

Introduction

The nature of religious ethics has remained a matter of dispute from the early period of Islam. The traditionalist (subjectivist) schools, including al-Shafi' (d.820), Ibn Hanbal (d.855), and al-Ashari (d.936), among others, have been considered to be ethical voluntarists (Leaman, 2004, p.147-148). They considered only that which was sanctioned or criticised, ordered or prohibited by God to be the ethical norm (ibid, p.148). They considered the notion of ethics being independent of God incomprehensible (ibid).

On the other hand, the rationalists, who will be the focus of this paper, took an objectivist viewpoint (ibid, p.147). They believed that independent reasoning was sufficient to determine what is right and wrong, and obligatory and prohibited (ibid).

This academic reaction paper will be an evaluation of the concept of objective ethical values as advocated by the rationalist school.

Analysis

One such group that subscribed to this rationalistic worldview were the Mutazilite school, who according to Abrahamov (1998, p.32) were not pure rationalists. Rationalism was adopted in some of their doctrines, but revelation remained a central focus for them (ibid). Consequently, their concept of rationalism is believed to allow one to recognise the existence of God, the formation of the world and its organisation, and mankind and the logical understanding of their actions (ibid). More importantly, the world must follow certain rational rules, which are also applicable to God (ibid).

For the Mutazilite, reason is considered to be the “governing principle of the world” (ibid, p.33). Therefore, a significant dimension of Mutazilite rationalism is the superiority given to reason over revelation (ibid). To the extent that if revelation were to conflict with reason, the contradiction must be resolved in light of reason (ibid).

The ethical voluntarists, the Asharites in this case, believed that man is unable to determine, by the use of independent reason alone, ethical values (ibid, p.36). Rather, it can only be achieved with the assistance of revelation as it is God (ibid). Quite the opposite, the Mutazilite believe that good and evil actions possess an underlying “intrinsic property” (ibid) which can be uncovered by reason, independent of revelation. In other words, the characteristic of good/evil exists within the action itself. For the most part, according to the Mutazilite, revelation merely confirms what independent reasoning can determine on its own (Johnston, 2004, p.243). Mankind is able to rationally determine, without divine intervention, how they are to behave and conduct themselves. This is further elucidated by the Mutazilite scholar Abd al-Jabbar (d.1025) who stated that revelation only confirms “the obligation in the general theological or eschatological context” (ibid, p.237).

Since the dawn of the nineteenth century, the rationalistic worldview with a revival of Mutazilism has drawn a lot of attention, more so with the discovery of Mutazilite medieval sources (Demichelis, 2010, pp.411-412). The discovery, reprinting, and restudying of Mutazilite writings has led to the emergence of a new Mutazilite Islamic reformist movement (ibid, p.419). Reformists who share the same rationalist worldview of the Mutazilite include al-Afghani (d.1897), Abduh (d.1905), and Sayyid Ahmad Khan (d.1898) (ibid). Furthermore, during the Arab Awakening of the second half of the nineteenth and first half of the twentieth

century, the direct or indirect influence of the Mutazilite rationalist understanding can be viewed in the Islamic reformist approach (ibid).

The Egyptian historian, Amin (d.1954) has stated, in praise of the Mutazilite objective view, that the Mutazilite theological analysis will allow reason to be used freely, away from “the immobility in which it is located in the contemporary age” (ibid, p.417). This will also allow legislators to include reasoning when making legislation (ibid). As such, Amin remarks, the rationalist approach is the only “light that illuminates the path of modernity” (ibid).

Dr Soroush (2008) who identifies as a neo-Mutazilite, has stated in an interview that the Mutazilite approach can shed new light on the method we use tradition and also how we extricate ourselves from it. He considers the main reason for his attraction to the Mutazilite school to be their promotion of revelation-independent reasoning (ibid). They then reflected on the nature of the relationship of independent reasoning and revelation in an attempt to provide a new understanding (ibid).

In the modern world, the ethical objectivity approach may be able to assist in rethinking issues which may be considered inapplicable with modernity. This may include the unilateral right of divorce given to men, laws of inheritance, polygamy, etc.

Limitation

Despite the real-world applicability of the objectivist approach, it has been the Asharite subjectivists who have remained dominant throughout the centuries. Hourani (1985, p.65) has identified a number of reasons for their dominance, including a theological aspect. This

aspect is very much rooted in the omnipotence of God (ibid). The supreme power of God is an overarching theme throughout the Quran, a fundamental tenet of religion for the Asharite, and by extension the Ahl as-Sunnah (ibid). Man's dependence on God's will to guide them to realise right from wrong is demonstrative of man's insignificance in the sight of God, simultaneously highlighting God's might, which is very much the subjectivist approach (ibid).

The objectivist understanding, on the other hand, leads to a theological conundrum. The question arises, if reason - independent of God and revelation - is able to realise good and bad, could the same reasoning be applied to judge God's actions (Leaman, 2004, p.147)? According to the rationalist understanding, God's action will also need to be governed by such objective ethical values (Abrahamov, 1998, p.36). Values such as the need for justice in all of God's acts as logically deduced by the Mutazilite, seem to limit the omnipotence of God (Hourani, 1985, p.65). Questions such as 'can God do evil if He wanted to,' were answered in the negative, restricting God's power (ibid). Some Mutazilites claimed that God can do evil, but due to His nature He would not do it, a contradictory response (ibid).

This appears to be a major limitation for the objectivist school. It is not illogical to consider God to be all-powerful, capable of doing as He wills. As such, He should be able to deal with His creation as He so pleases. Al-Ashari was able to avoid this theological conundrum by denying the idea of objective values from the very beginning which may be used to regulate God's actions (ibid). Furthermore, al-Ashari's definition of 'justice,' "obedience to the command of a law" (ibid), freed God from all ethical limitations as God is not governed by Shariah. Hence, the ordinary human sense of justice does not apply to God.

Notwithstanding that Mutazilite objectivism has gained momentum in modernity, with intellectuals such as Soroush, Rahman (d.1988) and others expressing Mutazilite ideas, explicitly and implicitly in their works, have not been able to provide a satisfactory response to the theological conundrum.

Conclusion

The focus of this paper was primarily focused on the rationalist approach, more specifically that of the Mutazilite school and therefore naturally one-sided. However, this is not to say that there are no crucial limitations in the subjectivist approach. Nevertheless, the theological conundrum continues to be a major limitation which appears to directly conflict with not only a greatly stressed concept in the Quran, but God Himself. For the layman, this would naturally cause them to have some form of reservation for such an approach. In addition to the theological limitation, there remain other limitations.

This, however, is not to say that such a rationalistic approach cannot be of benefit. On the contrary, as Leaman (2004) has demonstrated in his chapter '*Are the ethics of religion objective or subjective?*' that at times, the subjectivist schools have resorted to a rationalist approach to some degree or another. Moreover, the rationalist approach may provide satisfactory solutions for Muslims in modern ethical problems as mentioned above.

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