

Information Ethics from an Islamic Perspective

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INTRODUCTION

The Web of networks has created a convenient global environment for people to work, socialize, learn, buy, and sell. The Web has also been used as a tool to breach privacy, gain illegal possession of property, battlefield for cyberwarfare, and in some cases, cause loss of life. The field of 'information ethics' was developed to curb this negative impact. Elrod and Smith (2005) define information ethics as a "field that applies ethical principles within the context of information provision, control, and use. This field considers issues about all aspects of information technology and information systems for personal, professional, and public decision-making." Moore (2005) defines information ethics as having three public interests related to privacy, property, and control. Mason (1986) proposes a different set consisting of privacy, accuracy, property, and access.

The characteristics of the networked economy make information ethics a global issue. Bynum (2001) argues there is a need for "global information ethics" to increase the use of the global networks. Górnjak-Kocikowska (2001) argues that globalization is an opportunity for creating global ethics in this digital civilization where every culture contributes to its creation. Any attempt to develop global information ethical theories or solutions should in fact consider the political, economic, social, and cultural dimensions of the various regions in the world (UNESCO, 1995).

Most discussions on information ethics have been from the perspective of Judeo-Christian ethics and from the works of ancient and modern philosophers, with little attention given to the Islamic ethical approach. Despite the fact that Islam is one of the major religions in the world, the underlying ethical structure of this faith is yet to be fully understood. Islam has brought prosperity in the past to various empires because it offered an elaborate ethical conduct for almost every aspect of life. Carney (2001, p. 167) argues that Islamic ethics is "exceptionally rich and impressive in the concepts, positions and lines of argument it set forth." The lack of resources in the English language

may be the reason for this lack of understanding of Islamic ethics and the distortions caused by the media. Reinhart (2001, p. 187) argues the foundation of the Islamic law provides an "ethical and epistemological system of great subtlety and sophistication."

This article introduces Islam and its sources of knowledge and the mechanism it uses to derive ethical judgment. A case at the end of this article demonstrates this mechanism. This article is introductory to raise research interest in this neglected epistemological ethical system.

ISLAM

Islam is a monotheistic religion with more than 1.5 billion followers (CIA, n.d.). The basic message of Islam is that God (Allah in Arabic) is the only creator and Mohammad is his Messenger and servant (Jalil, n.d.). Islam is regarded as "a way of life" because it goes beyond rituals; it includes ethical conduct, creed, and worship (Bouhdiba, 2005; Ghani, 2004). There are explicit teachings and laws concerning religious rituals, personal character, morals, habits, family relationship, social and economic affairs, administration, rights and duties of citizens, judicial system, laws of war and peace, international relations, and the protection of the environment. Bouhdiba (2005) argues that Islam can be described as a "superculture" because it had left its marks permanently on different societies globally and mainly because of its "extraordinary richness."

The corpus of Islamic teachings and laws is called Shari'ah, which provides the ethical foundation of conduct for either the individual or community (Siddiqui, 1997; Omar, 1997; Ahmad, 2003). The foundation of Shari'ah relies on primary and secondary sources of knowledge:

1. the *Quran*, or the holy book of Islam;
2. the *Sunnah* and the *Seerah*, or the way and biography of the Messenger; and

3. the *Usul-al-Fiqh* or the Fiqh Science, which is the Islamic legal sciences.

Scholars use these sources to formulate a ruling on a given issue or dilemma to decide the right action.

THE QURAN

The Quran, the holy book of Islam, is God's own words revealed to the Prophet Muhammad 1,400 years ago in the Arab Peninsula (Vondenffer, 1981). The Quran is complete in its content and preserved for all times (Ahmed, 1998). The verse from the Quran supports this claim, which says: "this day have I perfected your religion for you, completed My favor upon you" (Quran 4:3) and "We have, without doubt, sent down the Message; and We will assuredly guard it (from adulteration)" (Quran 15:9). Another supporting statement of its perfection is: "Nothing have we omitted from the Book" (Quran 6:38). This absolute statement implies that it contains a complete and comprehensive methodology of ways and laws of proper conduct (Patrick, 1901). Muslims believe that Islam is eternal because it is not a man-made religion and its teachings are applicable for all times and places (Idris, n.d; Brown, 1999).

The Quran has about 400 verses of legal principles and about 5,800 verses for purifying the soul through ethical conduct. The Quran in different forms commands people to do what is right and forbids what is wrong, especially when people are interacting with each other. The Quran also claims global or universal ethics since it was sent for all humankind (Ghani, 2004):

O mankind! We created you from a single (pair) of a male and a female, and made you into nations and tribes, that ye may know each other (not that ye may despise (each other)). (Quran 49:13)

The Islamic laws in the Quran seek to benefit and protect people's material goods. As mentioned earlier, it addresses issues related to social, financial, political, and personal affairs, including issues related to the soul, emotions, and sentiments, which may have a large influence on the ethical behavior of people.

THE SUNNAH AND THE SEERAH

The Sunnah is the traditions (Ahadeeth) of the Prophet, which includes his deeds, sayings, tacit approval, or description of his physical appearance. Al-Ghazali (1058-1111) said in his book *Muslim Character* that Muhammad's main purpose for being sent to this world was for "perfecting good morals" (translated by Alghazali, Ghazali, & Usmani, 2004).

These traditions expound on the teachings of the Quran. Muhammad's companions recorded his traditions and they are in the thousands. The companions have also recorded his biography (Seerah), which provides a foundation for virtue ethics. The biography documents Muhammad's successes and ethical conduct as a Prophet, legislator, teacher, husband, father, trader, leader, peacemaker, and warrior. Muhammad was responsible for the prosperity of many empires under one spiritual system (Hart, 1992).

THE USUL-AL-FIQH (FIQH SCIENCE)

The word Fiqh in Arabic means understanding and Usul means science. The Fiqh science aims at understanding and abstracting the essence of the operating principles of the Quran and the Sunnah (Brown, 1999; Hannan, 1999; Kamili, 1991; Alwani, 1990). The Fiqh science provides a condensed set of principles or legal maxims called Qawa'id al-Fiqh. The knowledge of these abstracted principles allows scholars and people to arrive at ethical conduct.

This science also relies on secondary sources such as analogical reasoning (Qiyas) (Shehaby, 1982) and the consensus of scholars (Ijma). Qiyas is the method for finding out the effective cause of a principle from the Quran and then applying the ethical rule to an analogous case. If Qiyas fails in reaching a judgment, then the consensus of scholars will be considered.

With this combination of sources, Muslim scholars have access to a mechanism for meeting the challenges of different periods such as abortion, euthanasia, intellectual property, and software piracy (see Figure 1). Scholars go through quasi-inductive processes to formulate rulings to determine the ethical status of an

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