

Rethinking Moral Ambiguity in the Qur'an: A Descriptive-Interpretive Meta-Ethical Analysis

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Abstract

This article, *Rethinking Moral Ambiguity in the Qur'an: A Descriptive-Interpretive Meta-Ethical Analysis*, examines how the Qur'an constructs moral value and moral knowledge in ways that generate, rather than eliminate, ethical ambiguity. The study aims (1) to explore the ontological status of moral value in the Qur'an, (2) to analyse the epistemic relationship between reason and revelation in Qur'anic ethics, and (3) to conceptualise moral ambiguity as a hermeneutical resource for ethical deliberation. Methodologically, this research is library-based and employs a descriptive-interpretive reading of selected Qur'anic verses related to key ethical concepts such as *khayr*, *birr*, *ma'rūf*, *'aql*, and *shukr*, combined with an analytical-comparative dialogue with classical and contemporary Islamic ethical thought and meta-ethical debates on divine command theory and moral realism. The analysis shows, first, that the Qur'an affirms an objective and purposive moral order while simultaneously grounding it in divine will and teleology. Second, the Qur'an attributes a significant epistemic role to human reason and moral intuition, yet subjects them to continuous correction and guidance by revelation. Third, the Qur'an deliberately maintains moral tensions and antinomies, which function as an apparatus for moral transformation rather than a defect to be theologically resolved. The article, therefore, proposes a meta-ethical framework that understands Qur'anic moral ambiguity as intrinsic to scriptural ethics and argues that preserving rather than suppressing this ambiguity opens a productive space for contemporary Islamic ethical reasoning.

Keywords: Qur'anic Ethics; Moral Ambiguity; Moral Ontology; Moral Epistemology; Islamic Meta-ethics

INTRODUCTION

In many contemporary Muslim societies, ethical debates are no longer confined to the domains of theology and jurisprudence, but increasingly take place in public arenas where Muslims negotiate questions of human rights, gender equality, environmental degradation, economic justice, digital communication, and violence carried out in the name of religion (Amanullah, 2012; El Fadl, 2017; Helfaya et al., 2018; Sayem, 2023; Yusuf & Marjuni, 2022; Zahed, 2020). Competing groups of Muslims frequently invoke the Qur'an to legitimate sharply opposed positions: verses on justice and compassion are cited alongside verses on warfare and punishment; scriptural language of *ma'rūf* and *munkar* is mobilised both to justify and to contest prevailing social norms. These conflicts reveal not only disagreements about specific moral rulings, but also deeper tensions regarding how the moral grammar of the Qur'an should be understood in relation to contemporary moral concerns. Within these debates, the Qur'an often functions as a source of allegedly unambiguous moral verdicts. Yet the fact that the same text can be invoked to support divergent, even contradictory, ethical positions suggests that Qur'anic moral language is far from unequivocal (Moqbel, 2024). Behind disputes about specific issues lie more fundamental questions about the nature of moral value and moral knowledge: whether goodness and badness are independent

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realities or simply products of divine command; whether human reason can discern moral truths or must rely entirely on revelation. These questions render the problem of moral ambiguity in the Qur'an both practically urgent and theoretically significant for contemporary Islamic ethical reasoning.

Ethics and morality occupy a central position in the Islamic tradition and constitute a major area of discourse within it. As one of the philosophical fields that seeks to offer rational formulations for the foundations of human conduct and to reflect critically on the characteristics of the terms and concepts used in these foundations, moral discourse has engaged theologians, philosophers, mystics, and jurists since the formative period of Islam. The evolution of these theological and philosophical discourses aimed at establishing, systematising, and reinforcing moral norms within the framework of Islamic teachings (Hourani, 1985, p. 1). Although the Qur'an—the primary textual source on which Muslims base their moral, legal, social, and theological lives—is not a book of moral philosophy and does not present a moral theory in the strict sense, it nevertheless contains a rich repertoire of ethical messages that may serve as the basis for constructing a “comprehensive” ethical system (Darrāz, 1973, pp. 15–16). This can be seen in a number of Qur'anic terms, such as *al-khayr*, *al-birr*, *al-'adl*, *al-qist*, *al-ma'rūf*, *al-qadr*, and others, which carry moral connotations and may be interpreted in ways that resonate with moral philosophy. Consequently, discursive formations within the Islamic tradition that address moral issues—whether at the meta-ethical or normative ethical level—almost invariably ground their theoretical assertions in the Qur'anic text.

However, in light of the fact that the Qur'an is not a thematically organised text and is not arranged chronologically, the various meanings and values it contains, including those related to moral issues, tend to appear vague and ambiguous. Majid Fakhry (1994, p. 11) famously describes the Qur'anic ethos as “vague and elusive.” This structural and semantic openness allows the Qur'anic text to generate a “surplus of meaning,” giving rise to a spectrum of interpretations that are diverse, plural, and sometimes mutually contradictory. In an attempt to construct a systematic moral theory based on Qur'anic ethical messages, researchers of Islamic ethics typically begin by identifying and grouping relevant verses before framing them within fundamental questions developed in moral philosophy. These questions include, first, ontological questions about the fundamental nature of moral facts, such as the nature of goodness and badness; and second, epistemological questions about the sources of knowledge of moral value, particularly the relationship between reason and revelation.

As far as Qur'anic ethical presuppositions are concerned, they remain open to interpretation and consequently generate multiple, often conflicting, readings. If the ontological question of the fundamental nature of moral value is posed to the Qur'an, one finds textual bases that can be used to justify divine command theory, ethical voluntarism, or theistic subjectivism—such as Q. 35:8—as well as guided will theory, moral rationalism, or ethical objectivism—such as Q. 16:90. In this context, ethical voluntarism may be understood as a stance that attributes moral value to the perspectives, approvals, and commands of moral subjects—human individuals, communities, or God—so that goodness and badness depend entirely on the will of the commander. In contrast, moral objectivism posits the objective reality of moral standards, measures, and values, asserting that these values possess a genuine existence independent of the desires and opinions of moral subjects (Nanji, 1991, p. 112; Sachedina, 2005, pp. 260–264).

A similar ambiguity emerges at the epistemological level. The question of how humans know moral truths—closely tied to the ontological status of moral facts—allows interpreters to read the

Qur'an either as privileging a traditionalist approach (Q. 53:30) or as supporting a rationalist approach (Q. 2:44). Moral rationalism affirms the possibility of knowing the value of goodness through human reason. This can be pursued independently, as in the works of Muslim philosophers, or in conjunction with revelation, as in the case of the Mu'tazila. Traditionalism, on the other hand, challenges this epistemic optimism by arguing that humans can only grasp goodness through revelation and the textual sources derived from it. While the Ash'arites and the majority of Hanafi, Mālikī, and Shāfi'ī scholars regard revelation as the primary source of morality—assigning to reason a role that is strictly circumscribed by the textual sources—the more radical textualism of *ahl al-ḥadīth*, Hanbalī, and Zāhirī circles categorically rejects the independent role of reason in ethical judgement (Abdullah, 2016, pp. 148-151; Hourani, 1985, pp. 24-25). It is thus reasonable to suggest that the ambiguity of moral language in the Qur'an constitutes a significant factor in the emergence and evolution of various Islamic ethical theories, which interact, influence, and compete with one another in their attempts to establish orthodoxy and orthopraxy.

The difficulty with many Islamic ethical theories that claim Qur'anic foundations lies in the inability, or unwillingness, of theologians from different schools to preserve the moral ambiguities present in the text. Proponents of particular schools tend to resolve the dual character of Qur'anic moral discourse by reducing it to a single perspective that aligns with their own commitments and, in some cases, by explicitly negating alternative readings (See al-Syahrastānī, 1968, pp. 43-46, 86-88, 94-103, 162-164). The unavoidable result of such reduction is what may be termed *hermeneutical violence*: the simplification of Qur'anic moral discourse into a straightforward, clear, and definitive message, coupled with the negation of textual ambiguity by narrowing the horizon of the text and locking it into the monolithic horizon of a reader's interpretation. Yet a close reading of the Qur'an reveals enduring moral tensions. The Qur'an presents a dual perspective on human nature, simultaneously criticising the arrogance of those who rely solely on the absoluteness of reason and freedom of action—pure humanism—and warning against the destructive consequences of despair and surrender—fatalistic determinism (Q. 57:23. Rahman, 2002, p. 241). An exclusive emphasis on either the autonomy of human moral development or fideistic textualism and the absurdity of absolute dependence on God's arbitrary commands risks undermining the Qur'anic moral order itself.

Recent decades have witnessed a growing scholarly interest in Islamic ethics within the wider field of Islamic studies, marked by efforts to analyse moral issues in the Islamic tradition through interdisciplinary approaches. A significant portion of this scholarship focuses on ethical pronouncements and teachings in the Qur'an. Toshihiko Izutsu and Fazlur Rahman, for example, examined religious ethical concepts in the Qur'an using a semantic approach to elucidate key Qur'anic ethical notions (Izutsu, 2002; Rahman, 1983). Other scholars have explored particular Qur'anic verses in relation to a variety of ethical themes, including environmental ethics, animal ethics, ethics of journalism, ethics of social media, gender and sexuality, and the intersection of Islamic ethics and law (Amanullah, 2012; El Fadl, 2017; Helfaya et al., 2018; Jaenudin, 2022; Muhamad et al., 2020; Sauda, 2014; Sayem, 2023; Yusuf & Marjuni, 2022; Zahed, 2020). In addition to thematic studies, some researchers have concentrated on specific ethical terms in the Qur'an, such as *ma'rūf*, *taqwā*, and *al-mar'* (Chafik, 2021; Helli, 2021; Reinhart, 2017). Particularly relevant for the present study are the works of George F. Hourani, Majid Fakhry, and Mariam al-Attar, who discuss key Qur'anic concepts that play a central role in shaping the ethical predisposition of the text and contextualise them within debates about the nature of ethical value, the primary source of

ethical judgement, human capacity and moral responsibility, and divine justice (al-Attar, 2010, pp. 11-21; Fakhry, 1994, pp. 11-21; Hourani, 1985, pp. 23-48).

However, previous studies have not systematically examined Qur'anic moral ambiguity at the intersection of ontological and epistemological questions, nor have they treated ambiguity itself as a constitutive hermeneutical feature of scriptural ethics. There is still a lack of research that approaches the Qur'an's ethical discourse as a field in which moral realism, divine command, rational intuition, and revelatory guidance are held in deliberate tension, rather than being resolved into a single, coherent moral theory. The majority of existing works tend to smooth out the Qur'an's internal moral tensions in order to reconstruct a unified ethical doctrine—whether in the form of a rationalist natural law, a voluntarist divine command theory, or a substantively thick conception of justice—thereby risking the very hermeneutical violence they seek to avoid. This article addresses this gap by offering a meta-ethical reading that foregrounds moral ambiguity in the Qur'an as an intrinsic and productive feature of its ethical discourse.

The objective of this study is to elucidate the “mind” of the Qur'an on fundamental issues in religious-philosophical ethical debates. This will be done through a descriptive-interpretive analysis of selected ambiguous statements in the Qur'an that bear directly on questions of moral ontology and moral epistemology. The article argues that moral ambiguity in the Qur'an is a fundamental characteristic that ought to be preserved, because it constitutes a moral strength of the text by expanding its ethical horizon and opening space for diversity in moral reasoning. At the ontological level, the article contends that the Qur'an posits moral values as having an objective reality while simultaneously affirming that these values originate from, are intertwined with, and ultimately return to God. In this respect, the Qur'an promotes a conception of value that dialectically connects moral realism with teleological ethics: objective standards of ethical value are established by God, yet their objectivity is inseparable from their alignment with God's involvement and will.

At the epistemological level, the Qur'an does not reduce divine commands and decrees to written texts alone. It presents divine revelation as interwoven with the very fabric of the universe and humanity, acknowledges the partial validity of human reason as a moral instrument for discerning the values underlying moral facts—whether embedded in *āyāt kauniyyah* or inscribed in *āyāt qauliyyah*—and thus attributes the genesis of ethical values both to revelatory texts and to human rationality. The historical, diverse, and dynamic horizons of human rationality, at both individual and collective levels, provide various schematic models for understanding the ethical meanings conveyed in God's revelation. Consequently, this study proposes that the Qur'an does not unequivocally endorse a single moral theory. By preserving ambiguity as an integral component of the text, the Qur'anic moral realm—encompassing ontological and epistemological concerns—invites the incorporation of insights from diverse ethical approaches and moral theories. The intricate and sometimes contradictory values embedded in the textual ambiguity of the Qur'an challenge binary moral theories that view moral life in strictly dichotomous terms, while simultaneously unveiling hermeneutical potentials that can significantly contribute to moral progress.

In this research, “ethics” is understood as the systematic study of moral philosophy, with particular attention to the characteristics of moral value and the methodology of moral judgement (Chakraborti, 2023, p. 3; Gensler, 2011, p. 3; Vaughn, 2015, p. 13). The analysis also employs Thomas Bauer's notion of ambiguity to describe cases in which a Qur'anic statement can reasonably sustain two contradictory, or at least competing, meanings with regard to the same object (Bauer,

2021, p. 10). On this basis, the selected verses are categorised into two broad clusters: (1) verses that primarily concern the ontological status, structure, and features of moral value (for example, those that speak of goodness, justice, righteousness, divine pleasure, and the objectivity or universality of *khayr* and related concepts); and (2) verses that primarily concern the epistemological sources and instruments of moral knowledge (for example, those that discuss *'aql*, *fiṭra*, *āyāt kauniyyah* and *qauliyyah*, *ma'rūf*, and the justificatory force of divine commands). Verses that straddle both dimensions—such as those that simultaneously speak of objective moral value and divine will, or of rational discernment and revelatory decree—are treated as liminal texts that exemplify Qur'anic moral ambiguity.

Analytically, the study proceeds in three main steps. First, it undertakes a descriptive-interpretive reading of the selected verses, focusing on their lexical and syntactic features, immediate textual context, and major lines of interpretation in classical and modern tafsīr, in order to map the Qur'an's own moral vocabulary and its underlying ethical presumptions. Second, it organises the resulting patterns into ontological and epistemological trajectories, comparing how different sets of verses collectively portray moral values as objective facts, as dependent on divine will, or as embedded in human rational and experiential capacities, thereby making explicit the internal tensions and antinomies of Qur'anic moral discourse. Third, it places these Qur'anic trajectories in analytical-comparative dialogue with Islamic theological and philosophical debates (for example, Ash'arite voluntarism, Mu'tazilite and Māturīdī moral rationalism, Shi'i natural law tendencies, and critiques by Ibn Taymiyya) as well as contemporary meta-ethical discussions on divine command theory and moral realism. This combined descriptive-interpretive and analytical-comparative procedure allows the study to conceptualise Qur'anic moral ambiguity not as a defect to be removed, but as a constitutive meta-ethical feature of scriptural ethics and as a hermeneutical resource for moral reflection.

RESULTS

The analysis of the selected Qur'anic verses yields three interrelated clusters of findings that reflect the Qur'an's ethical presuppositions at both the ontological and epistemological levels. First, a set of verses articulates an objective and purposive moral order that is grounded in God's creative and legislative activity, while at the same time engaging and transforming existing moral sensibilities. Second, a group of verses highlights the epistemic role of human reason, moral intuition, and experiential reflection in discerning moral value, even as these faculties are repeatedly subjected to correction and guidance by revelation. Third, a number of verses exhibit internal tensions and apparent antinomies that cannot be reduced to a single, coherent moral theory but instead preserve a productive ambiguity in the Qur'an's moral discourse. The following subsections present these textual patterns in turn.

Objectivity, Interdependence, and Purposefulness of Moral Value

The Qur'an presents a distinctive conceptualization of human being, emphasizing the duality of the components that constitute her existence. In addition to affirming the material dimension of human beings—a metaphor that describes their lowliness, stagnation, and absolute passivity—which derives from a lowly lump of clay (Q. 6:2; 7:12; 15:26; 17:61; 23:12; 32:7; 38:71,76; 55:14) and a

contemptible drop of water (Q. 16:4; 18:37; 22:5; 23:13; 35:11; 36:77; 40:67; 53:46; 75:37; 76:2; 80:19), Qur'an also asserts that human beings are created from a spiritual entity—a metaphor that presupposes a continuous upward movement towards perfection, namely the spirit of God (Q. 15:29; 21:91; 32:9; 38:72; 66:12). Such a duality, of course, has significant implications for the way in which humans exist in the world. According to Ali Shari'ati, this existential condition is a primordial aspect of the human condition, comprising a thesis and an antithesis. These two contradictory tendencies then give rise to dialectical and evolutionary processes in human life (Shari'ati, 1979, p. 89). In this context, the Qur'an, on the one hand, presents a relatively pessimistic portrait of human beings, depicting them as weak, ignorant, inclined to turn away from God, unjust, exploitative, selfish, often sinful, disobedient, unfaithful, arrogant, transgressive, hasty, disbelieving in favors, negligent, despairing, miserly, stubborn, stupid, and always complaining (Q. 4:28; 5:49; 10:12,21,44,60,92; 12:38; 14:34; 17:13,60, 67,83,89,100; 18:54; 21:1,37; 22:66; 33:72; 39:8,49; 41:49,51; 42:48; 43:15; 70:19-21; 75:5; 80:17; 89:15-16; 96:6-7; 100:6). However, on the other hand, the Qur'an states that God has created human beings in the best form, bestowed upon them honor, and appointed them as *khalifah* on earth (Q. 95:4; 17:70; 2:30; 35:39).

In terms of the context of morality, the Qur'an makes it clear that human beings are inclined to love faith and to hate disbelief, wickedness, and lawlessness (Q. 49:7). Given this ambiguous conceptualization, the notion of scriptural ethics promoted by the Qur'an is predicated on the assumption that the duality of human nature's dispositions necessitates guidance through an act of guidance from God. As Abdulaziz Sachedina explicitly contends, the dual constitution of human beings, comprising both material and spiritual elements, serves as the fundamental foundation for piety-oriented guidance as set forth in the Qur'an (Sachedina, 2022, p. 114). This is because, in the absence of God's direct involvement, humans are prone to actualizing their negative potential, which manifests as exploitation, social fragmentation, and the destruction of cosmic order. This is because, as stated in Q. 2:251, In the absence of divine intervention, human beings are prone to manifesting their negative potential, which is characterized by exploitation, social fragmentation, and the disruption of the cosmic order. Commenting on Q. 2:251, some modern exegetes write that the intrinsic nature of human beings is characterised by selfishness and exploitation. Consequently, in utilising (*istikhdām*) others, they become selfish and engaged in conflict with others (*tanāzu' al-baqā'*). Therefore, the Sharī'ah serves as a foundational framework that restrains and mitigates the negative proclivities of individuals, thereby safeguarding society from harm and destruction (al-Marāghī, 1946, p. 227; Mughniyyah, n.d., pp. 382-383; Tabataba'i, 1997, pp. 297-299).

Qur'anic ethics then can be defined as a comprehensive system of guidance and conduct, delineating the manner in which humans should conduct themselves in order to act in a morally and spiritually virtuous manner. This understanding gives rise to the question of the values' ontological status put forward by the Qur'an. Specifically, it prompts the question of whether these values are entirely based on God's subjective will or refer to an objective order. In the context of moral philosophy, this kind of dilemma is known as the Euthyphro dilemma, which refers to Socrates' debate with Euthyphro concerning the fundamental nature of piety (See Blackburn, 2001, pp. 14-16). The crux of their debate is the definition of piety, namely whether a certain action is godly because it is loved by the gods or whether the gods love it because of the inherent godliness of the action (Hare, 2019). In contemporary terminology, Socrates' question to Euthyphro can be posed in the context of religious monotheism. This question then can be reformulated as follows:

are morally good actions only good because God wills them, or does God will such actions because they are, apart from his will, morally good (Antony, 2009, p. 71). Implicitly, the Euthyphro dilemma is based on a pattern of binary opposition in matters of moral ontology between the first and second definitions. Asking questions following such a pattern to the Qur'an would potentially result in the text losing its polysemic nature (Şuyūṭī, 2019, pp. 283-284), thereby removing the tension and moral ambiguity it contains. As I will demonstrate subsequently, while affirming the objectivity of moral values, the Qur'an does not espouse a deistic view and does not hold that objective moral values are independent of God's will and power.

It is crucial to recognize that the Qur'an emerged within the context of the socio-political developments that characterized 7th-century Arab society. In order for the Qur'anic textuality to be comprehensible to its intended audience, it is necessary to employ a set of codes drawn from a specific and contextualized linguistic system, in this case Arabic (Abu Zayd, 2014, p. 57). Consequently, the historicization of the Qur'an into a historical human horizon requires that the Qur'an must fuse its horizon with the cultural realities and unwritten maxims of Arab society (Abu Zayd, 2018, p. 180; Nagel, 2020, pp. 6-7). It can be asserted that the linguistic system and profane cultural structure of Arab society act as the horizon that conditions the Qur'anic text (Abu Zayd, 2006, p. 97). In other words, the ethical terminology employed by the Qur'an, including terms such as *birr*, *khair*, *'adl*, *shukr*, and so forth, constitute a set of terms that possess specific meanings and connotations within the language game of Arab society and have become an integral aspect of their lives. It is not an exaggeration to assert that the Qur'an's process of humanization and textuality make it a historical and linguistic text (*naṣṣ tārikhī wa lughawī*) as well as a cultural product (*muntāj al-ṣāqafī*) (Akbar, 2019, p. 12, 2020, p. 142). Concurrently, however, the Qur'an also infuses new meanings into each of its ethical terms, aligning them with the monotheistic *weltanschauung* (*tauḥīd*) that it espouses. It is important to note that the core horizon that binds and unifies all the verses within the Qur'an is its emphasis on the oneness of God (Q. 18:110, Q. 21:108, and Q. 41:6. Shabestari, 2017, pp. 36-37; Shah-Kazemi, 2013, p. 91).

A case in point is the transformation of the pre-Islamic Arabic ethical concept of *shukr al-mun'im* (thanking the benefactor) into the Qur'anic monotheistic ethics. In pre-Islamic Arabian society, a moral norm that was upheld was that if an individual bestowed a gift upon another, particularly in a situation where their life was threatened, they were entitled to receive satisfaction (*riḍā*) and gratitude (*shukr*) in the form of public recognition for the good deed they had done. Accordingly, Qur'anic revelation subsequently rearticulated this norm within a monotheistic framework by asserting that ritual worship and ethical behavior constitute a form of gratitude for God's gifts and favors (Q. 5:6-7. See Reinhart, 2005, p. 245). Another example, the Qur'an also transforms the meaning of the term *birr*, which manifested as *takhayyul* in the practices of pre-Islamic Arab society, into *taqwā* (Q. 2: 189,177; 3:92; 5:2; 58:9. For further elaboration, see Reinhart, 2017, pp. 56-58). In addition, in order to demonstrate the practical significance of *birr*, the Qur'an provides a comprehensive list of specific actions that can be classified as such. These include acts such as charitable giving, prayer, *zakāt* (almsgiving), keeping promises, patience in adversity, devotion to one's parents, and others (Q. 2:177; 3:92; 19:14,32). The Qur'an also does not limit its definition of *birr* to the Muslim community; rather, it extends the value of this concept to people of different religious backgrounds (Q. 60:8). This implies that religious communities outside Islam can also comprehend and acknowledge the value of *birr* that the Qur'an promotes as commendable, even if they do not adhere to the Qur'anic injunctions as divine decrees.

In addition to undergoing a process of transformation, the Qur'an, in certain moral contexts, also serves as a reaction and antithesis to the traditions of pre-Islamic Arab society, as evidenced in the case of marriage practices. Prior to the advent of Islam, there were various patterns of marriage practised by the Arab society, such as *nikāḥ al-daysan*, *nikāḥ al-syighār*, *nikāḥ badal*, *zawāj al-istibdā* (Smith, 1903). The advent of the Qur'an, however, introduced a definitive critique of the prevailing matrimonial practices within Arab society. It strictly forbade sexual relations outside marriage (Q. 24:2), commanded to marry a single or good person among slaves (Q. 24:32), placed marriage it is a sacred covenant (Q. 4:21), limited polygamy (Q. 4:3), and prohibited a number of marriage practices that are degrading to women (Q. 4:22-25, 235). It is not an exaggeration to assert that the fundamental tenets of Qur'anic Ethics are not revolutionary; rather, the revolutionary nature resides in the underlying justification for these tenets. This moral justification takes a number of ethical features of pre-Islamic Arabian society as a starting point and then disciplines, moderates, and reunderstands them in a way that aligns them with the structure of Qur'anic monotheism.

One term that is insufficiently discussed in the context of the objectivity of Qur'anic ethics is *ma'rūf*. In its linguistic sense, the root of *ma'rūf* signifies "a series of things related to one another" (Ibn Fāris, 1979, p. 281). From this root, the verb *'arafa* is derived and signifies "to understand and recognize something," encompassing the specific attributes of the known, which distinguishes it from all other entities (al-Muṣṭafawī, 1965, pp. 117-118). In the *maf'ūl* (object) form, the word is understood to convey the idea of "everything that is seen as known and familiar, and therefore, socially accepted" (Izutsu, 2002, p. 213). Given the absence of any indication that the term *ma'rūf* in the Qur'an is a technical or legal term, it is reasonable to conclude that it is best understood as an ethical term that refers to certain standards of behaviour that are known and accepted by the first audience of Qur'an (Cook, 2000, p. 15). Framing the term in ethical discussion, A. Kevin Reinhart firmly posits that *ma'rūf*, as an ethical concept, implies that the good is already known to human reason (Reinhart, 2002, p. 62). The fact that the Qur'an features a greater number of guidelines, such as commands to do good and be just, rather than rules, suggests that the Qur'an assumes some of the goodness it commands is already known without the need for further revelatory details (Reinhart, 2017, p. 61). The Qur'an assumes that its readers are capable of rationally weighing the good and bad in their moral judgements (Reinhart, 2002, p. 60). Moreover, the Qur'anic *ma'rūf* encapsulates the dialectic between the personal and the societal, underscoring the notion that moral virtue is inherently tied to social transparency (Sajoo, 2004, p. 2). For example, Qur'anic instructions for believers to make inheritance (Q. 2:180) or deal with spouses in the past, present, and future (Q. 2:228-229, 231-233; 4:19, 25; 65:2) or utilize orphans' property for personal gain (Q. 4:6) to be in line with "what is considered right". At this juncture, the Qur'anic rules can be seen as entirely dependent on the moral value of what is considered and accepted as good, just and equitable in its cultural background (See Christiansen, 2019, p. 129). In short, if one commands what is recognized as good and right, one must be ethically sensitive and aligned with what is generally and legitimately recognized as good and right (Sinai, 2023, pp. 516-517).

From this, it can be posited that the Qur'an espouses the objective character of moral values. Furthermore, the Qur'an is clear in its intention to universalize the moral virtues it promotes, encapsulated in the term "*khair*/pl. *khairāt*". Interpreting Q. 3:104, Quraish Shihab notes that the distinction between the meanings of *khair* and *ma'rūf*, as representing the value of goodness, hinges on their range and scope. *Khair* is a universal value of goodness taught by the Qur'an and Sunnah. It is transhistorical and covers all contexts. Meanwhile, *ma'rūf* is something that is

considered good by the general view in a society. It is particular and temporal, and in line with the value of *khair* (Shihab, 2000, p. 164). By placing mankind equally into a single community/*ummah wāḥidah* (Q. 2:213) and recognizing the objective and universal character of the moral virtues to which each individual is ethically accountable, the Qur'an then encourages all individuals to compete in the realization of *khair*, with the aim of establishing an ethical public order on earth. This universal impulse expands the Qur'anic horizon, manifesting itself as a form of natural law accessible to any kind of specific revelation (Q. 5: 48) (for Islamic natural law theories, see Emon, 2010).

It would be reasonable to posit that the Qur'an represents a genuine moral call with the potential to transcend the differing perspectives of various religious communities. As Abdulaziz Sachedina eloquently explains, through the application of common sense, individuals—irrespective of their personal beliefs—can understand and appropriate this call for the benefit of themselves and of humanity at large (Sachedina, 2001, p. 70, 2009, p. 82). Hence, when addressing the *ahl al-kitab* (Jews and Christians), the Qur'an explicitly links these two religious communities under the umbrella of monotheism while acknowledging their virtuous actions. This is evidenced by the Qur'anic affirmation (Q. 3:113-115) that "whatever good they (*ahl al-kitāb*) do will never go unappreciated (by God)". According to Hamka, despite the Qur'an's repeated declaration of Islam as the superior religion in numerous verses, the People of the Book, who engage in prayer, call for what is *ma'rūf*, and forbid what is *munkar*, will nevertheless receive recognition and respect from God (Amrullah, 2001, pp. 888-889). In the same vein, Muhammad Abduh write that the core lesson of Q. 3:113-115 is not about the particularity of religion, but about the moral-pious conduct and genuine faith (Abduh, 1947, pp. 73-74).

Nevertheless, the universality and objectivity of such moral values are not independent of God and will always depend on Him. Indeed, the Qur'an also corroborates the assertion that God's knowledge, will, and permission are foundational factors that contribute to the determination of the ethical value (Q. 4:19; 35:32). Indeed, there are numerous instances in the Qur'an where it is explicitly stated that this ethical value is attributed to God's Power (*qudrah*) and Will (*irādah wa masyī'ah*) (Q. 6:17; 7:188; 10:107). The tension between the objectivity of moral facts and God's will as the determinative of moral values can be understood as arising from the human need to seek divine guidance from God to justify their moral understanding gained from experience and reflective reasoning. Ultimately, the Qur'anic ethical ambiguity serves a single, overarching purpose: to align with God's pleasure. (Q. 2:110,197,215; 3:26; 23:57-62). In this regard, Quraish Shihab emphasizes that, although the concepts of good and evil are determined, ambiguously, by God's will and decree, these concepts that God considers as such must be an objective and intrinsic quality. This is due to the fact that God is not only consistent in upholding moral values, but also possesses attributes that are deserving of the utmost praise. (Q. 20:8) (Shihab, 2013, pp. 344-345).

In light of the aforementioned explanation, I would like to highlight that the Qur'anic exhortation to moral conduct does not espouse exclusively to the tenets of divine command theory. The fundamental thesis of this theory is that divine commands play a pivotal role in defining the nature of virtuous values and prohibitions in determining the characteristics of vice (Bagget & Walls, 2011, p. 33). In other words, the concept of goodness is essentially synonymous with God's commands, whereas the notion of badness is essentially synonymous with God's prohibitions. In Islamic tradition, this theory is commonly associated with the Ash'arites theological school, which argues that moral values are solely determined by divine commands (Mathewes, 2010, p. 76). In contrast with the views of Ash'arites theologians, the Qur'an is not solely conditioned by the moral

maxims surrounding its appearance, thus utilizing them as ethical devices. Rather, it also affirms the objective value of goodness and promotes a universal moral order. As Daniel Brown demonstratively notes that the “voluntraistic position has only weak support in the Qur’an” (Brown, 1999, p. 182). Ibn Taymiyyah and a number of prominent Shi’a theologians, including al-Ḥillī and al-Ṭūsī, critically challenged the Ash’arites’ perspective by proposing that the value of goodness is an objective reality that can be understood by human reason. Because, if it is solely based on God’s commands, then the moral values, legal concepts, and a number of religious doctrines that take the form of decrees in the Qur’an will end up being tautologies, futile, and absurd (Bhojani, 2015, pp. 52-75; Vasalou, 2016, pp. 21-49). Accordingly, as Mariam al-Attar writes, the overarching perspective of the Qur’an cannot be utilized as a basis for endorsing ethical voluntarism, given that it is replete with human ethical attitudes, which are ascribed to God and regarded as integral to His perfection (al-Attar, 2010, p. 44).

As illustrated by the preceding exposition, moral values are portrayed by the Qur’an in a contradictory manner, simultaneously presenting themselves as independent objective facts and being associated with God’s will. This phenomenon gives rise to an ontological tension between values that are presumed to be objective moral facts and the dependence of those values on divine commands. This tension, therefore, has ambiguous consequences for humans, both at the hermeneutical and ethical levels. This is due to the fact that the recognition of moral values as objective facts is not accompanied by an explicit affirmation of whether these facts are an independent reality or are completely dependent on, and limited by, divine decisions. Concurrently, humanity’s engagement to cultivate ethically virtuous character is characterized by a persistent moral paradox. This paradox manifests in the tension between two conflicting principles: the imperative to adhere strictly to the moral tenets of the Qur’an, as derived from the doctrine of divine command, and the pursuit of moral reasoning concerning moral facts that are universal and accessible to everyone. It is imperative to acknowledge that these two metaethical positions, divine command theory and moral rationalism, are firmly embedded within the ethos of moral realism (for further exposition on moral realism, see Brink, 1989; Shafer-Landau, 2005). This is because both theories acknowledge the existence of objective moral facts. However, a divergence arises in their attempts to define these facts as either independent or determined by a divine entity. As will be shown later, this ambiguity is not a moral obstacle that needs to be overcome, but rather a positive horizon that not only allows moral imagination, reasoning, and decisions to grow dynamically, but also paves the way for moral progress.

Moral Knowledge: Between Reason and Revelation

The Qur’an places great emphasis on the role of intellect and reasoning in human life. The term *‘aql* has its etymological roots in the verb “to bind, understand, judge and draw conclusions rationally” (Badawi & Haleem, 2008, pp. 633-634). Al-Syarīf al-Jurjānī, in his *Ta’rīfāt*, posits that reason is the spiritual essence of human beings as well as the light of their hearts, capable of distinguishing between truth and error (al-Jurjānī, 2004, p. 128). In similar vein, al-Raghīb al-Aṣfahānī defines reason as “the potential power that humans have to acquire knowledge” (al-Aṣfahānī, 2009, p. 577). Although the term *‘aql* does not take the form of a noun in the Qur’an, the derivation of this word in the form of the verb *‘aqala-ya’qilu*, which is repeated 49 times, and other words that also refer to the activity of reflection (*tafakkur*, *tadabbur*, *taẓakkur*) indicate that reason plays a fundamental role in the Qur’anic moral epistemology. In several verses of the Qur’an,

including Q. 12:2, 16:44, 21:10, 43:3 and 59:21, it stated that the Qur'an was revealed for the purpose of enabling humanity to actualize their rational potential.

Indeed, as articulated by 'Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib, the Qur'an is a written text that lacks the capacity to articulate its own message (silent text), necessitating its translation. Consequently, it is only through an epistemological-hermeneutical process that one can understand and explicate the author's intention behind the text (al-Ḥusain, 2016, p. 225). The Qur'an, which sets out God's commands and prohibitions, including the prohibition of polytheism (*shirk*), can only be understood if one employs one's intellectual capacity (see Q. 2:241-242; 5:58; and 6:151). Regarding to divine prohibitions, reason serves not only as a tool for recognizing moral evil but also as a force that restrains humans from committing such acts, given that one of the meanings of the term "ʿaql" is "to restrain (*al-imsāk*)" (al-Aṣḥānī, 2009, p. 578). In other passages, the Qur'an states clearly that God's guidance will not be given to those who merely imitate the beliefs and practices of their ancestors without ever utilizing their intellectual capacity to understand God's words (Q. 2:170). Therefore, if one reads the Qur'an with a rational approach, one will be able to ascertain a moral conclusion regarding the value of goodness (*birr*) and provide a logical rationale for pursuing virtuous actions (Q. 2:44). It is not an exaggeration to suggest that piety, as outlined in Q. 6:32, is closely intertwined with one's capacity for critical thinking and reasoning.

The aforementioned explanation illustrates that human rationality serves as a foundational epistemological instrument in comprehending the ethical messages conveyed in scripture. As Reinhart states, the Qur'an "calls for ethical knowledge based not solely on revelation itself but on revelation informed by norms extrinsic to the revelational text" (Reinhart, 2017, p. 54). Indeed, the Qur'an not only situates reason as an instrument of moral knowledge, but also positions it as a source for moral understanding that is parallel to the scripture itself. Indeed, the Qur'an repeatedly affirms the existence of God's signs that encompass the realities of the universe, both at the macrocosmic level—the creation of the heavens and the earth, the oceans, rain and lightning, the heavens and the stars, plants and animals, minerals and metals, the alternation of day and night, the decrease in rainfall, the wind cycle, and so on—as well as at the microcosmic level—human beings (see Q. 2:164; 6:141; 13:2-4; 16:10-11, 14-18; 13:4; 18:16; 20:53; 21:30; 22:46; 23:12-14, 80; 24:45; 29:35; 30:24, 48; 31:10; 34:10-12; 35:27; 39:21; 45:5, 13; 50:6, 9-11; 57:17, 25; 76:2; 86:5; 22:5; 30:28; 36:68; 40:67; 42:49-50; and 86:5. Rahman, 1980, pp. 10-11). Due to the abundance of references to God's signs encapsulated in the Qur'anic term *āyāt*, Ian Richard Netton subsequently posited that the Qur'anic text serves as an exemplar of semiotics paradise par excellence for those engaged in the pursuit of sign-based inquiry as elucidated in the scripture (Netton, 1994, p. 321).

At this juncture, reason, which has the capability of understanding these signs, then becomes an epistemological source for the discovery and justification of moral knowledge. In addition to *ta'aqqul*, the Qur'an employs the terms *tafaqquh* (Q. 6:65, 69) and *tafakkur* (Q. 2:266; 3:190-192; 7:176; 10:24; 13:2-3; 16:11, 69; 45:13; 30:8, 21, 42.) to elucidate the process of extrapolating divine laws from the myriad signs within the universe. Furthermore, the Qur'an exhorts humanity to examine historical events and the laws that govern them in the context of the destruction of previous civilizations due to their rejection of divine ethical principles (Q. 12:109; 41:25; 46:18). A reflection on past events can thus provide a framework for ethical understanding in the present, preventing the potential for destruction. As a consequence of the worldview of *tauḥīd*, the ultimate objective of such Qur'anic moral-rational appeals is none other than to lead humanity to a solid conviction about the existence of God. In this case, it can be stated with a high degree of certainty that those who employ

their cognitive-moral faculties to the fullest to understand God's verses in the sacred text, the universe, history, and human existence are identified by the Qur'an as *ūlū al-albāb* (Q. 3:190-195) (Rahardjo, 2002, p. 557; Rakhmat, 2021, pp. 233-235; Q. 3:190-195. Shihab, 1992, pp. 610-611). Accordingly, *ūlū al-albāb* possess the moral competence and imagination necessary to distinguish good from evil, to separate the two, and to choose the former (Q. 5:100). Subsequently, they were bestowed with *ḥikmah* from God and acquired profound moral impact from it (Q. 2:269).

When considered in conjunction with the concept of *ma'rūf*, the aforementioned observations elucidate the existence of divine laws that transcend the boundaries of the Qur'anic text, and can be apprehended through the faculties of human reason. In Q. 91:8-10, the Qur'an explicitly asserts that God has bestowed upon the human soul the capacity to discern between good and evil. This verse implies that God has endowed mankind with the capacity for rational thought and moral discernment, enabling them to distinguish between good and evil. In this regard, Naser Makarim Shirazi advances the argument that this verse is closely related to positive assertion of the existence and clarity of moral facts and the capacity of humans to understand them (Syirāzī, 2013, p. 280). In a similar vein, Mohsen Qera'ati writes that humans are inherently endowed (*fithrī*) with the epistemic capacity to comprehend moral values and formulate moral knowledge in accordance with the moral truth (Qera'ati, 2014, pp. 469-472). In other passages, Q. 90:8-10 indicates that the human ability to distinguish between good and evil is also a gift from God (al-Attar, 2017, p. 37). Ramon Harvey, who developed the concept of natural law by elaborating a neo-Maturidi approach to understand the Qur'an, subsequently asserted that the Qur'an actually espouses moral realism (Harvey, 2018, p. 191). This perspective posits that God's actions are inherently consistent with moral values. This is predicated on the premise that God established objective moral facts derived from divine love and compassion concerning goodness and subsequently disseminated these facts to human beings (El Fadl, 2005, p. 129).

This entails the view that human beings possess non-revelatory access to moral norms embedded in the universe, namely through reason, and that these norms derive from God's eternal wisdom. It can be argued that good and bad are rationally independent values in that one can comprehend the praiseworthiness of virtuous actions and the blameworthiness of vice actions without recourse to revelatory text. The Qur'an's designation as *al-ẓikr* (reminder) also suggests the existence of values and truths that are potentially knowable by humans through their innate faculty of reason (El Fadl, 2014, pp. 11-12; Lazhar, 2023, pp. 212-213; Reinhart, 2005, p. 248). The notion of the accessibility of objective moral values through human understanding also represents an early Muslim understanding of the meaning of moral values. This is evident given that they lived in the original context from which the Qur'an emerged, experiencing the status of a minority group amidst the diversity of the 7th-century Arab religious community. In other words, the moral appreciation of the early Muslims was shaped by the environment in which Islam was born (Reinhart, 1995, pp. 177-178). Consequently, it can be argued that the Qur'an does not articulate a position of strict scripturalism or scriptural universalism, which presupposes that the moral and legal value of all human actions can only be understood by direct reference to scripture.

In order to strengthen the above argument, it is worth discussing the moral provisions of the Qur'an in terms of principles. This concept was popularised by the renowned American legal philosopher Ronald Dworkin, who explained that principles are "a standard to be observed, ... because it is a requirement of justice or fairness or some other dimension of morality" (Dworkin, 1977, p. 22). Unlike rules that are applied in the form of "all or nothing" (Saphiro, 2007, p. 26), principles are something that requires a person's judgement when faced with actual moral cases. It is evident that the ethos espoused by Dworkin stands in stark

contrast to the legal positivism perspective advocated by H. L. A. Hart (1994), which underscores the imperative to compartmentalize legal matters from moral values. In this context, the Qur'an, which contains more ethical guidelines than rules, implies a person's capacity for understanding and reasonable judgement when faced with moral dilemmas, thus implying the position of reason as the source of human moral knowledge. Indeed, in relation to divine legal commandments, Islamic Sharia exigently necessitates a hermeneutic-epistemological endeavor from the Muslim community to not only ascertain the exhaustive set of injunctions and legal ramifications contained therein, but also to discern the ethical underpinnings underlying these divine prescriptions (Nusseibeh, 2017). For example, the moral maxim in Q. 41:34, "Good deeds (*al-ḥasanah*) and bad deeds (*al-sayyi'ah*) are not the same; so repel (*evil*) with what is best (*aḥsan*)", are principles that urge a person to make moral decisions in certain situations based on his rational judgement, while ensuring that the option he chooses is the best decision among other alternatives. This proposition aligns with the analysis of numerous Islamic legal scholars, who contend that in Islam, legal constructs and products are merely representations of moral values (Fadel, 2023, p. xxiv; Hallaq, 2009, p. 2; see Reinhart, 1983). Of course, this is only possible if human rationality is affirmed as a moral source capable of identifying, weighing, and choosing the best moral option among various alternatives (Reinhart, 2002, p. 69).

Concurrently, the Qur'an repeatedly identifies ignorance as a sinful act (Goodman, 2003, p. 143). In Q. 8:22, the Qur'an explicitly states that "The worst of animals to God are the deaf and dumb—those who do not reason." Commenting on this verse, al-Qāsimī wrote that the worst of *al-dawāb* means the worst of animals who are able to hear the truth and talk about it but do not understand it. At this juncture, the analogy of human beings with animals means a peak of blame for them (al-Qāsimī, 1957, pp. 2981-2982). This is due to the significant potential for humans to engage in *shirk*—the act of deifying something other than God—as a result of their failure to contemplate and understand the signs of God's power (Q. 21:66-67). In this context, the act of reflective thinking assumes significant importance as a means of preventing moral transgressions and misguidance, both in terms of horizontal and vertical transgressions (Q. 36:62). Therefore, the Qur'an categorizes those who do not engage in critical thinking as disbelievers (Q. 2:171; 5:103; 30:8). The Qur'an then proceeds to issue a stark warning to those who fail to utilize the faculty of reason bestowed upon them by God, declaring that they will be consigned to the eternal damnation of hell (Q. 67:10). In relation to this verse, al-Shaukānī posits that the disbelievers who rejected the revelations of God, in this case the holy book and the virtuous values espoused therein, were subsequently designated as residents of hell. This is primarily due to their reluctance to heed the messages conveyed by the messengers and their inability to discern between good and evil (al-Shaukānī, 2007, p. 1512). Furthermore, the Qur'an also states that the hell of Jahannam will be filled with people who do not use their epistemological instruments during their lifetime to understand and contemplate the signs of God's power (Q. 7:179). This description demonstrates that the Qur'an calls for every epistemic agent to be responsible for the proper use of their knowledge potential (Adeel, 2019, p. 35). Those who fail to utilize their God-given potential adequately will suffer disgrace.

It is also important to note that the term "reason" as used in the Qur'an is always employed in a positive sense. Reason, as an expression of divine wisdom, is never regarded as a factor that will result in immoral conduct. The Qur'an then employs the term *hawā*/pl. *ahwā'* to describe the negative impulses inherent to human nature. This term is defined as "the inclination of the soul towards the deviant" (al-Fairuzābādī, 1996, p. 359). A number of descriptions from the Qur'an indicate that *hawā* is not only paralleled with egoistic subjectivism and moral vices, such as misguidance, *shirk*, lying, deceit, injustice, wickedness,

negligence, and unethical conducts (Q. 5:49,77; 6:56,150; 18:28; 28:55; 30:29; 38:26; 47:14; 54:3.), but also contrasted with the virtues of *khair*, knowledge, *haqq*, *qist*, *'adl*, and *imān* (Q. 2:120,145; 4:135; 5:48-49; 6:119; 23:71; 42:15). Moreover, in Q. 13:37 and 45:18, the Qur'an posits these negative tendencies as being diametrically opposed to God's law or shariah. In their interpretation of the latter verse, Zamakhsharī and Fakhruddin al-Razi argue that the command to follow God's path, which is a matter of religion, implies the necessity to adhere to that path based on compelling and logical arguments and evidence, rather than relying on ignorance and desire (al-Razi, 1981, p. 266; al-Zamakhsharī, 1998, p. 485). In essence, it is *hawā*, not reason, that leads humanity to err and deviate from the path of righteousness in their practical decisions.

Notwithstanding the existence of significant epistemological cues for moral reflection and suggestions to engage with such cues, there are textual materials in the Qur'an that indicate that human reflective and intuitive powers are inadequate for the purpose of deciding moral judgements. An examination of the Qur'anic rules pertaining to *qiṣāṣ*, wills, fasting, and warfare reveals that the term *kutiba* is used to indicate that these are moral actions whose justification is derived exclusively from divine command (Q. 2:178,180,183, and 216. See Reinhart, 2002, pp. 67-68). The term *kutiba*, as used in the context of religious obligations, implies that the rules commanded cannot be known with certainty by humans except by referring to divine revelation. In his interpretation of Q. 2:178, al-Ṭabarṣī asserts that ethical goodness, or *al-birr*, can only be fully actualized through the integration of unwavering faith and strict adherence to the tenets of the shari'ah. He elucidates that the term *kutiba*, as used in this verse, signifies nothing less than *faraḍa 'alaikum wa awjabakum* (it is obligatory upon you) (al-Ṭabrṣī, 2006, p. 368).

In this regard, one of the most esteemed theologians in the Islamic tradition, al-Ghazali, advanced the argument that moral language does not inherently align with other forms of language, as it cannot be derived univocally from our experience of natural human behaviors (Leaman, 2019). It is important to note that the Qur'an contains several pessimistic descriptions of human beings who are prone to deviant desires, arbitrary behaviour leading to wrongdoing, selfishness, and worse (Sajoo, 2010, p. 3). In the context of social upheaval between individuals who tend to be egoistic, the revelation of God occupies a fundamental position in providing a powerful binding force that can limit their destructive tendencies in order to strengthen social cohesiveness while guaranteeing the enforcement of justice in society (Badamchi, 2017, p. 105). It is therefore evident that the Qur'anic moral epistemology is ambiguous when considered in conjunction with the affirmation that reason is an indispensable instrument for understanding the Qur'an and a source for moral knowledge, and the assertion that the declaration of revelation is a significant, if not decisive, aspect of the Islamic moral order, particularly in relation to ethical prescriptions (Reinhart, 2002, p. 77).

The preceding discussion demonstrates that rationality functions not only as a hermeneutic instrument for understanding divine moral values in scripture, but also as a source for moral understanding derived from engaging with moral facts in reality. In this regard, the Qur'an places significant emphasis on rationality as a fundamental component of humanity's struggle with the moral world. Moral judgments are then regarded as having cognitive content related to the assessment of right and wrong facts and can still motivate a person to form judgments objectively (regarding moral reasoning, see Dancy, 1993; McNaughton, 1988). In this context, the Qur'an appears to maintain that various moral properties are identical to a number of natural properties, which are then specified through a combination of non-moral terms (regarding moral naturalism, see Brandt, 1979; Copp, 1996). However, the Qur'an also explicitly acknowledges the limitations of reason in forming accurate moral judgments, asserting that only through divine revelation can humans attain

moral knowledge with precision. The Qur'an exhibits ambiguity and tension regarding moral epistemology by recognizing rationality as an instrument and source of moral knowledge on one hand, but demonstrating the absolute normativity of revelation in the process of making moral decisions on the other. Therefore, the Qur'anic text explicitly states the limitations of the validity of human reason regarding moral knowledge.

Ambiguity as Qur'anic Apparatus for Moral Transformation

The present study posits that the metaethical stance articulated in the Qur'an evinces a moral ambiguity, thereby engendering a tension between the objectivity of moral values that stand independently and the role of divine will in determining the objective structure of morality itself. This investigation, grounded in meticulous scrutiny of moral statements within the Qur'an, reveals an intricate relationship between moral values and divine sovereignty. While moral values are posited as objective moral facts, their existence and ultimate destination are deemed contingent on and thus subject to God's decrees. Additionally, while human rationality is acknowledged as a valid instrument for understanding moral facts, divine revelation maintains a central role in moral knowledge. The findings of this study demonstrate that the ethical principles outlined in the Qur'an are characterized by a certain degree of paradox, as they acknowledge the existence of an objective moral framework while simultaneously establishing ambiguity regarding its independent standing or its determination by God. Consequently, human moral struggles are characterized by a constant tension when formulating moral knowledge, whereby reason is recognized as a valid source for accessing objective moral facts but also affirmed to be limited, thus requiring assistance from divine revelation. Therefore, the present study corroborates the hypothesis that, despite the fact that the Qur'an presents a form of ontological commitment to moral realism, human moral understanding based on epistemic-hermeneutic instruments is confirmed as unable to fully access moral facts. This finding then positions human moral endeavors within the framework of anti-realism. As E. Moosa (2020) states, the meaning and significance of moral concepts, ideas, and practices change and become thicker or thinner over time, depending on the circumstances and context of the individuals and Muslim communities that formulate them.

Recent advancements in the field of moral theory have demonstrated that tension, and at times, contradiction, are inherent features of all human moral situations. A number of philosophers involved in philosophical moral discourse identify this phenomenon as moral antinomy. Through meticulous observation, Nicolai Hartmann has demonstrated that in actuality, humans will persist in encountering discord between disparate moral impulses (Hartmann, 2017). In this regard, moral antinomies are not merely incidental, but rather integral elements of the operation and continuity of morality. The notion of a moral life is one that is in constant tension and conflict. It is imperative to acknowledge that, irrespective of an individual's adherence to an ethos of moral realism, they must acknowledge the inevitability of moral plurality and conflict in daily moral decision-making and actions, viewing it as unproblematic (Stocker, 1992). Indeed, an examination of quotidian experiences reveals the pervasiveness of discord between conflicting moral imperatives across all facets of life (Hampshire, 1983). The concept of ambiguity and contradiction, however, is not confined to the moral realm; in fact, it also plays a central and positive role in sacred texts (see Brenneman, 1997; Thaver, 2024). The existence of these phenomena does not impede interpretive activity but rather serves as an unavoidable point of departure for hermeneutic events and a positive feature that facilitates access to the most profound and virtuous understanding (Vlshanoff, 2011). It is not surprising that Muslim hermeneutical engagements with the Qur'anic text have given rise to diverse methods, approaches, theories, and interpretations, some of which even contradict one another (see Ahmed, 2016). Thus, ambiguity can be regarded as an

immanence textual attribute that constitutes a pivotal element of the moral fabric inherent within the Qur'an (Moqbel, 2021).

The presence of moral ambiguity in the Qur'an has been demonstrated to engender a plethora of substantial hermeneutic-ethical possibilities, while concurrently disrupting conventional, linear conceptions of morality and those still ensnared in binary oppositions. As a text that displays moral antinomies at both the ontological and epistemological levels, the Qur'an contains elements of complex and diverse ethical approaches and moral theories. This suggests that it is impossible to adequately approach and grasp its moral intentions by relying on only one particular form of moral theory (Moqbel, 2024). Indeed, the development of a comprehensive understanding of true morality can only be achieved through an integration and synthesis of diverse moral theories (Canto-Sperber, 2008). In this context, it appears that the Qur'an seeks to spark, provoke, and cultivate critical moral imagination among its readers; that is, a kind of imagination that has the potential to furnish a framework for moral growth and evolution (for elaborative account of moral imagination, see Johnson, 1993). The Qur'an employs antinomy and ambiguity as a moral apparatus to refine human existential sensitivity concerning the intricacies of moral life. It is important to remember that genuine moral reasoning and decision-making do not arise from mathematical calculations; instead, they are deeply rooted in deliberation and existential contemplation that embraces all dimensions of humanity (Aristotle, 2004). At this juncture, the Qur'an plays a central role as a hermeneutic site that reminds humanity that various moral challenges cannot be responded to in a reductionist and monolithic manner. It does so by instilling in moral subjects the understanding that they must consider the plurality and diversity of moral contexts in formulating their moral understanding and decisions.

DISCUSSION

The three clusters of results presented above underscore the Qur'an's resistance to encapsulation within a single, unified moral theory, highlighting its inherent polysemy and antinomic structure. At the ontological level, verses emphasizing goodness (*khair*), justice (*'adl*), righteousness (*birr*), and divine pleasure (*ridā*) delineate a morally structured cosmos where certain actions, dispositions, and states of affairs possess objective superiority (e.g., Q. 16:90; 3:104; 2:177). Yet, these same passages construe moral value as inherently purposive and teleological: moral facts are not autonomous entities but are inextricably embedded in God's creative wisdom (*hikmah*), legislative will (*irādah*), and providential concern for human flourishing (*falāḥ*). This duality echoes, yet transcends, classical dichotomies in moral philosophy. It neither fully aligns with divine command theory, which risks reducing goodness to arbitrary fiat (as critiqued in Plato's Euthyphro and echoed in Ash'arite voluntarism), nor with unmitigated moral realism, which posits values as independent of divine sovereignty (Fakhry, 1994). Instead, the Qur'an posits an interdependent ontology where objective values emanate from and revert to God, fostering a theocentric moral realism that integrates teleology with divine involvement (al-Attar, 2010; Sachedina, 2022).

Epistemologically, the Qur'an ascribes a robust role to human rationality (*'aql*) and moral intuition (*fiṭrah*), as evidenced in appeals to reflection on cosmic signs (*āyāt kauniyyah*), historical precedents, and the recognition of the "known good" (*ma'rūf*) (e.g., Q. 3:190-192; 91:8-10; 2:228-233). These elements presuppose an innate human capacity to apprehend moral truths independently of explicit revelation, resonating with rationalist traditions in Islamic thought (e.g., Mu'tazilite emphasis on independent reason, see Hourani, 1985). However, countervailing verses highlight the frailties of human cognition—such as susceptibility to whims (*hawā*), ignorance (*jahl*), and distortion—necessitating revelatory intervention to rectify, refine, and occasionally invert moral judgments (e.g., Q. 5:49; 8:22;

2:178 with *kutiba*). This creates a dynamic, dialectical epistemology wherein reason and revelation are interdependent and mutually corrective, neither endorsing unbridled rationalism (which risks anthropocentric hubris) nor absolute traditionalism (which undermines human agency). Such a framework aligns with contemporary meta-ethical insights into epistemic humility and fallibilism, where moral knowledge emerges from iterative dialogue between intuition and authoritative guidance (Harvey, 2018; Reinhart, 1995).

Collectively, these ontological and epistemological tensions illuminate the genesis of divergent Islamic ethical theories. Ash'arite voluntarism draws textual warrant from verses prioritizing divine will (e.g., Q. 35:32), while Mu'tazilite and Maturidi rationalism leverages those affirming innate moral discernment (e.g., Q. 90:8-10). Natural-law orientations, meanwhile, find support in universal appeals to *ma'ruf* and cosmic signs (e.g., Q. 5:48; Emon, 2010). Yet, the Qur'an refrains from adjudicating these polarities in favor of a monolithic paradigm, often sustaining antinomic elements—such as divine command alongside objective value, rational autonomy conjoined with revelatory dependence—within a unified discursive horizon (e.g., Q. 2:110 juxtaposed with Q. 2:44). To enforce theoretical closure here constitutes hermeneutical violence, constraining the text's polyvalence to the doctrinal confines of a single school (Moqbel, 2024).

From a meta-ethical vantage, this ambiguity is not an incidental artifact of the Qur'an's asystematic composition or 7th-century Arabian milieu but a deliberate hermeneutical apparatus integral to its scriptural ethics (Bauer, 2021). It compels readers to partake in perpetual moral deliberation, navigating competing intuitions, textual evidences, and contextual exigencies while acknowledging the provisionality of their judgments—a process akin to Aristotelian phronesis or Kantian reflective judgment, adapted to a theistic framework. Far from eroding moral authority, this ambiguous feature amplifies the Qur'an's moral horizon, rendering it responsive to evolving challenges in contemporary Muslim societies—such as bioethical dilemmas in AI and genetics, environmental stewardship amid climate crises, or gender justice in globalized contexts. Ultimately, Qur'anic moral ambiguity emerges not as a quandary demanding resolution but as a generative resource, cultivating a self-critical, dialogical, and progressive Islamic ethical discourse attuned to both divine sovereignty and human rationality.

CONCLUSION

This study has examined the Qur'an's moral predispositions, revealing inherent ambiguities and tensions at both ontological and epistemological levels. The analysis demonstrates that the Qur'an recognizes moral values as objective factual realities while permitting an antinomic interpretation of their objectivity—whether they exist independently or are conditioned by God's will. This acknowledgment of objective standards does not preclude divine involvement; instead, it integrates moral value with God's knowledge, permission, and teleological purposes, thereby transcending the binary oppositions of the Euthyphro dilemma. From an epistemological perspective, the study has demonstrated that the Qur'an attributes a central role to human rationality and moral reflection in discerning the moral significance of both scriptural and cosmic signs of God. Reason is presented as part of human self-perfection and as an instrument of moral responsibility, even as revelation is affirmed as the most authoritative and comprehensive source of moral justification. Revelation thus functions as a meta-level frame within which humanly accessible moral values are situated, corrected, and deepened. Moral agency, in this framework, consists in maintaining an epistemic balance between what is already known or socially recognised as *ma'ruf*

and what remains to be discerned as *mathlūb*. Rather than constituting an obstacle, the moral ambiguity identified in this study operates as an ethical horizon that can sustain the expansion of moral imagination, the growth of moral character, and the cultivation of moral virtues.

The main contribution of this article lies in foregrounding Qur'anic moral ambiguity as an intrinsic and productive feature of scriptural ethics, rather than as a defect to be overcome. By reading the Qur'an meta-ethically—at the intersection of moral ontology and moral epistemology—the study proposes a framework in which divine command, objective moral value, rational discernment, and revelatory guidance are held in deliberate tension. This perspective challenges normative-theological readings that tend to close the Qur'anic horizon by resolving its internal tensions into a single, systematised moral theory. In doing so, the article contributes to contemporary discussions on Islamic ethics by offering a nuanced account of the Qur'an's moral framework that can better accommodate plurality, contestation, and ongoing moral deliberation.

At the same time, this study is subject to several limitations. With respect to data, the analysis has been restricted to a selected corpus of verses closely related to the thesis, thereby excluding other morally significant notions that could further enrich the picture. In terms of scope, the focus has been confined to the meta-ethical dimensions of the Qur'an and has not addressed in detail the catalogue of specific virtues, vices, and practical prescriptions found in the text. Nor has the study systematically treated the question of human freedom and moral responsibility in relation to divine decree and predestination. These limitations point to several directions for future research. Subsequent studies could extend the present meta-ethical framework to a more detailed examination of Qur'anic virtues and concrete moral injunctions, or to the Qur'an's treatment of human freedom and divine decree. Further work could also place Qur'anic moral ambiguity in constructive dialogue with major strands of modern moral theory—such as virtue ethics, deontological ethics, and consequentialist approaches—as well as with contemporary debates on human rights, gender, economic justice, and environmental responsibility. Such inquiries would help to deepen and operationalise the insights of this study, and to explore more fully the transformative potential of Qur'anic moral ambiguity for contemporary Islamic ethical discourse.

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