

Ethical Dimensions of God-to-Man Relation according to Rūmī and Ibn ‘Arabī

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Abstract

‘Good’ and ‘evil’ are often regarded as the most general, and at the same time universal categories that shape human moralities and ethical theories. Islamic ethics is no exception. The Quran uses the concepts of khayr (good) and sharr (evil) to denote what the world as a whole with its various parts and events taking place in it can bring to the human being. ‘Good’ and ‘evil’ as philosophical categories were elaborated in Mu‘tazilism and later in Sufism along the lines generally adopted in Islamic ethics. As for the falāsifa, they were largely dependant on Aristotelian and, even more, Neoplatonic view on good and evil.

Although the Mu‘tazilites and the Šūfīs proceed from the intuitions of the Quran, their theories differ from it in at least one respect. Quran regards good and evil as relative categories. Something is evil not because it participates in an evil principle, but because its ‘bad’ effects are overweighing the ‘good’ ones. Fiqh adopts the same basis for prohibiting and sanctioning, and therefore the prohibited may easily be not only sanctioned ad hoc but even prescribed as obligatory if its ‘good’ effect prevails over the ‘evil’ one in a given situation. As for the Mu‘tazilites, they strive to treat good and evil as consistently non-relative categories, claiming at the same time that the outcome and the meaning of the Divine actions is only ‘good’ and never ‘evil,’ e.g., they argue that the punishment of sinners is not an ‘evil’ for them but a manifestation of God’s ‘concern’ about their fate resulting out of His ‘benevolence.’

Sufism can be treated as an interpreter of this Islamic legacy, as it proceeds along the line of non-relative philosophical approach to the good and evil. Ethical theories of Rūmī and Ibn ‘Arabī, the two prominent Šūfī thinkers, appear at the first glance to be opposite. They seemingly may be qualified as ‘ethical dualism’ on the part of Rūmī (he accepts the

dichotomy of good and evil which are sharply distinct and immiscible principles) vs. ‘ethical monism’ on the part of Ibn ‘Arabī (whose basic assumption resulting out of his ontologism is ‘all is good’). This qualification seems to be confirmed by these authors’ elaboration of traditional ethical topics like love (‘ishq) and beloved (ma‘shūq), temptation (fitna), thankfulness (shukr), patience (ṣabr) and complaint (shakwa), autonomy of human will (ikhtiyār) and action (fi‘l), attitude towards other religions. However, I will argue that this opposition is not as sharp as it might appear after the comparison of the relevant texts. Epistemological theory which Ibn ‘Arabī calls ‘perplexity’ (ḥayra) treats the truth as an entwinement of the two opposites that would ordinarily be considered mutually exclusive. Therefore his ethical monism does not rule out dualism, but on the contrary presupposes it according to the strategy of the ‘perplexed’ (ḥā’ir) reasoning. Rūmī moves from the other end, as his dualistic theses develop into discourse which leads him to what at least logically is compatible with ethical monism.

M. Fakhry, a well-known scholar of Islamic ethics, points in his fundamental study ‘Ethical Theories in Islam’ to the scarcity of ethical thought in Islamic philosophy. There is a good reason to agree with that, but only as far as *falsafa* (which is the chief object of M. Fakhry’s attention), as well as the Ismā‘īlī and, to some extent, the Ishrāqī thought (which remained outside the scope of his book) are concerned. These schools of Islamic philosophy followed mainly Greek, which means in this case chiefly Aristotelian and Neoplatonic, way of understanding the good and the evil and developed ethics along these lines. But as far as the philosophical Kalām and Taṣawwuf are concerned, this statement does not appear as valid.

I will consider the basics of the ethical thought of the two prominent Ṣūfī thinkers, Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī (1207-1273) and Muḥyī al-Dīn Ibn ‘Arabī (1165-1240), in the general perspective of Islamic approach to the concepts of good and evil. While doing so, I will be distinguishing between the religious and the philosophical treatments of the topic as the ‘relative’ and the ‘absolute’ understandings of these categories.

Islamic ethics appears to be no exception from the well-known assumption that the ‘good’ and the ‘evil’ are the basic and universal moral ideas. It is rather obvious that the concept of ‘good’ (*khayr*) is one of the chief Quranic notions. Frequency of its occurrence, among other things, testifies to that. The term *khayr* (‘good’) appears in the Quran 176 times, not to speak about its derivatives. The term *sharr* (‘evil’) is by far less frequent, as it occurs only 31 times throughout the Quranic text. Though in a very simplified form, these facts reflect the general ‘optimistic’ approach of Islam to the basic ethical issues. Of course, *khayr* and *sharr* are not the only terms that denote the concepts of good and evil, although they are expressive enough in the context of the present discussion.

In the Quran and the Sunna the good and the evil are treated as relative rather than absolute concepts. It means that if the Sharī‘a prohibits some things, it does so not because those things participate in a certain evil principle, but because the good that results out of these things is by far and without doubt outbalanced by the evil they bring. Such is, for example, the gambling which, though bringing delight to the human soul (which is a certain good), results in an evil that beyond doubt outweighs this benefit, since the gambler might lose his part of the camel and later starve together with his family. What is more important and even worse in its effects, is the fact that gambling absorbs the man totally and leaves no place in his soul for the true faith and affection. The same applies to perhaps the most important thing in religious ethics. People are persuaded to adopt the true faith because Islam will certainly to bring the good to its followers both in this life and in the hereafter, whereas other faiths might bring some benefits to their adherents on the earth but will inevitably cause evil after death (which is a settled fact at least in the case of *mushrikūn*). The balance of good and evil is quite obvious and is supposed to motivate the human behavior.

The attitude adopted in *fiqh* is basically the same. The ‘five categories’ (*al-aḥkām al-khamsa*) classify the human deeds as good or evil after sorting out the *mubāḥ* actions (those that leave the Lawgiver indifferent). The juridical aspect is thus added to the ethical estimation of human actions. It seems important that this ethical aspect is not forced out by the juridical one in the reasoning of the *fuqahā*’ or overshadowed by it. The most ‘radical’ evaluation is expressed by the *wājib-maḥzūr* (‘obligatory-interdicted’) pair of categories, whereas the non-mandatory prohibitions and prescriptions fall into the *sunna-makrūh* class of opposites. However, even the most ‘extreme’ of these categories do not express the absolute and unchangeable evaluations of the thing, as they can easily be swapped with the change of context which reverses the balance of good and evil. The *khamr* (alcohol) is a well-known example of that kind. Its consumption is prohibited absolutely (*maḥzūr*) in ordinary contexts because of the evil resulting out of its usage. But if a Muslim had a choke and might die, and has no other liquid to drink, he/she not only may but is obliged to save his/ her life by drinking some alcohol. Thus the usage of *khamr* in a given situation becomes not just permitted, but ‘obligatory’ (*wājib*).

Philosophy puts aside this strategy of relative and context-dependant evaluation. Instead, it adopts the ‘absolute’ standpoint which results out of the basic philosophical attitude which the Western tradition usually calls ‘the critical spirit.’ The Philosopher would not agree to take something external and not belonging to the thing under consideration as the ground for its qualification. The basis and the foundation of all the thing’s qualities needs to be discovered inside, not outside, the thing.

The Mu‘tazilites were the first Islamic thinkers to make an attempt of building up such ‘absolute’ ethical evaluation. I will speak about the two themes which seem important for our present purposes out of the plentitude of topics addressed by the early Mutakallimūn.

Firstly, it is the question concerning the qualification of the Divine acts. On very rare occasions did the Mu‘tazilites agree among themselves, but this question was one of those. As al-Ash‘arī relates, in fact all of them shared the opinion that the evil created by God is only called ‘evil’ metaphorically (*majāz*), it is not evil in its reality (*ḥaqīqa*). In the light of the semiotic theory of *ma‘nā* (literally ‘sense’) and its indication (*dalāla*), which was developed already in the early Islamic philosophical and philological thought, this thesis means the following. Any act of God and all the things created by Him indicate only the ‘good’ as their *ma‘nā* (‘sense’) as long as the ‘proper’, or the ‘true’ indication (*ḥaqīqa*) is concerned. But the Quran speaks about the ‘evil’ brought to the unbelievers by God’s acts, e.g., calamities in this life and punishment in the hereafter. However, the Mu‘tazilites argue that ‘evil’ is not the proper sense indicated by these Divine actions. ‘Evil’ is the proper sense of some other things, the place of which the Divine acts occupy in such cases and therefore indicate the ‘evil’ as their metaphorical sense. In a similar way the Mu‘tazilites solved the problem of unbelievers’ damnation (*la‘na*) by God. According to them, it is not evil but ‘justice’ (*‘adl*), wisdom, good and appropriate (*ṣalāh*) for the unbelievers’ (*Maqālāt al-islāmiyyīn*, Wiesbaden 1980, p.249).

Secondly, it is the question of whether the act prescribed by the Sharī‘a is a ‘good act’ (*ḥasana*) by itself or by virtue of God’s commandment, and, accordingly whether the forbidden act is a ‘bad act’ (*sayyi‘a*) by itself or because of the Divine prohibition. The Mu‘tazilites were doing their best to reach the rational explanation of the questions asked. Following the same line and proceeding from their assumption that the things have their own nature not overwhelmed in certain cases even by the Divine will, some of them agreed on the following. What the God could have never prescribed as obligatory and what He could have never prohibited is ‘good’ and ‘evil’ by itself. As for the commandments which could have been

given in an opposite way to what we find in the Sharī‘a, they are good or evil only because the God commanded so and have no good or evil quality in themselves.

Thus the early Mutakallimūn declared the absolutely good character of the Divine acts and grounded the Divine Law in universal ethics, drawing a distinction between the ethically justified commandments and those given arbitrarily.

Falāsifa, the Ismā‘īlī and the early Ishrāqī thinkers can hardly be said to be inventive in the sphere of ethics. In philosophy *per se* they followed mainly the Neoplatonic paradigm in treating the problem of good and evil and stuck to the Aristotelian and Platonic models in the books on temperaments and their improvement (numerous *Tahdhīb al-akhlāq* treatises which would baffle even the most patient of readers by their endlessly varying classifications of the soul’s faculties), or simply reproduced the Greek prototypes adding little new (e.g., *Risāla fī māhiyyat al-‘adl* ‘Treatise on the Essence of Justice’ by Miskawayh). All this could hardly help in settling the ethical issues that faced the Muslim society.

Now let us consider the foundations of ethical thought of the two prominent Šūfī thinkers, Jalāl al-Dīn *Rūmī* and Muḥyī al-Dīn Ibn ‘Arabī.

At the first glance, they appear to be incompatible, if not contradictory. Let us first speak about them in general, and later get down to the details and concrete examples.

What *Rūmī* says could be put down as follows. Good and evil are the two opposites that never meet. The goal of the human being is to distinguish the one from the other, to set them apart and never mix them up. Those two notions are the instrument of universal ethical categorisation: any human deed is classified as either good or evil,

and the human goal is to stay as far from evil and as close to good as possible.

Taken in that generalised form, the ethical basics of *Rūmī*'s thought appear only too familiar to anyone brought up in Christian or Judaic milieu. And perhaps this is no incident, if we take into account the fact that the ancient Persian thought had beyond doubt influenced the Persian Muslim thinkers, poets and philosophers alike. The sharply drawn distinction between the good and the evil as the two principles of the universe is the basic feature of this ancient Persian legacy. The claim that some contemporary authors make saying that Zoroastrianism could have influenced the Jewish thought and could have given rise to the Jewish ethics is not quite without ground. If this is true to at least some extent, then this similarity of ethical basics that we find in *Rūmī*'s writing and in those of the Christian and Jewish authors seems less surprising.

As for Ibn ‘Arabī, his position looks strikingly different from what *Rūmī* puts down as an indubitable principle. Al-Shaykh al-akbar argues that nothing is evil ‘as such’ (*bi al-‘ayn*), and that every thing in the universe should rather be evaluated positively, as good. If so, what is the reason for the prescriptions and prohibitions of the Divine law? *Rūmī* is quite definite on that point, as he sets the good aside from the evil and says that ‘the Supreme God... is pleased only by the good’ (*Kitāb fī-hī mā fī-hī*, Tehran 1330, p.179). But if, as Ibn ‘Arabī puts it, everything in the world belongs to the domain of the existence (*wujūd*), and since the existence belongs only to the God (the theory which was to be called later *waḥdat al-wujūd* ‘unity of existence’), any thing is by virtue of that fact good in itself and never evil, -- if so, why should anything at all be prohibited? Many scholars of Ibn ‘Arabī’s thought find parallels for his ideas in Neoplatonic writings. To make justice to the Great Shaykh, I would say that at least in that issue he does not follow the Neoplatonic trend of thought and does not adopt the idea of evil as the ‘lack’ of existence. This idea

equalizing the material and the bad was readily available at the Islamic intellectual market, and al-Fārābī or Ibn Sīnā are only the too well-known names who made good use of it. But Ibn ‘Arabī insists that this is not the case, and any of the least admired things in the world, e.g., garlic, is only good when considered in itself. Why then did the Prophet detest it? He disliked not the garlic ‘as such,’ Ibn ‘Arabī insists, but its smell (*rā’iḥa*) (*Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam*, Beirut 1980, p.221). It is so because the thing as such (*‘ayn*) can never be qualified as ‘disliked’ (*makrūh*), only its outward and relative effects can be treated that way.

This ‘ontologism’ of Ibn ‘Arabī leads him to conclusions that would seem rather bizarre when introduced without the philosophical reasoning that stands behind them. Perhaps the most striking for the ‘ordinary’ Muslim mentality is the claim that *no* religion is wrong, and that *every* worshipper worships *only* the One and the True God. This is rather uncommon even as pure theory. However, Ibn ‘Arabī does not stop at this point and draws the logically inevitable conclusion saying that those who were trying to make people abandon their ‘wrong’ faiths, were thus preventing them from worshipping the God and therefore were acting in fact against His will. Even the odious Pharaoh of the Quran appears in *Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam* as the server of God, and following the argumentation of the Great Shaykh we cannot but agree with his logically consistent reasoning as long as we accept his basic ontological position which is qualified as *waḥdat al-wujūd*.

This, to put it mildly, religious tolerance of Ibn ‘Arabī (of which I am citing only a few examples out of many) stands in sharp contrast to *Rūmī*’s position. Treating the question of the true faith, *Rūmī* is quite definite in drawing a distinctive line between Islam and all other religions. He does not hesitate to criticize not only pagan beliefs or actions of the adversaries of Islam, but Christianity as well (*Fī-hī*, p.124-125), proceeding from rather orthodox reasons quite

‘evident’ for anyone (e.g., *Rūmī* asks how a humble creature like ‘Īsā can hold the seven heavens with all their weight, taking this argument quite literally). Addressing of the issue of love (*‘ishq*), *Rūmī* feels little doubt that there is ‘the real beloved’ (*ma ‘shūq haqīqī*) to be set apart from other objects of love that do not comply with that criteria (*Fī-hī*, p.160). It is not difficult to see how distinct this position is from that of Ibn ‘Arabī when he says the God is not contained by any direction (*ayn*, literally ‘where’) but is to be found everywhere, and that the human being is to discover Him always, not only when facing the *qibla* (*Fuṣūṣ*, p.80, 114 and other), or when he insists that any temptation (*fitna*) can easily be overcome not by turning away from the ‘wrong’ object of affection but by making it the ‘real’ one through seeing it as a manifestation of God (*al-Futūḥāt al-makkiyya*, Beirut, vol.4, p.453-456).

I was arguing that Ibn ‘Arabī’s position is quite consistent with his basic assumption that the Reality is one and all-encompassing, and therefore it is impossible to differ from it or somehow deviate from the Real in any of our actions. As for *Rūmī*, he also hardly doubts that the human being is more than just a creature under God’s command, and warns us against underestimating our real value. In *Fī-hī* he compares the man to pure gold and says that it would be a folly to make a turnip pot out of it. The precious jewel of the human spirit is for *Rūmī*, not unlike Ibn ‘Arabī, the image of God. To put it in one word, *Rūmī* is not an adversary of Ibn ‘Arabī’s *waḥdat al-wujūd* theory. If so, why do the ethics of the two thinkers appear so different? *Rūmī* proceeds from the dualism of good and evil which never come together, while Ibn ‘Arabī’s position is rather to be called ethical monism. There should be little doubt that the Persian cultural legacy left its trace in *Rūmī*’s thought, whereas it could hardly have influenced Ibn ‘Arabī’s theory. Is the difference between the two thinkers explained by the diversity of their cultural background? Or perhaps there is much more similarity than it appears at first glance between their views due to their common ontological premises?

To answer this question, let us take a closer look at how *Rūmī* explains the relation between the existence of good and evil and the fact that the God is pleased only by the good.

Addressing this topic, *Rūmī* introduces the notion of the Divine will (*irāda*). Unlike the Mu‘tazilites, he does not hesitate to say that the God wills both the good and the evil (*Fī-hī*, p.179), which is meant to say that the God creates them. However, what is the evil (*sharr*) that *Rūmī* is speaking of? On the one hand, it is the real, not the metaphorical evil that he has in mind. In this point *Rūmī* differs from the Mu‘tazilites with their universal tendency to treat every evil brought by the acts of God to the human being as *majāz* (metaphor), not the reality. On the other hand, this evil, since it is evil really (*ḥaqīqatan*), not metaphorically, is evil ‘as such’ (*bi al-‘ayn*). This standpoint becomes quite evident when *Rūmī* says: ‘The willing of evil (*sharr*) would have been bad (*qabīḥ*) if He willed it for its sake (*li-‘ayni-hi*)’ (*Fī-hī*, p.180), which would be impossible if the evil had not been evil by itself (*bi al-‘ayn*). This means that *Rūmī* does not take advantage of the possibility that Ibn ‘Arabī benefits from when he says that everything is exclusively good as such but is either good or evil according to human tastes, affections and dislikes, in short, that everything is good or evil only ‘as established’ (*bi al-waḍ‘*), that is, relatively, not absolutely and not substantially.

Rūmī goes a different way. He says that the evil is willed not for its sake, but rather for the sake of the good. This thesis is coupled with another one: no good can be brought to the human being in this world if that human being is not suffering from certain evil. As the teacher is willing for the ignorance of his pupils because otherwise he would have been unable to instruct them, as the baker is willing for the hunger of his customers to feed them, as the doctor is willing for the illness of his patients to cure them, — in the same way the God is willing for the evil in the world to bring the good to people (*Fī-hī*,

p.179). *Rūmī* even addresses the topic of the ruler and his subordinates, which is the closest analogy of the God-to-man relation, and says that the rulers are willing for the disobedience and even for attacks of the enemies to manifest their power and authority, though they are not pleased by them.

Taking these two theses together, we discover that, according to *Rūmī*, it is impossible to will the good without willing the evil, although the evil is willed only for the sake of the good and never for itself. *Rūmī* is quite definite on that point as he stresses: ‘The adversary says [that the God] wills evil in no aspect. But it is impossible to will the thing and not to will all its concomitants (*lawāzim*)’ (*Fī-hī*, p.179).

This adds a new and very important dimension to the otherwise sharp distinction between the good and the evil drawn by *Rūmī*, since it means that it is impossible to establish the exclusive goodness and to rule out the evil, at least in this world, and that the evil and the good are by their very nature so closely intertwined that they do not come without each other. Now *Rūmī*’s position appears much closer to Ibn ‘Arabī’s monism, and especially to his strategy of the ‘perplexed’ (*ḥā’ir*) reasoning which shifts from one of the opposites to the other without ever making a stop and treating each as a prerequisite for the other and its concomitant.

To make the last but very important step in this short exploration of *Rūmī*’s ethical thought, we must return to the mainstream of our discussion to answer the following question: how is the evil, the prerequisite of the good, exemplified in the case of the direct God-to-man ethical (not ontological) relation, which is the case of the Divine law, its prescriptions and prohibitions?

In the examples discussed above (the baker, the teacher, etc.), the evil as the necessary condition for the good is represented by a certain state of the object of benevolence: hunger of those to be fed,

ignorance of those to be instructed. Something very similar is to be found in the human being as such, when treated in general in his relation to the God. Such is the unwillingness of man to follow the path of good and his inclination to choose the evil. For that, and only for that reason was the Law given to people. In his well-known argument *Rūmī* says that no one calls ‘Do not eat the stones!’ a prohibition, and no one calls ‘Consume the viands!’ addressed to a hungry man a prescription, although these phrases, from the point of view of linguistics, are a prohibition (*nahy*) and prescription (*‘amr*). They are not called so for the reason that no obstacle stays in their way to being implemented, because the human being would naturally and without hesitation behave that way. However, the human being is endowed with the soul which commands him to do evil things (*nafs ‘ammāra bi al-sū’*) (Quran 12:53), and it is this evil soul that the God wills and that He creates for the man in order to pour His benefits on him and lead him towards the good. This means that the human spirit is a place where the two kinds of orders, those of his own soul prone to evil and those coming from the God Himself, meet to come in conflict. Thus the human being in *Rūmī*’s thought is endowed with a chance to choose freely between the two opposite commandments, those of God and of his own soul, and to proceed in either of the two directions presented to him as options.

