

Religious Ethics and Moral Realism

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to explore the relations between various forms of moral realism and some views about religious ethics, particularly, religious ethics in the Islamic tradition, although much of what is said will apply to ethical views in other religious traditions, as well. First, there is a brief historical review of the rise of moral realism in the twentieth century. Second, the major types of moral realism are distinguished. Third, it is argued that for each of the major types of moral realism, from robust moral realism to minimalist moral realism, religious views of ethics can be formulated that are compatible with both realism and its denial. In each case, however, the religious ethicist must pay a price for taking on realism or its denial. Finally, it is argued that the position taken by major Muslim philosophers in the tradition of Ibn Sina through Mulla Sadra is one that concurs with the non-realist position on a number of significant points.

Keywords: Ash'arite, ethical theory, Islamic ethics, moral epistemology, moral realism, robust realism, moral constructivism, Mu'tazilite, Peripatetic, religious ethics, Shi'ite metaethics.

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G. E. Moore and the Origins of Contemporary Moral Realism

One might well argue that moral realism begins with Plato, after all, the Good, along with Beauty and Truth, is a part of the trinity of supreme Platonic Ideas or Forms; but in the twentieth century, it is G. E. Moore (1873-1958) who stands at the fountainhead of contemporary moral realism. Moore's *Principia Ethica* was published in 1903;¹ and with this work, metaethics first makes its appearance as a distinct branch of ethics in which the meanings of moral terms are examined and moral concepts and propositions are subject to analysis.²

G. E. Moore was one of the founding figures of analytic philosophy, and *Principia Ethica* was one of the works that helped define this style and method. Moore claimed that he was doing conceptual analysis, the analysis of propositions into their component concepts, and the analysis of concepts into simpler concepts until one arrives at primitive undefinable concepts, like that of the good. He was supported at Cambridge in his demands for logical rigor by Bertrand Russell and later by Ludwig Wittgenstein; but although historians consider all three to be founders of analytic philosophy, each had his own view of how analysis was to be undertaken.

In his *Principia Ethica*, Moore sought to refute all of the major theories of ethics that were then current: idealism, evolutionism, and utilitarianism. Although he defended a form of ideal utilitarianism, this was far from the forms that utilitarianism had taken in previous moral theorists. Moore struck the pose of an iconoclast. With regard to his practical ethics, he advocated neither a religious ethics, nor the kind of reformist political activism for which Bentham and the Mills were known, nor the moral stringency associated with Kant's ethics of duty. Instead, Moore championed aestheticism, the enjoyment of good company and intimate friendships, and the appreciation of art and natural beauty, a view of life whose precedents are to be found in writers and artists of the Victorian era, such as Oscar Wilde and Walter Pater. After *Principia Ethica* was published, Moore became the philosophical sage for the elite students of Cambridge who, with Moore, were members of the secret society of the Apostles and also for the intellectuals who became known as the Bloomsbury group.

In theoretical ethics, Moore also appeared as a maverick. While others debated the proper definition of "good", Moore declared that it was undefinable, and accused

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1. G. E. Moore, *Principia Ethica* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1903). T. Baldwin, ed., revised edition with "Preface to the second edition" and other papers, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).
 2. Terry Horgan and Mark Timmons, eds., *Metaethics After Moore* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 1.

anyone who disagreed of an error he dubbed “the naturalistic fallacy.” He held that if we consider all the things that are good, we will find that there is no natural property that they all share. The good can be identified with neither utility nor the will to do one’s duty nor anything else. As Bernard Williams and others have pointed out, Moore’s “naturalistic fallacy” is not really a fallacy, because it is applied to what Moore considers to be mistaken views and not faulty inferences. Furthermore, Moore would apply the term “naturalistic fallacy” to divine command theories as well as to theories that would define the good in terms of natural properties.¹ So, religious ethicists would be making an error if they were to interpret attack on naturalism in Moore’s ethical theory as an indication of amenability to religious faith.

Moore introduces the term “naturalistic fallacy” as follows:

It may be true that all things which are good are also something else, just as it is true that all things which are yellow produce a certain kind of vibration in the light. And it is a fact, that Ethics aims at discovering what are those other properties belonging to all things which are good. But far too many philosophers have thought that when they named those other properties they were actually defining good; that these properties, in fact, were simply not “other,” but absolutely and entirely the same with goodness. This view I propose to call the “naturalistic fallacy” and of it I shall now endeavour to dispose.²

In the sequel to this discussion we find Moore asserting three claims:³

1. Ethical propositions cannot be validly inferred from non-ethical propositions.
2. Ethical terms (particularly “good”) are not definable in terms of non-ethical ones.
3. Ethical properties are different in kind from any non-ethical properties or combination thereof.

The first claim is logical, the second semantic, and the third metaphysical. All three are controversial, and cannot be established simply by accusing those who do not accept them of committing fallacies. Suppose one is a eudaimonist, and believes that what is good is what leads to ultimate felicity. This is the kind of position that has been predominant in Jewish, Christian, and Islamic Aristotelianism. The term “leading to ultimate felicity” is one in which no ethical terms appear; so, according to (2), it

1. Bernard Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985), 121. W. K. Frankena, “The Naturalistic Fallacy” *Mind*, Vol. 48 (1939), 464-477, reprinted in Philippa Foot, ed. *Theories of Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 50-63.

2. Moore (1903), §10 ¶3.

3. See Frankena (1939), 53. Frankena asserts that since (3) implies (2), and (2) implies (1), Moore’s position can be stated simply as (3). It is not clear that (3) implies (2), however. Suppose there are two kinds, K1 and K2, that exhaust a common genus, G. K2 could then be defined as what is G but not K1, in which case a K2 term would be definable with non-K2 terms. If one is a Cartesian substance dualist, one could define the material as the non-mental, or the mental as the non-material. To avoid this sort of problem, one would have to specify what it means to define x’s in terms of y’s in some manner that prohibits these sorts of negative definitions or definitions by exclusion without being ad hoc.

cannot be used to define “good”. Is the property of leading to ultimate felicity a non-ethical property? Not according to the Aristotelians. On Moore’s view, to the contrary, the property of goodness is different in kind from the property of leading to felicity, because he considers this latter property not to be an ethical one. A defender of Moore might argue that a definition of goodness in terms of ultimate felicity cannot be correct because even if on eudaimonist theory the good is what leads to felicity, this is not what the word “good” means in English. But Moore is not interested in verbal definitions. He explicitly says that when he claims that “good” is indefinable, he does not mean that it has no verbal dictionary definition. Hence, the criterion by which “leading to felicity” might be rejected as a dictionary definition for “good” would be irrelevant to what Moore means when he claims that “good” is indefinable.

Hilary Putnam has argued against Moore that our intuitions about meanings do not reveal anything about what we are attributing to a subject when we apply a predicate to it. To have a concept, Putnam suggests, is to be able to use words in certain ways. To grasp the concept of the good will then amount to knowing how to properly employ the words that are taken to express this concept. One may have this competence without knowing that the proper employment of the term “good” turns out to be one in which the term is applied to that which leads to felicity. So, whether “good” is indefinable or not is not something that we should judge by reliance on linguistic intuitions or conceptual insight, but by reliance on what explains our ability to employ the relevant signs. The eudaimonist suggests that what we are doing, perhaps unwittingly, when we say that something is good is saying that it leads to felicity. The eudaimonist might be wrong about this, but to show the position is wrong requires considerably more than reflections upon how we intend the words we use.¹

Moore’s argument against the naturalistic fallacy is known as the open question argument. It has been reformulated in countless ways, and Moore’s own formulations are often not as clear as one would like. The designation and a version of the argument given in *Principia Ethica* is as follows:

It is, I think, obvious in the first place, that not all that is good is normal; that, on the contrary, the abnormal is often better than the normal: peculiar excellence, as well as peculiar viciousness, must obviously be not normal but abnormal. Yet it may be said that nevertheless the normal is good; and I myself am not prepared to dispute that health is good. What I contend is that this must not be taken to be obvious; that it must be regarded as an open question. To declare it to be obvious is to suggest the naturalistic fallacy.²

1. Hilary Putnam, “Language and Philosophy” in *Mind, Language and Reality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), 13-14.

2. Moore (1903), 27§ 3.

From the fact that it remains an open question whether X is good, where for X any proposed analysis of the concept of the good may be substituted, such as health or normality, in the passage above, Moore takes it to follow that X cannot be identified with the good. Moore's choice of health and normalcy as examples makes it clear that Moore has Aristotelianism as a target. Plato and Aristotle taught that excellence is achieved when the faculties are functioning properly, that is, when the golden mean is found in one's appetites, ambitions, and intellect, corresponding to the virtues of temperance, courage, and wisdom, respectively. So, for the Aristotelian what is normal is what avoids destructive extremes. Moore, however, interprets the normal as what is average or common. Health is not good, according to Aristotelians, because it is the state in which people are most commonly found, or the average physical condition of the body; health is good because it is the state in which the parts of the body are functioning properly and in harmony.

Because of the popularity of the so-called new wave semantics advocated by Putnam, philosophers prescribe caution about confusing metaphysical and semantic issues. A standard example is "water". One may inquire into the meaning of "water" in English. This is a semantic question. One may also propose that the word "water" be used in a way that differs to some extent from ordinary usage, for example, by stipulating that ice and steam should be included in the definition of "water". All of this is still semantics. There are also epistemological questions about how we can tell whether some substance is water. Finally, there are metaphysical issues concerning what water really is, for example, we may hold that water is liquid H₂O. The word "water" does not mean "liquid H₂O", for one may know what "water" means without knowing its molecular structure. As far as epistemology goes, one can know that the liquid in a glass is water without knowing that water is liquid H₂O. None of this means that water is not essentially liquid H₂O. A chemist may insist that there is no possible world in which there is water in a glass but no H₂O, because water has that molecular composition, regardless of the meaning of the word used to describe it or the ways we recognize it.¹

1. A good discussion of the distinction between semantics and metaphysics as applied to moral terms is to be found in Robert M. Adams, *Finite and Infinite Goods* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 15f. The distinction with regard to natural kinds is found in Hilary Putnam, "Explanation and Reference" (first published in 1973) reprinted in Putnam (1975), 196-214, which draws upon the work of Saul Kripke: "Identity and Necessity," in M. Munitz, ed. *Identity and Individuation* (New York: 1972); and *Naming and Necessity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1980).

In light of the distinction between semantics and metaphysics, Moore's arguments in *Principia Ethica* against ethical naturalism seem confused. He argues that “good” does not mean “X”, where X is some alleged reduction of the good to a natural or supernatural property. On the basis of the distinction in the meanings of words, Moore concludes that the identification of properties is an error. But we cannot conclude that water is not liquid H₂O just because “water” does not mean “liquid H₂O”, and so, likewise, we cannot conclude that the hedonist thesis that the good is the pleasurable, or the theological claim that the good is what is near to God, simply because “good” does not have any such meaning. If the open question argument proves anything, it is only that claims of the form: “X = Y” are not analytic when it is an open question as to whether X is Y.¹

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1. Despite the criticisms of the open question argument based on the new wave semantic theories derived from Kripke and Putnam, the open question argument still has defenders. Most of the defenders concede that Moore's original argument fails, but they propose that it can be fixed in such a way as to maintain the rejection of what Moore called the naturalistic fallacy. One of the most widely discussed defenses is due to Terry Horgan and Mark Timmons. They argue that there is a difference between “good” and “water” that permits the identification of water with H₂O, while blocking the move from this to the permissibility of an identification of the good with some natural property. The idea is to imagine another planet just like earth, called “twin earth”. On twin earth people use the term “water” to designate a colorless odorless liquid that they drink and that fills their oceans, but whose molecular composition is XYZ instead of H₂O. The people of earth and of twin earth both use the word “water” in similar ways, but the substances designated by “water” in the two worlds are different. Next Horgan and Timmons ask us to imagine that on earth, “good” is used for whatever has the property of having superior utility, while on twin earth “good” is used for whatever has the property of arising from a will to do one's duty, but people use “good” in both worlds to make evaluations in much the way that we actually use the word “good”. Horgan and Timmons contend that there is a difference in the case of “water” and the case of “good”. In the case of “water”, people in the two worlds use the same word for different things, but in the case of “good” they use it with one meaning, specified through its function in evaluations. The defense of Moore offered by Horgan and Timmons is controversial. As many commentators have noticed, whether the open question argument in some revised form can be used to defend a rejection of ethical naturalism remains an open question. For more on the open question argument see Caj Strandberg, “In Defense of the Open Question Argument,” *The Journal of Ethics* 8: (2004), 179–196; Robert Peter Sylvester, *The Moral Philosophy of G. E. Moore* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990).

Moore offered an argument about the meanings of moral concepts, by which he intended to defend a metaphysical thesis about the nature of the good, a particularly stringent form of moral realism. From the fact that the concept of the good cannot be analyzed into simpler concepts and is in this sense undefinable, Moore concluded that the property of goodness is metaphysically simple and can only be grasped by direct intuition.

Regardless of the flaws in Moore's arguments, his views were tremendously influential. Many were convinced that the open question argument showed that identifications of moral properties with natural (or supernatural) ones were mistaken. The result, however, was not an embrace of the ethical non-naturalist realism espoused by Moore. Although Moore's realism was defended by such philosophers as such as Prichard, Ross, and Carritt, many came to the conclusion that the open question argument showed that moral terms should not be taken to designate any properties at all. Contrary to Moore's intentions, his arguments led many to accept some form of noncognitivism or expressivism. Non-cognitivism was taken up by Logical Positivists like A. J. Ayer and Rudolf Carnap, who had no interest in the metaphysical doctrines espoused by Moore and his disciples.¹

With the decline of Logical Positivism, and the revitalization of metaphysics by W. V. O. Quine and Wilfrid Sellars, after the Second World War, other forms of moral realism began to appear, and the Aristotelian ethics defended most prominently by G. E. M. Anscombe, Peter Geach, and Philippa Foot continued to defend elements of the naturalism Moore had attacked, as well as the forms of expressivism that succeeded the initial forms of non-cognitivism of the Positivists.

While Anscombe and Geach were Catholics, Foot was an atheist; but together they were to erect the foundations of twentieth century virtue ethics, a project that has continued to find supporters among both religious and atheistic thinkers.

The newer forms of moral realism that appeared on the scene are sometimes divided into British and American varieties.² British moral realism is inspired by Wittgenstein and finds reasons to support moral realism in the ways that moral language is used. The British realists tend toward moral particularism and the denial that moral properties supervene on physical ones. Philosophers who hold this sort of

1. See Alasdair MacIntyre, *A Short History of Ethics*, 2nd ed., (London: Routledge, 1998), 162.

2. Cf. Robert Arrington, *Rationalism, realism, and relativism: perspectives in contemporary moral epistemology*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989), chapters 4 and 5.

view include Jonathan Dancy, Sabina Lovibond, John McDowell, David McNaughton, Iris Murdoch, Mark Platts, and David Wiggins.¹

The American version of moral realism takes its inspiration from realism about theoretical entities in the philosophy of science. On this view, moral properties supervene on natural properties. The preferred method of argumentation is inference to the best explanation. Richard Boyd and David O. Brink have championed the analogy between scientific and moral realism.²

In the 21st century, two more forms of moral realism have appeared. The first is really just a restatement and defense of the sort of realism defended by Moore, which now goes by the name “robust moral realism.” The second form of realism goes in the opposite direction and might be called “minimalist realism”.³ According to this view, a deflationary theory of truth allows us to say that there are moral truths as another way of making moral statements. “It is true that stealing is wrong,” is taken to mean no more nor less than “Stealing is wrong.” Simon Blackburn argues on this basis that since noncognitivists are prepared to endorse moral statements, they should give up the claim that there are no moral truths. He dubs his view “quasi-realism.”⁴ Other

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1. Jonathan Dancy, *Moral Reasons* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993); Sabina Lovibond, *Realism and Imagination in Ethics* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1983); John McDowell, “Virtue and Reason,” *The Monist*, July 1979, 331-350, “Values and Secondary Qualities,” in *Morality and Objectivity*, ed. Ted Honderich (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1985), 110-129; David McNaughton, *Moral Vision* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1988); Iris Murdoch *The Sovereignty of Good* (London: Routledge, 1970); Mark Platts, *Ways of Meaning* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1979); David Wiggins, *Needs, Values, Truth* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1987).
 2. Richard Boyd, “How to be a Moral Realist,” in *Essays on Moral Realism*, Geoffrey Sayre-McCord, ed., (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988), 181-228. David O. Brink, *Moral Realism and the Foundations of Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).
 3. The minimalist project for truth is defended by Crispin Wright, *Truth and Objectivity*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992); and is proposed as an alternative to then current metaethical views in his “Realism, Anti-Realism, Irrealism, Quasi-Realism”, in French, P., Uehling, T. and Wettstein, H., eds., *Midwest Studies in Philosophy*, (1987), 25-49. Although Wright does not defend a minimalist realism, he does show how his minimalist treatment of truth could be used to develop a correspondingly minimalist realism, and he considers what it would take to support such a position. See *Truth and Objectivity*, 199201.
 4. Simon Blackburn, *Ruling Passions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 75-80; *Essays On QuasiRealism*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993); *Spreading the Word* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984).

minimalist moral theories have been developed and defended by Mark Timmons¹ and an explicitly minimalist moral realism is advocated by Matthew Kramer.² Minimalists are prepared to say that there are moral facts and properties, but they take this to bring with it no metaphysical commitments, or very minimal ones, according which a recognition of moral facts amounts to little more than a willingness to assert moral claims. Likewise, the minimalist will admit that there are moral properties; but the minimalist interpretation of the claim that there is a moral property of goodness is that this claim is just another way of saying that some things are good.

Even this very brief historical survey of the arguments about moral realism since G.E. Moore will suffice to indicate the very large amount of literature on moral realism that exists today. Authors give different definitions of moral realism, some of which are exceedingly precise and others sloppy. Moral realism has been defined as a metaphysical, semantic, and epistemological doctrine. Arguments for and against various versions of moral realism can be found that are presented with a high degree of sophistication. My purpose is here is not to evaluate these arguments, except insofar as they have a bearing on religious ethics. First, however, we should consider the range of positions that religious thinkers have taken on morality.

Islam and Morality

There is a vast range of views on the relation between ethics and religion that have been offered by religious ethicists. Virtually all of the views that have been taken by Muslim theologians have analogues in Christian writings; and likewise, the views similar to those taken by Christian authors, for the most part, either have been defended by some Muslim authors, or could be. Here, I will consider some views that either have or could be taken from an Islamic perspective. Despite the considerable overlap in ethical views across religious traditions, there are some discussions that have figured more prominently among Muslims, such as the relation between morality and religious law, and this discussion may provide an appropriate entry to consider Islamic ethics and moral realism.³

1. Mark Timmons, *Morality Without Foundations: A Defense of Ethical Contextualism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999). Timmons does not consider himself a realist, but see James Dreier, "Meta-ethics and the Problem of Creeping Minimalism"
 2. Matthew Kramer, *Moral Realism as a Moral Doctrine* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009).
 3. I have benefitted in this work by the overview provided by my friend and colleague, Mohsen Javadi, "Moral Epistemology in Muslim Ethics," *Journal of Religious Thought: A Quarterly of Shiraz University*, 11 (Summer, 2004), 3-16.

One of the most important and contentious discussions among Muslim scholars is the relation between ethics and religious law. The Greek word $\eta\theta\iota\kappa\acute{o}\varsigma$ (ethikos) was translated into Arabic as *akhlāq*. The translation was a good one, for both words stem from roots meaning character. In the Western tradition, however, the subject of ethics was soon broadened beyond what was found in the teachings of the Greek philosophers about the virtues to include discussions of duties, rights, principles, and norms. In the Islamic tradition, there were also discussions of these issues, but they were not generally regarded as a part of ethics. Rights and duties are given in the law. Ethics deals with virtue.¹ The law that prescribes rights and duties was generally taken to be religious law, and there was no view that there might be a specifically moral law parallel to but different from the religious law. That part of morality that is accessible to reason without the guidance of religion has been taken by many Muslim thinkers to be very small, and has focused on the issue of whether there is a good and evil that is discernible by reason, *ḥusn wa qubḥ ‘aqlī*, although some have argued that obligations can also be derived from rational knowledge of good and evil. The exact extent of moral knowledge independent of revelation is a matter over which there is considerable disagreement among Muslim scholars.

Although Ash‘arite theology is known for its divine voluntarism, according to which what is right and wrong is completely dependent on the commands of God, and Shi‘i theology, like that of the Mu‘tazilite theologians, allows that reason can discern what is good in at least some cases, and that God’s goodness is incompatible with the possibility of His commanding what is known to be evil independent of revelation, there remain a wide variety of positions that can be taken between the most extreme versions of these views.²

One might hold a Mu‘tazilite position that God cannot command what is known by reason to be unjust, but claim that what reason knows to be unjust is limited to

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1. Another difference is that in the Western tradition, ethics refers at once to a person’s moral character, to moral teaching and training, and to the philosophical discussions related to these; while in the Islamic tradition, *akhlāq* (ethics) is generally used for character and training, and the philosophical discussions are called *falsafah al-akhlāq*; although this usage is changing due to the influence of Western discussions.
 2. A. Kevin Reinhart’s *Before Revelation: The Boundaries of Muslim Moral Thought* (Albany: State University of New York at Albany Press, 1995) provides an indispensable and penetrating analysis of some of the most important of the views of the *mutakallimīn*. Also see George F. Hourani, *Islamic Rationalism: The Ethics of ‘Abd al-Jabbār* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971). More recently, some of these issues have been reviewed by Anver Emon, *Islamic Natural Law Theories* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

platitudes. God could command stealing, but not unjust stealing. God cannot command injustice only because it is impossible for God to command evil, and it is trivially true that injustice is evil. This kind of view may be considered a special kind of moral skepticism, according to which there is no non-trivial moral knowledge independent of revelation.

The Ash‘arite position could then be defended with the argument that the allegedly moral knowledge known by reason in the case of trivial truths is not really moral knowledge at all, but is merely a knowledge of logic. Any content of moral terms, beyond what is to be found by mere logic and grammar, must be given by the divine lawgiver. One might even go so far in this direction as to deny morality altogether, and to claim that the only substantive “oughts” are the demands made by religious law. A more moderate form of an Ash‘arite position might retain the view that reason is unable to discern substantive moral truths, but yet deny that divine commands are arbitrary. According to this view, what is good and right is what God commands, not because God commands it, but because God knows what is good and right, while human reason is not capable of such knowledge independent of revelation.

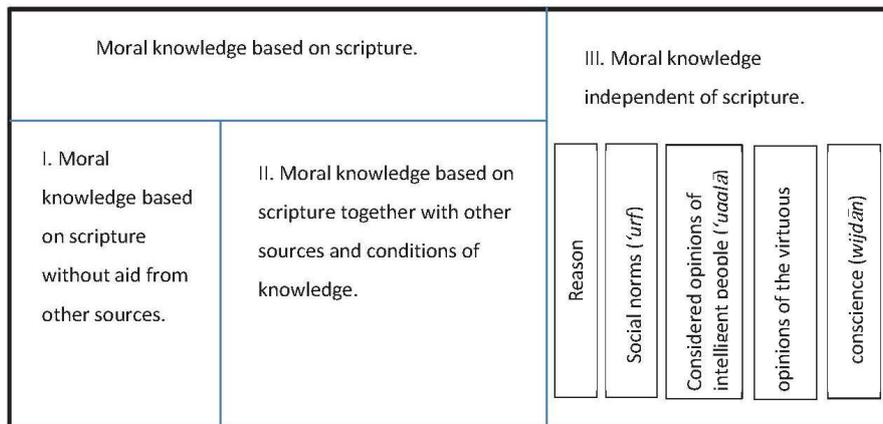
The view sketched above may be considered forms of moral scripturalism¹ in the sense that they hold that the main source of knowledge about what is right and wrong is through revelation. Denials of this view must posit that moral knowledge can be gained from other sources independently of scripture (the Qur‘ān and knowledge of sunnah based on narrations attributed to the Prophet, and, for the Shi‘a, attributed to the infallibles) or in combination with it. As mentioned, the Mu‘tazilite and Shi‘ite theologians appealed to reason. Other sources of moral knowledge that have been discussed by Muslims include conscience (*wijdān*), what is commonly considered good and bad in the society (*‘urf*), and the considered judgment of intelligent people (*‘uqalā*).

For Plato, knowledge of the form of the good may be considered the ultimate moral knowledge, and it is only available to one in whom the faculties of the soul exhibit the proper hierarchical harmony.² In the Aristotelian tradition, it has been argued that those who live virtuously possess moral knowledge that is not available to others, for it

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1. The term “scripturalism” is used in a different but related sense by Robert Gleave, *Scripturalist Islam: The History and Doctrines of the Akhbāri Shi‘i School*, (Leiden: Brill, 2007). Gleave’s scripturalists held that Islamic law is to be discerned directly through the Qur‘an and narrations from the infallibles, while their opponents held that rational principles were needed to determine how the texts are to be interpreted and the law derived from them.
 2. Plato’s moral epistemology is discussed in detail in C. D. C. Reeve, *Philosopher Kings: The Argument of Plato’s Republic* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988).

is only through the practice of virtue that one becomes able to know the aim toward which the virtuous life is directed.¹ Strands of Platonic, Aristotelian and Neo-Platonic doctrine are prominent in the tradition of Islamic philosophy, and this is particularly the case in the Muslim philosophers' moral epistemology. Fārābī explicitly seeks to harmonize Platonic and Aristotelian elements of moral and political thought. The Platonic (and Socratic) view that virtue itself is a kind of knowledge is reflected in Fārābī's contrast of the virtuous city with the city of ignorance.²

All of the positions on the above spectrum can be offered in more or less skeptical varieties, depending on the extent of the domain of moral knowledge that is to be derived from non-scriptural sources. So, one could take an extremely rationalist position according to which reason alone is sufficient for knowledge of some substantive moral truths, e.g., that it is wrong to hurt sentient beings for entertainment, that one should not engage in activities that are detrimental to one's health without good reason, that public officials should not accept bribes. One might even claim, more controversially, that what are normally considered to be specifically religious prohibitions are supported by reason independently of scripture, such as prohibitions against the consumption of alcohol. No matter how extreme and controversial the claims on behalf of reason might be, one could still hold that the domain within which reason issues moral judgments is very limited, and that for most issues, reason is unable to discern right from wrong without the aid of divine revelation.



1. See Alex John London, "Moral Knowledge and the Acquisition of Virtue in Aristotle's Nicomachean and Eudemian Ethics" *The Review of Metaphysics*, 54 (March 2001), 553-583.
2. Abū Nasr al-Fārābī, *On the Perfect State*, Richard Walzer, tr. and ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962). For discussion, see Walzer's introduction and Muhsin Mahdi, *Al-Farabi and the Foundation of Islamic Political Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001). See, also, the selections from Fārābī translated in *Medieval Political Philosophy*, Ralph Lerner and Muhsin Mahdi, eds. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1963).

We can form a model for the range of positions to be taken as follows.

Let's consider three sorts of disagreements that might be raised with reference to this chart.

First, there are important differences of opinion about how moral knowledge based on scripture is to be divided between categories I and II. Obviously, there is no knowledge based on scripture without the aid of any other sources, for scripture itself cannot be understood without knowledge of Arabic grammar and rhetoric, at least; and even the most elementary deductions rely upon reason. So, consider category I to consist of knowledge that is obtained by knowledge of the literal meanings of scripture, including all the prerequisites for knowledge of the literal meaning of scripture, which may be expanded to include such things as the historical knowledge needed to be able to evaluate the validity of traditions. The uṣūlī-akhbārī controversy may be viewed as turning on the issue of whether rulings to be derived from scripture can make use of principles beyond what is needed to understand literal meaning. This is not precise, for it is impossible to specify what implications of a set of statements should be included in their literal meaning. Furthermore, given that category II is not empty, the question must be raised about the non-scriptural sources to which appeal must be made in order to derive moral laws from scripture. Once the Qur'ān has been properly understood and the reliable narrations have been identified, what other knowledge is needed on the basis of which to draw moral conclusions? Are there rational principles to be followed in cases of doubt? Can the cases of doubt themselves be classified? In what ways can the textual features, historical features, and other aspects of the context of a statement contribute to the way in which it is to be understood? Some of these sorts of issues are discussed by scholars of 'ilm al uṣūl. Some scholars have claimed that in order to practice ijtihād, one must understand the purpose of the various laws in Islam, and this purpose is only understood by one who leads a pious life. Piety is not considered a source of moral knowledge, but as a precondition for some moral knowledge, that is, for a proper understanding of the moral law as given in the sharī'ah. There has also been considerable controversy among Muslim scholars and intellectuals about the extent to which knowledge of current conditions, technology, political arrangements is relevant to the derivation of the law.

One of the most influential views in this field is that of Shahīd Bāqir Sadr. He takes a moderate stance, which is that of the majority of Shi'i scholars, that intellectual discernment (idrāk al-'aqlī) may be used to find principles by which to derive religious legal rulings. He also surveys the controversy against the more extreme positions. In the course of this work, several types of intellectual discernment are described: (a)

intellectual discernment based on sense-experience and experimentation; (b) intellectual discernment based on self-evident truths; and (c) intellectual discernment based on theoretical speculation.¹

Second, positions can vary with regard to what goes into category III, moral knowledge independent of scripture and its prerequisites. Some of the 'urafā, for example, might claim that one can gain moral knowledge independent of scripture by mystical inspiration. One might also argue that if it is known by reason that one should not cause harm when it can be easily avoided, and it is only through experience and the development of medical sciences that various behaviors are known to cause harm, e.g., smoking, then there is moral knowledge that can be known independent of scripture only by reason in combination with experience and science. It is with regard to this category that the Muslim philosophers developed ethical views based on their analyses of the virtues and practical reasoning.

Third, after the above two sets of issues have been addressed, there still remains the question of how much moral knowledge is to be found in the three categories. One might hold that although there is moral knowledge that can be obtained by reason alone, this knowledge is extremely limited. Just as Hegel criticized the empty formalism of Kant's ethics, Muslim scholars might criticize attempts at deriving moral rulings on the basis of reason alone as yielding little more than empty formalism. At this point one may claim that substantive moral knowledge must rest on scripture, or one may appeal to other extra-scriptural sources of moral knowledge: conscience, moral intuitions, the moral intuitions of the pious and virtuous, or other sources and conditions that have been suggested for moral knowledge.

I have been assuming that religious obligations are moral obligations. This view could be supported with the following sort of argument.

1. We have a moral obligation to obey God.
2. To obey God, we must follow religious rules.
3. If we have a moral obligation to do x, and to do x, we must do y, then we have a moral obligation to do y.
4. So, we have a moral obligation to follow religious rules.

The first premise is controversial.² Some have held that there is no moral obligation for us to obey God, but that obedience to God is demanded by prudential rationality.

1. Ayatullah Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr, *A Short History of 'Ilm al-Usul* (Karachi: Islamic Seminary Publications, n.d.), part 3; on-line at URL = <http://www.al-islam.org/usul/>.

2. The truth of this claim was the basis of an argument by the Mu'tazilites, who argued that there must be an initial obligation to speculation, because it is only by means of speculation that God can be known

This view may be developed into a form of moral nihilism, albeit a religious moral nihilism, according to which we are obligated to obey religious rules by prudence alone, and that the laws given by God are arbitrary decrees that have little or nothing to do with the Greek concept of ethics. I think that a good theological case could be made against this sort of position; but I am not prepared to argue for that here. The point here is merely to acknowledge the possibility of a religious moral nihilism.

If religious moral nihilism is false, and if morality is not defined in such a way as to exclude obligations to God, and assuming that what religion teaches about the existence and attributes of God is true, a good case could be made for (1) on the basis of divine goodness.¹

Thus far, we have briefly introduced a range of opinions among Muslim scholars about the sources of moral knowledge. The question remains as to the implications of the various positions for a realist moral metaphysics.

Islamic Ethics and Metaphysics

The metaphysics of some of the early Muʿtazilites was clearly a robust form of moral realism. At least some of these early mutakallimīn held that goodness and badness are non-sensible properties that actions have in much the same way that a fruit might have the property of being an apple, or being red. The problem is that what makes a kind of action, like trespassing, bad is dependent on circumstances. If the trespassing is done in order to save a drowning child, it will be justified; but if it is done to snoop on a neighbor, it will not be. Hence, the act type, trespassing, is not essentially good or bad; a particular instance of the type will be good or bad depending on the circumstances. In recognition of this, the Basrian Muʿtazilites developed a rather sophisticated theory of wujūh, aspects. The aspects theory saved the realism of the Muʿtazilites, but only by making it relational.²

We find a similar course from an absolutist account of moral properties to one that views moral properties as relational in the writings of G. E. Moore; but there is an important difference. The relational element of the good that Moore came to

and the obligation to obey Him recognized. See ‘Abd al-Jabar, *Kitab al-Usul al-khamsa*, translated in Richard C. Martin and Mark R. Woodward with Dwi S. Atmaja, *Defenders of Reason in Islam: Muʿtazilism from Medieval School to Modern Symbol* (Oxford: Oneworld, 1997), 90f. If all obligation arose from divine commands, there could be no initial obligation to obey divine commands; but there is such an obligation, and so, not all obligations result from divine commands. See Hourani (1971), 56f.

1. For an argument of this sort, see Robert Adams, *Finite and Infinite Goods: A Framework for Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 244-245. 28 See Reinhart (1995), Ch. 9.

2. See Reinhart (1995), Ch. 9.

recognize included the conscious appreciation of the object considered good. The work of art, for example, is not intrinsically good, but the whole that includes the appreciation of the art work may be good. Moore begins with the idea that the goodness of a thing cannot be reduced to any combination of its natural properties (or its being commanded by God), but that goodness supervenes on the thing's natural properties, that is, if X and Y have the same natural properties, then X and Y cannot differ in their moral properties. This is the idea that dominates *Principia Ethica*. By 1912, however, when his *Ethics* was published, Moore had come to ascribe intrinsic value only to wholes which would include conscious states.¹

The pressure to view the good in a more nuanced manner that includes recognition of how what is considered to be good is received by human beings or other conscious beings creates difficulties for the model of moral knowledge that motivates realism in the first place. According to the model, actions, character traits, lives, and other objects of moral judgment, whether particulars or types of such objects, have moral properties. Human beings become aware of these properties through some sort of intuition, which may be either interpreted as a rational intuition, which is usually said to apply to general principles, or as a moral sense, to which appeal is often made with respect to particular actions and events. If, however, moral properties are not directly attached to things, but only to things in relation to conscious beings, the model of intuitive knowledge becomes excessively taxed. Rational intuition can be of little help beyond concept inclusion and deduction, and stumbles when it comes to relations unless aided by such structures as are found in modern logic and mathematics, and even with such aids, rational intuition will falter when considering the relations of objects to conscious subjects because we have no evidence that our rational faculties are capable of an intuitive recognition of such complex relations. This is not to say that such relations cannot be known, only that knowledge of them cannot properly be called intuitive. Moral sense would seem to have a better shot at knowledge of these complexes if the

1. See G. E. Moore, *Ethics*, William H. Shaw, ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 82, 129. An illuminating study of Moore's notion of intrinsic goodness together with a sustained argument that x being good for y is prior to any intrinsic good to be found in x (independent of teleological factors) is given by Christine Korsgaard, "The Relational Nature of the Good," forthcoming in *Oxford Studies on Metaethics*, Volume 8, Russ Shafer-Landau, ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), on-line at URL = <http://www.people.fas.harvard.edu/~korsgaard/CMK.Relational.Good.pdf>. If we examine Islamic Aristotelian ethics, as in Tūsī's Nasirean Ethics, we find that there is no intrinsic goodness in the sense of Moore; absolute goodness is defined as a good that is not sought for the sake of something else, and it is identified with felicity. Nasīr al-Dīn Tūsī *The Nasirean Ethics*, G. M. Wickens, tr. (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1964), 60; Khwājah Nasīr al-Dīn Tūsī, *Akhlaq-e Nāsiri*, Mujtabā Mīnavī and 'Alīridā Haydarī, eds. (Tehran: Kwārazmī, 1356/1977), 82.

sensitivity and empathy needed were properly developed; but to distinguish the feelings that lead us to adopt true moral beliefs from those that are deceptive they must be augmented by considerations that go far beyond direct intuitions.

One of the motivations for the adoption of moral realism of any sort is the idea that it is only by virtue of a firm grounding in reality that moral claims can be defended against the charges of: skepticism, relativism, subjectivism, and arbitrariness. Some religious people may also be motivated to accept moral realism for this sort of reason. However, here we need to be very careful about overgeneralizations. As previously pointed out, some religious ethicists accept a kind of moral skepticism. They hold that neither reason nor sentiment nor any other natural human cognitive faculties have the ability to figure out what is right and wrong. That's what revelation is for. With regard to relativism, everything depends upon what moral judgments are held to be relative to what factors. Some religious believers hold that rights and responsibilities are relative to gender, relative to whether one is a member of the clergy, or whether one is a descendent of the Prophet (ﷺ), and whether one is a believer or not. The kind of relativism many (but by no means all) religious people reject is relativity to time and place. The Law of God is binding on us today just as it was in the time of the Prophet (ﷺ). The Iranian martyr, Murtidā Mutahhari, held a moderate position on this issue: there are some moral constants and some elements of morality that are responsive to the contingencies of time and place. Subjectivism and arbitrariness are also controversial issues about which there is no consensus among religious scholars. Some religious laws certainly appear to be arbitrary, such as the details of ritual, although even with regard to these, religious scholars often contend that there is some divine wisdom behind what seem to us to be arbitrary commands.

The issue of subjectivism is even more problematic, for divine command theories of morality are sometimes described as subjectivist. George Hourani, for example, argues that Ash'arite divine command theories are subjectivist, "because the value of action is defined by relation to certain attitudes or opinions of a mind in the position of judge or observer, such as wishing and not wishing, commanding and forbidding, approving and disapproving."¹ He explains further: "the determining factor is His mind, so the theory of ethics is properly classified as 'subjective'."² This is a rather unusual use of the term "subjectivism" which is usually used for theories of moral judgment according to which such judgments either describe or express personal attitudes (or prescriptions). Hourani rejects the more common label, "ethical voluntarism", because

1. Hourani (1971), 12-13.

2. Hourani (1971), 13, n. 8.

“this name does not show very well its relation to other types of theory.”¹ The point is not to quibble over labels, but to understand the relation of moral and metaphysical theories. Hourani contrasts the Mu‘tazilite “rationalist objectivism” with the Ash‘arite “theistic subjectivism”, and considers the refutation of the latter sufficient support for the former, which, following ʿAbd al-Jabbār, is taken to imply the existence of moral attributes.²

Hourani explicitly compares Mu‘tazilite objectivism to British intuitionism, including references to Moore’s Ethics. As Hourani sees it, both the Mu‘tazila and the British intuitionists arrived at essentially the same conclusions because both were reacting against different forms of subjectivism. The Mu‘tazila sought an objective basis for morality in opposition to theological subjectivism; and the British intuitionists sought the same in opposition to the subjectivist currents in Christian thought and in social contract theories. He sees the same sort of conflict in Greek philosophy:

Here again, it was partly the prevalence of subjectivist theories among the sophists that stimulated the effort of Socrates and Plato to find an objective ethics, based on definitions of ethical terms, a theory of Forms, and a corresponding theory of knowledge. By the time of Aristotle this challenge had passed, and the relaxation in his work on the most fundamental issues of ethics is noticeable.³

There are several points worthy of note in this quotation. First, Hourani offers a dualistic picture of the history of ethics: it is a conflict between subjectivists and objectivists. Second, objectivism has metaphysical and epistemological components: moral realism and intuitionism, respectively. Third, and most importantly, Aristotle is seen as backsliding toward subjectivism on “the most fundamental issues.” Aristotle retains an appeal to rational intuitions in his ethics; and David Ross, at least, has interpreted Aristotle as an intuitionist. Aristotle does not, however, think that what is intuited are Platonic forms or non-naturalistic moral attributes.⁴ So, it seems that what Hourani considers to be a “relaxation” on the most fundamental issues of ethics would be Aristotle’s rejection of a moral realism that finds moral attributes in things in the way that accidents are in a substance.

The Mu‘tazilite/Ash‘arite conflict seems to lead scholars to assume that if one is to reject divine voluntarism in ethics, and avoid both skepticism and non-cognitivism,

1. Hourani (1971), 13.

2. Hourani (1971), 62.

3. Hourani (1971), 146.

4. For discussions of the senses in which Aristotle may and may not be considered a moral realist, see Robert Heineman, ed., *Aristotle and Moral Realism* (London: UCL Press, 1995).

then the only choice worth considering is realist-intuitionism. This appears to be what leads Prof. Reinhart to consider the Sufis as heirs to the Mu'tazilites. He writes:

There is a sense... in which the heirs of the Mu'tazilah are the Sufis whose missionary and pietist origins they share-not so much the Qushayrīs and Muhammad al-Ghazālīs but Ahmad al-Ghazālī, Ibn 'Arabī, Qunnavī and Suhrawardī al-Maqtūl with their mystically plural epistemology of private revelation, movements of the heart, dueling impulses, passion, fears and griefs. It is not merely that many of the most prominent figures in Mu'tazilī history were personally ascetic, but that one goal of asceticism is to become available to interior promptings.¹

This is an insightful remark. Both the Mu'tazilah and the Sufis (and Ishrāqīs) hold that through asceticism, we may gain intuitions that allow us to appreciate various moral truths. But if the ontology of the Mu'tazilah is accepted, this means that just as God has created the things of this world with colors and sounds that are perceived by the senses, He has also created them with moral attributes that may be perceived by the ascetic. It is not clear to me that the Sufis would accept this. With regard to theology, many of the Sufis would side with the Ash'arites and accept some form of divine voluntarism. The reason why asceticism provides moral perception for an Ash'arite Sufi would be because the Sufi becomes united with divinity and likes what God likes and hates what God hates, not because of the moral properties in the things liked or hated, but because of the divine attitude toward them that is taken on by the Sufi ascetic.

Asceticism, however, can also facilitate moral knowledge and moral intuitions in another way, which is discussed by Avicenna near the end of his *Ishārāt*. Avicenna represents a third alternative in the conflict over moral knowledge that is neither a realist-intuitionism nor a form of divine voluntarism. This Peripatetic view is that we intuit what is good by perceiving it to be pleasurable. Pleasure is not a sensation, but the satisfaction of achieving what is good with appreciation that it is good. Goodness is not a non-natural property, but is relative to the ends or perfections of that for whom the object is judged as good.² Through asceticism, one is able to avoid errors of judgment about what is good that arise because of a negligence of intellectual perfections and undue attention to physical pleasures. The intuitive knowledge gained through asceticism, according to Ibn Sina, is not one that enables the ascetic to perceive the nonnatural goodness that inheres in various objects, for objects are only good relative to one who is able to use them to become more perfect or eliminate defects.

1. Reinhart (1995), 183.

2. All of these points are also defended in Korsgaard (2013).

The above explanation can help us to solve a puzzle in the text of the *Ishārāt*. Concerning why certain pleasurable things are attained and yet disliked, Avicenna writes:

The pleasurable may be attained and then disliked, as some sick people dislike sweets in addition to not having appetite for such objects as they have had earlier. This is not a refutation of what has preceded, for such objects are not good in this state since the senses are not aware of them inasmuch as they are good.¹

The translator surmises that the phrase “for such objects are not good in this state” must be “the result of negligence either on the part of Ibn Sīnā or on the part of his scribes.”² Prof. Inati comes to this conclusion because it is clear that Avicenna is not a subjectivist, and does not think that a thing can only be good when the senses are aware of them as good. She interprets the case as one in which due to sickness there is a resultant dislike of something good. But Avicenna’s point seems to be that sweets are not good for the sick person, and so, the sick person will be unable to take pleasure in them since the senses cannot be aware of the sweets in the way needed for pleasure, that is, as good. The intuition through which the good shows itself as pleasurable is not one by which a non-natural property in the object becomes known, but one by which what is known is that the object brings about one’s perfection, and this will vary under different conditions.

Conclusions

In sum, a religious ethics can be developed in a number of different ways. One would be through a voluntaristic divine command theory. While there are philosophical and theological reasons to reject this sort of theory, because obedience to God would no longer be moral, and because divine commands would fail to reflect divine wisdom, respectively, the purpose of this paper is not to present or examine such arguments. The point is to consider the relation of positions that may be taken in religious ethics with regard to moral realism.

Realism has been promoted in forms that include the following features:

- rejection of normative relativism
- rejection of subjectivism
- rejection of non-cognitivism
- rejection of moral nihilism
- rejection of moral skepticism

1. Shams Inati, tr., *Ibn Sīnā and Mysticism: Remarks and Admonitions: Part Four* (London and New York: Kegan Paul International, 1996), 72. 39 Inati (1996), 12.

2. Inati (1996), 12.

- an acceptance that at least some moral truths can be known through rational intuitions or through moral sense and conscience, or both.
- an acceptance that moral facts and properties exist independent of the reason, thought, or will of moral agents.

The last of these elements is independent of the others, that is, versions of the other elements can be incorporated into a Peripatetic view of ethics without an ontological commitment to the existence of moral facts and properties. Of course, much more would need to be said about how the Peripatetic view handles moral intuitions, and how a Peripatetic moral epistemology differs from the epistemology of robust moral realism. Indeed, the quarrel between the Peripatetics and the robust realists is not so much one of ontology, but is over the question of the relation between epistemology and ontology. For the intuitionist-realist, intuitions provide a window on moral reality, so that moral truths are known through the apprehension of moral entities by intuition. For Peripatetics and moral constructivists, on the other hand, it is through an examination of the conditions of practical reasoning and human interests that moral truths are known, regardless of whether these truths are said to correspond to moral facts or to describe moral properties. The attitude of moral constructivism toward the reality of moral properties is comparable to Mullā Ṣadrā's position on the existence of the Platonic Form of the Good. Mullā Ṣadrā accepted the existence of the Platonic Forms, because he held that universal concepts should have a reflection in the intellectual realm; but he did not believe that an appeal to the Forms could be used to solve epistemological problems about natural kinds. Likewise, Peripatetics and constructivists could accept a minimalist account of realism about moral facts and properties, while denying that an appeal to direct intuitions of such entities provides moral knowledge. Moral knowledge independent of revelation must be based on knowledge of human nature and practical reasoning.

With regard to divine voluntarism, an imaginary Ash'arite could accept a form of moral realism and hold that non-natural moral properties inhere in objects and actions because of divine fiat, so that the prescriptive (tashrīṭ) will of God is necessarily accompanied by his creative willing that moral properties attach to things. It could also be held that human beings do not have any access to moral reality except through revealed truth. What is essential to the voluntarist position is not the denial of realism, but the epistemological thesis that moral truths cannot be known by any means but revelation.

Divine command theories can also be developed without voluntarism and in ways that are compatible with a strong form of realism about values.¹

The denial of divine voluntarism must be seen as an epistemological thesis rather than as a metaphysical one. A religious ethics that rejects divine voluntarism will be one that allows knowledge of at least some moral truths independent of revelation. Knowledge of such moral truths can be explained in a number of ways. Two of the most prominent that were developed in the Islamic world were: (1) those of the Mu'tazilite and Shi'i mutakallimīn who offered a realist model of moral intuitions, and (2) those of the philosophers from Fārābī through Ṭūsī, Mullā Ṣadrā and beyond who have defended a Peripatetic approach to ethics and practical wisdom. While the Peripatetic approach might be classified as realist in a minimalist sense, it has more in common with some versions of moral constructivism² than the sort of robust realism defended by Moore and his contemporary advocates.³

Prof. Reinhart offers a plausible alternative to Hourani's suggestion that moral realism appears as a reaction against subjectivism: what brought about the shift to voluntarism was the fading of Islamic missionary zeal. The missionary sought to appeal to moral truths that would be recognized by non-Muslims and attract them to the faith. This required an admission of moral truths that could be known independent of revelation. Once the structures and institutions of Islamic civilization had become secure and missionary activity was confined to the peripheries of Dār al-Islām, adherence to the moral rulings of Islam became a test of faith rather than a way to

1. As in Adams (1999).

2. For an excellent review of some of the major varieties of moral constructivism and how they address a number of metaethical issues, see Carla Bagnoli, "Constructivism in Metaethics," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2011 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL= <<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2011/entries/constructivism-metaethics/>>. Also see Sharon Street, "What is Constructivism in Ethics and Metaethics?", *Philosophy Compass* 5 (2010): 363-384. For a form of moral constructivism draws on some aspects of the Aristotelian tradition, see Mark LeBar, "Good for You," *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly*, 85 (2004), 195-217; Mark LeBar, "Aristotelian constructivism," *Social Philosophy and Policy*, 25: 1, (2008), 182-213.

3. See, for example: Graham Oddie, *Value, Reality, and Desire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005); David Enoch, "An Outline of an Argument for Robust Metanormative Realism" in *Oxford Studies in Metaethics*, Vol. 2, ed. Russ Shafer-Landau (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 21-50; David Enoch, *Taking Morality Seriously: A Defense of Robust Realism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011); William J. FitzPatrick, "Robust Ethical Realism, Non-Naturalism, and Normativity" in *Oxford Studies in Metaethics*, Vol. 3, ed. Russ Shafer-Landau (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 159-205.

attract outsiders. No further reason would be given for prescriptions and prohibitions than that it has been so decreed by divine command.

Since ‘Abd al-Jabbār (935-1025) and Avicenna (c. 980 – 1037) were contemporary, their works could be seen as reflecting the same sociological factors that would favor the recognition of moral truth independent of revelation. It would require more analysis than I can offer to suggest why this recognition continued through the Shi‘i tradition of philosophical theology from Khwājah Naṣīr al-Dīn Ṭūsī (1201-1274) onward. Needless to say, the sociological factors to be taken into consideration would include more than the motivation to present and defend Islam to outsiders. When we turn our attention to sociological factors that might encourage various theological tendencies, we should not fall into the trap of a reductionism that sees argumentation as completely beside the point. Moral realisms of robust varieties have been difficult to defend because they posit the existence of non-natural attributes and access to them through intuitions of one kind or another that are dubious. It is the philosophical difficulties with robust realism that led both Moore and ‘Abd al-Jabbār to complicate their theories through the recognition of some of the relational aspects of moral attributes; and perhaps it is these same difficulties that attracted scholars of the Shi‘a from Ṭūsī onward to a more Peripatetic view of moral philosophy.

In the contemporary Muslim world, there is still no consensus on divine voluntarism or moral realism. Identity politics would seem to promote a form of divine voluntarism; while the intellectual defense of Islam in international arenas could be expected to work in favor of approaches that incorporate elements of rationalism and/or some form of moral intuitionism. For historical reasons, Shi‘i theology remains committed to a rejection of divine voluntarism; although, as mentioned earlier, factors that promote voluntarism may also work to limit the scope of moral knowledge independent of revelation while stopping short of its complete denial, resulting in an attenuated moral skepticism. In Iran, a great impetus to the acceptance of the public teaching of philosophy in the seminaries of Qom was the threat of Marxism.¹ While some forms of religious conservatism might be expected to support attenuated skepticism about moral reasoning and to limit the scope of moral knowledge independent of revelation, there have been religious defenses of moral realism by Western Christians against the subjectivist elements that have been attacked in the so-called “culture wars”, and it would not be surprising to find similar inclinations among

1. See ‘Allāmah Ayatullah Sayyid Muhammad Husayn Husaynī Tehrānī, *Mihr-e Tābān* (Tehran: Baqir al‘Ulūm, n.d.), 60-62. For more on contemporary philosophy in Iran see Hajj Muhammad Legenhausen, “Introduction” to special issue on Contemporary Islamic Philosophy in Iran in *Topoi*, 26:2 (2007), 167175.

Iranian Muslims. Moral realism is attractive to some precisely because it seems to offer a way of defending absolute moral claims against cultural relativism. On the other hand, the globalization of moral discourse tends to promote moral views that appear to differ from those enshrined in Islamic law; and this may serve to fortify tendencies among Muslim scholars toward skepticism about the ability of natural reason to support Islamic ethics. Reliance on claims to direct intuitions of moral reality can only be expected to harden opposing stances. At this juncture, a Peripatetic constructivism offers a reasonable alternative on which to found a religious ethics consistent with the traditional Shi'ite insistence on 'aql wa 'adl (reason and justice), but Allah knows best.

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