



Prophetic Ethics: A Model for those Seeking God and Eternal Life

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For part one in this Ethics Series, see [Being a “Good Person” is Not Enough: Why Ethics Need Islam](#).

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Introduction

“God is Beautiful and loves beauty,” said Muhammad ﷺ, the Final Messenger of God.¹ And nothing is more beautiful for the human being, after faith in the Truth Most High, than the manifestation of that faith in one’s character, *akhlāq*. “I have come only to perfect the noble traits of character,” he ﷺ declared. Recall that in the previous article we explored the meanings of this statement and showed that Allah instilled the love of truth and moral beauty in human nature (*fiṭra*) so that when people encounter divine revelation, they see its truth and beauty instinctively, just as when they encounter beauty and order in creation, they think of the perfection and wisdom of the Creator. People are lovers of goodness by nature and develop many types of virtue even in the absence of direct guidance from revelation. The Messenger of God ﷺ never denied people’s “inner light” but rather appreciated, identified, and enhanced it by providing it the right motivation and direction. However, when bereft of divine guidance, the divinely gifted instinct for truth and beauty, *fiṭra*, is counteracted and at times utterly sabotaged by transgressive desire, false ideas, and/or misguided culture, leading to a struggle between the two and often the total loss of truth and goodness. We showed why ethics need Islam, and why the answer to the question, ‘How ought we to live?’ must come from God, the source and end-goal of life. Good conduct, we learned, is the fulfillment of the ultimate truth and goodness rather than merely a function of utility, feeling, or fulfillment of desire.

In this article, we explore the nature and essence of Islamic ethics. The One who gave us life has also given us guidance on how to live it, sending messengers to all peoples to teach both timeless truths and concrete ways to worship. The messengers guided and enhanced humans’ innate nature as well as rational capacity to pursue the good in a dazzling variety of conditions in which humans have struggled and flourished. As humanity matured, God in His infinite wisdom sealed the line of prophets with a final one, sending down a final revelation that would suffice every searching human being in any future time and any circumstance. To ensure human access to guidance, He not only [preserved His final](#)

¹ Part of a hadith in *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, no. 91.

[revelation](#) that taught the perfected divine law, but also concretized its meaning and secured it against misunderstanding by embodying it in one man, the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ, and declared him the role model for all those “who seek God and the Hereafter.”² Of course, even those afflicted by falsehoods, doubts, or desires may, through their blinkered *fiṭra*, see glimpses of the human perfection that was Muhammad ﷺ, but only those who seek ultimate truth and beauty, “who seek God and the Hereafter,” can love, appreciate, and embody it to the fullest and attain the eternal bliss that the Truth Almighty has promised.

This essay reflects on the wisdom (the why) and modality (the how) of the divine choice to embody His final guidance in a man. We show how his mission and method, teachings and conduct, and circumstances of life and community of disciples together created a perfect ecosystem for the revelation and exposition of the final truth and perfect goodness. Put differently, we explain how Islamic ethics are universal, valid for all times, places, and peoples. We begin with a glimpse of the Prophet’s ﷺ character and then, in order to deepen our understanding, proceed to address some common questions about Islamic ethics.

A glimpse of the Prophet’s character

No one can be considered a Muslim without loving, reflecting on, and emulating the character of the Prophet ﷺ. It is no wonder that countless sketches of the Prophet’s ﷺ physical and moral person have been composed throughout Islamic history in every imaginable language and idiom. In his classic treatise *Iḥyā’ ‘ulūm al-dīn*, Imam Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī (d. 505 AH/CE 1111) includes an entire section in the second quarter, “Book of Etiquette of Life and the Prophetic Character,” which reproduces several moving and detailed descriptions of the Prophet’s ﷺ character composed by earlier scholars. This, in my opinion, is the noblest section of this epochal text. The entire chapter is worth reading, but space allows us to quote only a small fraction. Nearly every sentence is backed by authentic reports, only some of which will be referenced in the footnotes.

² Qur’an 33:21.

He ﷺ was the most forbearing of men, most courageous, just, and forgiving. He never touched the hand of a woman he did not have the right to touch, or to whom he was not related by marriage.³

He ﷺ was the most generous of men. He would not leave even a dinar or dirham overnight without giving it in charity. If something was left with him, he would not retire to his chambers until he found someone in need to give it to.

He ﷺ took the minimum possible sustenance of dates and barley from what God gave him, leaving the rest for God's path. He was never asked for charity but that he obliged, so much so that he would give those in need from even his yearly provisions, leaving himself in need. He would fix his own sandal, patch his cloak, serve his family members, and carve meat [to help his womenfolk].

He ﷺ was the most bashful of people, never staring into anyone's face. He would respond to the invitation of anyone, free or slave, and accept gifts, even if it was a draught of milk or the leg of a rabbit, and reciprocate. He would, however, not eat of charity [as he was forbidden from doing so]. His humility was such that he attentively responded to the needs of a little girl or a needy person.

He ﷺ would get angry only for the sake of his Lord but never for himself. He would uphold what is right even if it meant risking harm or pressing a right against his own companions. He was offered help by the polytheists against the [Meccan] polytheists but he refused, declaring that he did not seek help from the polytheists. He once found the dearest and noblest of his Companions murdered in the Jewish neighborhood [of Khaybar], but he did not hasten against them nor did he veer from the course of justice. Instead, [resisting penalizing them without conclusive proof], he paid [the victim's family] the blood wit of a hundred she-camels [from the treasury] even as his own companions needed every last one of them.⁴ He would tie stones to his stomach due to the intensity of hunger. He was never fussy and would eat anything licit that was available to eat no matter how rough; at times he had nothing but mere dates without even bread. ... He would not eat reclining. His concern for the poor was such that he never filled his stomach even with plain bread for three days straight until he met Allah, not because he didn't

³ *Saḥīḥ Bukhārī*, no. 7214.

⁴ *Saḥīḥ Bukhārī*, no. 6142.

possess the means, but because he gave all in charity.⁵ He accepted invitations, visited the sick, attended funerals, and walked among his enemies without any bodyguard. He was the humblest of men, silent without being insolent, eloquent without being loquacious.⁶ He had the most joyful countenance and was never overawed by the affairs of this world.

He ﷺ wore what was at hand—at times a cloak, at times a striped Yemeni garment, at times a gown of wool; anything permissible that was available. His signet was of silver which he wore now on the little finger of his right hand, now on that of his left hand.

He ﷺ mounted his servant and others behind him on the same beast, rode whatever was available, including a horse, a camel, a mule, or a donkey. He walked on foot, at times barefoot without an outer cloak, turban, or cap. He would visit the sick in the distant outskirts [of the town].

He ﷺ loved perfumes and disliked foul odors. He sat and ate with the poor, showed regard to those who were virtuous in their morals and gave honor to noblemen. He was kind to his relatives without favoring them over those who were more meritorious than them. He did not tyrannize anyone and accepted the excuse of anyone who begged his pardon.

He ﷺ sometimes jested but only spoke the truth, and laughed but without bursting out into laughter. He witnessed and did not disapprove of permitted games, raced sportingly with his wife, and showed patience when voices were raised in his presence. He and his family got nourishment from their milch camels and sheep; he did not eat better food nor wear better clothes than his bondsmen and maids. No moment passed without his performing an action for the sake of Allah or what he had to do for his sustenance. He would go out to the gardens owned by his companions. He never despised a poor man for his poverty and misfortune, nor feared a king because of his power; rather, he urged them equally to Allah.

Allah combined in him virtuous conduct and perfect leadership even though he ﷺ was unlettered, did not read or write, and grew up poor among the shepherds in the land of ignorance and wilderness as an orphan without father or mother. Allah taught him all the fine qualities of character and praiseworthy conduct, the reports of the past and the future, the matters of

⁵ *Saḥīḥ Bukhārī*, no. 5414.

⁶ *Saḥīḥ Bukhārī*, no. 3567; *Saḥīḥ Muslim*, nos. 523 and 1733.

salvation and reward in the future life and happiness and reward in this world, and to attend to that which is obligatory and forsake what is useless.

May Allah direct us to obey him ﷺ in his commands and imitate him in his actions. Amen, O Lord of the worlds!⁷

Frequently, the Prophet's ﷺ conduct is so lofty that it appears inaccessible to most mortals. But his life is also full of anecdotes of simple, emulable acts of kindness to inspire anyone. Anas, his young attendant and Companion, lived a long life after the Prophet's ﷺ passing and often recalled such anecdotes:

Allah's Messenger ﷺ had the best of manners (*akhlāq*). I had an (adopted) brother, Abū 'Umayr who had a little sparrow (*nughayr*). Allah's Messenger ﷺ used to playfully ask the little boy [in rhyme], “O Abū 'Umayr! How is your *nughayr*?”⁸

On other occasions, we witness how his divine purpose allowed him ﷺ to set aside his ego, forgive aggression, and return harshness with kindness, offense with charity, and cruelty with mercy with unassuming magnanimity. Anas b. Mālik reports,

I was walking with the Prophet ﷺ. He had wrapped a thick cloak round him. A Bedouin approached and pulled the cloak so forcefully that his shoulder was uncovered. I was rather perturbed. The Bedouin then said: “O Muhammed! Give me some of my share from the property which Allah has given you.” The Prophet ﷺ turned towards him, gently laughed, and bade that a share be given to him.⁹

Perfectly beautiful and balanced, pleasant in looks and manners, yet fully human. Although he was balanced between mercy and justice, between strength and gentleness, the governing trait of the Prophet ﷺ was mercy and compassion—as described by the Almighty Lord, he was sent as “Mercy for the worlds.” Mercy, or the deeper Arabic original *rahma*, is derived from the attribute that Allah loves the most from among His own Beautiful Names. He ﷺ was compassionate and

⁷ Al-Ghazalī, *Ihyā' 'ulūm al-dīn* (Beirut: Dār al-Ma'rifa, 1402/1982), 2:359–64. The translation by Leon Zolondek (Leiden: Brill, 1963) contains numerous errors (Book XX, p. 23–25), which have been addressed here.

⁸ *Saḥīḥ Bukhārī*, no. 6129.

⁹ *Saḥīḥ Bukhārī*, no. 3149.

merciful, not only when he was weak, but especially when he was strong. He was a commander and a leader, but never overbearing. He not only taught tough, well-nigh unteachable people, but also made them the greatest of teachers. He taught lifelong haters to love and sacrifice for each other. While being the most beloved creation of God, he ﷺ embodied such humility that visitors couldn't tell him apart from his Companions.

The more they knew him, the more they loved him, and those nearest to him were most in love with him. When he first received the divine revelation and feared for himself, his wife beloved Khadija declared without hesitation that God would never forsake him given his devotion to the weak and needy, chivalry, and nobility.

¹⁰ Anas b. Mālik, who attended on him as a young man, testified, “The Messenger of Allah ﷺ was never ill-mannered nor rude.” He would not interrupt anybody's speech until the speaker was finished. When someone angered him, Anas continued, he would reproach in the gentlest way, “What is with him, may his forehead be dust-ridden.”¹¹ When he ﷺ wished to correct someone's error, rather than naming them, he would say, “What is with some people who do such and such,” thus avoiding embarrassing them.¹² Anas also reported,

I served the Noble Prophet ﷺ for ten years. He never said “Uff” (expressing dissatisfaction), nor ever asked me why I did this or did not do that. [Another version adds at the beginning:] I never touched brocade or silk softer than the hand of the Messenger of Allah ﷺ, nor a smell sweeter than the odor of the Messenger of Allah ﷺ.¹³

He ﷺ was a loving husband, a doting father, many of whose children died and left him crying. He mentioned his love for his wife publicly, interrupted his Friday sermon and prayers to hug, kiss, or entertain his grandchildren before a people to whom expression of love was fit only for sentimental women. He was the most masculine man yet one whose wives could argue with him and raise their voices without fearing retribution. Before him the proudest men sat in humility, yet the

¹⁰ *Ṣaḥīḥ Bukhārī*, no. 3.

¹¹ *Ṣaḥīḥ Bukhārī*, no. 6031.

¹² *Sunan Abū Dawūd*, no. 4770, graded *ṣaḥīḥ*.

¹³ Agreed upon; *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, no. 2309; also *Ṣaḥīḥ Bukhārī*, no. 6038; the addition is found in *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, no. 2330.

youngest children didn't fear approaching him and old, frail women felt free to interrupt him on the street with their concerns.

He ﷺ was the most courageous warrior, even though he disliked violence. 'Alī b. Abī Ṭālib, Allah be pleased with him, the most fearless of warriors, would say that in the thick of battle when the attack was unbearable, he and other Companions would take cover behind the Prophet ﷺ, for he never flinched or cowered.¹⁴ "He did not strike anybody with his own hands," reported his wife, 'Ā'isha, "neither a wife nor a servant. Yet, he ﷺ fought valiantly in the cause of Allah."¹⁵ One night the people of Medina were terribly frightened by a strange sound. Some people cautiously proceeded to explore it only to find the Prophet ﷺ returning from that direction, comforting them, having rushed before anyone else, riding a horse without a saddle, a sword hanging from his neck.

Another salient trait of the Prophet ﷺ was his loyalty and compassion for his companions and followers. Anyone who joined him or asked for his help, he would satisfy his need or if he couldn't, would console him until his burden was lifted. His generosity was described as a gentle breeze that delights everyone without discrimination. For his companions he was a protector and guardian, and yet in the matter of rights, all were equal in his eyes.

He ﷺ taught and practiced equality and fairness, and disliked social distinctions, all within the limits of common sense. Anas reports,

There was no one more beloved to the Companions than the Messenger of Allah ﷺ and yet they would not stand up when they saw him approach because they knew that he disliked that.¹⁶

He ﷺ also said,

I am a slave of Allah; I eat as other people eat, and I sit as other people sit.

¹⁴ *Musnad Aḥmad*, no. 654; declared authentic by Aḥmad Shākir and al-'Irāqī in his *takhrīj* of *al-Iḥyā'*, 2:380. Also, *Saḥīḥ Muslim*, no. 1775.

¹⁵ *Saḥīḥ Muslim*, no. 2328.

¹⁶ *Jami' Tirmidhī*, no. 2754, declared 'sound' by al-Albani and others, 'fair' by yet others.

He ﷺ honored all visitors and guests. Often, he would spread his shawl for the visitor, and place the cushion which was in his use behind the visitor's back. If the visitor were reluctant to sit on the shawl, he would insist. When a delegation of Negus, the Abyssinian king, came to the Prophet ﷺ, he rose to serve them. His companions told him that they were sufficient to serve them. He ﷺ replied,

They had honored our companions, so I wish to personally serve them.

Some fools have fabricated fanciful reports out of love of the Prophet ﷺ or at times with nefarious intentions, but any fair observer would testify that his authentically reported conduct was far superior to the imagination of the fabricators.

How can anyone who seeks God and the afterlife not fall in love with him ﷺ ?

Theorizing Prophetic ethics

How could one human being, inevitably situated in his time and place, be a role model for all? Are moral truths universal? If so, and there exists a “natural law” so to speak, why did the Almighty not just reveal a book with a list of such rules rather than sending a living human teacher? And if not, were the teachings of the Prophet ﷺ limited to his time and place, now rendered obsolete by modern developments? Such questions are often raised in the name of some ethical paradigm that happens to be in vogue, be it freedom, equality, progress, social justice, or the current state of scientific knowledge. Muslim theologians, as we shall discuss below, entertained both of these paradigms. Another error that surreptitiously makes its way into the thinking of even many well-meaning Muslims is to reduce the Prophet’s ﷺ role-model to a selection of feel-good stories divorced from his divine message of belief in (*tawḥīd*) and submission to God (*sharī‘a*), thus turning him, as secular Christians have done with Jesus, into a darling sage always ready with quotable quotes rather than a role-model to be

followed earnestly for guidance in this world and salvation in the next.¹⁷ In the rest of this essay, we dive deep into the meaning and import of the Prophet's role-model by exploring these questions.

The alternative paradigms

To understand why it is the example of the Prophet ﷺ, and not a set of abstract principles or the insights of rational contemplation, that lies at the center of the Islamic system of ethics, we need to understand why alternative ethical groundings have proven inadequate. Our ideas of ethics—of what is right and wrong, or morally beautiful and ugly, respectively—are naturally grounded in our fundamental worldviews, sometimes formulated in theological or philosophical discourses. Modern philosophers distinguish the practical question of which actions are right and wrong ('first order' concerns) from the theoretical question of the status of moral values and the nature of moral valuation ('second order' questions, the concerns of metaethics). One may further subdivide first order concerns into applied ethics (specific policies and decisions in particular spheres of life, answering questions such as, "Is it right for one to tell a white lie to make peace between spouses?" and "Ought I to use the printer at work to print my son's homework?") and normative ethics (questions such as "What are the general principles of good conduct?" or "Ought I to do that which pleases God, or maximizes human benefit, or what a virtuous community considers to be good, or do to others what I would have them do to me?" etc.). This division is merely conventional, as the line between metaethics and normative ethics is often blurred, and hence the two can be lumped together as 'theoretical ethics,' which in Islam has been dealt with in theological discourses found in the works of Kalam, *falsafa*, *usul al-fiqh*, *tafsir* works, and numerous other genres.

Metaethics has profound implications for normative as well as applied ethics. For instance, most modern Western philosophers, given their field's largely atheistic or agnostic approach, think that the idea of right and wrong is merely a man-made fiction or social construction—the debate often revolves around what kind of

¹⁷ We defer to a later article the doubts raised by those who posit that ethical truths are relative to each culture or even individual, and, therefore, there cannot be a universal right answer to every moral question.

fiction.¹⁸ The only ethics possible in their world are based on secular notions such as utility, emotion, or survival. In contrast, for ancients like Plato, Aristotle, and their disciples (including the Muslim *falasifa*), right and wrong were matters of rational inquiry, and the good was inscribed in the nature of things which a philosopher could read through systematic reasoning. Insofar as reason to them was a divine quality, their systems in fact were at once deeply religious and philosophical, and far nobler than modern secular ethics, but as we saw in the first article, without the benefit of revelation, prone to grave errors.

Because all ethical systems are part of a larger worldview (‘*aqīda*), any comparison is of limited validity. All ethical comparisons must pay attention to both the grounds for similarity between any two systems as well as the disagreements. Ethics can be likened to the skin of an organism, and comparing the softness of bird feathers to the roughness of alligator hide misses the fact that the two perform different functions. Any comparison, furthermore, must be made from within a given framework, which we take to be the shared human nature. And although the shared *fiṭra* (God-given human nature) is a valid ground for comparison, humans have also been given an oversized capacity for self-deception, and *fiṭra* discloses itself only to the discerning.

With some holistic discernment, however, we can see the superiority of the revealed wisdom. Think of the contention by Immanuel Kant (d. 1804), purportedly the greatest modern ethical philosopher, that the way to be ethical is to obey the **categorical imperative**—a rule that you would accept being practiced by everyone. In other words, a universal law. Kant’s ethical system, known as **deontological** ethics, went so far as to decry the force of human feelings of love, friendship, or altruism in the performance of the rational, ethical duty. This is an abstract and ultimately unusable formulation of the ancient, revealed wisdom recorded in the Biblical tradition as well as the Prophetic hadith, known as the golden rule. The Prophetic injunction, “One does not believe until he loves for his brother what he loves for himself,” is a rule of thumb that inhabits an entire ecosystem of relationships, beliefs, imperatives, and sentiments that together

¹⁸ See, for instance, Richard Joyce, “Moral Fictionalism,” *Philosophy Now*, 2011, https://philosophynow.org/issues/82/Moral_Fictionalism.

prevent its misuse and abuse. Now imagine a morally depraved person, like today's billionaire capitalists. What do they love for themselves? Instant gratification without end, even at the expense of ending all that lives on Earth, and all that is good. What would they choose for others if they want everything on the planet for themselves? Perhaps death ("If I had a life as worthless as yours, I would prefer death") or some prosperity gospel of equal opportunity ("We had equal opportunity, I won billions and you, the billions, got nothing, fair deal!").

Alternatively, imagine a fanatic believer forcing everyone to his faith, to his truth. In a perfect Kantian world, such a believer would want to be forced to believe as well as forcing others to believe, for the truth and its consequences in the afterlife do not depend on one's erroneous belief that denies it. Whereas Islamic ethics teaches us that "there is no compulsion in religion" and hence people who choose to hold erroneous beliefs are to be given freedom and rights, such divinely mandated generosity would appear illogical to a Kantian liberal. In the liberal worldview, tolerance can be premised only on the unknowability or irrelevance of the truth. In short, modern liberal ethics grounded in the Kantian imperative is at heart the translation of a religious principle that made perfect sense in shared communities of faith, but has since become a soulless idiom of Enlightenment-era secularism in which empty universalism replaces commitment to the truth. In Islam, as we shall see, we love for our brethren in faith what we love for ourselves: eternal success in the afterlife. And yet, for our brethren in humanity for whom we desire faith, we are constrained by the divine law not to coerce them into faith.

Similarly, humans are driven to do good not merely by a sense of abstract rational duty, as Kant insisted they must, but by a combination of acquired virtuous habits, sentiments of love or mercy, desire for reward or fear of punishment or loss in this world and/or the eternal afterlife, and the best of them, for the love of the infinite good that is God. Another modern approach to ethics, called **consequentialism**, judges actions by their consequences. But it is as unhelpful as Kant's duty-based ethics, because of at least two obvious reasons: first, consequences of actions are typically unknowable in the real world, and second, what consequences should be desired falls into question-begging.

A moral philosophical tradition nearer to human nature (and hence Islam) is the ancient tradition of *virtue ethics*, often attributed to Aristotle. It prioritizes not abstract duty but acquisition of virtues recognized within a morally alert community such as charity, benevolence, courage, temperance, and so on, turning the focus from Kantian mental gymnastics to the habits of the whole human person. One good example of virtue ethics is the tradition of Arab chivalry (*murū'a*) before Islam, one that the Prophet ﷺ both encouraged and often corrected or redirected. Virtue ethics is, however, fundamentally incomplete. What counts as a virtue requires not only the use of rational thinking but also, and this is the crucial part, individual and communal well-being defined by a worldview. In a community of pickpockets, one could become a skillful thief with virtues of speed and nimbleness; among ruthless capitalists, being a heartless shark is a compliment. Virtue ethics does not account for the ultimate consequence of one's actions and the purpose of one's life.

Classical Islamic theories of ethics

None of these approaches, notwithstanding the insights they offer, fully encompasses the Islamic approach to ethical formation, for they ultimately neglect or decenter the question of truth. In contrast, notwithstanding its great diversity and intellectual depth, Islamic tradition is committed, metaphysically, to an Omnipotent and Ever-Living God who created humankind to worship Him and, in the social sphere, to the central fact of divine law. As such, Muslim thought derived not from endless puzzlement about the nature and possibility of the good, but from the great, transformative fact of the good revealed by God and embodied in the Prophet ﷺ and in the community he created. Muslim scholars, therefore, did not immediately need to attend to the question of metaethics, and their intense moral lives drew their inspiration from the divine command embodied in the Prophet ﷺ.

Even as classical theology expanded into abstractions forced by polemics and reflection, Muslim theologians tended to be guided by the centrality of God's law in Islam. Consider classical Muslim theologians' discourse on the well-known "Euthyphro's dilemma" posed by Plato over a thousand years earlier: Is an action good because "the gods" command it (to use Plato's language), or do "the gods"

command it because it is good?¹⁹ Whereas the early scholars had silently assumed a harmony between the two, the Mu‘tazilites, who were the first Muslims to theologize about ethics and developed a rational system that became known as Kalam, contended that it was the latter, that Allah commanded only what was already good. This had the unintended effect of binding God to do what human reason demanded. In response, the Ash‘arites, the first Kalam-based defenders of scripture, insisted that it was the former, thus articulating a Divine Command Theory of ethics. To them, ethical value had no ontological existence—acts are not actually good or bad but God, through revelation, freely and arbitrarily labeled certain acts as licit and hence rewarded in the afterlife, and others as illicit and punishable in the afterlife. Precisely because the leading Ash‘arites held to an extreme version of the Divine Command Theory, they sought purely psychological and utilitarian explanations for why and how humans universally assign ethical value to acts. On this view, people call good what they see as benefiting them, or that which evokes a positive reaction in them (a view today called *emotivism*). This prompted leading Ash‘arites like al-Ghazālī (d. 505/1111) to attend to and write masterfully on psychological aspects of human action, while restricting the source and knowledge of ethics to divine revelation. Human reason, nevertheless, could reflect on values declared or implied in the divine law, and such reflections gave birth to a discourse on the higher objectives of the law (*maqāṣid al-sharī‘a*).

Unlike today’s postmodernists who deny the ontological reality of ethics and are left with nothing but arbitrary power, Muslim skeptics of rational ethics were not nihilists but advocates of ethics embodied in the divine law, and thus still vigorously believed in ethical norms. Ultimately, even when they assigned different relative values and took different epistemic routes to the Prophet’s Sunnah, its normative value was central to all of their systems. The Traditionalists (the heirs of the early Muslims who rejected Kalam as a heretical innovation altogether), Mu‘tazilites (a school that became established among the Twelver Shi‘a), the Ash‘arites and the Maturidites (who sought to defend Sunnism using

¹⁹ Mariam al-Attar, *Islamic Ethics: The Divine Command Theory in Arabo-Islamic Thought* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2010), 3.

Kalam) were all committed to upholding the divine command and the Sunnah of the Prophet.²⁰

Akhlāq and fiqh

Turning to reflection on the nature of the Prophet's ﷺ ethics, we begin with the Almighty's declaration:

And indeed [O Prophet] you are possessed of a great character (*khuluq*).²¹

The Qur'anic word for character is *khuluq*.²² In Arabic, *khuluq* (same as *khulq*, plural of which is *akhlāq*, or *khalā'iq*)²³ refers to the non-physical part of a human being, or 'second nature,' in contrast to *khalq*, the physical form of a human being. *Khuluq* refers to both the outwardly qualities known as *manners*, such as courteousness, gentleness, forbearance, etc., and the inner qualities referred to as *morals* (from Latin *mores*, *moralis*), *ethics* (from Greek *ethos*, *ethikos*), or *character*, like integrity, honesty, truthfulness, patience, courage, etc.²⁴ Humans use language, however, in creative and supple ways that do not admit of rigid classification, and often, a reference to outward *manners* means inner *morals* and vice versa.

To appreciate how the meaning of *khuluq* in Islam encompasses both morals and manners, consider the following widely reported saying of the Prophet ﷺ:

²⁰ For this line of reasoning about the attitude of pre-Kalam jurists as well as the Mu'tazila and the Ash'arites, as well as the influence of Greek physician Galen's writings on al-Ghazālī's development of the "purposes of the law" discourse, see Ahmed El Shamsy, "The Wisdom of God's Law: Two Theories," in *Islamic Law in Theory*, ed. A. K. Reinhart and R. Gleave (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 30. For a detailed discussion of the four theoretical schools in Islam, see Sherman A. Jackson, *Islam and the Problem of Black Suffering* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).

²¹ Qur'an 68:4.

²² For example, Qur'an 68:4.

²³ E. W. Lane, *Arabic-English Lexicon* (London: Williams and Norgate, 1863–1893), 799–800.

²⁴ Some have suggested that ethics refers to subjective understanding of right and wrong (answering the question: what should I do?), whereas morals refer to communal and social norms (answering the question: how should we live?). See Paul Walker and Terry Lovat, "You Say Morals, I Say Ethics—What's the Difference?," *The Conversation*, September 18, 2014, <https://theconversation.com/you-say-morals-i-say-ethics-whats-the-difference-30913>. But this distinction is somewhat overwrought and not borne out in actual English usage. An erudite discussion of these derivatives, and the futility of such distinctions and of most modern nit-picking on ethics, is found in Moroccan Islamic philosopher Ṭāhā 'Abd al-Raḥmān's text *Su'āl al-Akhlāq* (Morocco: al-Markaz al-Thaqāfī al-'Arabī, 2000), 17–24.

There are four habits, whosoever has them is a complete hypocrite. If one of these habits is found in him, he will have one habit of hypocrisy until he gives it up: When he speaks, he lies, when he makes a promise, he breaks it, when he makes a covenant, he is treacherous, and when he quarrels, he is abusive.²⁵

Three of the vices listed here are moral flaws—lying, breaking promises, and treachery—and all can be classified as pertaining to moral integrity. The fourth one, absence of self-control in a dispute, is a vice of behavior, although it too suggests a meanness of character. At the risk of reading too much into it, we might say that even the proportion of three-fourths inner virtue and one-fourth outer courtesy is an apt depiction of prophetic ethics. This hadith stresses the most emphasized Islamic virtues: truthfulness, reliability in promises and contracts, patience, and forbearance. But it also includes in the meaning of *akhlāq* good cheer, politeness, and simple kindness.

Since the early days of Islam, the Qur'an and the Prophetic character were seen as substantively the same, and the meanings of the Qur'anic ideal were sought in the *akhlāq* of the Prophet ﷺ. In fact, Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*) was, in the first instance, nothing but a comprehensive response to the divine commands and prohibitions, without any formal distinction between worship and other aspects of life. Allah commanded all that was good and prohibited all that was bad. Manners and morals were taught through role-modeling, reminders of heaven and hell, and moral stories. Authorities or scholars were consulted only in cases of disagreement; matters that elicited disagreement and required expert knowledge became the preserve of the specialists, and those that were largely agreed upon and required mastery of practice fell under *akhlāq*. Rather than thinking of *fiqh* and *akhlāq* as equivalents of the modern notions of law and ethics, in my view, the most helpful way to differentiate between the two is precisely this: *fiqh* is that part of Islam where the challenge is expert knowledge and management of differing interpretations, while *akhlāq* is that part of Islam where the challenge is the internalization of commanded virtues, habit-formation, and cultivation of virtuous

²⁵ *Saḥīḥi Bukhārī*, no. 34.

sensibilities.²⁶ Over time, *fiqh* became concerned with knowing God's commands in specific situations, such as ritual worship (*'ibādāt*, whose form is defined in revelation) and social relationships and transactions (*mu'āmalāt*). The discipline of *akhlāq*, in contrast, came to focus on the acquisition of virtues and refinement of outward manners and inner states. The challenge posed by virtues is to acquire them, make them a habit, learn how to prioritize when they compete with each other, and most importantly, direct them to God rather than selfish or other non-godly ends. It is for this reason the discipline of ethics is closely related in Islam to the inner, psychological disciplines of *tazkiya*, *sulūk*, and *taṣawwuf*.²⁷

Unsurprisingly, then, the cultivation of good character was sought ubiquitously in Islamic civilization: in parental discipline at home, Qur'an schools, *madrasas*, mosques, the battle field, the marketplace, the Sufi orders, and so on, and incorporated in the instruction of every science and craft. It was also discoursed on in dedicated treatises and "self-help" books. These included titles such as *Adab al-Dunya wal-l-Din* (Worldly and Religious Etiquette) by Abū al-Ḥasan 'Alī al-Māwardī (d. 450/1058) and *al-Ādāb al-Shar'iyya* (Divinely Mandated Etiquettes) by Ibn Muflīḥ al-Maqdisī (d. 763/1263), to mention just two prominent ones, in addition to sections on *adab* in nearly all comprehensive collections of prophetic hadith.²⁸

Different Muslim traditions of ethics, some taking their cue from hadith reports, others from *fiqh*, and yet others from *taṣawwuf*, *kalam*, and *falsafa*, have variously emphasized divine command, rational analysis, and psychological reflection, but all sport features of each, and to the extent that they are truly Islamic, they are all grounded in the Prophetic model. I propose, therefore, that as the Muslim *ummah* strives to understand, revive, and embody Islamic ethics, rather than resolving

²⁶ We will turn to the relationship between *fiqh* (law) and *khuluq* (ethics) in the next article in this series, God willing.

²⁷ That being said, we must not forget that divinely ordained norms make up one inseparable whole, just as skeleton and flesh make up one complete human body; no adherence to law is complete and worthy of divine reward without truthfulness and sincerity to God and benevolence toward God's creation, and no act of kindness, justice, or chivalry is truly good in disobedience to God.

²⁸ For instance, we find a section named *Kitāb al-adab* in each of *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, *Sunan Abī Dawūd*, *Sunan Ibn Mājah*, and *Jāmi' al-Tirmidhī* and one titled *Kitāb al-birr wa-l-ṣila wa-l-ādāb* in *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, not to mention detailed sections in later, more expansive collections such as Imām al-Nawawī's collection *Riyāḍ al-ṣāliḥīn*.

theoretical conundrums or constructing abstract principles—which no doubt have academic value—it is *prophetic ethics* with which we must begin.

What is *prophetic ethics*? A complete moral ecology

Because real life is bigger than words, only a living, breathing exemplar confronted by the enormity and complexity of real life—followers and detractors, ups and downs, surprises and tragedies—could express the fullness of the divine moral teachings. This is why it is the role model, the Sunnah, of a human being ﷺ, who was sent as “Mercy to all the worlds,”²⁹ that is at the heart of Islamic teachings on right and wrong, their nature and consequences, and ways to acquire virtues and avoid vices. Islamic ethics involve three complementary elements:

- (i) *obedience* to divine commands--this being the most distinctive dimension of Islamic ethics that orients the believer towards an afterlife and infuses moral actions with an eternal concern;
- (ii) *rational* comprehension and reflection for the purpose of appreciating the truth, knowing appropriate ways and occasions to practice, prioritizing competing values, reconciling general principles and particular teachings, and the like; and
- (ii) finally, *love*, the proper drive for being virtuous, which prompts one to seek God’s pleasure and love.

In the following, we show how God embodied the elements of obedience, reason, and love in the person of the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ.

It is important to differentiate at the outset between the Prophet’s personal traits and the normative aspects of his role-model. As a complete human being, the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ had a unique combination of personal traits, such as a preference for gentleness, patterns in speech, and preferences in dress, cuisine, perfume, and appearance, etc., traits that do not have normative value. Every prophet had such personal traits that allow us to relate to them as human beings.

²⁹ Qur’an 21:107.

Moses, for instance, is known to have possessed the strong, dominant character of a leader, whereas Jesus had the gentle and patient character of a sage. Both types of traits are fitting in their place.

What we shall call *prophetic ethics* refers to the character not only of the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ but all the prophets through whose example Allah Almighty taught our Prophet and us (as in 4:26: “Allah wishes to explain to you and guide you by the examples [*sunan*] of those who were before you”). And precisely because a number of moral exemplars are included in this Sunnah, the diversity of their personal characters enriches this guidance. *Prophetic ethics*, therefore, is inclusive of the virtues of all the prophets like Jesus, Moses, Noah, and Abraham, upon them be peace, whom Allah has praised as role models, as well as the virtues that the Prophet ﷺ cultivated and encouraged in his disciples, the Companions, in whom we witness a great variety of human personalities. Following the prophetic character, then, is not merely a matter of imitating a single text or a single personality type on every matter, but the employment of revealed teachings and the best of our rational capacity—as Allah says in the Qur’an, “those who listen to speech and follow the best of it”³⁰—to understand and emulate the moral import of the entire ecosystem of *prophetic ethics*.

Consider, for instance, the remarkable Qur’anic story of Moses’s harshness toward his assistant and brother prophet, Aaron, upon them both be peace, when he found upon his return from his meeting with God that the Israelites had fallen into worshiping the calf. In rage and sorrow, Moses pulled his brother’s hair, until Aaron explained how he pleaded with them but due to their obstinacy decided to wait for Moses to return and strengthen his hand rather than aggravating the situation. Moses understood Aaron’s wisdom and turned to Allah to seek forgiveness. In this case, the *prophetic ethics* does not consist merely in the imitation of any one person in the story, but understanding the priorities and complexities of action in real life. We can appreciate both Aaron’s patient diplomacy and Moses’s overpowering personality; Moses’s rage and sorrow are

³⁰ Qur’an 39:18.

prophetic ethics, as are Aaron's patience and wisdom. In this one story, we learn all three virtues of obedience, reason, and love for God.

How *prophetic ethics* is relevant for all times

As the site and embodiment of God's final revelation, the Prophet ﷺ was made to live a full, complex, and eventful life. Earlier prophets were presented to him as his role models, and he was to become the role model for all humans to come:

Surely there is in the person of Allah's messenger an excellent example (*uswa*) for you: for those of you who seek Allah and the Afterlife and remember Allah much.³¹

This verse states the fundamental principle of the Islamic ethical system, which is that for all those who seek Allah and success in the eternal hereafter, Prophet Muhammad ﷺ must be the role model and exemplar. In turn, Prophet Muhammad ﷺ himself was called to follow the role model of earlier prophets, in particular our father Abraham, upon him be peace and blessings, who had lived over 2,000 years earlier. The essence of prophetic character, we learn, is timeless. It follows that in its essence, the Prophet Muhammad's ﷺ example is identical to that of all the great messengers and comprises the core of all that is truly good. This also means that by role model (*uswa*) what is meant is not the peculiar personal traits of any given prophet, but their moral mission to respond and call to God and hence to goodness.

Yet, there is another reason why the Prophet Muhammad's ﷺ Sunnah is relevant for all times. He ﷺ lived among a people and under conditions that were closest to nature, fitted with the bare necessities of life and uncorrupted by artificial luxuries that conceal the fullness of life from human experience. Like all prophets, he ﷺ was taught the bare nature of human beings as a shepherd: "Allah did not send any prophet but that he herded sheep."³² Although there is nothing morally wrong with power and wealth, he ﷺ was given, and loved, a life of austerity, postponing extraneous pleasures to the eternal afterlife with God. This

³¹ Qur'an 33:21.

³² *Saḥīḥi Bukhārī*, no. 2262.

self-sacrifice was stressed by the Almighty through an angel sent down to the Prophet ﷺ offering him a choice between being a “prophet-king” or “servant-messenger”—he chose the latter, the servant messenger (*‘abdan rasūlā*).³³ To live like a servant is both physically and symbolically closer to nature than to live as a king.

Encompassed within his mission was the entire gamut of human experience. He ﷺ was like Jesus in Mecca and Moses in Medina. He was like Joseph in his forgiveness in the moment of triumph, Job in his patience, and his father Abraham in his sincerity and nearness to God and in his concern for his *ummah*. Just as the Qur’an is encompassing (*muḥaymin*) of all the divine scriptures sent before it,³⁴ the Prophet’s ﷺ example encompasses the righteous examples of all the prophets before him. And in contrast to nearly all prophetic missions narrated in the Qur’an, his is the only mission that succeeded through a human struggle; rather than supernatural interventions such as parted seas, cooled fires, and great floods, God gave him success through his unrelenting struggle, beautiful character, and supporting cast of Companions. This is not to deny that Allah guided every step of the Prophet’s ﷺ mission, granted him miracles, and indeed aided early Muslims through angels (as in the Battle of Badr) as well as natural events (as in the Battle of the Trench), but to underscore that rather than annihilating the enemy through supernatural events named above Allah used the believers to combat the forces of unbelief. This makes the Prophet’s struggle accessible as a model to believers in any time and place, a fact in which Muslim scholars and revivalists have always found inspiration.

In the rare cases that he ﷺ chose anything less than beautiful, he was corrected by the Almighty Himself. Far from being a scandalous secret, these corrections were recorded in the Qur’an. Even his frowns, for instance, could become an occasion for divine attention. During his converse with Meccan leaders, with whom he stood pleading to embrace faith, a blind believer interrupted and a most understandable frown appeared on the Prophet’s ﷺ forehead. But God chose to

³³ *Musnad Aḥmad*, no. 7160, declared *ṣaḥīḥ* by al-Albānī, Aḥmad Shākir, and others.

³⁴ Qur’an 5:48.

raise His Prophet ﷺ to an even higher rank. A *sūrah* was sent down announcing this incident:

He frowned and turned away

Because the blind man accosted him.³⁵

And the believers have since recited in their prayers these divine correctives to their Prophet ﷺ, feeling in their hearts the Prophet's ﷺ humanity and assured of God's eyes watching over His most beloved creation. Similarly, when the Prophet ﷺ was moved to pray against the unbelievers of Quraysh after the Battle of Uhud, Allah corrected him that it was the Almighty's will whether to forgive or punish.³⁶ When he ﷺ vowed to give up eating honey to please his wives, Allah corrected him, for as a role model even his private choices were consequential.³⁷ Far more numerous than these rare occasions are the instances when the Prophet ﷺ was praised for his judgment³⁸ or guided before taking an action through divine inspiration or through the Archangel Gabriel, as recorded in countless edifying anecdotes in hadith.³⁹

The character of the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ, therefore, is to be emulated because, on the one hand, it is natural, practical, and feasible, and on the other, it embodies the timeless ideal of *prophetic ethics*, one which comprises a loftier and more comprehensive answer to the nature of the good than any alternative. Other philosophies often ground ethics in rule-following, from answering to an abstract universal imperative to maximizing 'happiness' (setting aside the question of true happiness for now) to cultivating virtuous habits. *Prophetic ethics*, however, is a judicious use of all of these strategies in service of the ultimate good and for the

³⁵ Qur'an 80:1–2.

³⁶ Qur'an, 3:128–29; *Saḥīḥ Muslim*, no. 1791.

³⁷ *Saḥīḥ Muslim*, no. 1474. Consider how the personal dietary preference of Prophet Jacob, upon him be peace, became law for the Jews. Qur'an 3:93.

³⁸ For an extensive treatment of the Prophet's judgments and the divine response, see Nādiya Sharīf al-'Umarī, *Ijtihād al-Rasūl* ﷺ (Beirut: Mu'assasa al-Risāla, n.d.).

³⁹ See Dr. Omar Suleiman's inspiring lectures on Archangel Gabriel, upon him be peace, to appreciate how and how frequently such encounters occurred. Omar Suleiman, "Episode 1: They've Got Your Back | Angels in Your Presence with Omar Suleiman," Yaqeen Institute, YouTube video, April 24, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9VtsVxVynIg>.

attainment of true happiness, in light of the divine revelation and the guidance of the concrete role model in the form of the Sunnah of the Prophet ﷺ.

“His character was the Qur’an”

Who doesn’t appreciate virtues such as truthfulness, forgiveness and justice? Yet, a preacher of peace who always forgives powerful bullies and tyrants but seeks justice from the weak and the poor is not a moral person, but a sniveling hypocrite. Someone who speaks truth about other people’s flaws and weaknesses with the intent of harming them while hiding his own flaws is not a truth-teller. A loudmouth who publicly plays up sin and debauchery, others’ and his own, in the name of being “real,” candid, and funny, may be a comic hero in American society, but he is an immoral scoundrel in Islam. A dressed-to-a-tee religious preacher who has mastered every pleasantry and memorized every religious text and yet uses his fine manners to maintain his status and secure his fortunes, failing to speak truth to power, defend the weak, and uphold truth is an empty shell, devoid of Prophetic character. Being virtuous, it turns out, is not as easy as it might seem at first.

Enter the Prophet ﷺ. As the following will make clear, his example would never permit the divorce of doctrine from practice or morals from manners, nor perversions of virtuous ideals for selfish ends. Those closest to him were the most aware of this deep harmony. He ﷺ was not only praised by God for his virtue and unmatched faith in God, but also given a personality that was most receptive to virtue. Even his gentleness, demeanor, and natural habits—traits in which even prophets as humans differed among themselves—set him ﷺ apart and made him shine. The Prophet’s beautiful manners and personality are singled out by the Almighty for consistent praise in the Qur’an:

And indeed [O Prophet] you are possessed of a great character (*khuluq*).⁴⁰

The great Imam of Ahl al-Bayt, Ja‘far b. Muḥammad al-Ṣādiq (d. 148 AH) said, “Allah enjoined upon His Prophet ﷺ the noblest of manners, and there is no verse in the Qur’an that sums up these virtues better than this one,” reciting:

⁴⁰ Qur’an 68:4.

Make forgiveness your habit, enjoin righteousness, and stay away from the ignorant.⁴¹

In this Meccan *sūrah*, Allah does not merely command the Prophet ﷺ to forgive, but to take it on as a habit. Later, in a Medinan *sūrah*, Allah attributes the Prophet's ﷺ success in winning hearts to his being gentle, rather than harsh and grudging, as a matter of habit and character, thus testifying in 3:159 that the Prophet ﷺ had responded most beautifully to the divine teaching in 7:199.

This truth is reflected even more clearly in the following teaching of the Mother of the Believers. When Sa'd b. Hishām, a Basran Successor whose grandfather 'Āmir had been martyred at Uḥud, sought to give up his family, divorcing his wife and selling his property to seek martyrdom on the frontier, he was advised against it and told that this immoderation contradicted the Sunnah of the Prophet ﷺ. He took back his wife and then visited the Mother of the Believers 'Ā'isha, God be pleased with her, in Medina to inquire about the Prophet's character. She asked in response, "Do you not read the Qur'an?" He said, "Of course." She said, "The character of the Prophet ﷺ was the Qur'an." "Due to the comprehensiveness of this response," Sa'd added, "I thought to get up and never ask anyone for any guidance until I die."⁴²

Particularly dear to the Muslims is the verse in *Sūrah al-Tawbah* in which Allah describes how the Prophet ﷺ deeply cared for his *ummah*:

[O humankind], there has certainly come to you a Messenger from among yourselves, anything that causes you suffering is hard on him, [he is] full of concern for you; and to the believers he is [especially] affectionate and merciful.⁴³

Scholars of exegesis observe that the first part of the verse is directed to all humankind, the *ummat al-da'wa*, and the last part is explicitly addressed to the believers.⁴⁴

⁴¹ Qur'an 7:199.

⁴² *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, no. 746.

⁴³ Qur'an 9:128.

⁴⁴ See, for instance, Ibn 'Āshūr, *al-Tahrīr wa-l-tanwīr*, under verse 9:128.

A bulwark against fanaticism

The Prophetic example protects us from religious fanaticism and perversion. The Qur'an is God's announcement of something immeasurably vaster than the span of this life and its petty, mundane problems: the infinite greatness of God, the eternity of the afterlife, the infinitesimal smallness of this life, the boundless urgency of our short worldly life, the moral import of worshiping the One True God. Humans, especially those whose *fiṭra* (innate nature) is clouded, need to be shaken up, as if with a violent power of diction and rhythm that characterizes the Meccan Qur'an, to sense this urgency. The hauntingly powerful, eloquent, and urgent ethos of the Qur'an warns us that this life is merely deception, a thing of play, a mirage, and the Day of Judgment is near, almost here, and so on. It is not unlikely for some limited minds to interpret this message as suggesting a radical rejection of this life and with it the laws, morals, and actions that seek to improve and beautify it. If the other life is eternal and infinitely more important, why should I respect this life at all—why should I seek earthly mercy, beauty, and convenience for myself, let alone for others? Practicing forbearance toward others, especially those who are heedless of the truth, sounds illogical. Is Allah really asking us to allow the error of the unbelievers and the decadence of the heedless to stand, to be kind and charitable to them, and to even protect their rights?

The Kharijites, the first sect in Islam that departed from the moderate path of the Sunnah, grew out of this seemingly logical but radically misguided reading of the Qur'an precisely because they were ignorant of the Prophetic example and rejected the Companions' teachings about the proper meanings of the Qur'an. They excommunicated and massacred Muslims, justifying their actions by erroneously invoking the Qur'an. The Prophet ﷺ had so frequently cautioned against “those young, foolish gangs who read the Qur'an but it does not go past their throats” that we have numerous (*mutawatir*) reports confirming this warning. The Kharijites also justified their slaughter of non-combatant children and women, violating the

Companions' consensus against such heinous practices, by incorrectly citing the Qur'anic story of Moses and Khidr.⁴⁵

In fact, already during the lifetime of the Prophet ﷺ, some Companions wanted to abandon the comforts of this life, even their families, for the celibacy, perpetual fasting and self-abnegation of Christian monks. They were sternly prohibited by the Prophet ﷺ from doing so:

By Allah, I am the most fearful and mindful of God among you, and I fast but also some days break my fast, I pray [at night] but I also sleep, and I marry women: whoever renounces my Sunnah is not part of me.⁴⁶

With our knowledge of the prophetic model in hindsight, we might struggle to understand the desire of the Companions who wanted to stop enjoying life. But one has only to read the Qur'an as seriously as the Companions did, and recall its descriptions of heaven and hell and the insignificance of this life, to appreciate why they wanted to give up the world altogether. The Prophet's Sunnah, in fact, is necessary to understand the Qur'an as life-affirming rather than life-denying, or else a simply "logical" reading of certain *ayat* may lead one to join the fanatics. Alternatively, a selective reading of certain verses stressing God's lenience might tempt one to neglect duty to God and God's creation both.

Allah sent the Prophet ﷺ to teach us how to understand the Qur'an properly. The Qur'an is not a Book that asks us to abandon this life in favor of the next, but to live this life in a balanced, beautiful, and respectful way for ourselves, to learn the ways of this world and hence establish order and civilization in service to God, all while calling the whole of humanity to Him. The divine law assists us in attaining this goal and living a felicitous and full life.

Prophetic ethics against empty claims of faith

An even more common problem than excess and fanaticism that the Prophetic model solves is laxity and neglect toward the divine command. The two extremes,

⁴⁵ The correspondence between them and Ibn 'Abbās is reported in *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, no. 1812.

⁴⁶ *Ṣaḥīḥ Bukhārī*, no. 5063.

in fact, are deeply related, as one often leads to the other, and balance and moderation are absolutely key attributes of the Prophetic character. The Qur'an is not merely a book of precepts or a mine of quotable quotes, the Sunnah tells us, but the blueprint for an entire life of submission for the individual and the community. Merely recognizing the truth of the message does not suffice to make one Muslim let alone lead one to success. "They know him like they know their sons,"⁴⁷ the Qur'an said of the People of the Book, but by failing to join his community and his mission they rendered their knowledge worthless. What Allah demanded from the Muslims was to "follow him, strengthen him, and aid him, and follow the Light [the Qur'an] sent down with him."⁴⁸ When the Bedouin Arabs joined the Prophet ﷺ claiming that they "believed," Allah corrected them for confusing entering into Islam with true faith, declaring, "Say to them: No, you have not believed, but rather say, 'We have submitted,' for Islam has not yet entered their hearts."⁴⁹ In order to claim faith, they had to join the Prophet ﷺ and follow his Sunnah, the greatest Sunnah being his jihad, his struggle to establish Allah's religion, and give their wealth and life for it.⁵⁰

The Prophetic role model, in short, is the cure to the extremism, fanaticism, and self-destruction of pious warriors on the one hand and neglect, heedlessness, and lackluster claim of faith by the opportunists and weak-hearted on the other. To understand *Prophetic ethics*, one must understand and join the mission of the Prophet ﷺ, not merely select convenient anecdotes about creed, law, or stories of how he treated the poor and the weak and the like, isolated from his overall mission of guiding humankind to salvation. Only when understood in the light of his mission do his myriad virtues, to which we turn below, assume their transformative potential. Properly understood, the Sunnah turns the various precepts, stories, laws, and nuggets of wisdom in the Qur'anic revelation into a full, vibrant, and dynamic picture of life that God has intended to serve as the ideal

⁴⁷ Qur'an 2:156 and 6:20.

⁴⁸ Qur'an 7:157.

⁴⁹ Qur'an 49:14.

⁵⁰ Qur'an 49:15.

and aspiration for all peoples, while offering practical, detailed guidance for individual, family, and communal life, until the end of time.

How *prophetic ethics* help us confront secular modernity

He ﷺ is praised by God as the “mercy for the worlds,” and his numerous acts of mercy and compassion are appreciated by anyone who learns about them without prejudice. But the truest manifestation of his mercy was that he embodied servitude to Allah: he was the freest and greatest of human beings precisely because his will was one with the will of the Truth Almighty. Nothing oppresses human beings more than their inner demons of desire, especially the desire to conform to and please other mortals, who are merciless, petty, and fickle. To take him ﷺ as our role model and hence seek “God and the Hereafter” is the surest way to free ourselves from the servitude to others’ opinions and find joy and strength in the Almighty, All-Merciful God.

Rarely has a civilization been more moralizing and less moral, more obsessed with judging all others as falling short and yet so fundamentally bereft of coherent standards by which to judge any good, more filled with hubris about its ethical superiority and yet less sure about how to cultivate moral selves than the modern, secular West. The reason for this paradox may lie in the following. The modern secular West may be the first civilization in history to so starkly isolate the question of “What is life?” from the moral question of “How ought we to live?” thereby reducing life to merely its material substrate. From ancient Greek philosophers to various religious traditions, all human cultures treated the two questions as one, and none more clearly and powerfully than Islam. The idea of goodness is not an afterthought in Islam. The source of life, God’s final message declares, is one God, who is ultimate in goodness and justice, and *who created life as a moral test*,⁵¹ thus answering both questions at once. This means that *Islamic reason*, or Islamic philosophy, is fundamentally moral. Knowledge is sought for a moral end, and any question Islamic reason asks about any phenomenon has a moral dimension.

⁵¹ Qur’an 67:1.

Even from his or her most rudimentary thought, it is impossible for a believer to eliminate the question “What do I owe God and His creation?”⁵² In this sense, even when sharing the same physical space and time, it would seem that the believer in God and the non-believer experience two utterly different lives.⁵³ For all things, living and nonliving, share in the attribute of being God’s creation, and those who know this cannot be the same as those who deny it. The Qur’an puts it with matchless beauty and force: “All that is in the heavens and the earth glorify Allah!” and in places, declares, “There is nothing that fails to glorify Him in praise, but you do not understand their glorification, and yet He is Forbearing and Forgiving.”⁵⁴ This has profound implications for Islam’s attitude to all things; there is no need for escaping into spirituality, as dualist philosophies⁵⁵ tend to, for the matter itself is endowed with meaning and consciousness.

Witness the effect of this realization on the most mundane things. Even the water that we use to wash ourselves has a moral right over us, as the Prophet ﷺ said: “Do not waste water, even when purifying yourself for prayers, and even if you are on the bank of a flowing river!”⁵⁶ Consider, in the same vein, the advice of the Prophet ﷺ to not waste even a morsel of food remaining on your dish or your fingers for you do not know which one God has especially blessed.⁵⁷ The entirety of Islamic life reflects this spirit.

Conclusion: True freedom and happiness

In the truest sense, the Prophet ﷺ was the truest of men, the freest of them, for he was most truly the slave of one, true Master. When reading about him ﷺ, you will learn that he was the gentlest of friends, who gave those who deprived him and forgave those who wronged him, but he was also the most fearless of warriors who

⁵² Consider, for instance, 4:1: “Beware of God in whose name you seek rights from each other, and [relations of] the womb!”

⁵³ See, for instance, Qur’an 39:9.

⁵⁴ Qur’an 17:44.

⁵⁵ Dualist views such as Neoplatonism and ancient gnostic religions posited a stark separation of matter and spirit and from there these ideas seeped into Christianity and certain Muslim traditions.

⁵⁶ *Musnad Ahmad; Ibn Majah*; graded *ṣaḥīḥ* (sound) by Ahmad Shākir and *ḥasan* (fair) by al-Albānī in *al-Silsila al-ṣaḥīḥa*, no. 3292; other hadith critics have declared it weak.

⁵⁷ *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, nos. 2033 and 2035.

fought for God's sake and brought his enemies to their knees. His ethics, his Sunnah, therefore, has always challenged the tyranny of men, lowering the haughty and raising the meek, whenever and wherever it is truly embraced by his followers, rather than reduced to self-serving bits and pieces, as it often is. Prophetic ethics is not for cowards, pessimists, cynics, and worshippers of the rising sun, or the theologians and ministers of the Pharaoh.

Its contrast with modern secular ethics could not be greater, for the latter promises freedom and delivers nothing but slavery to all things and misery in both worlds. In all its mutually warring varieties—liberal, capitalist, conservative, progressive, and so on—modern secular ethics is ultimately the worship of man by man. This inevitably leads to various forms of polytheism—the worship of the egos of a few heroes, celebrities, political leaders, saints, and other false gods by the many. Sometimes this degradation of humanity occurs in the name of freedom and self-expression, and at other times in the name of national or tribal unity and progress. Sometimes, it is the *Brave New World*, where men entertain themselves to death, at others, it is *1984*, where a “Ministry of Truth” more brazenly controls thought and language.⁵⁸ Against both, prophetic ethics promises freedom from bondage to any and all false gods in return for bondage to the Truth Almighty. The most oppressive of all false gods may be the closest one to us: our unconstrained desire. As the great Muslim poet-philosopher Muhammad Iqbal once wrote in an Urdu couplet,

This one bowing weighs heavy on thee

Yet it frees thee of a thousand bowings!

The Almighty endowed His Final Messenger ﷺ with all manner of beauty: in looks, manners, feelings, wisdom, and most of all, in morals and character. Allah has given commands and prohibitions in His Noble Shariah, but has placed the secret of His special love in doing above and beyond what is required, in living as if in the presence of God, as if seeing Him and knowing that He sees us, instilling in His servants love for Him, in obedience that is so beautiful that it becomes a

⁵⁸ The reference here is to two classics of modern English literature: Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* and George Orwell's *1984*.

sign of Him, an object of art; in short, in imitating the character of the Messenger of Allah ﷺ. In the words of Imam Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī, one has to merge oneself with the Messenger's ﷺ personality, “through the experience of an inner relationship;” in a fashion that is not merely the practice of virtue but an embodiment of its truth. “The truth of prophecy” is not merely known, but experienced, as it is further “authenticated by the moral influence it exercises on the soul.”⁵⁹

The Almighty did not send the greatest teacher of good ﷺ with a book of ethical philosophy dedicated to ethical riddles and dilemmas, solving trolley problems, and formulating categorical imperatives. Rather, Allah sent a Book along with its embodiment, the law and its fulfillment, and a role model and its explanation in the person of the Prophet ﷺ. It is through this perfect vehicle of delivery that the greatest ethical revolution in human history was effected by the Final Revelation. The truth sent down by the All-Wise Creator deeply resonated with human nature, *al-fiṭra*. To use the Qur’anic image of “light upon light,” the light of divine revelation shone upon the divinely bestowed nature. The men and women of the first generations came to embody the “perfected way of life,”⁶⁰ each to the extent of his or her receptivity and effort, and as more and more peoples from lands far and near entered Islam, decade after decade, century after century. Without abandoning their distinctness altogether, they all adjusted their ways of life to accord with the Prophetic example.

The transformation of the first Muslims from petty, warring dwellers on the fringes of civilization into its leaders, masters, and teachers was the greatest of the miracles of Islam. And this miracle was repeated over and over in history: in Arabia, the Levant, Persia, Africa, Central Asia, India, Southeast Asia, and now, we are witnessing it day by day in Europe and the Americas. This struggle to surrender is never over and is renewed with every generation and every new turn in history.

⁵⁹ Leon Zolondek, *Al-Ghazālī's Iḥyā' 'ulūm al-dīn* (Leiden: Brill, 1963), Book XX, p. 14.

⁶⁰ Qur'an 5:3.