

Dualism and Monism: How Really Different Are the Two Versions of Sufi Ethics?

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 the Aristotelian and, even more, the Neoplatonic view on good and evil.

Although the Mu‘tazila and the Sūfīs proceed from the intuitions of the Quran, their theories differ from it at least in 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‘tazila, they strive to treat good and evil as 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 approaches to the good and evil. The ethical theories of Rūmī and Ibn ‘Arabī, the two prominent Sūfī 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 (*sabr*) 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. The epistemological theory which Ibn ‘Arabī calls ‘perplexity’ (*hayra*) treats the truth as an entwining 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’ (*hā’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, in his fundamental study ‘Ethical Theories in Islam’ points to the scarcity of ethical thought in Islamic philosophy. There is a good reason to agree with him, 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. Those schools of Islamic philosophy followed mainly Greek thought, which means in this case chiefly Aristotelian and Neoplatonic ways of understanding good and evil, and developed their ethics along these lines. But as far as philosophical Kalām and Taṣawwuf are concerned, this statement does not appear valid.

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

Islamic ethics appears to be no exception from the well-known assumption that ‘good’ and ‘evil’ are basic and universal moral ideas. It is rather obvious that the concept of ‘good’ (*khayr*) is one of the chief Quranic notions. The 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, occurring only 31 time throughout the Quranic text. Though in a very simplified form, these facts reflect the generally ‘optimistic’ approach of Islam to 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 good and evil are treated as relative rather than absolute concepts. This 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 those 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 runs the risk of losing his part of the camel and starving 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 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 bring 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-ahkām al-khamsa*) classify 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 evaluation 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 reversed with the change of context which reverses the balance of good and evil. *Khamr* (alcohol) is a well-known example of this. Its consumption is prohibited absolutely (*maḥzūr*) in ordinary contexts because of the evil resulting from its usage. But if a Muslim is choking 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‘tazila were the first Islamic thinkers to make an attempt at building up such an ‘absolute’ ethical evaluation. Among the many topics addressed by the early Mutakallimūn I will speak about the two which seem important for our present purposes.

The first is the qualification of Divine acts. On very rare occasions did the Mu‘tazila agree among themselves, and this question was one of those. As al-Ash‘arī relates, in fact all 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 already developed in early Islamic philosophical and philological thought, this thesis means the following. Any act of God and all the things created by Him have only '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'tazila 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 'evil' as their metaphorical sense. In a similar way the Mu'tazila solved the problem of unbelievers' damnation (*la'na*) by God. According to them, it is not evil but 'justice ('*adl*), wisdom, good and appropriate (*ṣalāḥ*) 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'tazila were doing their best to reach a 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 never prescribe as obligatory and what He could never prohibit, is 'good' and 'evil' by itself. As for the commandments which could have been given in an opposite way to that found 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 their 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 Sūfī thinkers, Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī and Muḥyī al-Dīn Ibn ‘Arabī.

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

What Rūmī says could be put down as follows. Good and evil are two opposites that never meet. The goal of the human being is to distinguish 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 ancient Persian thought had beyond doubt influenced the Persian Muslim thinkers, poets and philosophers alike. The sharply drawn distinction between good and 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 Jewish thought and could have given rise to Jewish ethics is not quite without ground. If this is true to at least some extent, then this similarity of basic ethics that we find in Rūmī’s writing and in those of the Christian and Jewish authors would seem 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 fi-hī mā fi-hī*, Tehran 1330, p.179). Ibn ‘Arabī holds that everything in the world belongs to the domain of existence (*wujūd*), and since the existence belongs only to 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 do justice to the Greatest 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 identifying the material with the bad was readily available at Islamic intellectual market,

and al-Fārābī or Ibn Sīnā are among those who made good use of it. But Ibn ‘Arabī insists that this is not the case, and that 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). This 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 ‘ontology’ 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 but draws the logically inevitable conclusion saying that those who tried 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 Greatest 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*.

Ibn ‘Arabī’s latitude in religion 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 wonders how a humble creature like ‘Īsā can hold the seven heavens with all their weight, taking this argument quite literally). Addressing the issue of love (*‘ishq*), Rūmī feels little doubt that there is ‘the real beloved’ (*ma ‘shūq ḥaqīqī*) 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 that 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*, vol.4, p.453-456).

Ibn ‘Arabī’s position is quite consistent with his basic assumption that the Reality is one and that it is impossible to go beyond it 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. In sum, 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 an 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 between their views than appears at first glance 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 God is pleased only by the good.

Addressing this topic, Rūmī introduces the notion of Divine will (*irāda*). Unlike the Mu‘tazila, he does not hesitate to say that God wills both good and evil (*Fī-hī*, p.179), which is meant to say that God creates them. However, what is the evil (*sharr*) of which Rūmī is speaking? 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‘tazila with their tendency to treat every evil brought by 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 Ibn ‘Arabī’s way of saying 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 evil is willed not for its own sake, but rather for the sake of good. This thesis is coupled with another one: no good can be brought to the human being in this world if that human being was not suffering from some evil. As a teacher is willing for the ignorance of his pupils because otherwise he is unable to instruct them, as a baker is willing for the hunger of his customers to feed them, as a doctor is willing for the illness of his patients to cure them, -- in the same way God is willing for evil in the world to bring good to His people (*Fī-hī*, p.179). Rūmī even

addresses the topic of ruler and his subordinates, which is the closest analogy of the God-to-man relation, and says that rulers are willing for 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 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 good and 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 evil and 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’ (*hā’ir*) reasoning which shifts from one of the opposites to the other without ever making a stop and treats each as a prerequisite for the other and its concomitant.

To make the last but very important step in this short research, we must return to the mainstream of our discussion to answer the following question: how, according to Rūmī, is evil, the prerequisite of good, exemplified in the case of 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.), evil as the necessary condition for 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 God. Such is the unwillingness of man to follow the path of good and his inclination to choose 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 ‘Eat the viands!’ addressed to a hungry man a prescription, although those phrases are, grammatically speaking, prohibition (*nahy*) and prescription (*‘amr*). They are not called so for the reason that no obstacle stays in their way, because a human being would naturally and without hesitation behave that way. However, man 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 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. As for Ibn 'Arabī, he assumes as well that the human being is endowed with ability to choose whether to obey the Divine law or not. But whatever he chooses, he anyway obeys the God's commandment, though not the one which takes the form of the Law (*'amr taklīfī*) but the one which is called 'the creative commandment' (*'amr takwīnī*). The first is not immediate and therefore might be disobeyed, whereas the second is direct and its fulfillment can never be avoided (*Fuṣūṣ*, pp. 165, 97-98, 115-116).