason, human nature, and social agreements for moral guidance. The Islamic view, represented by theological schools such as the Mu'tazila, Ash'ari, and Maturidi, presents a wide range of positions, from the belief in moral values existing independently of God's will to the assertion that morality is inherently tied to divine command. These perspectives are juxtaposed with Western philosophical traditions, including the moral autonomy argued by thinkers like Hobbes, Kant, and Hume, who contend that moral obligations can arise from human reason, societal contracts, or natural laws. Additionally, the paper delves into the role of religious belief in motivating ethical actions, examining arguments that suggest faith can inspire moral behavior by grounding it in a higher divine authority, while also considering critiques that question the necessity of religious belief for moral action. Through these discussions, the paper provides a comprehensive examination of the ethical frameworks proposed by both religious and non-religious traditions, highlighting their interplay and potential for mutual reinforcement or divergence.*

**Keywords:** Ethics, Islamic philosophy, morality, religion, value.

The intricate relationship between ethics and religion has been a subject of philosophical inquiry for centuries, often sparking debates about their origins, purpose, and implications. As fundamental elements of human thought, both ethics and religion serve as guiding frameworks that shape individuals' actions, values, and perceptions of right and wrong. Despite their shared role in fostering moral behavior and guiding human life, these domains are often discussed in

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terms of their identity, independence, or the ways in which they complement each other. Understanding this complex dynamic is crucial for addressing deeper questions about human nature, societal norms, and the role of divine will in shaping moral principles.

Central to the discussion is whether ethics can exist independently of religion or whether religion is inherently tied to the moral fabric of human life. This question has been approached from various philosophical, theological, and cultural perspectives. Each offers valuable insights into how we perceive good and evil, justice, and human rights. The relationship between the two is often framed in terms of either their identity, where religious and moral values are inseparable, or their independence, where morality exists as a secular pursuit that does not necessarily rely on divine guidance (Gensler 2016).

In the context of this discussion, several key philosophical and theological debates emerge, which this article seeks to address. These include the role of divine will in shaping moral values and whether the standards of morality are universal or culturally relative. Further, the paper explores the motivational role of faith in guiding ethical behavior, questioning whether belief in a higher power is essential to moral action, or if secular principles can function independently. Additionally, a look into the tension between the universal and relative aspects of morality, and how these aspects shape ethical decision-making, is vital to understanding the complex nature of morality. (Swinburne 2004). By engaging with these themes, the article draws upon a wide range of perspectives, from classical theological traditions to modern philosophical approaches. This allows for a thorough examination of the fundamental problems of moral philosophy, such as the highest good, the measure of right action, and the question of human free will. Throughout, the paper will consider how religious and secular views on morality intersect and influence each other, and how this affects contemporary moral and ethical discourse.

Ultimately, this article aims to provide a deeper understanding of the relationship between ethics and religion by exploring both their points of convergence and divergence. It seeks to contribute to the ongoing dialogue about the nature of morality, its origins, and its application in a diverse and complex world, offering insights into how humans can better navigate the ethical dimensions of their lives.

### Philosophical Background

When discussing human nature and the essence of life, we encounter a range of intellectual reflections—from the implicit to the explicit, from fluidity to consolidation, from influence to being influenced, and from authority to authorization. An indispensable third pillar in any discourse on the relationship between humans and life is morality. Morality pertains to an individual's perspective on life and the alignment of their attitudes, shaped by this perspective, with themselves and their surroundings.

At first glance, morality might appear to be one of the simplest topics to discuss. As Socrates famously asserted, "No one knowingly does evil" (Plato 1992). We are not debating a trivial issue (morality) but rather an incredibly significant one. After all, what subject could be more substantial than discussing how we should live or how we are currently living? Plato addresses moral issues in several of his works, including *Phaedrus*, *Protagoras*, *Symposium*, *Gorgias*, *Republic*, *Timaeus*, *Theaetetus*, *Phaedo*, *Lysis*, and *Laches* (Plato, 1992). According to Plato, a person who knows what is good will inherently be good. No one deliberately and willingly commits evil; rather, evil arises from ignorance. True virtue is based on true knowledge, and true knowledge is the knowledge of ideas. A knowledgeable individual who has attained the knowledge of ideas has also reached virtue. Plato's moral philosophy, thus, is centered around the attainment of the highest good by humans. Plato's epistemology, as seen in his *Allegory of the Cave*, further connects knowledge to morality—suggesting that human beings must step out of the shadows of ignorance to truly grasp the Good (Plato 1992).

Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* begins with references to the nature of the highest good for individuals and society, as well as its connection to happiness and human craftsmanship (Matson, 1987). According to Aristotle, inquiry into the nature of happiness naturally leads to the question of the ultimate goal of all human activities: happiness. Broadly speaking, some find the

purpose of life in pleasure, virtue, observation, or research, but Aristotle favors the latter. An action that aligns with reason and its standards is consistent with virtue, which signifies rational behavior. Any act that realizes human goodness and purpose is also morally good. For Aristotle, the good is that toward which all things strive (Aristotle, 1988). Aristotle's *doctrine of the mean* further specifies that virtue lies in finding balance between excess and deficiency—an important concept in understanding the ethical nature of human action.

Similarly, in Islamic philosophy, Al-Farabi's *The Attainment of Happiness* echoes the same themes. Al-Farabi brings forward the discussion of virtues, which Aristotle relegated to a secondary position, and attempts to ground human productions, arts, and crafts in a more foundational manner. His work builds upon the Aristotelian concept of virtue but emphasizes the relationship between individual and collective happiness in the context of a well-ordered society (Al-Fārābī 1999; Saruhan 2013). Al-Farabi introduces the concept of the "virtuous city," where moral and political philosophy intertwine to create an ideal state, promoting human flourishing as a collective endeavor rather than an individualistic pursuit.

Kant, as is well known, considers morality both as an independent proof and as a necessary condition for the realization of the highest good, which requires the existence of God and immortality. Virtue and happiness are the two fundamental components of the highest good. Through the concept of the highest good, people are drawn toward religion, and duty is the effort to realize this highest good in the world. Kant bases his moral philosophy on the moral law, duty, will, and freedom (Kant 2002; Erdem, 2008). Kant's *categorical imperative* further argues that moral actions should be guided by principles that can be universally applied—each individual must act as if their actions could be a universal law. This focus on duty, rather than on consequences, distinguishes his moral philosophy from utilitarianism.

Spinoza, however, approaches morality from a completely different perspective. He conceives of morality not in terms of an adherence to laws or duties, but in terms of understanding the nature of human desires and the effects of emotions, rationally processing them to achieve human flourishing. For Spinoza, virtue lies in the alignment of one's actions with the rational understanding of one's emotions and desires, rather than in a pursuit of an ideal external good. Spinoza employs a different method—one that relies on a geometric mindset and methodology. For him, geometry, with its axioms and definitions followed by propositions, represents the ideal mode of thought. Spinoza begins his famous *Ethics* with a discussion of God and concludes with an exploration of the power of the mind and human freedom (Spinoza 1994). Independent of religious texts, he formulates definitions, propositions, axioms, and proofs concerning God and the soul, using physics as a starting point to delve into metaphysics and the depths of pure reason. Spinoza's approach offers a novel perspective by focusing on the mind's power to shape human behavior through rational understanding of emotions, contrasting with the more conventional views of morality as a pursuit of external virtues.

In contrast to the rational ethics of Plato and Kant, Friedrich Nietzsche (1887) critiques traditional moral systems in his work *On the Genealogy of Morals*, arguing that modern moral systems have been heavily influenced by slave morality, which values traits like humility, self-sacrifice, and obedience. Nietzsche calls for a reevaluation of values and advocates for the creation of a "higher morality" that transcends conventional ethical norms, emphasizing individual strength and self-overcoming (Nietzsche 2014).

This brief review of the literature serves as a prelude to a deeper inquiry into the nature of morality. Philosophy, in its pursuit of true knowledge, ultimately aims at right action. Knowledge, therefore, is both beautiful and good. As Socrates asserted, "No one knowingly does evil" (Plato 1992). Knowledge and virtue are inseparable, just as ignorance and vice are. This demonstrates the essential role that knowledge plays in exploring the sources of moral principles and in shaping ethical behavior.

When confronted with the question, "What should I do?" an individual begins to generate values based on their knowledge and understanding. Undoubtedly, knowledge generally fosters morality. However, it is also evident that some individuals possess knowledge but fail to exhibit moral behavior. Socrates argues that not all knowledge, but only a specific type of knowledge, can

be equated with virtue. This particular knowledge is the knowledge of good and evil, which is wisdom (László 1988; Sahakian 1975).

The discussion of the nature of morality is, in essence, a discussion of the nature of humanity. Until we comprehend how humans acquire knowledge, we cannot fully explain their actions. The internal depth and scope of morality must be understood not just as external ethics, but also in terms of the cognitive and emotional processes that guide moral behavior.

Religious ethics places significant weight on divine commandments to define moral values. However, some philosophers, including Immanuel Kant, argue that belief in God is essential for grounding morality. Kant's moral philosophy incorporates belief in immortality and God as necessary components for completing his duty ethics. In his view, belief in God and the afterlife serves as a foundation for proper moral behavior and the resolve to overcome moral flaws. Additionally, Henri Bergson (1986) argued that ethics and religion are inherently connected, stating that "we cannot call primitive religions unethical. From the beginning, customs are entirely moral. Since religion forbids deviation from custom, ethics and religion exist together" (Matson 1987).

Modern thinkers, such as Jean-Paul Sartre, also critiqued traditional religious and moral views, asserting that morality must come from individual freedom and responsibility, not divine commandments (Sartre 1943). For Sartre, morality emerges from the existential act of creating meaning in an otherwise meaningless world, where human choices define the essence of existence.

### Morality and Relativity

Morality is a complex and multifaceted concept that can be understood as both universal and relative, creating a distinctive "tension" between these two dimensions. This tension is not a crisis but a dynamic interplay—an ongoing effort to achieve balance, reflecting both the shared ethical commitments of humanity and the diverse contexts in which these commitments are expressed. Morality is universal in many respects, yet as the standard of universality rises, relativity adjusts to maintain harmony, offering the necessary flexibility to account for human complexity. This tension reflects the fluctuating relationship between universal and relative aspects of morality.

On the one hand, morality applies to all cultures and peoples—whether Native American, African, French, Turkish, Japanese, Chinese, or Indian. Despite vast differences in customs, traditions, and practices, morality remains a universal concern. It is difficult to conceive of any society—no matter how different—without moral obligations that bind individuals together. This universality is grounded in the fundamental need for human beings to cooperate, form social bonds, and live in harmony with one another. Philosophers such as Immanuel Kant, with his *categorical imperative*, argue that there are moral laws that apply universally to all rational beings (Kant 2002). Similarly, the concept of "natural law" developed by thinkers such as Aquinas suggests that certain moral truths are self-evident and accessible to all human beings through reason (Aquinas 1947). In this sense, morality has a universal dimension that transcends cultural and geographical boundaries.

However, the application and interpretation of these universal principles vary greatly across cultures and situations, revealing the relative nature of morality. Different cultural contexts shape how moral principles are understood and enacted. What one society considers morally acceptable, another might deem unacceptable. This reflects the pluralistic nature of moral systems across the world. For instance, while the principle that lying is inherently wrong may be universal, the justification for lying can differ depending on the circumstances. In certain situations—such as protecting someone from harm—lying may be seen as morally permissible or even required. This highlights the *contextual flexibility* of morality, where universal norms are adapted to fit the specific needs and challenges of a situation.

Moral relativism, which emphasizes the context-dependent nature of morality, is an important theory in this regard. According to moral relativism, moral principles are not absolute, but are shaped by cultural, historical, and situational factors. In this view, what is considered morally right or wrong can vary from society to society, and there is no single, objective standard by which all moral claims can be judged. Proponents of moral relativism, such as David Hume,

argue that moral judgments are shaped by human emotions and social conventions, rather than by immutable, objective standards (Hume, 1739). This theory allows for a diversity of moral beliefs and practices, recognizing that different societies may have different but equally valid moral codes.

One of the strengths of moral relativism is that it promotes tolerance and understanding of cultural diversity. By acknowledging that different cultures have different moral norms, relativism encourages respect for cultural differences and discourages ethnocentrism. This can foster an environment of dialogue and mutual respect, where individuals and societies can learn from one another without imposing their own moral beliefs on others.

However, moral relativism also faces significant objections. Critics, such as J.L. Mackie, argue that relativism leads to a form of moral nihilism, where no moral principle is truly binding, and all moral claims are equally valid (Mackie 1977). This challenges the idea of moral progress, as there would be no objective basis for evaluating practices such as slavery, human rights violations, or environmental destruction. Without universal moral standards, relativism could undermine efforts to address these global issues. Furthermore, critics argue that if morality is entirely relative, then any action—no matter how harmful—could be justified based on cultural or situational factors, making it difficult to challenge harmful practices within a society.

In response to these objections, some philosophers propose a more moderate form of relativism, which holds that while moral principles are not absolute, there are still certain basic values that should be respected across cultures. For example, Thomas Nagel suggests that there may be a "core" set of moral principles—such as the prohibition of unnecessary harm—that can be agreed upon by all societies, while allowing for flexibility in other areas. This approach seeks to balance the recognition of cultural diversity with the need for certain moral universals.

The relationship between universal and relative morality, therefore, is not an either/or proposition. It is a dynamic interplay that requires both a recognition of universal moral principles and an appreciation for the contextual variation of moral practices. Philosophers like Richard Rorty and Charles Taylor argue that the goal of moral philosophy is not to establish a set of universal, unchanging principles, but to create a framework that allows for dialogue and mutual understanding across different cultural and moral traditions (Rorty, 1989; Taylor, 1991). The tension between universal moral norms and contextual variation is essential to the ongoing evolution of ethical thought, and it is through this tension that we can create a more inclusive and adaptive moral framework.

Stating that morality is universal does not imply that all moral actions are the same, nor does it erase the importance of cultural variation. Similarly, claiming that morality is relative does not mean endorsing a moral free-for-all. The key lies in understanding how specific circumstances—what we say, when we say it, to whom, and in what manner—help create a harmonious balance between universal moral principles and their relative application. This nuanced understanding allows us to recognize that while there may be common moral grounds, there is also room for variation and adaptation based on different circumstances, cultures, and histories.

Ultimately, the challenge is not to resolve the tension between universal and relative morality into a single, fixed position, but to embrace this tension as a dynamic aspect of moral life—one that encourages both universal respect for human dignity and the flexibility to adapt to the diverse realities of human existence.

### **Atheistic Perspectives on Morality**

Atheistic perspectives on morality diverge into two primary streams: one views morality as a product of rational and natural processes, while the other sees it as a tool exploited by the powerful to control the weak. The first group argues that moral principles arise naturally through human reason, social interaction, and evolutionary processes, emphasizing that ethical behavior can be derived from human nature, independent of divine command. From this standpoint, morality does not rely on supernatural beliefs but on rational reflection and social cooperation (Dawkins, 2006). Atheists in this camp suggest that morality evolves as societies develop more

complex systems of cooperation, trust, and empathy, driven by the need for individuals to live together harmoniously and contribute to collective well-being. In contrast to religious morality, which often posits divine commandments as the foundation of ethical behavior, this perspective proposes that moral norms are ultimately grounded in human reasoning, experience, and shared values.

The second group of atheists adopts a more cynical view of morality, asserting that it functions primarily as a tool used by the powerful to maintain control over the weak. From this perspective, morality is seen as a social construct designed to serve the interests of those in power. This view is informed by the ideas of thinkers like Friedrich Nietzsche, who argued that traditional moral systems—especially religious ones—were a form of “slave morality” that reinforced subjugation and conformity (Nietzsche, 2014). According to this line of thought, moral values such as humility, charity, and obedience were promoted by religious authorities to suppress individual freedom and self-assertion, ultimately benefiting those who held power. In this sense, morality is not a universal or altruistic force but rather a mechanism for maintaining societal hierarchies.

Within this broader atheist critique, there is also an argument that religious morality, by emphasizing reward and punishment in the afterlife, inadvertently promotes selfishness. According to atheistic critics like Richard Dawkins, the concept of divine reward and punishment encourages individuals to act morally not out of a genuine desire for the good, but out of a self-interested motivation to secure eternal reward or avoid eternal damnation (Dawkins, 2006). In this view, religious morality does not foster true altruism but rather reinforces egoism, as individuals focus on personal gain rather than acting morally for the sake of moral principles themselves.

Moreover, atheists also challenge the notion that religious belief is a necessary foundation for morality. They argue that many religious individuals act selfishly, and that moral behavior does not require divine commandments. Atheists contend that selfishness is intrinsic to human nature, and that ethical behavior can be explained by psychological and social factors, such as empathy, reciprocity, and social contracts, rather than religious doctrine. Evolutionary biologists like Charles Darwin have pointed to the role of natural selection in promoting cooperation and altruism within groups, suggesting that moral tendencies may be rooted in the survival and flourishing of human societies rather than in divine law (Darwin 1871).

This view is supported by various moral philosophers who have advanced secular moral theories. For instance, moral consequentialism, as espoused by philosophers like Peter Singer, argues that moral decisions should be based on their consequences for human well-being, without reference to religious commandments. Singer’s utilitarianism advocates for actions that maximize the well-being of sentient beings, suggesting that moral reasoning can be grounded in rational thought and the practical consequences of our actions rather than in supernatural beliefs (Singer 2011).

Atheists also argue that human beings, as social creatures, naturally develop moral sensibilities based on shared experiences. From this perspective, the recognition that selfishness harms social harmony and that love and cooperation are beneficial emerge not from divine command, but from the practical needs of human life. This social learning is reinforced through interactions with others, allowing people to understand what behaviors promote the well-being of individuals and societies. Furthermore, atheists point out that some religious individuals, despite professing faith, can act selfishly. In their view, selfishness is a fundamental aspect of human nature, often exacerbated by the moral frameworks promoted by religion. The emphasis on reward and punishment in religious morality, they argue, fosters a self-centered outlook, where individuals focus on achieving personal salvation or avoiding eternal damnation rather than genuinely promoting the welfare of others.

Thus, atheistic perspectives challenge traditional religious morality by offering alternative explanations for ethical behavior. Some atheists see morality as an expression of rational, natural processes, while others view it as a tool used by the powerful to maintain control over the masses. The tension between these views contributes to the broader discourse on

morality, prompting further exploration of how ethics can be understood and practiced without reliance on religious frameworks (Aydın 1991).

As the debate over morality continues, these atheistic perspectives remain a vital part of the conversation. By exploring the various philosophical, cultural, and historical contexts in which moral principles emerge, we gain a deeper understanding of the complex and dynamic nature of morality. Whether rooted in reason, nature, or power dynamics, the conversation surrounding the origins and nature of morality continues to evolve, offering new insights into human behavior and ethical decision-making.

### **The Relationship Between Ethics and Religion in Terms of Goals**

The relationship between ethics and religion, particularly concerning their ultimate goals, is deeply intertwined. Both ethics and religion aim to secure human well-being, peace, and happiness, guiding individuals toward moral and spiritual maturity by helping cleanse them of negative traits and promoting the cultivation of virtue. This shared purpose is a cornerstone in many religious teachings, with ethical principles often serving as a pathway to spiritual fulfillment and moral excellence. Religious figures, particularly prophets, have traditionally been seen as moral exemplars—individuals who embody the highest ethical standards and serve as role models for humanity. Through their actions, prophets not only impart moral teachings but also demonstrate the practical application of these values in daily life.

Religious narratives frequently present the ultimate goal of ethics as leading individuals toward a harmonious existence with themselves, others, and the divine. For example, in Christianity, moral teachings aim to promote love, compassion, and forgiveness as fundamental aspects of the human condition, reflecting the divine nature of God. In Islam, the pursuit of justice, charity, and truth forms the basis for ethical living, directly linked to obedience to God's will and the guidance provided by the Prophet Muhammad, who is considered a model for how one should live righteously (Saruhan 2006). These religious traditions view ethical behavior as not only a social necessity but also a means of drawing closer to the divine.

However, some philosophers, such as Émile Boutroux (1845-1921), challenge the traditional view of the inseparable connection between ethics and religion. Boutroux argued that religion and ethics emerged independently and evolved as distinct areas of human thought (Boutroux 1988). According to Boutroux, while both address similar issues related to human behavior, morality, and the ideal way to live, their origins and functions are fundamentally different. In his view, ethics can be rooted in human experience, reason, and social agreement, while religion arises from divine revelation and transcendent experiences. This distinction suggests that the moral framework offered by religion is not necessarily the sole basis for ethical behavior but is one of several possible systems derived from human reasoning, culture, and societal norms.

The relationship between ethics and religion can be approached from two main theological perspectives. The first perspective asserts that God's will is the ultimate source of moral values and laws. According to this view, divine commandments form the foundation of ethical principles, and human morality is contingent upon adherence to these divine dictates. For example, in many monotheistic traditions, ethical imperatives such as "do not kill" or "love your neighbor" are seen as direct commands from God, and fulfilling these commands leads to spiritual reward and fulfillment.

The second perspective posits that God's will influences ethics, acting not as the sole creator of moral laws but as a complementary and encouraging force. In this view, religious teachings provide guidance and encouragement for individuals to live ethically, but they do not exclusively define the moral order. This perspective allows for the possibility that moral reasoning can also arise independently of divine command, emphasizing the role of human agency, empathy, and rationality in ethical decision-making.

To further clarify the connection between ethics and religion, it is crucial to consider the issue from both existential and epistemological perspectives. From an existential standpoint, if one accepts the premise that God is the creator of everything, then nothing, including morality,

can exist independently of divine creation. In this framework, God is the cosmological cause of all things, including human beings and their moral capacities. Without divine creation, the very concept of ethics, as understood by humans, would not exist. The existence of moral values and the human capacity to understand them are thus dependent on a transcendent source.

On the other hand, from an epistemological perspective, humans possess an innate ability to recognize certain moral values within their own experience, suggesting that the moral compass may not be entirely reliant on divine revelation but also on human reason and intuition. For example, individuals across different cultures and religions can intuitively recognize that killing an innocent person or causing harm to others is wrong. This universal understanding of basic moral principles suggests that humans have an intrinsic sense of right and wrong, which guides their actions even in the absence of divine command. Prophet Muhammad, known as "Al-Amin" (the trustworthy), exemplified this inherent moral quality, as his reputation for honesty and integrity preceded his prophetic mission (Saruhan, 2006). His character reflects the idea that morality can be intrinsic to human nature, even before explicit divine guidance.

Thus, the relationship between ethics and religion is multifaceted, with varying perspectives on the origins, nature, and function of morality. Whether viewed as the result of divine will or as an autonomous product of human reasoning and social agreement, the intersection of ethics and religion remains a central theme in discussions of human well-being and moral action.

### **Morality and Religion Separation**

A prominent argument against equating morality with religion is the assertion that grounding morality in religious belief unnecessarily ties a human experience that is fundamentally based in freedom to an external authority that demands absolute compliance, which many find unacceptable. Critics, particularly atheist thinkers, contend that theological ethics cannot provide a reliable foundation for morality, primarily because it assumes the existence of God—an entity that, they argue, cannot be empirically proven. Furthermore, they argue that human experiences of morality are subjective, shaped by evolving social, cultural, and individual factors rather than any fixed, divine standard.

From the atheist perspective, faith in religious doctrines is often seen as an attachment to something without sufficient evidence. This position resonates with the philosophy of empiricism, which emphasizes that all knowledge should be grounded in observable, verifiable experience. Atheists assert that there is no rational basis to claim that God's will is the foundation of moral behavior, and as such, they believe that secular systems of ethics, grounded in reason and human experience, are preferable.

Fyodor Dostoyevsky's famous statement, "If God is dead, everything is permitted," reflects a common theistic concern about the collapse of moral order in the absence of divine authority. Theists argue that without religion to anchor morality, humans would fall into moral chaos, succumbing to selfishness and despair. They claim that religious belief provides a necessary foundation for morality, offering individuals a sense of purpose and a guiding framework for distinguishing right from wrong. However, atheists challenge this view by asserting that the concept of a moral void is artificially constructed by theists. According to this critique, it is not the absence of religious belief that leads to immorality, but rather the theistic insistence on a divine moral authority that creates the illusion of a moral vacuum.

While some extreme theists maintain that morality cannot exist without religious belief, and some atheists claim that religious individuals are inherently selfish, both of these positions are overly simplistic and flawed. Moral reasoning is complex, and moral behavior can be influenced by both religious and secular frameworks in different ways, depending on the individual and the cultural context.

Paul Thiry d'Holbach, an 18th-century French materialist, provides a significant contribution to this debate, offering a clear example of the separation between morality and religion. d'Holbach argues that religion has not advanced human knowledge or morality in any meaningful way and that moral values should be rooted in human nature rather than in supernatural or religious doctrines. He asserts that religion, far from promoting moral

development, is often a harmful superstructure that distorts human behavior by imposing artificial constraints. According to d'Holbach, morality is a natural product of human nature—shaped by reason, experience, and the pursuit of collective well-being—and not something that needs to be grounded in religious belief or divine command (Pieper 1994).

In summary, the debate between those who see religion as essential to morality and those who advocate for a secular, human-centered approach remains a complex and ongoing philosophical discussion. While extreme positions on either side are flawed, both perspectives contribute valuable insights into the ways that religion and human nature intersect in the formation of moral systems.

### **Theological Perspectives on the Identity of Ethics and Religion**

The question of whether ethics and religion are intrinsically linked remains a central point of contention in theological discourse. A key issue for those who assert the identity between these two domains is the question: "Do divine commandments imbue actions with intrinsic moral qualities such as good and evil, or do actions inherently possess these qualities independent of divine will?" This question underlies the broader theological debate concerning the foundation of morality and whether moral principles are contingent upon God's commandments or exist as objective truths that transcend religious authority. Those who align with the former position argue that divine will is the primary source of moral values, meaning that it is God's commandments that imbue actions with qualities such as goodness and evil.

In the Christian tradition, this debate is particularly salient. Protestant thinkers, especially those who adhere to the Reformed tradition, maintain that knowledge of good and evil can only be attained through divine revelation. According to this view, moral knowledge is not accessible to human reason or observation alone but requires the intervention of God's will as revealed through scripture and divine commandments. For Protestants, the ethical life is inseparable from the will of God; thus, what makes actions morally right or wrong is inherently tied to divine decree. This framework of moral absolutism emphasizes that, without divine revelation, humans cannot discern true moral goodness, as moral facts are ultimately rooted in the divine will.

In contrast, Catholic theologians often take a more nuanced position, suggesting that moral knowledge can be comprehended through both reason and revelation. The Catholic view does not necessarily deny the importance of divine revelation but contends that human beings possess a natural capacity to discern moral good and evil through the use of reason and conscience. Catholic thought incorporates the idea that human nature itself, as created by God, carries an inherent understanding of moral order, thus making revelation an enhancement rather than a precondition for moral knowledge. Despite these differences regarding the sources of moral knowledge, both Catholic and Protestant thinkers agree that God is the ultimate source of moral principles and that ethical behavior ultimately derives from adherence to divine law.

One of the most notable Protestant theologians in this tradition, E. Brunner, articulates a view that underscores the necessity of a religious foundation for morality. Brunner argues that certain moral concepts—such as human rights, honor, duty, and love for humanity—are not natural realities but abstract ideals that lack coherent meaning unless grounded in respect for a higher authority. For Brunner, these moral ideals are contingent upon the belief in a divine source that transcends human nature. He maintains that without the grounding of moral concepts in the divine, human ethics is at risk of degenerating into moral nihilism, where moral values become subjective and lose their objective grounding. In his view, the recognition of moral goodness cannot emerge solely from human autonomy; rather, it must flow from a relationship with God, whose love and goodness provide the ultimate source and motivation for moral action. According to Brunner, morality, when severed from religious belief, transforms into a hollow system of life principles, driven by survival and power dynamics rather than transcendent moral truths.

Brunner's critique echoes a broader theological concern about secular ethics, which, while perhaps promoting certain values like human dignity or justice, lacks a coherent ontological basis for these values without reference to the divine. In this sense, religious ethics provide the metaphysical foundation that underpins moral action, transforming love and goodness into

tangible moral directives that shape human behavior. Brunner's perspective highlights the necessity of theological grounding for the preservation of true moral order, asserting that only through a relationship with God can the human heart and mind be properly oriented toward the good.

This theological viewpoint has significant implications for the wider discourse on moral philosophy, especially in relation to secular moral systems. The challenge for secular ethics, as seen from the theological perspective, is to account for moral imperatives in a framework that does not rely on the existence of a higher power. Without a transcendent moral lawgiver, some argue, moral principles risk becoming contingent and variable, subject to human whims and social constructs, rather than reflecting objective moral truths that transcend human experience.

### Islamic Perspectives on the Identity of Ethics and Religion

Islamic ethics is deeply intertwined with various intellectual traditions, including Kalam (Islamic theology), Fiqh (Islamic jurisprudence), Sufism (Islamic mysticism), and Islamic philosophy. Kalam provides significant theoretical material for understanding the nature of human actions, freedom, and the moral good and evil, with profound discussions on the essence of divine commands. A critical debate within Kalam, particularly among the Ash'arites and Mu'tazila, revolves around the question of whether actions are good because God commands them or whether God commands them because they are inherently good. This issue, often referred to as the *Euthyphro dilemma*, explores the relationship between divine will and morality. The Ash'arites typically assert that God's will determines what is good, while the Mu'tazila argue that moral goodness exists independently of God's commands and that humans have the capacity to recognize it through reason.

The debates within Kalam address key questions about the nature of human freedom and moral responsibility. The Mu'tazila, for instance, emphasize human free will and the idea that moral responsibility depends on humans being able to distinguish between good and evil based on their rational capacities. In contrast, the Ash'arites focus on the omnipotence of God, asserting that divine commands govern morality. These theological discussions directly inform Islamic ethics by defining the limits of human autonomy and the role of divine guidance in ethical decision-making.

Moreover, Islamic ethics is significantly enriched by Sufism, which adds a spiritual and psychological dimension to the discussion. Sufism emphasizes the purification of the soul and the cultivation of virtues such as humility, patience, and sincerity. It views ethics not only in terms of legal obligations but as a journey of self-purification and closeness to God. Sufi teachings integrate an understanding of human nature, consciousness, and psychological development, offering a deep, introspective approach to moral behavior that complements the legalistic and theological frameworks provided by Kalam and Fiqh.

Islamic philosophy, particularly through its engagement with Greek philosophy, introduces more analytical and philosophical approaches to ethics. Concepts like the *nafs* (self), *'aql* (intellect), and *ikhtiyar* (choice) become central to discussions on moral development and the nature of the soul. Islamic philosophers, drawing on Aristotelian ethics, explore virtue ethics, the cultivation of moral character, and the relationship between reason and ethics. The integration of these ideas into Islamic ethics has contributed to a broader understanding of ethics that encompasses not only legal and theological dimensions but also psychological, political, and social aspects of human life.

In this way, Kalam, Fiqh, Sufism, and Islamic philosophy together provide a multifaceted and integrated approach to ethics. They offer complementary perspectives on the nature of good and evil, human freedom, and the role of divine guidance in moral behavior. Islamic ethics is therefore not a monolithic field but a rich, diverse tradition that incorporates theological, philosophical, legal, and spiritual dimensions, contributing to a comprehensive understanding of moral life in the Islamic tradition (Dar 1963).

One of the key positions in Islamic theology is presented by the Mu'tazila, a rationalist school of thought that emerged in the early Islamic period. The Mu'tazila argued for a form of

ethical objectivism, maintaining that moral values such as goodness, evil, and justice are independent of God's will. In this view, the moral quality of an action is determined by its inherent properties—whether it brings benefit or harm—rather than by God's command or prohibition. According to this perspective, human reason alone is capable of discerning the goodness or badness of actions. The Mu'tazila believed that moral truths could be understood through rational reflection and that divine revelation merely confirmed what human reason could already discern. This approach emphasizes the role of reason (aql) as the primary guide for moral conduct, independent of divine commandments. For instance, the Mu'tazila posited that actions like honesty, justice, and kindness are inherently good because they lead to the flourishing of society and the well-being of individuals, irrespective of divine commands.

Contrasting with the rationalism of the Mu'tazila, the Ash'ari school, which gained prominence under figures such as Al-Ghazali, presents a more theocentric view of ethics. For Ash'arites, moral values—whether good or evil—are intrinsically tied to God's will. According to this view, actions are not good or bad in themselves but become morally relevant only through God's command. For example, an action like lying is morally wrong only because it is prohibited by God, not because it is inherently harmful or unjust. This school emphasizes the omnipotence of God, asserting that His will defines what is right and wrong, and that divine commands are the ultimate source of all moral knowledge. In this view, morality is not an independent set of ethical principles but is directly derived from divine will and revelation. Ash'arites hold that human beings lack the capacity to discern moral truths apart from God's guidance, and that any attempt to do so without reference to divine revelation would be misguided. (Hourani 1960; Donaldson 1953).

The Maturidi school of thought presents a middle ground between the rationalism of the Mu'tazila and the divine command theory of the Ash'ari school. Maturidis argue that human reason is capable of recognizing certain moral truths, but that divine revelation is essential for understanding the full range of moral knowledge. According to the Maturidi school, human actions can be classified into three categories: those that are inherently good, those that are inherently bad, and those that are morally neutral or contingent upon circumstances. Actions that are inherently good or bad, such as the prohibition of murder or the encouragement of charity, can be understood through reason and do not require divine revelation to be recognized as moral imperatives. However, actions that fall into the morally neutral category—such as certain legal rulings or social practices—can only be judged correctly through divine guidance. This middle path allows for the integration of both rational ethics and divine revelation, acknowledging the role of human reasoning while upholding the necessity of divine commandments for a complete understanding of morality (Hourani 1960).

Islamic thought, particularly through the Ash'ari and Maturidi schools, establishes a profound relationship between ethics and religion by asserting that both are grounded in the will of God. This understanding posits that religion and ethics are not separate spheres but are interwoven, with divine commandments serving as the ultimate source of moral authority. As a result, ethical values such as justice, truth, goodness, and the prohibition of evil are all derived from the divine will. The Qur'an and the Hadith provide the moral framework for Muslims, and the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad are seen as the perfect model for ethical conduct. The connection between ethics and religion is so integral that, in the words of the Prophet Muhammad, "Religion is good character. The best among you in religion are the best in character" (Bukhari 1315: 81). This Hadith encapsulates the Islamic understanding that the ultimate goal of religious observance is the cultivation of moral virtues. The ethical dimension of Islam is inseparable from its religious teachings, as righteousness in both faith and action is understood to be a reflection of the divine will.

Moreover, the Islamic emphasis on human dignity and the importance of moral responsibility within the framework of Islamic ethics demonstrates the intrinsic link between moral behavior and religious observance. The concept of tawhid (the oneness of God) is fundamental in Islamic thought and signifies that all aspects of life, including ethics, are connected to a single, divine source. In this sense, ethical principles are not only religious obligations but also expressions of the divine order, guiding individuals toward a life of virtue and justice. The

overarching goal of both ethics and religion in Islam is to promote the well-being of humanity, uphold justice, and guide individuals to live harmoniously with both God and creation.

In conclusion, Islamic perspectives on the identity of ethics and religion reflect a rich theological discourse that balances the roles of human reason and divine revelation. While the Mu'tazila advocate for an ethics based on human reason independent of divine will, the Ash'ari school and the Maturidi school recognize the fundamental role of divine commands in shaping moral values. Regardless of the differing perspectives within Islamic theology, there is a consensus that ethics and religion are inextricably linked, both ultimately grounded in the divine will of God. ( Fakhry 1994; Abd al Rahim 2013; Saruhan 2009).

### **Moral and Religious Independence**

In contemporary debates surrounding the relationship between morality and religion, some perspectives treat them as distinct but interdependent domains, recognizing their distinct functions while also acknowledging their mutual support and reinforcement. This nuanced view contrasts with more extreme positions that either seek to identify them completely or separate them entirely. Such a balanced approach values both religion and morality, understanding that neither can be fully understood without the context of the other.

In this framework, religion does not merely serve as a source of moral guidelines but also plays an integral role in motivating and sustaining moral action. Faith becomes a critical factor in this dynamic. Philosopher S. Toulmin (1990) asserts that while moral principles provide us with a framework for seeking truth, religious belief compels us to embrace that truth wholeheartedly. Toulmin's perspective emphasizes the motivating power of religious belief, which encourages individuals to align their moral actions with deeper, transcendent values. This belief system strengthens an individual's commitment to truth, justice, and compassion, highlighting religion's crucial role in shaping moral life.

Consider a scenario where a person in need asks for help. While the act of helping or not helping is an empirical matter, it contains an underlying moral dimension. The decision to assist may be influenced by an individual's belief in the importance of moral duties, even when external pressures could lead to avoidance. In the context of religious belief, the awareness that God observes all actions may influence a person to act according to their moral obligations, distancing them from selfish tendencies. Faith, in this sense, serves not only as a guiding principle but also as a motivator to act consistently with moral values. For a theist, actions like lying are not merely viewed as wrong, but as sins that go against divine will. While morality offers individuals the freedom to make choices, religious belief introduces an authoritative framework, providing a sense of sacred duty and accountability to a higher power.

This interplay between faith and moral behavior is particularly apparent in moments of moral crisis, where belief in God can provide a firm foundation for navigating complex ethical decisions. In these situations, faith can offer clarity and strength, guiding individuals to act in ways that reflect their moral convictions and religious principles.

An important question arises in the context of moral and religious independence: Is it possible to fulfill one's moral duties without belief in God, perhaps through secular reasoning or ethical education? Philosopher P. Geach argues that non-believers can still recognize certain actions—such as lying or committing adultery—as morally wrong, similar to the judgments made by believers. Geach contends that while belief in God is not a prerequisite for recognizing moral wrongs, it is equally inaccurate to suggest that belief in God has no impact on moral decision-making. Both the assertion that morality is solely dependent on divine belief and the claim that belief in God is irrelevant to morality fail to capture the full complexity of this relationship. Ultimately, the debate between the independence of morality and religion highlights a perspective that values both domains. While morality can exist independently of religious belief, religion provides essential motivation, depth, and consistency in moral behavior, guiding individuals toward ethical action through the lens of a higher purpose.

To conclude, the relationship between ethics and religion remains a complex and multifaceted subject, with various perspectives that attempt to define their interconnection.

Some views argue that the two domains are closely intertwined, where moral principles are seen as inherently linked to religious beliefs. In this view, religious teachings serve as the foundation for determining right and wrong, with moral values being derived from divine command. According to this perspective, without a religious framework, morality would lack its grounding, and human beings would be left without a clear guide to ethical living. In contrast, other theories maintain that ethics and religion are distinct and independent, with morality being based on human reason, experience, and social context, rather than divine command. Proponents of this view argue that moral principles can be developed through secular means, relying on human capacities to discern right from wrong, without the need for religious guidance.

There are also perspectives that propose a middle ground, suggesting that while some moral values can be recognized through reason and experience, others may require divine revelation. These views acknowledge the role of both reason and religion in shaping moral behavior, with religion providing the motivation and support for living in accordance with ethical principles. Additionally, there are theories that focus on the interplay between ethics and religion, emphasizing how religious beliefs can guide and encourage individuals to act morally, while also recognizing the potential for moral reasoning outside of religious contexts.

Ultimately, the relationship between ethics and religion is not easily categorized, as it encompasses a wide range of ideas about how moral behavior is determined and what role religion plays in ethical decision-making. Whether viewed as deeply connected or independent, these perspectives offer valuable insights into how human beings navigate moral questions and how ethics and religion influence one another in shaping our understanding of right and wrong.

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