

## 4 Islamic Ethics

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### 4.1 INTRODUCTION

What is Islamic ethics? There almost certainly is no single answer to this question, if by such an answer one is seeking some sole, monolithic account of what Islamic ethics is. Instead “Islamic ethics” is more like notions such as “Christian philosophy” or “naturalistic ethics.” Islamic ethics can be, and indeed is, as diverse as the spectrum of ethical systems or the various interpretations of Islam itself. Consequently, the present study does not pretend to be a comprehensive survey of Islamic ethics even of the various medieval Islamic ethical systems. Most notably, this study sets aside Sufi ethics, which was frequently criticized as antinomian inasmuch as that ethical system is grounded in an ecstatic mystical relation with God rather than Islamic law (*sharīʿa*). (For a discussion of Sufi ethics, see 13.3–7 in the present volume.) Instead this survey limits itself to an overview of the ethical systems of Islamic theology (*kalām*) and philosophy (*falsafa*) during the classical period (roughly 850–1200). Still, such a limitation has the benefit of considering a formative period in the theological and philosophical articulation of Islam as well as some of the more historically influential figures from both the philosophical and theological traditions.

Within medieval Islam, *falsafa* and *kalām* represented two of the most important theoretical approaches to understanding the world and our place within it. *Falsafa* continued the Greco-Arabic philosophical and scientific tradition, whereas *kalām* drew upon the Qurʾan, traditions of the Prophet (sing. *ḥādīth*), and Islamic religious law (*fiqh*). While these two approaches are frequently viewed as having been at odds with one another, the fact is that they were more

like two parallel streams frequently crossing into and feeding one another. Moreover, even within a single stream there could be eddies, crosscurrents, and underflows. Accordingly, even within these two intellectual traditions there were multiple ways of thinking about ethics and morality.

Toward presenting the ethical system of these two traditions, this study divides into three parts. The first part considers certain metaethical issues important to Islamic ethics in both traditions. These issues include moral psychology and the closely related issues of will and action theory. The second section takes up the ethical systems of *falsafa*. Thinkers within this tradition most frequently subscribe to virtue ethics and eudaimonistic theories as found in the Arabic translations of Plato's *Republic*, Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, and even the thought of Stoics. Thus, within the *falsafa* tradition I consider Stoic-inspired therapies of the soul, ethical debates focusing on what a virtue is, and what constitutes human flourishing or happiness and whether such happiness even can be attained in this world or only in the hereafter. Historical figures to be considered include al-Kindī, Miskawayh, al-Fārābī, Avicenna, al-Ghazālī, and Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī. The third section considers important moral issues within *kalām*, namely, the status of reason in determining moral duty, a rationalist science of ethics, and Islamic natural law and its critics. A general theme throughout all of these *kalām* issues is whether the moral status of actions is the product of God's commanding or forbidding those actions (theological voluntarism) or whether certain actions are simply inherently morally right or wrong (moral realism or objectivism). Figures to be considered are rationalist Mu'tazilites, such as 'Abd al-Jabbār, traditionalists, and moderate traditionalist like al-Ghazālī and Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī.

#### 4.2 ISLAMIC METAETHICS

This section deals with three issues in Islamic metaethics addressing the status, foundations, and scope of morality itself as understood within the medieval Islamic world. These issues include the general

moral psychology of many (though not all) of the players in this study and issues of free will and action theory within medieval Islam.

#### 4.2.1 Moral Psychology

Within medieval Islam there were two distinct psychologies, that is, theories of the soul. The earliest proponents of *kalām* were atomists with a physicalist conception of the human person. Thus, if there are rewards in the Hereafter for acting according to God's commands in the here and now, those rewards will be bodily and so require a bodily resurrection.

In contrast, the philosophers and even some later *kalām* thinkers adopt a Neoplatonized, Aristotelian faculty psychology, which identifies the human person with (most frequently an immaterial) intellect. Since this later psychology provides the foundation for virtually all of the discussions of the virtues treated in this study as well as such ethically relevant notions as pleasure and pain, its basic contours should be sketched.

This faculty psychology had its historical origins in Plato, Aristotle, and their later Greek commentators. In the *Republic* (iv, 435c–441c), Plato had argued that the human soul is tripartite, having appetitive, spirited, and rational components. Aristotle effectively followed this division of the parts of the soul in his *De anima*, now identifying vegetative, animal, and rational faculties of the soul. The vegetative faculty gives rise to our desires for food, sex, and other basic bodily needs. The animal faculty is the source of perception and ultimately motion, frequently motivated by anger and fear. Finally, the rational faculty or intellect (Gk. *nous*, Ar. *'aql*) is of two sorts. One sort is the practical intellect, which moderates and ideally controls the vegetative and animal faculties. The other sort is the theoretical intellect, which apprehends the essence or universal intelligibles, like horseness, squareness, and in general gets at the ultimate underlying causes of things.

By the time one reaches the medieval Islamic world, the prominent view is that the theoretical intellect is immaterial, and because

it is immaterial can survive the death of the body. Additionally, a human's proper happiness is thought to be the perfection of the theoretical intellect, which many philosophers believe one achieves only in a disembodied state in the Hereafter. Such a position, however, was not universally accepted by all Muslim philosophers. For instance, al-Fārābī (c. 870–950) in his now lost commentary on Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* apparently maintained that happiness is to be achieved only in this life, not in the afterlife (see Neria 2013). Moreover, Averroes himself in his long commentary on Aristotle's *De anima* argues that an immaterial intellect common to all humans, and yet separate from any individual human, is what is immortal, and so strongly implies that there is no individual or personal immortality (see Taylor 1998).

#### 4.2.2 The Will and Action Theory

Closely related to moral psychology is an account of the will as well as what motivates and brings about human actions. According to the Mu'tazilites, that is, one branch of Muslim theologians who emphasized God's absolute justice, humans must have a will, and that will must be free to choose between real options. They reason that since God has promised to reward those who do what the Qur'an prescribes and punish those who do what the Qur'an proscribes, humans must be morally responsible for their actions. That is because, they argue, it would be unjust for God to reward or to punish those who are not morally responsible for their actions. To be morally responsible for an action, they continue, one must have willed that action such that the action is one's own, and also must have been able not to will the action. To hold one responsible for an action that is not one's own willful doing would render God unjust, or so maintain the Mu'tazilites. Thus, within the sphere of human actions Mu'tazilites are free will libertarians.

In polar opposition to the Mu'tazilites were Muslim voluntarists and traditionalists, who emphasized God's absolute power and omnipotence, where this power extends even to the

realm of human actions. At its extreme, the voluntarists' position took the form of occasionalism. On this view, God literally re-creates the world, all the atoms, and whatever features those atoms might have, as well as every event, anew at each moment. The result is that nothing in the created order, whether objects or events, is causally related to anything else in the created order. For these thinkers, God is the only Cause. As for moral responsibility, humans are still morally accountable for their actions, according to some of these thinkers. To explain how humans are responsible, some traditionalists, notably the Ash'arītes, appealed to a theory of acquisition (*kasb*). According to the theory, while the power that brings about any actions is God's, humans acquire, and so are responsible for, their actions by being the locus (*maḥall*) of God's power. It is in fact the human who does the action, even if the power to do the action is from God.

Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī (1058–1111) developed perhaps the most sophisticated strategy for explaining human moral responsibility in light of God's absolute omnipotence in his theory of two powers (*Iqtīṣād fī l-i'tiqād* [=Moderation of Belief], II.1.1; see Marmura 1994 and McGinnis 2006 for discussions). According to al-Ghazālī human action is the product of two powers: God's active power and humans', so to speak, passive power. Humans must have a passive power inasmuch as they change from not performing some action (and so are in a state of potentiality with respect to the action) to performing it (and so come to be in a state of activity with respect to the action). Thus, when not performing the action, they have a passive power to do it, whereas at the time that they act that passive power must be actualized, which God does through his active power. Thus, for al-Ghazālī, humans have the passive power to do good or evil. When they do good or evil, it is because God activates the passive power within them such that they can be said to act and so are morally responsible for the action. Al-Ghazālī acknowledges that when the human's passive power is compared with God's active power, human power appears to be no power at all. Still, maintains al-Ghazālī, it is

better that humans appear to have no power than to claim that God is in fact not completely omnipotent.

The philosophers take a middle path between the libertarianism of the Muʿtazilites and the hard determinism of the traditionalists, which perhaps may best be described as a form of compatibilism (see Ruffus and McGinnis 2015). While it is true that every action is determined by a set of complete causes, included among the set of complete causes are reasons for acting, some of which may be internal to or up to the human agent such that a given action is through the will (*bi-l-irāda*), that is, volitional. For example, in Avicenna's action theory, the principle of volitional actions is either the imagination (*takhayyul*), opinion (*ẓann*), or understanding (*ʿilm*). These three sources of volitional actions can be traced back to the tripartite psychology of Plato and Aristotle, with imagination corresponding with appetites, opinion with spirit, and understanding with reason. To be more precise, however, it is the imagined, opined, or (intellectually) understood good, which these faculties perceive, that is the source of action. That is because the agent rationally wishes for the perceived good, deliberates about the means of achieving it, and then decides and so acts to acquire that good. The main point, and one accepted by all the philosophers, is that every agent, including God, acts for some reason, namely, some good, whether an imagined, opined, or intellectually grasped good. (In the case of God, the good is God's very being or self (*dhāt*), that is, God wills his own existence as his good.)

Al-Ghazālī provides what became the standard criticism of the philosophers' thesis that all volitional actions result from some reason for acting (see *Incoherence of the Philosophers*, First Discussion, [45–46]). Al-Ghazālī complains that the philosophers have mischaracterized the nature and operation of the will. The very nature of the will, asserts al-Ghazālī, is simply to choose between particular options independent of reason, even if reasons can play a role in one's choice. His general argument for this thesis is a thought experiment: One is asked to imagine a starving man presented with

two palm dates of which he can only choose one. The palm dates are for all intents and purposes identical, with nothing about one making it more desirable than the other. Moreover, there is nothing about the man, like being right- or left-handed, that weighs in giving preference to taking one date over the other. Al-Ghazālī asserts that such a situation is possible and additionally asserts that it is impossible that the man would not choose one date rather than sit in indecision and starve. It is through an act of the will, al-Ghazālī claims, that the man chooses one particular date over another independent of any reason for picking that particular date. He can do so, concludes al-Ghazālī, precisely because the nature of the will, contrary to what the philosophers say, is to choose among options regardless of having a reason for such a choice.

#### 4.3 ETHICAL SYSTEMS OF *FALSAFA*

For medieval Islamic philosophers, the thought of three ancient figures held significant sway over the ethical systems that developed. These are Plato, particularly the ethics of the *Republic*, Aristotle and his *Nicomachean Ethics*, and Galen and his two Stoic-inspired ethical treatises, *On the Affections and Errors of the Soul* and *On Ethics*. This section considers three themes found in these authors and how they are developed at the hands of medieval Muslim philosophers. These themes are (1) therapies of the soul, (2) virtue ethics, and (3) eudaimonism, that is, what constitutes the happy or flourishing life.

##### 4.3.1 Therapies for the Soul

The first Arab philosopher, al-Kindī (801–873), can be credited with the earliest ethical writings within *falsafa*. His treatise *On the Means of Dispelling Sorrow* belongs to a Stoic-inspired genre of works, which might best be described as therapies for the soul. The general idea is that like the body the soul can experience both health and maladies, that is, affections or passions and errors. When the soul is in an affected or ill state, then, it requires a cure, although

as with bodily health, optimally one tries to prevent psychological ailments from occurring in the first place. In al-Kindī's *On the Means of Dispelling Sorrow*, the psychological ailment is sorrow, the cause of which al-Kindī identifies with loss of loved or cherished things. The way to prevent sorrow, al-Kindī suggests, is twofold: first, love and cherish only that which cannot be lost, namely, the things of the intellect, and, second, decrease the number of the things that one possesses that can be lost.

As for curing sorrow, one must ask whether the cause of the sorrow is one's own action or that of another. If it is one's own action, then one must refrain from doing it. If it is the action of another, then the dispelling of that sorrow is either up to oneself or up to another. If the dispelling of the sorrow is up to oneself, one should do so. If the cause of the sorrow is up to another, then one should not fret before the actual sorrow occurs, for the cause might not occur and so one will have felt sorrow without cause. If the cause does occur, then one must first take consolation in the fact that the sorrow will abate over time and second do what one can to shorten the period of time, presumably by taking delight in the things of the intellect.

Also writing in the genre of psychological therapy were Abū Zayd al-Balkhī (d. 934) and Abū Bakr al-Rāzī (865–925). Al-Balkhī was a student of al-Kindī and expands on the theme of dispelling affections from the soul, now to include not only sorrow, but also anger, envy, fear, melancholy, and suspicion (Adamson 2007, 111). As for al-Rāzī, like Galen before him, he was a physician whose work, *Spiritual Medicine*, is directly in the Galenic line of a therapy for the soul (see Adamson 2017 for details). Drawing upon the tripartite faculty psychology, al-Rāzī underscores in this work the greater value of the rational faculty when compared with other faculties. More pointedly, the rational faculty, al-Rāzī maintains, echoing Galen, must dominate the other faculties; for it to be otherwise would reduce a person to the status of an irrational brute. While *Spiritual Medicine* has strong tendencies toward a rigid asceticism, al-Rāzī's autobiography, *The Philosophical Life*, champions a life of moderation. This



moderate life, in which one is not enslaved to the passions, is the best one, since reason can seek its proper perfection and so one can reach ultimate human flourishing.

#### 4.3.2 Virtue Ethics

This last point is seen most clearly in the discussion of virtue (*faḍīla*) in which the medical practices used for acquiring and maintaining bodily health all find their counterpart in acquiring and maintaining virtue, which is identified with psychological health. Medieval Muslim philosophers adopt Aristotle's account of virtue presented in *Nicomachean Ethics* 2.1–6. Virtue, then, is a fixed disposition of the soul acquired through a process of habituation (*i'tiyād*) that produces an intermediate or mean (*wasīta*) response, relative to us, to affections of the soul like fear, anger, desire, etc. Vice in contrast is a habitual response to those affections that is either excessive or deficient relative to the mean. This account of virtue and vice is found in al-Fārābī's *Directing Attention to the Way of Happiness*, Avicenna's *On the Science of Ethics*, the epitome of Plato's *Republic* by Averroes, Ahmad ibn Muhammad Miskawayh's (932–1030) *Refinement of Character*, Naṣīr al-Dīn al-Ṭūsī's (1201–1274) *Naṣīrean Ethics*, and the *Jalālean Ethics* of Jalāl al-Dīn al-Dawānī (1426–1502). Indeed, medieval Muslim philosophers accept Aristotle's definition of virtue almost without argument. Where they differ from Aristotle is merely in the extent to which they rely on a comparison between health and virtue to explain Aristotle's definition and develop the various therapies of the soul mentioned in the previous section.

A perhaps novel element in the virtue ethics of Muslim philosophers is their taxonomy of the virtues. In the *Republic*, Plato identified four cardinal virtues: moderation (Gk. *sōphrosunē*, Ar. *īffa*), courage (Gk. *andreia*, Ar. *shajā'a*), wisdom (Gk. *sophia*, Ar. *ḥikma*), and justice (Gk. *dikaionē*, Ar. *adāla*). Plato linked moderation with the appetitive faculty of the soul, courage with the spirited (or animal) soul, and wisdom with the intellect. Finally, justice is viewed as a virtue arrayed throughout all of the soul when each part

acts according to its proper function. This Platonic view is accepted in the main, with most medieval Muslim philosophers adopting the view as is. The later philosophers, al-Ṭūsī and al-Dawānī, slightly diverge in their consent. Specifically, al-Ṭūsī maintains that the virtue of wisdom properly corresponds only with the theoretical intellect, whereas justice corresponds properly with the practical intellect. (Admittedly justice occurs only when the appetitive and animal faculties submit to the practical intellect.) Al-Dawānī mentions both views about justice, namely, the Platonic suggestion that justice is not localized and al-Ṭūsī's claim that justice is localized in the practical intellect. While al-Dawānī remains uncommitted, his leaning appears to be toward al-Ṭūsī's view.

Whatever the view about the relation of justice to the soul, many of these philosophers, and even the occasional theologian like al-Ghazālī, maintain that the four cardinal virtues – moderation, courage, wisdom, and justice – are in fact genera with subspecies of virtues falling beneath them. Concerning the various subspecies of the cardinal virtues, there appears to be no firm consensus on either their number or even under which genus a subspecies necessarily falls. Their various classifications of humility hopefully will make this point. Miskawayh in his *Refinement of Character*, which is arguably the most important and complete ethical work in the classical medieval Islamic period, does not mention humility at all as a moral character, whether as a virtue or a vice. Al-Ghazālī, in one work, identifies humility with a vice standing opposite to arrogance, whereas in later works he sees humility as a subspecies of courage. Both al-Ṭūsī and al-Dawānī followed the later al-Ghazālī in identifying humility with a subspecies of courage, namely, one does not assign merit to oneself over those of a lowlier station. Presumably, one does not fear other people thinking less of one than one deserves. Avicenna takes an entirely different tack and classifies humility as a subspecies of wisdom in which one not only discerns one's superiority over another but also recognizes that nothing is to be gained by lording it over that individual.

In addition to the cardinal virtues and their subspecies, at least one philosophically inspired theologians, namely al-Ghazālī, who incorporates many elements of the philosophers' virtue ethics into his own ethics, maintains that certain theological virtues (*al-faḍā'il al-tawfīqiyya*, lit. "[divine] assisting virtues") are also essential for a complete virtue ethics (see Sherif 1975 for al-Ghazālī's virtue ethics). These virtues, which are linked with divine grace (*faḍl*), are four: (1) divine guidance (*hidāyat Allāh*), (2) good sense (*rushd*), (3) focus or aim (*tasḍīd*), and (4) support (*ta'yīd*). In very general terms, the virtue of divine guidance is God's gracing us with a general knowledge of what is good and evil; it is a knowledge of good, however, not the doing thereof. Where divine guidance concerns a general knowledge of good and evil, good sense appears to be a recognition that a particular action is good or evil. In this respect, both divine guidance and good sense might be seen as God's helping us to recognize some good, whether a general or particular good, as a proper end of action (or conversely some evil as an end to be avoided). One is apparently graced with the virtue of focus or aim when one deliberates correctly about the means to some end or good. Finally, divine support is God's aiding us in our actions directed toward the various means and final ends. Al-Ghazālī draws much of his understanding of these theological virtues not from the philosophers but from debates with Muslim theological rationalists, who believe that unaided reason can discover much of what is morally right and wrong. Still, al-Ghazālī also seems to have embedded these theological virtues within a theory of action much indebted to that of the philosophers, with its elements of rational wish, deliberation, and decision.

#### 4.3.3 Eudaimonism and the Proper End of Human Life

For the philosophers, of the four cardinal virtues, only wisdom, that is intellectual activity in its highest form, was to be reckoned as the true and final end of human life, the obtainment of which brings proper human happiness or flourishing (*sa'āda*). Intellectual activity for these thinkers refers to the activity of either the practical intellect

or the theoretical intellect. The activity of the theoretical intellect involves understanding the ultimate underlying causes of things, not with an eye to manipulating them to our benefit or as means to some further activity, but for the sake of understanding alone. In contrast, the activity of the practical intellect is about understanding how we should manage a society (political science) or ourselves (ethics). While sometimes it was simply assumed that the activity of the theoretical intellect should be given priority over that of the practical intellect when determining the proper end of human activity, it was occasionally argued on the basis of various aims or ends of human action.

Thus, al-Fārābī (*Attaining Happiness*, ¶75) identifies three ends of human actions, namely, to acquire what is either pleasurable, useful, or noble. When the end is to be useful, its usefulness is precisely that it helps in attaining what is either pleasurable or noble. Consequently, the proper activity of human life must have either the pleasurable or the noble as its true end, not simply the useful. Al-Fārābī dismisses the suggestion that the proper end of human action is pleasure (*Attaining Happiness*, ¶67), which he even identifies as an obstacle to human happiness. The proper end of human life, rather, must aim at either what is noble or what is useful. If, however, it aims at what is useful, it again does so precisely because that activity is useful for attaining what is noble (since what is pleasurable was excluded as the proper end of human life). The end of the practical intellect's activity, however, is just the useful, whether what is useful for the management of society or of ourselves. In contrast, the activity of the theoretical intellect, namely understanding the underlying causes of the world around us, that is, science, is sought for its own sake. Therefore, the attainment of scientific understanding, which al-Fārābī and the other philosophers call wisdom, is the true end of human life, whose attainment ensures happiness.

Here it is worth noting that for the philosophers, wisdom (*ḥikma*) involves, first, the acquisition of logic, followed by training in the physical and mathematical sciences, and then is crowned with

an understanding of metaphysics. While there was some dispute about the precise subject matter of metaphysics, all agreed that it culminated in an understanding of, to the extent possible, God, the Cause of all causes. Thus, true human happiness is attained only by means of contemplating God.

It was noted that al-Fārābī dismissed a life of pleasure (*ladhdha*) as the ultimate end of human life. Al-Fārābī was not alone in denying that a life dedicated to the pursuit of pleasure is not fitting as our proper human end. For example, Miskawayh in *The Refinement of Character* argues at length against the suggestion that human perfection involves bodily pleasure. In general, he notes that bodily pleasures, like the pleasures of eating, drinking, and sex, follow upon a prior pain or at least discomfort. Indeed, bodily pleasure, Miskawayh argues, is simply the body's return to a balanced or healthy state after experiencing some imbalance or malaise. In short, bodily pleasure is a restoration from a disease-like state. Obviously "the treatment of a disease does not constitute complete happiness." He continues, "The completely happy person is he who is never affected by any disease" (*Refinement*, 45).

Despite Miskawayh's fairly clear dismissal of bodily pleasure as the end of human life in *The Refinement of Character*, he endorses the suggestion that pleasure is a proper human end in a short treatise *On Pleasures and Pains*. While such a turnaround might seem inconsistent, it need not be, since Miskawayh has two distinct notions of pleasure at play in these different works. In the *Refinement of Character*, Miskawayh appeals to and endorses what has been termed the "restoration" theory of pleasure (Adamson 2015). Pleasure is a certain motion back to a balanced or healthy state and not that healthy or perfect state itself. This conception of pleasure can be traced back as far as Plato and Aristotle. In contrast, in *On Pleasures and Pains*, Miskawayh adapts a suggestion from Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* 10.4, which makes pleasure no longer a motion toward some perfection but "the perfection perceived by what is perfected" (*On Pleasures*, §1). Avicenna also adopts this understanding of pleasure,

which he defines as “a perception and attainment within the perceiver of a certain perfection and good as such” (*Pointers and Reminders*, 8.3). We may call this view the perfection theory of pleasure.

On the perfection theory of pleasure, there are as many different kinds of pleasures as there are different kinds of perceptions and their corresponding perfections. The different kinds of perception are in turn related to different faculties of the soul. For example, the external senses are most frequently associated with the appetites of the vegetative soul, and so give rise to sensual pleasures, while perception directed toward the appetites of the animal faculty give rise to the pleasures of the spirit, like the pleasures taken in victory or honor. Analogously, intellectual perception has an associated intellectual pleasure. Indeed, philosophers (and some theologians) thought intellectual pleasure to be more pleasant than the pleasures of the body or spirit. That is because on this view pleasure is a perceived perfection, and the ultimate object of intellectual perception is again contemplation of God, who is most perfect. Consequently, the perception of God is most pleasurable. Admittedly, intellectual pleasures in their purest form can be fully appreciated only once one is free of the distractions of the body, that is, in the afterlife.

Given the philosophers’ notion of intellectual pleasure and that some philosophers, like Miskawayh, actually identify God with the highest intellectual pleasure, some of these thinkers endorse in a very refined way a form of utilitarianism or consequentialism. For what makes an action good or evil of its kind is that it promotes some perfection rather than imperfection, and closely tied (even occasionally identified) with the perfection or imperfection of the action is a corresponding pleasure or pain.

Ironically, it is the philosophically inspired theologian Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī who perhaps develops the most thoroughgoing Islamic consequentialism based upon this philosophical perfectionist theory of pleasure (see Shihadeh 2006, esp. 56–83, 109–129). For him, following the philosophers, perfection and pleasure are closely linked. Precisely, the perfection of some part of the soul is

an objective psychological reality, while pleasure is the subjective response to that perfection. Additionally, unlike many traditionalist Muslim theologians, who were physicalists, al-Rāzī adopts the philosophers' faculty psychology and accordingly accepts the immateriality of the soul. Consequently, he acknowledges both bodily, that is, appetitive and spirited, pleasures, and non-bodily intellectual pleasures. Given this understanding of the relation between perfection and pleasure, al-Rāzī happily endorses a utilitarian view that all human actions are directed toward the attainment of pleasure and avoidance of pain. Moreover, and ironically, based upon his consequentialism, al-Rāzī criticizes the philosophers for maintaining that humans seek God in order to attain their proper end, for such a view, he complains, renders God a mere means to our end. In contrast, al-Rāzī notes that pleasure is only ever sought as an end in itself, not as a means. Thus, since contemplating God perfects us and indeed is our greatest perfection, so likewise is it our greatest pleasure. Consequently, the contemplation of God must be sought for itself as our final end, not as a means, for the contemplation of God is the greatest human pleasure.

#### 4.4 ETHICAL SYSTEMS OF *KALĀM*

In addition to medieval Islamic philosophers, whose ethics clearly finds its inspiration in classical Greek moral theory, there was the ethics of the Muslim speculative theologians and lawyers. While these thinkers were certainly aware of the ethical systems of the philosophers and, as seen, even drew upon and responded to them, they relied most heavily upon religious sources like the Qur'an and the life and sayings of the Prophet Muhammad. Additionally, the ethical project of Muslim theologians and lawyers was fundamentally different from that of the philosophers. Whereas the philosophers approached issues of morality from the stance of virtue ethics, theologians and lawyers most frequently approached ethics from the stance of deontology. Thus, for the theologians and lawyers, ethics

was less about forming a moral character from which good actions flow than about duty and which actions are morally obligatory, permissible, or forbidden.

#### 4.4.1 The Debate about Reason

One of the significant metaethical issues for Muslim theologians and lawyers is the status of independent reasoning (*ʿaql* or *raʾy*) and to what extent, if any, it can stand alongside revelation as a source for determining the moral value of actions. There are three stances: (1) a strong rationalist position; (2) a hard voluntarist or traditionalist position; and (3) a “soft voluntarist” or “weak rationalist” position, for lack of a better term, which is loosely poised between the other two positions. On one side are the rationalist theologians, frequently identified with Muʿtazilites like ʿAbd al-Jabbār (935–1025) and Abū Ḥusayn al-Baṣrī (d. 1044). The Muʿtazilites were among the first Muslim “speculative theologians” (*mutakallimūn*, literally proponents of *kalām*) and much of their theology was forged in debates with either Christian theologians or proponents of *falsafa*, both of whom were trained in Greek logic and science. In part as a result of the Muʿtazilites’ interactions with Greek philosophy, they developed a rationalist system of ethics, which maintains that the demands of reason are necessary and frequently sufficient conditions for determining the moral status of an action. Thus, not only can reason discover much of what is morally good and bad independent of Scripture, but also God as a rational agent must act according to the dictates of reason. In short, God commands us to act in certain ways precisely because reason demands it.

On the opposite side were the traditionalists, like Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal (780–855), Ibn Abī l-Dunyā (823–894), and Ibn Hazm (994–1064). They maintained that independent human reasoning provides no authoritative foundation for the rightness or wrongness of an action nor can human reason judge an act to be morally permissible or obligatory. God’s willing alone determines an action’s moral status. Consequently, humans need Scripture to learn what God’s



will is and subsequently to learn the moral status of actions. In short, an action is right or wrong precisely because God commands it.

Finally, between these two positions was that of the weak rationalists/soft voluntarists, who include al-Ghazālī and Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī and, as seen, drew upon and developed themes from the philosophers. These legal theorists follow the traditionalists in maintaining that God is under no obligation to act according to what we humans believe that reason demands, and if he does so, it is only through his grace. Where these thinkers differ from the traditionalists is that they recognize that the Qur'an and prophetic traditions have not addressed all moral quandaries that might arise. Thus, in certain limited and defined cases, reason can determine and judge what action it is our moral duty to perform (see Emon 2010, ch. 4, for a discussion of the conditions under which exceptions are made).

Since, for the traditionalists, God's will determines morally right behavior and God's will is known only through religious sources, the ethical treatises of these thinkers frequently took the form of collections of traditions of the Prophet Muhammad with perhaps the occasional and additional story of a pre-Muhammadan prophet or one of Muhammad's Companions. Such is certainly the case of ethical works in the "noble qualities of character" genre (*makārim al-akhlāq*), where the emphasis is on providing examples of moral character rather than elucidating an ethical theory (see Bellamy 1963 for a discussion of one such work). I do not consider these works here, but limit myself to traditionalist critiques of the rationalists. As for more moderate traditionalists, many of their unique contributions to ethical theory were seen above in response to the philosophers. Thus, in the present section, I focus on the rationalists' ethics, particularly as articulated by 'Abd al-Jabbār, then discuss the rationalist tradition of natural law followed by the voluntarist critique.

#### 4.4.2 Rationalism and a Science of Ethics

Muslim rationalists are most frequently associated with Mu'tazilite theologians, whose most notable representatives include Abū

l-Hudhayl (d. 841), Abū l-ʿAlī al-Jubbāʾī (d. 915) and his son Abū l-Hāshim (d. 933), and then later ʿAbd al-Jabbār. It is the late and fully developed ethical theory of ʿAbd al-Jabbār and his discussion of moral vocabulary, postulates, and practical reasoning that is presented here (see Hourani 1971 and 1985 for more detailed discussions).

One point of clarification is in order first. While what typifies Muʿtazilite theologians is their rationalism, they still believed that Scripture has a place in one's ethics. (That is, once one has proved rationally (1) that God exists, (2) that God sends prophets, and (3) that the particular Scripture is indeed the revelation of a true prophet.) The need for Scripture occurs because Muʿtazilites did not believe that every moral claim could be discovered by human reason alone. Some moral claims are learned only through Scripture, although once revealed human reason can and should be used to assess those claims. Such claims include, for example, the moral value of prayer, fasting, and pilgrimage.

ʿAbd al-Jabbār attempted to embed these and other value claims within a demonstrative science of ethics, the development of which involves three steps. The first step provides definitions of the most basic value terms, like "evil" and "obligatory." The next step sets down certain moral postulates that link the basic definitions with various classes of actions. Finally, these moral postulates are used to assess particular moral actions. These steps are themselves all part of a Muʿtazilite natural law theory, which is the subject of the next section.

For ʿAbd al-Jabbār there are four basic value terms: evil (*qabīḥ*), permissible (*mubāḥ*), virtuous (*tafaḍḍul*), and obligatory (*wājib*). In a certain respect, ʿAbd al-Jabbār defines these terms by reference to the degree of praise or blame the agent of the action deserves or merits. Thus, an action is evil if its agent deserves blame for doing it, while an action is obligatory if the agent deserves blame for not doing it. An action is permissible if its agent deserves neither praise nor blame for performing it, whereas an action is virtuous if its agent merits praise for doing it but does not deserve blame for not doing

it. In many cases, purportedly we immediately recognize that some action is deserving of blame or praise. We can do so according to ‘Abd al-Jabbār because humans have a divinely created disposition that is directed to the good (*ḥusn* or *maṣlaḥa*), which he calls *luṭf*, literally a kindness or civility. This disposition seems much akin to the Christian scholastic notion of *synderesis*, that is, an innate principle in the moral consciousness of all humans directing us toward the good and restraining us from evil. Thus, through the application of reason one can distinguish what is good and beneficial from what is evil and harmful.

Given these basic moral definitions, ‘Abd al-Jabbār turns to the second stage, in which he indicates the moral postulates for a science of ethics. Moral postulates link the basic moral valuations with specific kinds of actions. For ‘Abd al-Jabbār, there are two classes of moral postulates: absolute duties and *prima facie* duties. In both cases, a rational agent simply sees that these postulates are true. Absolute duties are those actions that a rational agent sees are true without qualification regardless of the surrounding circumstances. Examples of absolute duties include “thanking the benefactor is obligatory,” “injustice or wrongdoing (*ẓulm*) is evil,” and “lying is evil.” (The case of lying creates some tension for ‘Abd al-Jabbār, since traditionalists observed that if someone came to murder a prophet in your home, lying would be at least permissible if not obligatory. ‘Abd al-Jabbār’s response seems to be that while lying is always evil, telling the truth is not always obligatory, for one can be evasive or dissemble without lying or even simply remain silent.)

Most moral postulates, however, are of the variety of *prima facie* duties. In these cases, the postulate taken in its simple form is seen to be true, but there are also certain aspects (sing. *wajh*), which must be weighed too. For example, to harm or to cause pain to another is *prima facie* evil; however, there might be certain circumstances when causing pain is permissible or even obligatory, such as disciplining a child or punishing a criminal. Similarly, fasting

during Ramadan is obligatory for a Muslim; however, if the Muslim is a pregnant woman or a traveler, then fasting is not a duty.

The third stage in ‘Abd al-Jabbār’s ethics is the application of these moral postulates to particular cases, which involves a type of practical reasoning. The reasoning is straightforward. One subsumes some particular action done at some particular time and place by some particular agent under one of the classes of actions identified in the moral postulates. For example, all lying is evil; this particular action is a case of lying; therefore, this particular action is evil. Or again, causing pain is *prima facie* evil, although certain aspects must also be weighed; this particular action is a case of causing pain and none of the relevant aspects is there (or some are); therefore, this particular action is evil (or permissible if the relevant aspect is present).

#### 4.4.3 Islamic Natural Law Theory and its Critics

‘Abd al-Jabbār’s account of moral vocabulary, postulates, and reasoning as well as the Mu‘tazilites’ ethics more generally is embedded within a theory of natural law. (See Emon 2010 for details. The philosopher Averroes also seems to have understood the Aristotelian theory of natural justice in terms of natural law; see Taliaferro 2017.) For the purposes of this study, I take there to be two desiderata of a natural law theory in ethics (Murphy 2011). The first essential feature concerns the place of human reason in natural law, namely that natural law consists of those principles that determine whether a human action is reasonable or unreasonable. Thus, from that perspective a theory of natural law is in the main a theory of practical reasoning. The second key feature is that natural law is rooted in God’s creation of a good and beneficial world. Thus, natural law is from that perspective part and parcel of a theory of divine providence. We have seen in the previous section how ‘Abd al-Jabbār develops a Mu‘tazilite science of ethics that culminates in a theory of practical reasoning, and so meets the first desideratum. Now I consider how Mu‘tazilites in general link ethics and divine providence so as to round out their natural law theory.

Mu'tazilites begin by noting that God created the world either (1) without a purpose or (2) with a purpose. Next, if God created the world with a purpose, that purpose is either (2a) harmful or (2b) beneficial. Finally, if the purpose is beneficial, then either (2bi) God is benefited or (2bii) creation is benefited. Mu'tazilites take it as necessary that God is a rational agent who only acts for the good. Consequently, God does nothing without purpose, and so (1) must be rejected. Similarly, since God acts only for the good, he would create this world not for some harmful end, but for some good or beneficial end, and so (2a) must be also be rejected. Finally, the Mu'tazilites argue, since God is in need of nothing, creation cannot be for God's benefit but for that of creation. Consequently, the argument concludes, (2bii) God purposefully created the world for creation's benefit.

Since creation is for our benefit, the argument continues, the use of creation in the way that it was intended, namely to benefit and not to harm, is permissible, otherwise there would be no purpose in God's creating. Conversely, an action that harms is prohibited. Notions of permissibility and prohibition are identified with what we *ought* to do: we ought to do good and to avoid evil. Thus, because we can know whether some thing or some action is good or bad, we can further determine whether we ought to act thus or not act. Facts purportedly become fused with value through the intermediacy of the permissibility to use creation as it was intended. In short, through reason we can learn that we are obliged to do what is good and avoid what is evil. Humans then can develop a demonstrative science of practical reasoning about what is good precisely because they can discover and reflect on the nature of the good and fitting things created in accordance with God's providential design.

Mu'tazilite rationalists and Islamic natural law theorists were not without their critics, who came from both the traditionalist and soft voluntarist camps (Emon 2010, ch. 3). In general, these critics had three kinds of objections to the Mu'tazilites' natural law theory.

These were of either a metaphysical, epistemological, or metaethical stripe. The metaphysical criticism appeals to God's omnipotence. The natural law theorists' argument is predicated on the principle that God must act for the good. Such a principle was thought to compromise God's power to do anything (or at least everything possible). For these critics, there are no restrictions upon what God can do and if, as a matter of fact, God does act for the good, it is only because of His grace (*fadl*, *tafaddul*), not because He cannot do what is harmful and bad.

'Abd al-Jabbār had an interesting response to this kind of objection, which apparently relies upon a difference between metaphysical and nomic modalities. He concedes that it is logically possible that God not act for the good, for presumably there is no contradiction in such a proposition. Still, asserts 'Abd al-Jabbār, it is not permissible for us to entertain such a proposition. In short, while we have to take it as necessary that God only acts for the good, and so any theology or ethical system must proceed from the belief that God's acts are good, the negation of this proposition is not absolutely impossible.

The second class of objections to the Mu'tazilites is epistemic in nature, taking two forms, noting either the apparent arbitrariness of many of the Mu'tazilites' moral propositions or the apparent circularity haunting their attempt to account for basic value terms. Concerning this first form, the natural law theorists assume that what is good or bad is an objective fact that all humans can know regardless of their circumstances. Some voluntarists noted that what appears good and bad is significantly a product of one's social and cultural upbringing. What appears rational to a Christian may not appear rational to a Jew or a Muslim. Consequently, human reason is not a sufficiently reliable tool to fathom the depths of God's willing that certain actions are permissible and others prohibited. For example, pork and wine both appear good, and yet God has prohibited their consumption by Muslims.

The second form of the epistemic objection is that their attempt to account for basic value terms is circular. These critics

observe that terms like evil, obligatory, and the like are intended to be the most basic value terms, with all other moral valuations being made in reference to them. The Mu'tazilites, however, explain these basic terms by reference to such notions as "deserve" or "merit," namely, to deserve or merit praise or blame. The criticism then continues that for some action to deserve praise or blame implies that it is *appropriate* or what one *ought* to do. Of course, notions like *appropriate* and *ought* are themselves value judgments indicating what is obligatory; however, obligatory is just one of the terms that the Mu'tazilites wanted to explain by reference to deserving praise or blame.

Metaethical objections make up a third class of criticism leveled against Mu'tazilite rationalism. One concern is that there is a kind of category mistake at the heart of the Mu'tazilite natural law theory. Terms like "good," "bad," "beneficial," and "harmful" are best thought of as aesthetic and ethical in nature, telling us about our preferences and personal valuations. In contrast, terms like "permissible" and "prohibited" are legal categories understood by references to laws. Laws involve lawgivers – in this case, what God wills – and it is because God commands a certain law that we ought to do it. Thus, in a way perhaps anticipating the idea of an "is-ought" fallacy, these thinkers complain that what we ought to do cannot be derived from facts about us and our preferences.

Certain later soft voluntarists, like al-Ghazālī and al-Rāzī, went further and complained that the basic notion of deserving praise or blame used in the Mu'tazilites' description of value terms lacked any rationalist basis at all. Instead, to say some action deserves our praise or blame is merely to express our like or dislike for the action (Hourani 1985, 135–166, esp. §2; Shihadeh 2006, 56–63). Consequently, both al-Ghazālī and al-Rāzī, who broadly accepted the philosophers' moral psychology, could deny that ethical propositions are discovered by reason (*'aql*). Instead, such propositions are the product of our imagination (*wahm* and *khayāl*), which is rooted in the animal rather than the rational

soul. Consequently, our valuation of moral propositions, like “lying is evil,” is the result of our emotional responses to imagined scenarios, which give rise to certain pleasures or pains. Indeed, these critics’ response to the Mu‘tazilites verges on an emotivist critique of ethical rationalism. Whatever the case, claim these critics, moral propositions are merely rhetorical and so cannot lie at the base of a demonstrative science of ethics.

#### 4.5 CONCLUSION

This study considered two historically important approaches to ethics prevalent in the medieval Islamic world. The *falsafa* tradition as a rule relied heavily upon Greek sources, even if at times going beyond them. The *kalām* tradition took both a traditionalist and a rationalist approach to ethics, with Islamic rationalism itself arising from interactions with Greek thought. Perhaps one broad generalization can be drawn from this study. Medieval Islamic ethics was arguably at its most creative when Greek sources were made to interact with Islamic and Arabic sources so as to be modified and re-adapted to a new environment. One sees such re-adaptations in al-Ghazālī’s virtue ethics and al-Rāzī’s consequentialism. There is also evidence that such an influence was at work in Islamic natural law theories as well. While there is much more that can be said about medieval Islamic ethics, hopefully one now has some sense of the various ethical resources and key issues at play during this philosophically vibrant period.