

Main Ethical Questions In Islam

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One of the definitions of the word “ethics” is the study and evaluation of human conduct. It is regarded as normative because it relates to certain basic ideals. Ethics can also be described as a field of study that focuses on the knowledge of good and evil, and the basis on which aspects of behavior should be evaluated.

Ethics and Life

Since the start of creation man has never ceased to contemplate the moral question of good and evil.

Nowadays technological advancement is peoples’ main concern, but progress in the field of ethics and morals is rarely considered. The relevance of morals to our daily life is so great that a lot of our present social, economic, and political problems are the result of our ethical problem.

This ethical problem leads to the breaking down of the family institution, subjecting it to problems such as, cohabitation (couples living together without legal or religious sanctions) and generation gaps.

In the name of “modernism,” some people have excluded morals from their dealings. They claim that honesty is meaningless unless there is benefit derived from it. Others stopped worshipping God in the name of “liberation,” and instead they worship false gods like worshipping wealth, power or expediency.

This disregard of the ethical problem led to many wars which caused a great deal of human suffering. The philosopher Jeffery Burton Russell commented on this problem, pointing out that it is unfair to say that man has descended to the level of beasts, as beasts only kill for food while people kill each other brutally and senselessly, which gives a clear indication of our dire need for ethics and morals in life.

In Sayyid Abul A`la Maududi’s book The Ethical View Point of Islam, he quoted some western scholars on the ethical problem. For example, Lewis Mumford in his book The Conduct of Life, talks about the invisible breakdown of civilization, the erosion of values, the dissipation of human purpose, the demurral of distinction between right and wrong, and the diversion to subhuman levels of conduct. Harold Titus in his book Living Issues in Philosophy says that man has devised several plans and organizations for gaining greater security and comfort, yet he suffers from mental and emotional security as to the meaning of life, the nature of the world in

which he lives, and the kind of life that he wants to live with his fellow men. Another quotation given by F.S Northrop in his book *The Meeting of East and West* says that it seems that the more civilized we become, the more incapable of maintaining civilization.

The Ultimate Good

Books of philosophy have concentrated on four main ethical questions. The first, what is the supreme good that a person really aspires to? One answer considers happiness the ultimate good that a person aspires to. Anything that makes a person happy is good and anything that causes disappointment is evil.

Another answer is that the attainment of perfection is the ultimate good. This means that a person should do his best to achieve perfection, and anything that helps achieve it is good and anything preventing its achievement is evil.

Philosopher Emmanuel Kant's answer to this question is that the feeling of duty makes a person moral, which is considered the ultimate good.

All these answers, which are based in secular morality, are established on a moral system that is independent of God and religious faiths. That is why these answers are unclear in their definition. For example, if people aspire to happiness, is this happiness sensual, spiritual, or mental? Also, is it the individual or group happiness that should be fulfilled? And if the ultimate good is perfection then, what are the standards of measuring perfection? And, is it the individual or group perfection that people strive at? The answer that claims that the ultimate good is the feeling of duty is ambiguous about who is responsible for defining what duty is.

Knowledge of Good and Evil

The second question in books of philosophy is what is the ultimate standard of judging whether a certain behavior is good or evil? Again, the answer of secular morality is very contradictory. This deficiency in approach is due to the various explanations given for one question.

Empiricists answer this question by saying that human experience should be regarded as the ultimate source of differentiating between good and evil. On the other hand, intuitionists declare that humans have an insight for what is right and what is wrong.

Many famous philosophers like Plato, Aristotle, Spinoza, and Hegel were of the "rationalism" school, which says that people discover good and evil by using reason and experience. This school was also not clear in defining whose experience should be taken as a measure? If the measure is "universal" experience then there has to be a full evaluation on human experience before reaching a conclusion. This evaluation will need an ultimate and unbiased interpretation, which is basically impossible due to the various interpretations given by different experts.

This evaluation would be a relative source of measuring good and evil because of the long duration that would be taken in collecting this data, which would mean leaving people without a distinction between good and evil for a very long time.

Sanctions on Morality

The third question is who has the power to sanction morality? According to secular morality, one school claims that morality sanctions itself, meaning that if a person does something right he feels content, and if he does something wrong he feels guilty. Another school says that “law of practical reason” is a self imposed law that sanctions morality. Others claim that by force, political power can sanction morality. In any society there is a certain code for permissible and prohibited actions. An opinion says that this informal social pressure is the sanction for morality.

Motives of Moral Conduct

The fourth question is what are the real motives behind people following a certain moral law? One of the schools of secular morality claims that the motives of moral conduct are the inherent respect for moral law. Another says that the motive is the desire to achieve perfection. A third school declares that punishment and reward are the motives of moral conduct, and that people are moral because they will be subjected to punishment or reward. They also varied as to who gives that reward or punishment? And whose reward or punishment is more important, is it the political power or society? For example, the reward or punishment in society would either be, by being accepted and respected, or by being ostracized and rejected by people.

Secular Morality and Moral law

Ideas presented by philosophers of secular morality on human thoughts throughout history are not wholly devoid of truth. One of the problems facing secular morality is that it is an incomplete and incomprehensive system. Although there have been many attempts to answer these four questions, there has not been a clear indication as to how these answers could be applied to the foundation of morality. Also, how can these answers help in building an individual or a society that is righteous without being too totalitarian or too free? The most crucial problem of secular morality is that it attempts to establish a moral system independent of God, by divorcing morality from the belief in God and the Hereafter.

**** Adapted from a lecture in Dr. Jamal Badawi's Islamic Teachings series.***

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