

Divine Command and Ethical Duty: A Critique of the Scriptural Argument

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What is the relationship between divine commands and ethical duties? According to the divine command theory of ethics, moral actions are obligatory simply because God commands people to do them. This position raises a serious question about the nature of ethics, since it suggests that there is no reason, ethical or non-ethical, behind divine commands; hence both his commands and morality become arbitrary. This paper investigates the scriptural defense of the divine command theory and argues that this methodology is wrong as any interpretation of the text stands on a complex web of ethical and non-ethical presuppositions and as these presuppositions change so does the interpretation.

What is the relationship between divine commands and ethical duties? Are actions that are obligatory, obligatory because God commands people to do them? Or does God urge humans to do them because they are obligatory? According to the divine command theory of ethics, moral actions are obligatory simply because God commands people to do them. This position raises a serious question about the nature of ethics, since it suggests that there is no reason, ethical otherwise, behind divine commands, and hence renders both his commands and morality arbitrary. On this theory, God could have commanded, for instance, “cruelty for its own sake,” and it would have been obligatory for humans to do it. The theory also rules out the possibility of thinking of God as a moral agent, leaving the believer with no way to make sense of divine moral goodness. On the other hand, rejecting the divine command theory and conceiving of ethical principles as rules (laws) that are valid independently of divine command flies in the face of the common understanding of divine omnipotence, sovereignty, and freedom. Contrary to what is commonly understood; divine power will be restricted to actions allowed by ethical

principles. In either case, then, the theist seems to encounter a paradoxical quandary.

There are generally three ways of defending the divine command theory. One is the metaphysical approach, which suggests that a correct understanding of divine attributes, particularly divine absolute power, logically leads to the divine command theory. The second is a meta-ethical approach, which starts with an analysis of the salient features of ethical judgements, such as objectivity, normativity, and action-guiding and argue that, among competing theories of ethics, the divine command theory most successfully accounts for the features of interest.¹ The third one is the scriptural approach, which defends the divine command theory on the basis of scripture.²

This paper investigates in some detail the plausibility of the scriptural approach. According to this approach, the divine command theory is necessary to furnish a consistent interpretation of scripture, and since there is no doubt for believers in the authenticity of scripture, the necessity implies the validity of the theory. It is also held that scripture is a source of moral judgement and authentically teaches people what is ethically wrong or right.

The paper argues that there is no theory or assumption-free interpretation of scripture. Any scriptural interpretation is based on a complex web of prior philosophical, theological, social, and scientific theories. Consequently, depending on the information with which one begins, one could arrive at competing but consistent interpretations. To justify the validity of a specific interpretation, one has to defend the validity of the prior information. This general argument applies to ethical issues as well. When the concern is to understand the moral import of scripture, reliance on background information about a vast variety of issues is inevitable, including prior assumptions about the nature of ethics. Moreover, as the prior information varies, one arrives at competing views about the nature

1. This is championed by Robert M. Adams, *Divine Command Theory Modified Again: The Virtue of Faith and Other Essays in Philosophical Theology* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), 128–143; Philip Quinn, *An Argument for Divine Command Ethics: Christian Theism and the Problems of Philosophy* (Notre Dame and London: University of Notre Dame Press, 1992), 289–302; and Richard Swinburne, *Duty and the Will of God: Divine Commands and Morality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981), 120–134.

2. Scripture in this paper refers to the holy books of the Jewish, Christian, and Muslim traditions: the Torah, Bible, and Qur'an.

of ethics, and its relation to divine commands. Thus, independently of our prior assumptions about the nature of ethics, we cannot talk of an Islamic or Christian ethical theory.

In section two, the paper argues that interpretation of scripture, like our understanding of nature, is theory laden, and there is no assumption-free interpretation. Sections three and four illustrate the argument by considering some historical controversies over the ethical teachings of the Qurʾān. Section five shows that similar considerations apply to other religions including Christianity; section six concludes the paper.

Theory-free Interpretation: An Impossibility Argument

The general argument of this paper is based on three basic premises.³

First Premise: There is no assumption-free understanding, and any interpretation of scripture, like our understanding of nature, is theory-laden. Thus, the plausibility of any interpretation depends on the reasonableness of the underlying theories. This claim is of an interdisciplinary nature, falling within the realm of modern hermeneutics, philosophy of science, philosophy of language, and epistemology. Nonetheless, instead of engaging in a purely philosophical discussion, for the current purpose it is sufficient to attempt a defense of the claim through an intuitive analysis of how a person generally learns a text, and support the argument by looking at historical cases from the history of religious thought.

Consider a person who is interested in understanding the Qurʾān but does not know Arabic, Arabic culture, and Islamic history at all. What does the person need to know in order to be able to understand the text? The following seem to be among the things that she needs to acquire:

1. Undoubtedly, she needs to acquire knowledge of the rules of Arabic language, in particular the rules prevalent at the time of the transmission of the Qurʾān. She needs to know the meaning of the words that occurred in the Qurʾān, the

3. The basic argument of this paper is inspired by the writings of contemporary Iranian theologians on interpretation, notably Abdolkarim Soroush (*Reason, Freedom and Democracy in Islam* [Oxford University Press, 2002]). These authors have usually avoided spelling out the implications of their thought or applying them to specific issues. The original contribution of this paper lies in outlining some implications of the view of interpretation, and, most importantly, applying it to ethical issues.

context in which the words were commonly used at the time, the circumstances in which they were used in their literal meaning, metaphorical meanings, and so forth. A good grasp of these things will not of course be achieved without a good, and, in fact detailed knowledge of the Arabic culture, folklore, and proverbs of the time. She also has to know the social, cultural, and historical occasion (*shān al-nuzūl*) of the Qur'an.

2. She needs to make some explicit assumptions about the nature of the Qur'an, and its relation to divine attributes. Numerous theories are possible. The predominant view is that God is the author of the Qur'an (*kalām Allāh*) in the sense that He precisely cited these words to the prophet, and the prophet functioned as a messenger and simply recited the words to his followers.⁴ Another view is that God did not actually cite these words to the prophet but inspired in him the ideas, and the prophet himself expressed the ideas in his own words, and in doing this he relied on his linguistic ability, style, knowledge of the culture, and the history of his nation. Still another view is that God just gave the prophet the ability to acquire certain spiritual experiences and conceive the ideas that are hard for others to acquire and conceive, with the text being just an expression of his

4. This is the predominant view in Muslim orthodoxy. Shabir Akhtar puts this view nicely: "The content of the Qur'an is wholly divine . . . The Qur'an's Arabic segments 'descend' on one particular individual, an Arab called Muhammad Ibn 'Abdullah, but he has no role to play in the production of the Qur'anic materials. The prophet of Islam passively receives the sacred text . . . The Qur'an, then, is in no way co-authored. . ." (Shabir Akhtar, "An Islamic Model of Revelation," *Islam and Christian Muslim Relations* 2, no. 1 [1991], 96). The nature of this prophetic revelation (*waḥy*) is accepted by Muslim scholars, mainly as a matter of faith (*imān*). This is also endorsed by the Qur'an itself: *I am no bringer of new-fangled doctrine among the messengers, nor do I know what will follow by that which is revealed to me* (46:9, also 10:15, and 11:12-14). Philosophers, however, such as al-Fārābī and Ibn Sīnā, tried to rationalize it through Aristotle's doctrine of intellectual cognition. For instance, al-Fārābī believed that prophets have extraordinary intellectual power, and their intellects make contact with the Active Intellect, which is considered to be the source of revelation (*waḥy*) (See Deborah L. Black, "Al-Fārābī," in *A History of Islamic Philosophy*, eds. Seyyed Hossein Nasr and Oliver Leaman [London and New York: Routledge, 1996], 1:187); Lenn E. Goodman, "Ibn Ṭufayl," in the same (1:298); and Deborah L. Black, "Psychology: Soul and Intellect," in *The Cambridge Companion to Arabic Philosophy*, eds. Peter Adamson and Richard C. Taylor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 313. This kind of explanation was not persuasive for the orthodox scholar, as it is regarded as more a Greek doctrine than an Islamic position.

spiritual experiences cast in the culture of the time; so false ideas might well have entered the book.⁵

Each of these viewpoints also rests on further philosophical assumptions. The first view, particularly, assumes that God can speak to his human creatures.⁶ This can, of course, be a controversial position especially if one's notion of God is a timeless God.⁷ The position requires making some metaphysical assumptions concerning divine nature and attributes, as these assumptions play a crucial part in interpreting the text. Believing in an anthropomorphic God requires taking some passages of scripture such as, *He is sitting upon the throne* (20:5) or *that some people will see him on the Last Day* (75:23), or some passages in the Old Testament that represent God as subject to emotion such as anger. Whereas conceiving of him as a timeless and simple being, as in Aquinas or Ibn Sīnā's view of God, who is timeless and simple, requires a non-literal interpretation of these passages, equivocally, analogically, or, metaphorically.

3. She also ought to make certain assumptions about the prophet Muḥammad. She needs to credit the prophet with a certain degree of rationality to make sense of his words. This means she needs to assume, among other things, that he was logical, honest, and truthful, and for these reasons he conveyed the divine message to the people correctly and

5. The second and the third theory are adapted more by Christian scholars in interpreting the Bible as revelation. The Gospels have come through the minds of their authors, they have been condensed and edited, and represent experience and history (Kenneth Cragg, *The Call of the Minaret* [Oxford: Oneworld, 2000], 249).

6. The doctrine of revelation has not been fully discussed among Muslim scholars. The main reason is political; since this doctrine is a foundation of Muslim faith, the scholars have not always been in a position to criticize or analyze it. Therefore it was left for non-Muslim scholars to analyze it—Western thinkers such as Kenneth Cragg, Keith Ward (*Religion and Revelation: A Theology of Revelation in the World's Religion* [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994]), and Richard Swinburne (*Revelation, from Metaphor to Analogy* [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992]).

7. Classical Muslim and Christian theologians such as Aquinas, St. Anselm, and Ibn Sīnā believed in a simple and timeless God so as to preserve the idea of divine perfection. This belief means that God does not undergo any change, either intrinsically or extrinsically. The idea of divine speech seems to involve some change in God. This view has been the subject of frequent criticisms by contemporary philosophers, such as Alvin Plantinga, *Does God have a nature?* (Milwaukee, WI: Marquette University Press, 1980); Richard Swinburne, *The Coherence of Theism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989); Richard Creel, "Immutability and Impassibility," in *A Companion to Philosophy of Religion*, eds. P. L. Quinn and C. Taliaferro (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), 313–319. These philosophers have argued for a God in time in order to defend divine freedom and a God who would answer human prayers, perform miracles, and love humans.

completely. If different assumptions are made here, and the interpreter comes to believe that the prophet was not truthful or sane, the meaning of his words and the text will change. This accusation about the prophet being insane (*majnūn*) in fact occurred.⁸

4. Furthermore, the person has to decide who is the intended audience of the text; whether it is the simple-minded people in the sixth century, all people of all time, or those with philosophical, historical, and scientific knowledge. If the intended audience were the ordinary people of that time, one would expect that the author did not need to be careful in precisely describing the truths of the nature, and allowed himself to speak in the ordinary language understood by the people. In that case, one would permit the possibility of false scientific beliefs entering the text, whose falsity has now become known by the advancement of science. When Aquinas encountered difficulties in understanding scripture, at some point he said: "Take into account rather that Moses was speaking to ignorant people and out of condescension to their simpleness presented to them only those things immediately obvious to the senses."⁹
5. She also needs to make certain linguistic/semantic assumptions regarding the meaning of the Qur'an. There are several possibilities: According to a common linguistic theory, the meaning of a text consists in what is *meant by the words* of the text in the original language *at the time of utterance*. Thus the meaning of the Qur'an consists in what the words of the Qur'an meant at the time of the transmission or composition of the text. If this is the case, as Robert Adams points out,¹⁰ then because the text is relatively ancient, and distant in time, parts of its meaning may have become inaccessible or inapplicable. Moreover, even if one gains perfect knowledge of that culture, it might not help one understand the text's response to such modern questions as the morality or

8. His enemies in Mecca said to him that he was "a man possessed," a "soothsayer," and "a poet" (Rafiq Zakaria, *Mohammad and the Quran* [London: Penguin, 1991], 21).

9. *Summa Theologiae* (Ia. 68.3), cited in Swinburne, *Revelation*, 182.

10. Robert M. Adams, "The Concept of a Divine Command," in *Religion and Morality*, ed. D. Z. Phillips (Houndmills, UK: Macmillan, 1996), 65.

ethical acceptability of euthanasia, “designing” a baby, or experimenting on embryos to select a healthy one.¹¹ God might have forbidden “murder,” but the way in which the term is understood in modern times must be accounted for and may differ from the way it was understood at the dawn of Islam.

An alternative view of meaning defines it in terms of the *speaker’s meaning*—that is, “in terms of what the speaker (or writer) of a particular utterance means by it on a particular occasion.”¹² Paul Grice¹³ suggests that the speaker’s meaning must be analyzed in terms of the speaker’s intention to “produce some effect in an audience by means of the recognition of this intention,” so that “to ask what [the speaker] meant is to ask for a specification of the intended effect.” In commanding, one then utters something with the intention of impelling an audience to do something, supposing that the addressee recognizes the intention in the utterance. God commands what God intends to command in order to produce some effect in an audience (intended effect), with the requirement that the intention is recognized.¹⁴ This view of meaning raises the possibility of the falsity of many propositions in the text. God might have spoken of eternal fire, but there is no need to assume that there is in fact any eternal fire. God might have simply intended to produce certain effects in the audience, without implying the real existence of heaven and hell.¹⁵ These conflicting linguistic assumptions, and many others available, have far-reaching implications for interpreting the text.¹⁶

6. Similarly, the person has to make certain assumptions about the goals of scripture. She has to decide if scripture is meant

11. Robert Adams: “Thus there would be no fact of the matter as to whether turning off the permanently comatose patient’s respirator is forbidden by God’s commands or not.” “Concept of a Divine Command,” 65.

12. *Ibid.*, 66.

13. Paul Grice, *Studies in the Way of Words* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), 217–222.

14. Adams discusses various theories of “meaning” and “intensions” and applies it to the sixth of the ten commandments, “Thou shalt not kill.” Adams, “Concept of a Divine Command,” 66–79.

15. *Ibid.*, 66. Adams applies this interpretation in understanding the Bible where it refers to eternal fire.

16. Nicholas Wolterstorff, in his book *Divine Discourse, Philosophical Reflections on the Claim that God Speaks* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), has a lengthy discussion on different kinds of divine speech.

to teach human beings everything, including scientific facts, historical truths, and philosophical principles, or if it pursues a less ambitious task of guiding humans toward spiritual salvation. And hence, it is essentially concerned with matters that are important for the salvation of human beings, which cannot be achieved without revelation. These requirements are not in fact peculiar to the understanding of scripture; they in fact lie behind the interpretation of any text.¹⁷

These are only a small sample of the kinds of assumptions necessary in order to make sense of the text; indeed it is impossible to furnish an exhaustive list of all the assumptions behind an interpretation. Here, what is most important to note is the inescapable role of preconceptions in shaping our interpretation of scripture, and how with a change in assumptions our interpretation of scripture also varies. This can be seen vividly by studying the controversies between scientific and philosophical theories and the interpretation of the text throughout history. To this end, it is useful to briefly consider some well-known examples from the history of religious thought.

The first concerns the famous controversy surrounding the Copernican theory of the solar system and its apparent incompatibility with scripture. In the history of Western thought, among Christian scholars, Luther and Calvin did not believe that the goal behind scripture was to convey the truths of nature. Rather, scripture was important as a testimony to the redemptive events in which God's love and forgiveness in Christ had been mediated in their personal experience. Accordingly, they allowed the possibility that the Copernican theory could be true, and that scripture could contain false passages—in this case passages implying a geocentric universe. In sharp contrast, some Protestants of the time maintained

17. The twentieth century has witnessed a considerable debate on the notion of subjectivity and relativity of scientific theories. The controversial discussions of Thomas Kuhn (*The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970]) have largely addressed this point to the scientific community. Others such as Mary Hesse (*Revolutions and Reconstructions in the Philosophy of Science* [Brighton, UK and Bloomington, IN: Harvester and Indiana University Press, 1980]), and Ian Barbour (*Religion in an Age of Science* [London: SCM Press, 1990]) have argued the same thing in the field of science. It is now widely accepted that science is not so different than the humanities; the former is deeply embedded in hermeneutics as well; no field can escape from relativity. Contemporary thinkers in science have largely accepted the subjectivity of the observer in scientific research.

that the Bible contained true information in every field, scientific or non-scientific, and as a result, took the Bible in a literal sense. They viewed scripture as infallible knowledge in propositional form verbally imparted by God, and hence opposed the Copernican theory as contrary to the biblical passages seemingly implying a geocentric universe.¹⁸ The history of this controversy demonstrates how different preconceptions assumptions about the purpose of the Bible led to conflicting interpretations.

As another example, consider the controversies surrounding the opening chapters of Genesis 1, which says the world was created in six days. If one assumes that God follows, and is subject to the laws of logic and metaphysics, one would refuse to take this phrase in a literal sense. And, like Augustine (in his commentary *Di Genesi ad Litteram*), one would argue that the 'days' of creation could not be taken literally, because, given the laws of logic and metaphysics, there could only be 'days' when there is a Sun and the narrative records the creation of the Sun on the fourth day. And based on logical reasons and scientific theories of the day, Augustine came to the conclusion that the passage must be understood metaphorically.¹⁹ In modern times, though, the scholar's reason for taking the passage metaphorically is different. Some take the 'days' as long periods of time and the detailed order of creation as unimportant. Thus, the passage states that God gradually brought about the various facets of creation (through secondary causes, as Genesis 2 suggests) over long periods of time.²⁰ In sharp contrast, if one follows Descartes in believing that God is the creator of logical, metaphysical, and scientific laws, and he stands above all these laws, and is not subject to them, one would have no difficulty in taking the above passages literally, since one could say that it would have been possible for God to create the Sun on only the fourth day, even if there had not been a Sun earlier. A Cartesian interpreter would blame his own limited intellectual ability—his inability to conceive

18. Ian G. Barbour, *Issues in Science and Religion* (New York and London: Harper & Row, 1966), 29.

19. Swinburne, *Revelation*, 185.

20. Richard Swinburne, "Meaning in the Bible," in *Religion, Reason and the Self*, eds. S. R. Sutherland and T. A. Roberts (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1989), 23.

such an illogical thing—and insist on a literal understanding of the opening chapters of Genesis.²¹

Another highly controversial example is that caused by the publication of Darwin's *Origin of Species* in 1859. Perhaps no other book has so stirred the thoughts of men on aspects of life, and comprehensibly presented the integration of the human species with the natural world.²² The worldview underlying the *Origin* was totally different from the one offered by scriptures. The Hebrew scriptures, the Bible, and the Qur'an envisioned a small geocentric and static world, governed by a wise and almighty God; the main purpose of God was to help his human creatures, the crown of his creation, to his eternal destiny—salvation.²³ Before Darwin, Galileo's new vision of the universe threatened, at least implicitly, the exclusive centrality of humanity to divine purpose, and denied man's location at the center of the universe.²⁴ In Darwin, however, the place of man in the universe was fundamentally threatened.²⁵ He made man insignificant by giving a vast dimension of time and space to the universe, and on the earth he placed him next to the monkeys and apes. In the worldview arising from the *Origin*, man is as insignificant as mountains, rocks, and stars. Species come and go, like dinosaurs and mammoths, and so does man. He is now viewed as the temporary product of the purposeless and blind activity of nature, not as a providential activity of God.

Not surprisingly, the evolutionary theory led the theists to rethink their interpretations of scripture that portray the immediate creation of humans by God, or revise their view of scientific theories. Among Muslim theologians, Ṭabāṭabā'ī,²⁶ the renowned

21. Ian Barbour believes that the stories of the creation and fall should not be viewed as narratives of historical events. The Genesis story is a symbolic assertion of God's relation to the world and the ambivalence of human existence (*Religion*, 72–73).

22. Alfred E. Emerson, "The Impact of Theory of Evolution on Religion," in *Science Ponders Religion*, ed. Harlow Shapley (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1962), 136.

23. "Largely on biblical grounds, most intelligent men before the end of the eighteenth century assumed that the world was about 6000 years old." See Langdon B. Gilkey, *Naming the Whirlwind: The Renewal of God-language* (Indianapolis, IN: Bobbs-Merrill, 1969), 160.

24. Ward, *Religion*, 258.

25. "Instead of the traditional estimate of a 6000-year span, scientists now offered the awesome picture of time stretching backward almost to infinity: 'we find no vestige of a beginning' said James Hutton in 1795" (Gilkey, *Naming*, 161).

26. 'Allama Sayyid Muḥammad Ḥusayn Ṭabāṭabā'ī was born in 1903 in Iran. He has been widely recognized both by Sunnī and Shī'ī Muslims as a major commentator of the Qur'an in modern times. His 20 volume commentary is entitled *al-Mizān* [the Balance].

Shīʿī commentator of the Qurʾān, felt it necessary to take an instrumentalistic position toward the evolutionary theory (Qurʾān 4:1). He argued that since mutation and evolution have never been directly observed in nature, Darwin's theory is nothing but a hypothesis useful for unifying scientific data, and cannot be claimed to be true.²⁷ And, in this way, Ṭabāṭabāʾī tried to establish harmony between the theory and his interpretation of the text. In contrast, Nasir Makarim, another contemporary commentator, holds that the Qurʾānic passages relating to the creation of humans are vague; they neither rule out nor support any specific theory. Although the literal meaning of the passages seems closer to the "immediate and independent creation of humans" than to the theory of evolution, they can also be made compatible with the theory. He asserts that Darwin himself was faithful to God, and argues that no one could ignore the fact that God is needed to guide this complicated process of evolution.²⁸ Obviously, in the absence of the theory of evolution, it would have been unlikely that this commentator considers the verses relating to the creation of humans as vague. It is the arrival of this new theory that has made him view these verses as vague, and search for an alternative interpretation. And this indicates the (implicit) dependence of one's interpretation of Scripture on one's scientific view of the world; as the scientific view changes, so does one's interpretation.

Second Premise: So far it has been argued that in understanding scripture one necessarily relies on a complex web of assumptions that determine what the text means. To make these assumptions in a well-informed manner, one has to rely on a host of theories. A crucial assumption in interpreting the text, for instance, is whether the author of scripture intends to give a precise account of history and the laws of nature. Or simply intends to motivate people toward a respectable spiritual goal. One should inevitably clarify her view on a number of issues, including whether humans are able to understand the things that they need to know, or if they need God to inform and guide them. Certainly this requires a general theory about the boundaries of the human intellect and its capabilities. The necessity of non-scriptural assumptions, therefore, points to the necessity of non-religious theories of understanding a text.

27. Muḥammad Ḥusayn Ṭabāṭabāʾī, *al-Mizān* (Tehran: Golshan, 1366 Sh), 4: 244–245.

28. Nasir Makarim Shirazi, *Tafsir Nemuna* (Tehran: Dār al-Kutub al-Islamiyya), 11:86–89.

Any interpretation of a text is the result of the theories held by the interpreter.

Third Premise: Since any interpretation is theory-laden, depending on what theories the interpreter begins with, he or she can arrive at conflicting but internally consistent interpretations. The theories determine how to understand the text literally or metaphorically. As a consequence, it is always possible to remove inconsistencies within a proposed interpretation by modifying the underlying theories and reinterpreting the text.

The general implication of these considerations is that, since one can give competing but internally consistent interpretations of scripture, scripture on its own cannot offer us an answer. Depending on one's preconceived notions, the text can be interpreted differently. This does not, of course, mean that the preconceptions of an interpreter are not influenced by the text. As in the case of nature, without theories, observations do not speak. But observations can, and do, influence the theories by creating new questions or suggesting inconsistencies. There is always a dynamic dialogue, conscious or unconscious, between the interpreter and the text, and this may lead the person to re-evaluate her assumptions. The interpreter's preconceptions of the prophet Muḥammad, for instance, might change during the process of understanding the Qur'ān. The dynamics of the influence of the text on an interpreter's secular preconceptions is a complex process; what guides it is the search for coherence.

Besides this general consequence, it is important for the purpose of the following discussion to bring to the fore two more specific implications. As explicit in the above analysis, the interaction between background theories and scriptural interpretation implies that there is no theory-independent distinction between the passages of scripture that ought to be taken literally and the passages that ought to be understood metaphorically. "One only takes metaphorically a sentence which taken literally would be obviously false or inappropriate in the context."²⁹ But it is the preconceptions that dictate what can be true and what can be false, and this, in turn, suggests what passages in scripture can be understood metaphorically. Before the emergence of the Copernican theory, the geocentric

29. Swinburne, "Meaning in the Bible," in *Religion*, 21.

view of the universe was the respected scientific theory of the day, and there was no need to take the relevant passages metaphorically. Once the geocentric view was rejected by the simplicity and success of the Copernican view, interpreters were forced to take the relevant passages metaphorically. Thus progress or a shift in one's assumptions could require a non-literal interpretation of parts of text that had so far been understood literally. There is no theory-independent line between the scriptural passages that should be understood literally and those that should be understood metaphorically.

This reasoning applies equally to the central question of which passages in the text convey meanings that are essential to the intended message of the text and which passages convey meanings that are peripheral to its intended message. Depending on one's theory of the purpose of scripture, different passages may appear to convey a peripheral (or essential) meaning. In general, the line between essential and peripheral passages is quite fluid, changing with variations in underlying non-religious theories.

In what follows, this line of reasoning will be applied to ethical claims in the Qur'an. The objective is to show that the Qur'an can, in principle, be made consistent with both sides of the Euthyphro dilemma, and as such, provides no solution to it. The choice of an ethical theory is a decision that must be made prior to understanding the text. It is the theory that guides one to understand the text, rather than the reverse. This conclusion has far-reaching implications for interpreting the ethical judgements in the text.

The Mu'tazili Position on the Nature of Ethics

In reading the Qur'an, one immediately encounters two general categories of verses. There are, on the one hand, passages that suggest that God is infallible, or all-good and absolutely just. These verses include: a) *God enjoins equity and benevolence and graciousness as between kin, and forbids evil design, ill-behavior and transgression. He admonishes you that you may take heed* (16:90); b) *When they commit an evil, they say we found our fathers doing it, and God has enjoined it upon us. "Say to them: God never enjoins evil. Do you say of God that which you know not"* (7:28); c) *That He may justly reward those who believe and do good deeds* (10:4); and d) *God is not a wrong doer to his servants* (8:51). These passages and numerous similar verses are compatible with the view that the validity of

moral principles is independent of the commands of God, and apply equally to both human and divine actions, and that God behaves and commands according to these principles.

In contrast to these verses, there are frequent passages in the Qur'an that *prima facie* appear to suggest an entirely different view of the nature of ethical principles. These passages assign to God an unlimited power that even encompasses power to do actions that are apparently ethically wrong. These passages include: a) *Then God lets go astray whom He wills and guides whom He wills. He is Mighty, the Wise* (14:4); and b) *He cannot be questioned concerning what He does, but they will be questioned* (21:23). According to these passages, at least as a possible interpretation, moral principles do not apply to God, his commands and actions cannot be subjected to moral scrutiny as human actions do, and he behaves in a way that we intuitively consider to be immoral, like letting people go astray, while he could have guided them to the light.

These two groups of passages could be taken as supporting quite different views on the nature of ethics. Some appear to suggest that the validity of moral principles is independent of divine will or commands, while others seem to place God above ethical principles, implying a different view of the nature of ethics. As a result, to achieve a consistent interpretation of the text, one ought to interpret one group of the verses literally, while trying to find a way to interpret others metaphorically. This is in fact what has occurred in the history of Islamic thought. In what follows, two major schools of thought from early Islam are presented to explain how different preconceptions can give rise to different but internally consistent interpretation.

One of these schools is the Mu'tazila, a major theological (*kalām*) school of early Islam (fl. ninth century).³⁰ The school emerged as a reaction to the literalist/traditionalist thinking dominant at the time. The Mu'tazila placed reason (*al-'aql*) at the center of their view of religion, giving it precedence over revelation, and markedly emphasized the justice (*'adl*) and unity (*tawhīd*) of God. Unity of God and divine justice, they argued, must be fully

30. According to Majid Fakhry, The Mu'tazili movement is "the first articulate theological movement in Islam" (*A Short Introduction to Islamic Philosophy, Theology and Mysticism* [Oxford: Oneworld, 1997]), 16.

interpreted in accordance with reason, in order to interpret the Qurʾān.³¹

The Muʿtazila called themselves “the people of justice” to stress their position on theodicy, that God was just. Theodicy was a first principle of their theology, and by this they meant two things. Primarily, God is just in his essence, but this justice falls beyond the reach of human understanding. In their view, this justice entails the justice of divine acts, which is of the same nature as the justice of human acts. The justice of divine and human acts is a real feature of the acts, and can in principle be discovered by human reason, without the support of revelation.³²

For the Muʿtazila, divine justice is not separate from the issue of good and evil in general, and good and evil in a moral sense. Like just actions, moral values have real existence in particular things or acts, regardless of anyone’s wishes, approval, or commands.³³ They also believed that, by intuitive reason, everyone could immediately know moral facts such as “wrongdoing is evil” or “justice is good.”³⁴ These ethical principles are general and synthetic and every intelligent person can recognize them *a priori*.³⁵

31. The most significant part of Muʿtazila is that “they start from the principle that reason (*al-aql*) is sound, and that even the will of Allah and his decisions are subordinate to it” (A. J. Wensinck, *The Muslim Creed* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1932], 261). This has been mentioned by Shahrastani: “The Muʿtazilites unanimously declare that the Wise (i.e. Allah) can only do what is salutary (*al-ṣālah*) and good, and that His wisdom keeps in view what is salutary to His servants” Dwight M. Donaldson, *Studies in Muslim Ethics* [London: S. C. P. K., 1953], 101).

32. George Hourani, *Islamic Rationalism, the Ethics of Abd al-Jabbar* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), 10.

33. This kind of ethical objectivism is rooted in Greek philosophy. Socrates’ discussion with Euthyphro was to persuade him that ethical truths cannot be dependent on the commands of gods. This view was upheld by Plato and the Stoics, and was later adopted, in one way or another, by Catholic and Muslim philosophers.

34. Hourani, *Islamic Rationalism*, 30. Although ‘Abd al-Jabbar does not offer an analytical discussion of how “wrongdoing is evil” is synthetic, the general impression is that he regards evil deeds as such; and they are generally recognized as bad, indicating that they are *a priori*. According to George Hourani, “Assertions that reason knows propositions of this type are common in the entire Hellenic philosophical tradition of which the Muʿtazilah were heirs in some indirect and still obscure fashion” (Hourani, *Islamic Rationalism*, 30).

35. George Hourani believes that “‘Abd al-Jabbar thinks in the same way as Ross, but does not express his theory in such well-defined terminology” (32). He goes so far as to say “If the modern intuitionist had studied Muʿtazilite ethics they might have learned something from them” (145).

Since moral values are objective, even a command by God does not imply obligation, and is not sufficient by itself to make an act obligatory. God may command certain actions, and we certainly ought to obey the commands. But this is not because the commands make the actions obligatory. Rather, it is because “He can certainly see much better than we can why certain actions ought to be performed, and we are often obliged to look to him for guidance; but all he knows better than us is the route to virtue. He does not know what virtue is in the sense that he creates it.”³⁶ Divine prohibition only reveals that the prohibited act is in fact wrong. It does not create the wrongness in the act.

A command only indicates (*yadullu ‘ala*) the obligatoriness of the obligatory act; it is impossible for it to be obligatory because of the command (*la-ajlihi*), because it is the function of an indication to disclose the condition of the object indicated, not to put it in that condition.³⁷

‘Abd al-Jabbār quotes the Qur’ān to support his view: *God commands justice and kindness and charity to one’s kin; and He forbids indecency, wickedness and rebellion.*³⁸ He argues that God refers to these things as real virtues and vices, with their own characters prior to command and prohibition.³⁹ As a consequence, the Mu‘tazila believed that there is always an intelligible reason behind the prohibited or commanded acts in revelation accessible in principle to our intelligence, although it is only seen by God’s wisdom.⁴⁰

The belief in the objectivity of justice and moral values naturally led the Mu‘tazila to stress human responsibility and freedom, arguing that the principle of divine justice entails human liberty and responsibility. A degree of human free will is certainly essential if human subjects are to be held responsible. And in fact it is only by granting human liberty that divine punishment and justice make sense. In support of this view, the Mu‘tazila frequently draw on Qur’ānic verses that state *whoever does what is just and right, does*

36. Oliver Leaman, *A Brief Introduction to Islamic Philosophy* (New York: Blackwell Publishers, 2001), 109.

37. Hourani, *Islamic Rationalism*, 57.

38. Qur’ān 16:90. Hourani, *Islamic Rationalism*, 57.

39. Hourani, *Islamic Rationalism*, 113.

40. ‘Abd al-Jabbār, cited in Hourani, *Islamic Rationalism*, 57.

so for his own good, and whoever does evil, does so to his own hurt (41:46 and 45:16). Hourani follows this view of the nature of ethics, and its relation with the commands of God and refers to it as “rationalistic objectivism.”⁴¹

The Mu‘tazila defended their rationalistic view of ethics by making use of a complex set of arguments and counter arguments. Notably, they argued that the fact that people to whom no messenger had been sent make the same moral judgements in most cases as religious people demonstrates that moral principles are rational and objective. Were moral judgements to imply the divine commands laid down in scripture, non-religious people would have to make either different moral judgements or no ethical judgements at all. An ethical theory that identifies ethical wrong doing with the commands of God cannot explain this important historical fact.

‘Abd al-Jabbār argues that evaluating the moral value of an action is not the same as valuing a work of art. It is possible, he argues, for a person to approve a work of art at one time and disapprove the same work at another time, through his being attracted and repelled by it respectively on the two occasions. That is, the beauty of a work of art is related to the condition of the viewer, but in the case of an ethical judgement it is related to the fact of the matter.

[T]hat is in one case the badness or goodness is of the viewing (in the eye of the beholder) not the picture, according as we shun or welcome it, while in the other case it is of the object, the wrong or good act, which deserves blame or not, independently of anyone’s reaction to it.⁴²

The Mu‘tazila also supported their position by stressing the implausible implications of any attempt to identify ethical values with divine commands. They rightly pointed out that such identification would make it impossible to view God as a moral agent or speak of his commands as ethically good.

Acts from the Exalted could not be good, if goodness in our acts arose only following a command, for commands do not happen to Him, in the same way as they

41. *Ibid.*, 3.

42. *Ibid.*, 53.

say that acts from Him are not evil, because prohibition of Him is impossible.⁴³

Second, the identification would raise the possibility that God may lie to us. This indeed means that he could punish the prophets and the obedient, and reward tyrants. This would surely cause mistrust on behalf of humans toward God; it leaves no room for establishing divine honesty, and the fulfillment of God's promise of rewarding the obedient.

The Mu'tazila emphasized that moral actions have two preconditions—consciousness and capacity (freedom). They therefore maintained that it is morally incumbent on God not to demand what is physically beyond human ability; they believed that their view was consistent with the Qur'an: *God requires not of anyone that which is beyond his capacity* (2:286). In a similar manner, they also argued that God is obliged to act in accordance with the universal precepts of wisdom, and does torture the innocent, without any greater reward. In brief, for the Mu'tazila, God's actions, as well as his commands, are restricted to the confines of ethical principles.⁴⁴ In fact, sending prophets with revelation that requires humans to perform religious duties such as praying and fasting, and establishing a system of reward and punishment is incumbent on God and this is in accordance with the rational precept of wisdom.

The Mu'tazila argued that the function of revelation in the field of ethics is to uncover moral principles that human beings are rationally and independently able to know. Again, 'Abd al-Jabbār, vividly recapitulates this view as follows:

Revelation only uncovers about the character of these acts aspects whose evilness or goodness we should recognize if we knew them by reason; for if we had known by reason that prayer is of great benefit to us, leading us to choose our duty and to earn Reward thereby, we should have known its obligatory character [also] by reason. Therefore we say that revelation does not necessitate the evilness or goodness of anything, it only uncovers the character of the act by way of indication, just as

43. Ibid., 61.

44. Thus the idea of divine grace plays an unobtrusive part in Mu'tazili teaching: what predominates is the idea of justice (Henry Corbin, *History of Islamic Philosophy* [London: Kegan Paul International, 1993], 110–111).

reason does, and distinguishes between the command of an Exalted and that of another being by His wisdom, Who never commands what it is evil to command.⁴⁵

This view of the nature of ethics is not, at least on the face of it, consistent with a literal interpretation of some parts of the text, and there are many verses whose literal interpretation seems to contradict rationalistic objectivism. To be precise, despite the fact that the Qur'an emphasizes the justice of God, and emphatically denies his injustice or wickedness, a remarkable number of verses bearing on such concepts as the guidance or misguidance of God (14:4), the "sealing of the heart" (6:2), the provision for human need, the book of fate (33:7), and especially the overwhelming picture of hell it depicts, exhibit a dazzling spectacle of the unlimited and arbitrary power of God, which can hardly leave scope for any power other than God in the world.⁴⁶

Faced with such verses, the Mu'tazila saw no alternative except to make recourse to metaphorical interpretations.⁴⁷ In addition, the idea of human responsibility and the view that man is the master of his destiny seems to oppose some passages in the Qur'an which affirm that everything humans do is written in a celestial register, and anything that happens to them happens according to divine *mashī'ah* (innate divine will). The Mu'tazila interpreted these passages as indications of divine knowledge. This knowledge is compatible with human liberty, as it is unrelated to the divine act of volition and command, rather it is related to being.

In this way, with appeal to metaphorical interpretation or (other means), the Mu'tazila succeeded in constructing a fully coherent interpretation of the Qur'an so that insofar as logical considerations are concerned, the rationalistic interpretation could be defended.

The Ash'arī Position on Ethics

The Ash'ariyya are another major religious school of thought in Islam; they emerged during the tenth–eleventh/sixteenth–seventeenth centuries as a response to Mu'tazilī rationalism. The core

45. Hourani, *Islamic Rationalism*, 33–34).

46. Majid Fakhry, *Ethical Theories in Islam* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1994), 46.

47. For an interesting discussion, see Abū al-Ḥusayn al-Khayyāṭ (a ninth-century Mu'tazilī scholar) in *Kitāb al-intiṣār* (Beirut: n.p., 1957), 122–127.

principles of the school were formulated by several well-known theologians of the time, in particular Ibn Ḥazm (d. 1064), al-Ghazālī (d. 1111), and al-Shahrastānī (d. 1153).

Al-Ashʿarī (d. 935), the founder of the Ashʿariyya school, debated with his Muʿtazilī master, al-Jubbaʿī, concerning divine justice and his relation to humans, which brings out his true feeling against Muʿtazila.⁴⁸ In a public discussion, al-Ashʿarī challenged his master's view that God's actions are based on rational consideration, and that God ought to treat humans in the best and most just way. Al-Ashʿarī asked his teacher: What would be the fate in the afterlife of three brothers, one of whom dies in a state of faith, the second in a state of sin, and the third in a state of innocence (i.e., died when he was a child)? The righteous brother, answered al-Jubbaʿī, would be sent to paradise, the sinner to hell, and the third to an intermediate position. Al-Ashʿarī then asked: What if the third brother was asked to be allowed to join his more fortunate brother? Al-Jubbaʿī replies that this would be denied to him because the first brother was admitted to paradise on the strength of his good works. If the third brother were to protest that if he had been given a long life he would have lived righteously, God would have replied: I foresaw that you would not and therefore chose to save you from hell by taking your life early. Here, al-Ashʿarī protested, the second brother who had died in sin could exclaim: Surely, Lord, you foresaw my own plight as well. Why did you not then treat me as mercifully as you have dealt with my younger brother?⁴⁹

It has been said that al-Jubbaʿī was unable to respond with God's possible answer to such a protestation, because of the Muʿtazilī position of God's unqualified justice.

Al-Ashʿarī then developed his own view of God's nature and his activity. He tried to find an intermediate way between those who took every word of the Qurʾān literally and regarded any interpretation as blasphemy, and the rationalist Muʿtazila who went

48. Abū al-Ḥasan al-Ashʿarī (d. 935) studied theology with al-Jubbaʿī, head of the Basra branch of Muʿtazilī school, but he broke away from that school at the age of forty. The prophet appeared to him in a dream and urged him to "take charge" of the Muslim community, whereupon al-Ashʿarī ascended the pulpit at the mosque of Basra and publicly recanted and proclaimed his determination to expose "the scandals and follies" of the Muʿtazila, see Majid Fakhry, *A History of Islamic Philosophy* (New York and London: Columbia University Press, 1970), 229.

49. Fakhry, *History*, 229–230.

as far as to give full priority to reason over revelation. He placed divine power and sovereignty at the center of his theology and on that basis he tried to rationalize the Qur'ān. God's decree is final; they are not conditioned by any rules or principles, except God's absolute commands.⁵⁰

Al-Ash'ari adopted the position of "theistic subjectivism" in ethics,⁵¹ according to which terms such as "good," "right" and "justice" denote no objective existence. The goodness and the evil of actions (*ḥusn wa qubh*) are not qualities inhering in them; they are mere accidents (*a'rād*). Actions in themselves, in other words, are neither good nor bad. Since the referents of the words "good" and "right" are not some attributes of actions, they must be ontologically based on something external to the acts, and this is, of course, God's command. It is God who makes things good or bad for us by his decision that they should be so (that is, his will is sufficient for *x*'s being obligatory): "God's power and sovereignty are such that the very meaning of justice and injustice is bound up with His arbitrary decrees. Apart from those decrees, justice and injustice, good and evil, have no meaning whatsoever."⁵²

This view of the nature of moral valuations has many implications, which the Ash'ariyya happily accepted. Given that ethical valuations are not grounded in the acts or in their properties, but in God's commands, they cannot be discovered by reason or intuition. Al-Juwaynī (d. 1085), an illustrious teacher of al-Ghazālī, argues that

[T]he only grounds of morality is, for him, revelation (*sam'*) and the religious law (*shari'a*). For nothing is good in itself or bad in itself, because goodness and badness are neither generic nor essential qualities of the action. The good is what is commanded by the religious law, whereas the bad is what is proscribed.⁵³

As a result, God could have preferred an entirely different ethical setup for our world. He could have punished the angels, the prophets and believers everlastingly in hell, and rewarded the devil

50. *Ibid.*, 230.

51. This terminology has also been taken from George Hourani (*Islamic Rationalism*, 3).

This phrase is another name for the divine command theory of ethics.

52. Fakhry, *History*, 238.

53. Fakhry, *Ethical Theories*, 49.

and unbelievers everlastingly in heaven; he could have imposed on man obligations impossible to fulfill, and then punished him for failing to fulfill them; he could have justly punished a man for something that he has helped him to do. There are no rational limits to God's will to preclude him from acting otherwise.⁵⁴ He judges as he pleases, and whatever he judges is just.⁵⁵

Any attempt at giving a rational justification of God's ways, His prescriptions or prohibitions, should be abandoned as entirely futile. God, Who is fully unanswerable for His actions, as the Koran itself has put it (21:23), can torture or reward whomever He pleases, having Himself guided them aright (*hadā*) or led them astray (*aḍalla*) in the first place.⁵⁶

In the next life, God will reward or punish men in accord with the actions they perform in this life. However, their being rewarded by him for their obedience to him cannot be construed as something that God owes them in justice; no creature can have any claim of right with respect to God, for this would imply that there is something that God ought to do. We know that he will reward the faithful and punish the unbelievers, the Ash'ariyya claim, simply because he has said so and he does not deceive. It is his to forgive what he will and we know that he is forgiving. God's forgiveness, however, is unmotivated and wholly gratuitous (*fadl*); he does not forgive the sinner because of his repentance or for any other act of obedience, for he is under no obligation even to accept the sinner's repentance.

There is nothing binding on God . . . It is by the inner necessity of His own nature that He fulfils His promises of reward to the virtuous and does not do otherwise. And it is in His infinite mercy that He may forgive any

54. The Qur'anic proof that God can enjoin what cannot be done is his remark to the angels: *Tell me the names of these* (2:31), i.e., the names of creatures, when they did not know that and were unable to do it. God also said that the impious *will be called upon to prostrate themselves and will be unable to do it* (68:42). So if God can enjoin upon men in the next life what they will be unable to do, he can also do the same in this life. Cited in Fakhry, *History* (al-Ash'ari, *Risala 'ila ahl al-thaghr bi-bab al-abwab* [Letter to the people of the frontier] Ankara: Ilahiyat Facultiesi Meçmuasi, 1928), 8:95.

55. Fakhry, *History*, 238–239.

56. Fakhry, *Ethical Theories*, 168–169.

wrongdoer or vicious person, in spite of the threats of punishment for his vicious acts.⁵⁷

Al-Ghazālī, another highly prominent member of the Ash‘ari school, challenged the Mu‘tazila views in his book *al-Iqtisād*. God, he argued, has no purpose in his creation except the intention of revealing his will and power without gaining any benefit from that creation. Since he is far exalted above his creation and has no needs, it would be inappropriate to apply to his actions good or bad in the normal sense, since the term “wrong” is applied when one unjustly uses the property of others while everything in the world is God’s property. He further argued that we know that in this world many people suffer without any compensation in this life, and this is not contrary to the rule of justice, as he is the only one with control over his creation, over which he has exclusive claim. Therefore, there is no objective notion of justice, as this would constrain God’s activity.⁵⁸

We assert that it is admissible for God the exalted not to impose obligations on his servants, as well as to impose on them unachievable obligations, to cause pain to his servants without compensation and without offence, that it is not necessary for him to take notice of what is in their best interest, nor to reward obedience or punish disobedience . . . and that it is not necessary for him to send prophets, and if he does not send them it is not evil or absurd.⁵⁹

Al-Ghazālī challenges the Mu‘tazila arguments that God is obliged to impose obligations on his servants because it is beneficial to them. He argues that God need not have created anything at all, and his creation is not for benefiting or harming them:

Some . . . have advanced the argument that there will be compensation in the after-life for . . . [undeserved] suffering. These people fail to realise how evil a king’s act of slapping a weak person as a condition for giving

57. M. M. Sharif (ed.), *A History of Muslim Philosophy* (Weisbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1963), 1:237.

58. Oliver Leaman, *An Introduction to Medieval Islamic Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 132.

59. Leaman, *Medieval*, 132.

him a loaf of bread is, if he could have given him the loaf without the slapping.⁶⁰

The Ash'ariyya defended their position on several grounds. To begin with, contrary to the Mu'tazila, they argued that there is no universal agreement among prudent and intelligent men regarding moral judgements. Sincere and intelligent people often strongly disagree as to whether an action is ethically wrong or right. However, if moral goodness and ethical wrongness referred to objective features of the external world, and people were capable of recognizing those features, surely they would not disagree about whether or not a particular action is ethically wrong. The existence of moral disagreements, they argued, is a strong reason for rejecting rationalistic objectivism.⁶¹

The Ash'ariyya also argued that actions do not always possess the same moral status in different situations; an action can be good under certain circumstances but turn out to be ethically wrong under different circumstances, and this strongly indicates that goodness, justice, or badness are not intrinsic properties of actions.⁶²

Al-Ghazali challenges the Mu'tazila claim on the universality and necessity of ethical truths that is accessible by intuition, by demonstrating that they are very different than logical or mathematical truths.

In brief, whenever you wish to know the difference between those well-known judgments and the rational first principles, submit to your mind the statement "killing a human being is bad and saving him from death is good" after imagining that you have come into existence all of a sudden, fully mature and rational, having, however, no instruction being received, been associate with no community, experienced no human hierarchy or polity, but have simply experienced sensible objects . . . You would then be able to doubt these premises or at least hesitate in assenting to them, whereas you would be unable to experience such hesitation in our

60. Michael Marmura, "Ghazali on ethical premises," *Philosophical Forum* 1 (1969), 393–403.

61. Fakhry, *Ethical Theories*, 49.

62. Leaman, *Medieval*, 137.

statements “negation and affirmation are not true in one and the same state” and “two is greater than one.”⁶³

Al-Ghazālī also challenged the Mu‘tazila claim that to understand the truthfulness of the prophet and his miracle and revelation, one has to rely on his reason. Recall that the Mu‘tazila argued that claiming that one has a duty to accept and believe in the Qur’ān on the basis of the Qur’ān is a vicious circle. Al-Ghazālī argued that this reasoning is indeed a circular argument. For regarding the evidence, “if one does not examine it rationally, one doesn’t understand the rational need to examine it rationally, and if one does not understand the need to examine it rationally, then one will not examine it rationally.”⁶⁴ Given the vast benefit in adhering to the Qur’ān, al-Ghazālī argues that a person would be foolish not to believe in it. This is like someone who has been told that there is a lion behind him, and he replies that he will not believe it unless he makes sure that the informant is telling the truth. It is highly imprudent to doubt the information in such a case, in which the penalty for being wrong is the possibility of losing his life. God has sent the prophet and miracle to establish the veracity of the claim, and an intelligent person would realize the importance of this event.

In sum, the central consideration that encouraged the Ash‘ariyya to embrace theistic subjectivism was the desire to preserve divine absolute power. For them, objective values appeared as a factor limiting God’s power to do as he wills. Thus they dealt with the problem by denying objective values that might act as a standard for God’s action. By defining “justice” as obedience to the commands of a lawgiver, they set God free from ethical limits that confine humans.⁶⁵

63. Leaman, who criticizes al-Ghazālī: “Here al-Ghazālī simply ignores the elaborate descriptions by the Mu‘tazilites of different kinds of ethical truths. Some of which are rigidly applied regardless of the consequences” (*Medieval*, 137).

64. Leaman, *Medieval*, 138.

65. The same answer conveniently solved the problem of evil. There was an evident contradiction between the assertion that God is absolutely omnipotent, predestining man’s good and evil acts and then punishing them for the evil ones, and the assertion that God is just in the sense that we normally understand it. Al-Ash‘arī and his school preferred to stand by omnipotence and throw out justice in the ordinary sense. This could be done if human justice were defined in terms of law, since again “the Lord of the worlds . . . is not under a *shari‘a* therefore, ‘He is not foolish’ when He wills folly in man.” See George Hourani, *Reason and Tradition in Islamic Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 66.

Although the Ash‘ariyya portrayal of God was in harmony with many parts of the Qur‘ān, like the Mu‘tazila, they too needed to resort to a metaphorical interpretation to provide an overall coherent interpretation of the Qur‘ān. Faced with many examples of ethical attributes ascribed to God by the Qur‘ān, these theologians suggested that terms such as “good” and “just” could not be understood in their ordinary meanings when applied to God. In this respect, they followed the so-called method of purification (*tanzih*) by which God is cleared of all similarities to humans.⁶⁶ Moreover, to keep their view of divine unrestricted power in accord with a remarkable number of verses ascribing power and responsibility to humans, they coined the controversial theory of acquisition (*al-kasb*).

On this theory, whatever God wills happens. Everything is the realized object of God’s eternal ability to act and his eternal volition, so that he is, in a real sense, the agent of whatever happens in the world. Voluntary actions are ascribed to human beings only in a secondary sense, since it is God who creates the act and the ability to act when human beings perform. God’s action is a creation (*khalq, ikhtirā‘, ijād*), and the voluntary action of humans is a performance (*kasb, iktisāb*). When humans decide to do something, God creates at the same time and instance the ability and the performance of the action.⁶⁷ It is this intention on the part of the agent that makes him responsible for his actions. Man’s free choice is an occasion for God to create the action corresponding to that choice.

The Ash‘ariyya also challenged the Mu‘tazila’s literal interpretation of many Qur‘ānic verses such as (21:23): *He will not be questioned concerning what He [i.e. God] does, but they [i.e. mankind] will be questioned*. The Mu‘tazila interpreted this and similar verses as stating that because God’s action is purposeful and is for a reason, and he does everything correctly according to moral principles, there is no point in questioning him. But the Ash‘ariyya interpreted these verses to mean that since God’s action is purposeless, there is no reason in questioning him; he is beyond our reason and above any rule and principle.⁶⁸ Similarly, the Mu‘tazila took verses such

66. Hourani, *Reason*, 37.

67. See Fakhry, *Ethical Theories*, 53–55.

68. Commenting on this verse, al-Bayḍawī writes, “He (i.e. God) is not liable to question concerning what He does, on account of His majesty and the power of His sovereignty

as *God enjoins equity and benevolence and graciousness between kindred, and forbids evil design, ill-behavior and transgression* (16:90) to argue that God wants man to avoid injustice and ought to comply with the rule of justice, and that he will not ask anyone anything which is beyond his ability, because this is unjust. The Ash'ariyya, in contrast, argued that justice is whatever God does. He does not do evil because he is above any moral rules. He can, if he chooses, punish us for something beyond our capacity, and that is not unjust or evil from God.

This analysis of the debates between the Ash'ariyya and the Mu'tazila and the different ways they have interpreted scripture supports the conclusion that, regardless of the assumptions held by the interpreter, scripture does not imply a specific theory on the nature of ethics. scripture can be made compatible with conflicting theories about the nature of ethics. Depending on preconceived assumptions, the interpreter takes passages consistent with his theory literally, and interprets those incompatible with the theory metaphorically. Since competing theories can result in conflicting but internally consistent interpretations, it is wrong to claim, regardless of preconceptions, that scripture supports a particular ethical theory. Also, since the ethical theory that one accepts usually affects his ethical judgements, by adopting a particular ethical theory, one may even be forced to reinterpret ethical judgements that are otherwise considered to be essential to the teachings of religion.

Some Historical Examples in Christian Literature

Though the analysis has so far been confined to the Islamic tradition, the underlying philosophical argument about the impossibility of assumption-free interpretation applies equally to the scriptures of other religions. To stress this, it is useful to end the analysis by looking briefly at some historical controversies from the Christian tradition. This further demonstrates why, independently of non-religious background assumptions, one cannot argue for any kind of ethical theory on the basis of scripture. Indeed, the assumptions held by the believer may even force the person to reinterpret or even abandon practical moral judgements existing in the text.

and the fact that sovereignty and essential domination belong exclusively to Him. They (i.e. mankind), as well as the gods of the polytheists mentioned in the previous verse, are liable to question, because of their subordination and their servile status," cited in Fakhry, *Ethical Theories*, 19.

The Christian tradition presents some rigid ethical principles laid down in the Decalogue. The rules, among other things, prohibit homicide, theft, and adultery. At the same time, the Christian tradition presents incidents sometimes described as the immoralities of the patriarchs, which clearly run against those rules. Three cases in particular come to mind. The first is the divine command to Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac. The second is the divine command to the Israelites to plunder the Egyptians. And the third is the divine command to Hosea to have sexual relationship with an adulteress. These stories *prima facie* suggest that God has commanded in certain specific cases homicide, theft, and adultery, contrary to the general prohibitions in the Decalogue. The apparent conflict has given rise to conflicting views on the nature of ethics in the Christian world. How are these divine commands to be reconciled with the Decalogue's prohibitions? In this respect, two positions are noteworthy. One is that of St. Bernard of Clairvaux (Augustine's successor) and the other Aquinas.

In an attempt to solve the apparent conflict, Bernard appears to take for granted the conception of God as a lawgiver. He holds that God's authority is such that, by his command, he and only he may relieve people from the obligation to obey the precepts laid down in the Decalogue. Accordingly, he suggests that plundering the Egyptians and having sexual relationship with an adulteress, which, in the absence of the divine commands to the Hebrews and Hosea, would have been wrong, were it not in fact ethically wrong. Since they were commanded by God, they were as obligatory as the Decalogue principles. In his *On Precept and Dispensation*, Bernard writes this:

You shall not kill, You shall not commit adultery, You shall not steal, and the remaining precepts of that table, precepts which are such that, although they admit no human dispensation absolutely, and neither was it permitted nor will it be permitted to any human being to give release to something from those precepts in any way, yet God has given release from those which he wished, when he wished, whether when he ordered that the Egyptians be plundered by the Hebrews, or when he ordered the Prophet to have intercourse with a woman

who was a fornicator. Certainly would nothing but a grievous act of theft be ascribed to the one, and nothing but the turpitude of a shameful act done in the heat of passion, to the other, if the authority of the commander should not have excused each act.⁶⁹

If divine commands make the difference in the moral status of these actions, the appearance of immorality associated with the narratives is in fact groundless.

Aquinas, however, adopts quite a different strategy to exonerate the patriarchs. In the *Summa Theologia*, he holds that the precepts of the Decalogue “admit of no dispensation whatever,” thereby disagreeing with Bernard’s resolution of the apparent conflict. The crux of Aquinas’ strategy is to interpret the stories such that they can no longer be considered cases of homicide, theft, and adultery. In the case of Abraham, he argues that the apparent conflict has arisen from the neglect that God is the master of life and death, and for this reason, the order to kill Isaac is no more unjust than is the everyday death of any other innocent person by natural causes. When a human being kills another it may make sense to speak of murder, as a human being is not the master of life and death of another. But when God kills a human being it by no means makes sense to speak of murder, as God is the creator, and the master of life and death. He provides essentially similar analyses for the other two cases. All are attempts to explain why God has not breached any of the general moral rules laid down in the Decalogue. In his words:

Consequently when the children of Israel, by God’s command, took away the spoils of the Egyptians, this was not theft; since it was due to them by the sentence of God. Likewise when Abraham consented to slay his son, he did not consent to murder, because his son was due to be slain by the command of God, Who is Lord of life and death: for He it is Who inflicts the punishment of death on all men, both godly and ungodly, on account of the sin of our first parent, and if a man be the executor of that sentence by Divine authority, he will be no murderer any more than God would be. Again

69. This is quoted in Philip Quinn, *Argument*, 501.

Osee, by taking unto himself a wife of fornications, or an adulterous woman, was not guilty either of adultery or of fornication: because he took into himself one who was his by command of God, Who is the author of the institution of marriage.⁷⁰

Aquinas, in this way, preserves the universality of the Decalogue rules, and defends the objectivity of moral judgements.

Once more, as outsiders, we encounter two incompatible but coherent interpretations. Scriptural considerations alone would not be enough to make a decision. To select a particular interpretation, we must make a decision on different grounds; more precisely, we must make a decision based on a careful and detailed examination of competing philosophical theories concerning the nature of moral judgements. As a result, as in the case of the Qur'an, the Bible is also, on its own, silent about the nature of ethics, and the permanency of the ethical judgements it contains. It is the preconceptions that make the Bible appear consistent with a particular view of ethics.

If these considerations are to the point, one has to disagree with philosophers, such as Philip Quinn, who hold that the controversy over the immoralities of the patriarchs can serve as a basis for a direct argument that concludes that God is the source of moral obligation. His key consideration is that “[B]oth (Aquinas and Bernard) hold that the slaying of Isaac by Abraham, which would be wrong in the absence of a divine command to Abraham because of the Decalogue’s prohibition, will not be wrong in the presence of that command if Abraham carries it out.”⁷¹ This is an appropriate consideration, yet by no means is it the whole of the story. It basically overlooks the reasons these commentators have chosen different strategies to reconcile the incidences with the Decalogue’s prohibitions. Strangely, Quinn himself admits that the stories can coherently “be interpreted so as to portray God as merely promulgating to his people moral laws that hold independent of his will.”⁷² Yet he fails to tell us why one has to go along with Bernard who thinks divine commands are both necessary and sufficient to impose moral obligations, rather than with Aquinas who thinks otherwise. Quinn particularly fails to explain why these thinkers

70. *Summa Theologiae* quoted in Quinn, *Argument*, 502.

71. *Ibid.*, 502–503.

72. *Ibid.*, 500.

have sought different treatments to make the reconciliation possible. Granting this, it is not clear how he might be right to think that biblical considerations furnish Christians with positive grounds to favor a divine command theory of some sort.

Conclusion

This paper has argued that understanding scripture is inescapably theory-dependent. There is no theory-independent interpretation; any interpretation rests on a complex web of preconceived notions. And by varying the assumptions, alternative coherent interpretations can be achieved from scripture. And, in this respect, questions regarding the nature of ethics are not exceptional; prior to a decision about the nature of ethics, the text cannot be regarded as endorsing any specific theory. It is the preconceived theories that make the text appear consistent or inconsistent with a particular view of the connection between ethical judgements and divine commands.

It is true that there are well-entrenched views about what scripture promotes. It is a common belief, for instance, that all scriptures point to the existence of God, and they cannot be interpreted in a way that denies the existence of God. But this does not mean that in such cases the interpretation of the text is not based on any preconceived assumption. It only means that in such cases the background assumptions are well entrenched and accepted by all those who are concerned with Scriptures. In addition, even in well-entrenched cases such as the existence of God, the common element among the interpretations is not a clear-cut matter. Even though all the religious interpreters assume the existence of God, they usually have different conceptions of God in mind. The God of the Ash'ariyya and the Mu'tazila are dramatically different, and this difference originates from the differences in their preconceived assumptions.

In the same vein, perhaps all the interpretations of scriptures involve similar moral judgements, or, in other words, interpret certain ethical prohibitions in the same way, and consider them holy or unchangeable. But it must be well understood that it is often the implicit preconceived assumptions that lead to the conclusion that certain ethical judgements cannot be interpreted in a different way. The judgement of whether or not a verse conveys an idea

essential or peripheral to the teaching of a religion is influenced by preconceived theories held by the interpreter.

Finally, the analysis reveals that it is wrong to begin with scriptural considerations in justifying the divine command theory. The starting point must be an examination of preconceived assumptions concerning the nature of ethics and divinity. It should also be borne in mind that the ethical prescriptions usually ascribed to religion, regarding issues such as abortion, “designer babies,” and the like, are systematically and unavoidably influenced by the preconceived assumptions held by believers. They are as valid as the underlying assumptions.

