
HUMAN HEART (*QALB*) IN ISLAMIC ETHICS: A PERSPECTIVE FROM THE QURAN AND SUNNAH

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ABSTRACT:

There is a broad discussion concerning the importance of the self (*nafas*) in Islamic ethics. This discussion is based upon the primary sources of Islam, the scripture, and Sunnah. However, the idea of the human heart (*Qalb*) is not so widely discussed, which is considered integral to the self. This idea needs further exploration concerning its relationship to ethics. Ethics is an essential part of the Islamic worldview, and the measure of authentic, ethical behavior is intentionality which is an attribute of the heart. The Islamic sources assert that the ethical agent must possess a ‘sound heart’ that is free of vices and which, by belief, *Iman*, provides strength and motivation for good actions. Therefore, proper ethical behavior emanates from the heart. The critical point is that intentionality as the property of the heart matters in Islamic ethics because ethical accountability is ultimately before God in Islam. Therefore, a Muslim is responsible for safeguarding his heart from temptations and vices. The hearts can experience sickness and hardness through repeatedly sinning. Therefore, a Muslim should keep his heart clean from vices. In ethical decision-making, the heart’s purity will lead to good actions and better understanding. The heart has intellectual and cognitive powers that can help make ethical decisions.

Keywords: Heart; Qalb; Islamic Ethics; Intentionality; Virtue

Introduction

The subject of the self (*nafas*) with which the heart is assumed to be connected is present in the scholarly discourses on Islamic ethics. It is evident from the Islamic classics on ethics as they are comprehensive, including ethics, etiquette, the discipline of self, and the purification of the soul. However, in this article, the researcher aims to look at the place and role of the heart in Islamic ethics from an understanding derived from the primary sources of Islam: the Quran and the Sunnah, in other words, *Hadith* (Prophetic traditions or narrations). The grounding of the concept of heart in the scripture and Sunnah is because of the metaethical necessity to understand Islamic ethics as a fundamentally revelation-based discipline, thus providing an intellectual undisputed, uncontroversial foundation to the concept. In terms of the results, this research aims to reach some principles regarding the heart's place in ethics. Furthermore, to answer a few essential questions about the subject. Most importantly, how does the concept of heart matter in Islamic ethics?

Therefore the paper will firstly discuss briefly the place and importance of ethics in the Islamic worldview and how in such worldview, accountability to God makes the heart relevant; secondly, how the human heart is at the center of an ethical agent as the human actions result from it; thirdly, how intentions matter in Islamic ethics as they are attributes of heart; fourthly how and why a person should safeguard his heart from the temptations and ethical vices as they result in bad actions; and finally how the heart is considered to have a cognitive quality which provides it with the capacity to contribute to ethical decision making.

Ethics in the Islamic Worldview

Ethics includes various concepts such as character, etiquette, morals, intentions, consequences, duties, emotions, ego, contracts, nature, conscience, values, relationships, etc., according to many ethical

theories and the scholarship on the subject. Ethical thought in philosophy emphasizes three aspects: human character, ethical action, and judging a state of affairs that can be social, political, economic, etc. However, ethics is ultimately about how a living human acts with both living and non-living beings. Human beings are considered ethical agents as they stand morally responsible because of their natural capacities according to all theories, both from the religious point of view and biological perspective, as humans are rational and responsible beings. Ethical responsibility creates questions about the origins and sources of ethics and ethical accountability. To determine the source of ethics, human thought is diverse in theories and insights. The question of accountability is left to the authorities and regulators to develop mechanisms that will ensure ethical compliance and take account of those who break ethical codes.

Ethics is a subject that is rooted in a worldview. The subject of worldview is ontological, epistemological, and ultimately ethical. Islamic ethics begins with being; our being with God, our being with creation, and our being with fellow human beings. Islam remains clear on the assertion that there is a God who has created the world; there is the revelation that tells us so, and this same revelation provides norms and concepts that guide an ethical co-existence with being. Therefore, the ultimate source of ethics in Islam is God, which means his word as recorded in revelation or scripture (The Quran) and the practice of the Prophet (SAW), *Sunnah*. To support the authority of the first passage: when Aishah was asked about the character of the Prophet (SAW), she said, “His character was the Quran.”² And to support the Sunnah, the Quran testifies about the Prophet (SAW), “And you (stand) on an exalted standard of character.”³ Furthermore, God addresses the Prophet (SAW) by saying, “Ye have indeed in the Messenger of Allah a beautiful pattern (of conduct) for anyone whose hope is in Allah and the Final Day, and who engages much in the praise of Allah.”⁴ The Prophet (SAW) himself described perfecting good manners as why he was sent as a Prophet (SAW). “I have only been sent to perfect good character.”⁵ These are the primary sources of ethics in Islam, and scholars can draw many lines of thought from these sources, such as religious virtue ethics

or divine command theory, etc. On the other hand, Islam demands its followers to live ethically. The Prophet (SAW) said, “The believers most complete in faith are those who have the best character.”⁶ Finally, the people are responsible and accountable to God for their actions. This makes a big difference between merely behaving ethically and giving premium to aims, motives, and intentions, which are attributes of the heart. Various pieces of evidence could be provided from Islamic sources to support such a position. However, the Prophet (SAW) has said it in a precise manner “The reward of deeds depends upon the intentions and every person will get the reward according to what he has intended...”⁷

This is what an Islamic worldview could inform us about ethics. This worldview starts from the beginning of human creation and dedicated to giving the human being respect and making them responsible. It guides them in their life, and ultimately it turns them towards God and stand accountable to him.

Heart at the Center of Ethical Personality

The central Prophetic tradition on the importance of the ‘heart’ in matters of ethics is the one in which it is reported that the Prophet (SAW) said, “In the body there is a piece of flesh, and the whole body is sound if it is sound, but the whole body is corrupt if it is corrupt. It is the heart.”⁸ This shows the heart as the center of a human personality as it influences the rest of the human body. That includes how human beings act and behave. The soundness of the heart is, therefore, crucial in Islam. The Quran states, “But he alone will be saved who brings to Allah a sound heart (*Kalab Saleem*).”⁹ A sound heart, from the understanding of the Quran and Sunnah would mean a heart with pure faith in God, and in terms of ethics, it would mean a virtuous heart. Ibn Abbas states that a sound heart is the one that testifies that there is only one God, Allah.¹⁰ On the ethical side, Ibn al-Qayyim has mentioned that a sound heart should be free of including other vices from “polytheism, hatred, malice, envy, stinginess, arrogance, and love of the world and leadership.”¹¹

Acting according to the Islamic ethical norms needs strength, and the origin of this strength comes from the presence of strong belief in the heart. The belief (*iman*) of a person should guide his heart first, and the Quran states, "...And whoever believes in Allah - He will guide his heart..."¹² Being a Muslim is about acting according to Islam, but to be a believer it should start from the heart, the reliability of anyone's being Muslim depends on the Iman (belief) of such person, which is fundamentally connected with the heart. The Quran states, "The Bedouins say, "We have come to believe." Say, "You have not come to believe; instead, you (should) say, 'We have surrendered and the belief has not entered your hearts so far..."¹³

Therefore, obedience starts from the heart. It was one of the supplications of the Prophet (SAW) as he used to pray, "O God, who turns the hearts, turn our hearts to your obedience."¹⁴ Furthermore, the Prophet (SAW) used to supplicate, "O Allah! advance me in knowledge: do not cause my heart to deviate (from guidance) after you have guided me."¹⁵ Ethical teachings of Islam are a matter of belief and obedience. And such belief and obedience should be deep-rooted in a person's heart. The quality of piety is not limited to physical actions, piety starts from the heart, in this regard, the Quran states, "Having said that, if one observes the sanctity of the symbols of Allah, then such things emanate from the piety of the hearts"¹⁶

The Heart and its Role in Intention

In Islamic ethics, there are two main ways of evaluating an ethical action: the first is to evaluate it as a just action, and the other is to evaluate it from the perspective of intentions. This distinction is essential in Islam, as actions can be good, wrong, or accidental. And a person, before being accountable to the people and society, is supposed to be responsible before God and accountable to him. Here the heart plays a vital role. An ethical agent should be aware that God knows what is in his heart as the Quran states, "... Allah knows what is in your hearts. And ever is Allah Knowing and Forbearing."¹⁷ The affairs of the heart are more important

than anything else, “Verily Allah does not look to your bodies nor to your faces, but He looks to your hearts.”¹⁸ Still, in terms of ethical action the heart and the deeds take prominence as the Prophet (SAW) says, “Verily Allah does not look to your faces and your wealth, but He looks to your heart and to your deeds.”¹⁹ The all-encompassing narration from the Prophet (SAW) which sets a guiding ethical principle is the narration of the Prophet (SAW) that says: “Actions are *but* by *intentions*, and each person will have *but* that which he *intended*...”²⁰ This reference to intentionality is about weighing one’s actions before God; in the end, the good brings reward (*thawab*), and the bad brings punishment (*iqqab*) both in this life and hereafter (*akirah*) or in either of them.

Safeguarding Heart from Temptations and Ethical Vices

Many influences, such as reading, listening, or falsehoods, can contaminate a person’s heart. According to the Quran and Sunnah, one should safeguard his heart from temptations and ideas from evil, human, or demonic sources. The Quran orders Muslims to seek the refuge of Allah from “Who whispers in the breasts of mankind.”²¹ And those who whisper in the hearts of people include both demons and human beings. If a person does not safeguard his heart, his thoughts may affect his deeds and actions, and ultimately, if it is unretained, the heart may become devilish. As the Prophet (SAW) says, “...There will be leaders who will not be led by my guidance and who will not adopt my ways? There will be among them men who will have the hearts of devils in the bodies of human beings...”²² In the same way in the end times, there will be some people “...their hearts are the hearts of wolves...”²³

The sickness (*marz*) of the heart is mentioned in the Quran many times. However, in terms of ethics, a reference to verse 33:32 in the Quran shows the connection of such disease in the ethical sense as the Quran states, “Wives of the Prophet (SAW), you are not like other women. If you fear Allah, do not be too complaisant in your speech lest those with diseased hearts should covet you; but speak in a straightforward manner.”²⁴ This verse clearly shows that a diseased heart can lead to a wrong action;

therefore, cleansing the heart becomes the first step in fixing one's ethical behavior.

The heart of a person gets affected and sealed by the vices of a person. The vices influence the heart; the Quran states, "That is how Allah stamps a seal on the entire heart of an arrogant tyrant."²⁵ A person should keep his heart clean from ethical vices as the Prophet (SAW) says, "... none shall enter Paradise who has in his heart the weight of a mustard seed of pride."²⁶ The hearts get affected by the sins of a person and his wrongdoings until they harden and do not yield to piety, the Quran states, "No indeed; but that they were earning has rusted upon their hearts."²⁷ This could be well understood further by the Prophetic narration that states, "Verily, when the slave (of Allah) commits a sin, a black spot appears on his heart. When he refrains from it, seeks forgiveness, and repents, his heart is polished clean. But if he returns, it increases until it covers his entire heart. And that is the *'Ran'* which Allah mentioned: "Nay, but on their hearts is the rust (*Ran*) which they used to earn."²⁸ In other narration, the Prophet (SAW) says, "The slave continues to lie and a black spot grows in his heart until all his heart becomes black. Then he is written, in Allah's sight, among the liars."²⁹ On the other hand, a humble heart is favored in Islam, the Prophet (SAW) used to seek refuge (with Allah) from "from a heart that does not feel humble."³⁰ The hearts should be innocent, and this refers to the Prophet (SAW) as he says, "A group of people (both men and women) whose hearts will be like the hearts of birds, will enter Jannah."³¹ In the same manner, "It was said to the Messenger of Allah (saw): 'Which of the people is best?' He said: 'Everyone who is pure of heart and sincere in speech.' They said: 'Sincere in speech, we know what this is, but what is pure of heart?' He said: 'It is (the heart) that is pious and pure, with no sin, injustice, rancor or envy in it.'"³² The Prophet (SAW) used to pray, "O Allah, cleanse my heart of sins as You cleanse a white garment of filth."³³ Furthermore, the Prophet (SAW) advised to pray, "Say: O Allah, indeed I seek refuge in ... the evil of my tongue and the evil of my heart..."³⁴

Ethical Decision-Making and the Heart

Understanding by heart is essential; eyes become useless if hearts lack their cognitive capacities. One can see, but if the heart is blind, seeing will not benefit. The Quran states, “Do they not travel through the land, so that their hearts (and minds) may thus learn wisdom and their ears may thus learn to hear? Truly it is not their eyes that are blind, but their hearts which are in their breasts.”³⁵ When a person’s heart is vicious, asleep, and immersed in lust and covered by vices such as hatred, hate, greed, etc. it would be naturally difficult for such a person to reason well and purely. His reasoning and decision-making will be clouded by all those factors and influences. Therefore, the Prophet (SAW) says, “The intellect is located in the heart...”³⁶

In the same way, the heart has the quality to judge one’s actions as the Prophet (SAW) says, “...Virtue is a kind disposition and vice is what rankles in your heart and that you disapprove that people should come to know of it.”³⁷ In another narration, it is stated that “Consult your heart. Righteousness is that about which the soul feels at ease and the heart feels tranquil. And wrongdoing is that which wavers in the soul and causes uneasiness in the breast, even though people have repeatedly given their legal opinion [in its favor].”³⁸ However, in Islam heart becomes morally responsible only when it puts its whispering into action. If a person does not put the thoughts of his heart into action, such whispering would be forgiven, as the Prophet (SAW) said, “Allah has accepted my invocation to forgive what whispers in the hearts of my followers, unless they put it to action or utter it.”³⁹

Conclusion

The human heart has a very important place and role in Islamic ethics. It is the center from which motivation for ethical actions emerges, gives ethical validity to human action, and is part of the intellectual effort one makes in understanding and deciding ethical actions. The heart is at the center of an ethical agent, and actions emerge from it. A vicious heart would lead to wrong actions. Obedience in Islam, generally and

particularly in the ethical sense, should start from the heart. Being ethical is the call of faith, *iman*, which should be present in a person's heart. Therefore, the purity of the heart will lead to better ethical actions. Ethical action, according to Islam, depends on the intentions, and to judge an action, intentions become essential in terms of being responsible to God. In addition to that, the ethical validity of actions depends on intentions. The heart has cognitive powers and the capacity to judge a human action, understand an ethical problem, and thus take appropriate action.

ENDNOTES

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² Al-Bukhari, *Al-Adab Al-Mufrad*, 115.

³ *The Quran*, 68:4.

⁴ *The Quran*, 33:21.

⁵ Albayhaqi, *Al-Sunan Al-Kubraa*, 10:323.

⁶ Albayhaqi, 10:323.

⁷ Al-Bukhari, *Sahih Al-Bukhari*, 1:6.

⁸ Al-Bukhari, 1:56.

⁹ *The Quran*, 26:90.

¹⁰ Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr Al-Qur'ān al-'Azīm*, 6:134.

¹¹ Ibn Qayyim al-Jawzīyah, *Al-Jawab al-Kafi Li-Man Sa'ala "an al-Dawa"* *al-Shafi*, 121-122.

¹² *The Quran*, 64:11.

¹³ *The Quran*, 49:14.

¹⁴ Al-Nisaburi, *Sahih Muslim*, 4:2045.

¹⁵ Al-Sijjistani, *Sunan Abi Dawood*, 7:399.

¹⁶ *The Quran*, 22:32.

¹⁷ *The Quran*, 33:51

¹⁸ Al-Nisaburi, *Sahih Muslim*, 4:1986.

¹⁹ Al-Nisaburi, 4:1987.

²⁰ Al-Bukhari, *Sahih Al-Bukhari*, 1:6.

²¹ *The Quran*, 114:5.

²² Al-Nisaburi, *Sahih Muslim*, 3:1476.

²³ Al-Tirmidhī, *Sunan Al-Tirmidhi (Al-Jami' Al-Kabeer)*, 4:604.

- ²⁴ *The Quran*, 33:32.
- ²⁵ *The Quran*, 40:35.
- ²⁶ Al-Nisaburi, *Sahih Muslim*, 1:93.
- ²⁷ *The Quran*, 83:14.
- ²⁸ Al-Tirmidhī, *Sunan Al-Tirmidhi (Al-Jami' Al-Kabeer)*, 5:434.
- ²⁹ Bin Mālik, *Muwatta Imam Malik*, 2:990.
- ³⁰ An-Nasai, *Sunan An-Nasai*, 8:254.
- ³¹ Al-Nisaburi, *Sahih Muslim*, 4:2183.
- ³² Ibn Mājah, *Sunan Ibn Majah*, 2:1409.
- ³³ Al-Tirmidhī, *Sunan Al-Tirmidhi (Al-Jami' Al-Kabeer)*, 5:551.
- ³⁴ Al-Tirmidhī, 5:523.
- ³⁵ *The Quran*, 22:46.
- ³⁶ Al-Bukhari, *Al-Adab Al-Mufrad*, 192.
- ³⁷ Al-Nisaburi, *Sahih Muslim*, 4:1980.
- ³⁸ Al-Dhuhli, *Musnad Ahmad Ibn Hanbal*, 29:533.
- ³⁹ Al-Bukhari, *Sahih Al-Bukhari*, 6:377.

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