

VIRTUE IN THE DIVINE COMMAND THEORY OF ETHICS FROM THE SOKOTO CALIPHATE SCHOLARS

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Abstract

This paper gives attention to the argument for divine command theory (DCT) of ethics, the notion that morality depends upon God's command. Philosophers have discussed this theory in relations to the Abrahamic religions (Judaism, Christianity and Islam). Among them are those who argue against this theory and those who prolifically defend it. Some Jewish scholars, like Immanuel Jakobovits, argue that Jewish tradition supports DCT, while others, like Aharon Lichtenstein, object the argument on the ground that tradition denies this view. According to the common law, the opposite of all evil fall under a divine command. Thus, it is not possible that anyone rightly engage in evil acts, because they are not performed meritoriously. And if they should be done by any meritoriously, then they would not be called evil. Therefore, some philosophers understand that any evil act is not commanded by the divine. Then, do we conceptualise ethics from theological perspective? The paper attempts answering this by analytic method, considering the idea of DCT on virtue, an ethical conducts to which the Sokoto Caliphate scholars give a divine command theory explanation. The paper questions how virtue is theorised by philosophers, especially in the utilitarian view, and how it relate to the ideas of the Sokoto Caliphate scholars. The outcome shows that morality, according to those scholars, has its roots in religious instruction, and that a society can chose to apply the divine command ethical theory for the moral setting of its people to achieve political, social and economic development.

Keywords: Islam, Ethics, Divine, Virtue, Utilitarian.

Introduction

We have attempted a critique of the divine command theory (DTC) of ethics (Ibrahim, 2021). The DTC is a theory of ethics that grounds the nature of ethical demands in the fact that they represent the command of God (Blackburn, 2008:103). Also called theological voluntarism, divine command is a position which claims that **God's** command is the ultimate source of moral **obligation** or that God's **will** is the basis of moral laws. Grabber claims to be convinced that a DCT of ethics has more going for it than has been generally acknowledged (1975:62). However, one factor responsible for obscuring the merits of a DCT is the heavy-handedness with which philosophers have been led to deal with it as a result of trying to handle too much at once. For philosophical analysis, we must distinguish between divine to engage in acts of worship, ritual, prayer, and other “specifically religious” and those divine commands that give rise to moral obligation. The

criterion for distinguishing moral commands from such non-moral directives as religious commands can be provided by philosophical analysis of the concept of morality. This topic has been the subject of a good deal of discussion in philosophical circles, but no general consensus has been reached (Frankena, 1965). It would take us away from the focus of this paper if we attempt to deal with this issue here, so we shall keep it for another discussion.

Numerous philosophers have argued that the idea, for example, that God's command is a necessary and sufficient condition of the moral rightness of an act fails to effectively convey the *dependence* of the act's moral rightness on God's command (Sagi and Statman 1995:20). However, most versions of the DCT involve both conveying this dependence and explaining its nature (Sagi and Statman 1995). For Leibowitz, Judaism, at the level of the individual religious life who takes his or her faith seriously, is essentially co-extensive with the observance of Torah and the commandments. He acknowledges that, on a more abstract plane, Torah study and observance of the practical commandments do not exhaust the entire content of Judaism. But so far as the individual's Jewish life is concerned, he remains immovable that observance of Torah and the commandments is the fundamental relevant characteristic (**Ibrahim, 2021**). On the part of Christianity, the perspective of the DCT is reflected in certain passages in the Reformation writings of Luther and Calvin (Idziak, 1979:95). In Islam, there are ethical presuppositions of the Qur'an and Hadith. The Qur'an is the book revealed by God to the Prophet of Islam, Muhammad (peace be upon him). It has within it laws that guide the entire conduct of human life. Another source of ethics in Islam is the Hadith. This is the compilation of the words and deeds of the Prophet which broadly explain the teachings of the Qur'an.

The ontological problem of the nature of ethical value concepts and the epistemological problem of the source of knowledge of ethical values in Islam have been elaborately treated by George Hourani (1985). He explains why, we can infer, the Sokoto Caliphate scholars have relied principally on religion, basing their actions on the DCT, to guide the moral character of the society. Their arguments for using and defending the theory to shape moral character are replete in their treatises. However, we shall take a look at the root from which they tapped this method, which is the early Islamic ethics.

Early Islamic Ethics

To support the argument that God's command is a necessary condition for moral rightness, let us present a logical formulation before looking at ethics in the Islamic point of view. In a renowned passage in Plato's *Euthyphro*, Socrates poses the following question: 'Is what is holy holy because the gods approve it, or do they approve it because it is holy?' (Plato, *Euthyphro* 10a). The contemporary philosophical literature inclines to reorganize Socrates's query, which it terms 'the *Euthyphro* dilemma', in monotheistic and more modern vocabulary. The horns of the dilemma are then modified in the following style: is it the case that (1) an act is right because God commanded (or wanted or willed or approved) it, or alternatively, is it the case that (2) God commanded (or wanted or willed or approved) this act because the act it is right? (Meynell, 1972:223; Burch, 1980:279; Helm, 1981:2; Sagi and Statman, 1995:11)

According to horn According to (1), God, or more precisely His command or will, etc.,

determines morality; morality depends upon God. On (2), by contrast, morality is independent of God; He commands or wills certain things because of moral considerations that are not contingent upon Him. DCT, therefore, can be understood as the idea that if there had been no divine commands, there would have been no morality. On this view, there is simply no such thing as morality without God's commands. Thus, the very existence of moral values and moral obligations depends upon those commands. We can express this stronger interpretation of DCT in the following formulation:

If action *A* is right, then God has commanded us to do *A*. (= If God had not commanded us to do *A*, then *A* would not be right).

Another way of expressing this formulation is to say that God's command is a necessary condition of morality, or of the moral rightness of an act. A formal expression of this idea is as follows:

(x) (Rx \rightarrow Cx) where x = an action, R = 'morally right' and C = 'commanded by God'.

Therefore, our terminology for ease of reference later on is: God's command is a necessary condition of the moral rightness of an act.

Ethics, understood in a broad sense as the study of practical justification, has no particular equivalent in Islam. Instead we find a variety of literary and intellectual genres within which Muslims consider questions of the shape and nature of the good life. Among these genres, *fiqh*, or as many have been accustomed to say, Islamic jurisprudence, stands out as a particularly important discipline, the special interest of which is the discernment of guidance for life through the interpretation of divinely approved sources. To treat Islamic legal thought in the classifications of ethics, as done by the Sokoto caliphate scholars, is not a new notion. In an earlier focus on Islam, Kevin Reinhart suggested that students of ethics might find in the texts and arguments associated with Islamic law a rich source for their interests (Reinhart 1983). He argued that careful study of legal materials would contribute more to an understanding of Islamic ethics than would the study of Islamic philosophy or theology.

In maintenance of the ontological objective position of ethical values in the Islamic point of view, there are three points worthy of note. First, the Qur'an used an established language in illuminating the divine message, the Arabic language. It used the specific concepts with their unambiguous meanings and implications, and addressed many ethical terms to pagans, such concepts, for instance, are *ʿadl* (justice), *zulm* (transgression), *khayr* (goodness), *sharr* (evil). It used ethical terms, therefore, in a way that people could understand. Good and evil deeds mentioned in such verses as Q.16:90, "Surely Allah enjoins the doing of justice and the doing of good (to others) and the giving to the kindred, and He forbids indecency and evil and rebellion; He admonishes you that you may be mindful."

The second point is that many ethical attributes are predicated of God. As such these are difficult to interpret in terms of obedience to His own commands, which were made for man. Certainly, ethical attributes are distinct from ethical command. Like the statement in Q.10:4: "He may with justice recompense those who believe and do good" and the continuous assertion in the Qur'an that He is never unjust to his servants; as in Q.8:51: "Allah is not in the least unjust to the servants" and that "Allah is Benignant to His

servants” as in Q.42:19.

The third point is that if God is not good and just in a human common sense, but in another supernatural sense, then those divine attributes will be made meaningless and unpleasant to human moral feeling and religious piety. All that will be left for humanity is fear of an unknown mystic power, and a blind submission to subjective commands. This is definitely not the message of the Qur'an regarding human being's relation to God. The purpose of believing in and doing good deeds and avoiding bad is not only chastisement and remuneration in the hereafter but also God's pleasure and love. This is clearly stated, for instance, in the Qur'an. It says in Q.5:13, “surely Allah loves those who do good (to others).” And in Q.3:159, “place your trust in Allah; surely Allah loves those who trust.” As such, the Sokoto caliphate scholars ontologically explore the Qur'an and Hadith in moral issues of the society.

The Sokoto Caliphate Scholars

In the attempt to achieve moral development of the state, one of the ethical behaviours that the Sokoto Caliphate scholars give a divine command theory explanation is virtue. These scholars, popularly known as the triumvirate, are Sheikh Uthman bin Fodiye, Abdullahi bin Fodiye and Muhammad Bello. They sought for a virtuous society and political order whose guiding principle is the realization of human excellence. In philosophy, virtue was not only human quality or moral virtue, but also the quality of anything in the performance of its needed **function**. Human virtues are generally thought to include **courage**, **temperance**, piety, **justice**, and **wisdom**, but there were conflicting beliefs about them. **Socrates** devoted all of his life to clarifying the **meaning** of these virtues, claiming crucially that virtue is **knowledge** (Bunnin and Yu, 2004:727). One foremost aspect of **Plato's theory of ideas** was to launch the metaphysical foundation for moral virtues and to determine how a man should live. As such, in the ancient world ethical theory was more or less co-extensive with the doctrine of virtue, that is to say of qualities of individual character. It is not particularly of place to consider the influence of the Platonic habit of thought upon the conception of the virtuous life, particularly of a developing young person. The general characteristic of a developing person is that of acquiring the virtues, so that the virtuous life appears to him at first as something outside himself, something that has to be grasped and brought into his own possession.

The virtuous is the one who lives by senses rather than by the interior grace within. Such a person is first moved by authority or admonished by a teacher; to accept the good where it is found, and it always found in what others say and do. So the person begins by being obedient and by imitating the ways of others. By degrees, in subduing self-inclinations to dissipate self through senses and sense life, begins to acquire virtues, a fact which is revealed by the delight eventually discovered in exercising self in the ways of others (Pepler, 1952:1). In this way God's word is dictated from outside; which the Muslim must hear and accept it. So the Sokoto caliphate scholars moved the society in this manner to promote virtuous acts.

The ethical principles of the caliphate were founded on the *shari'a* laws which is the divine legislation, moral guide and source of philosophic ideas and principles in Islam. While Bentham argues that in most nations “thefoundations of a useful morality” were

obscured by religious doctrines and false morality (1823:179). These foundations consisted of sensations of pleasure and pain, and self-love was closely related to them: men ... are neither good nor bad, but ready to be either, according as a common interest unites or divides them; that self-love, a sensation necessary to the preservation of the species, is engraved by nature in a manner not to be erased; that a physical sensibility has produced in us a love of pleasure and a hatred of pain; that pleasure and pain have at length produced and opened in all hearts the buds of self-love, which by unfolding themselves give birth to the passions, whence spring all our virtues and vices. (Bentham, 1823:185-6). To Abdullahi, however, the various societies can be define as societies in which human beings come together to cooperate with the aim of becoming virtuous, performing dignified actions and attaining happiness. Such society is distinguished by the presence of knowledge of man's ultimate perfection. This knowledge has to be revelation from God through the Prophets who are morally sound through God's guidance (Abdullahi, Vol. II, 2013:115).

Mill admitted that the same passion that led to the love and practice of virtue in one age or society might produce vice in another. The link between the passions and public utility was not straight-forward. Murderers as well as geniuses might have strong passions (Mill, 1863:286). Mill fully accepted this problem, though he insisted that the route to public utility did not rest with the sacrifice of pleasure and strong passions. He argued instead that the passions, and especially the strong ones, must be made to conform to the public interest without losing their strength, and this was the task of the legislator. His means were the laws and his immediate tools, reward and punishment. "The virtues and vices of a nation", he confirmed, "are always necessary effects of its legislation" (Mill, 1863:317). Despite giving what appears to be great power to the legislator, it did not follow that Mill intended the legislator to be a despot, either enlightened or not. And between republics and despotisms, he clearly favoured republics, where no one was above the law (Mill, 1861:208). He also praised the right of the people to possess freedom of expression and criticism, including freedom of the press (Mill, 1861:301-2). He praised the separation of powers in England, and in his discussion of government, he seemed indebted to Montesquieu. But he rejected Montesquieu's emphasis on the importance of climate to explain differences between states (placing greater emphasis on the laws and legislator), and, unlike Montesquieu, he seemed to praise republics as the repositories of virtue and greatness (Mill, 1965:358).

Similarly, the attempt by the Sokoto scholars was no doubt an attempt to address the menace of oppression and exploitation of the masses, which the first objective of the reform movement set out to achieve. They desired a virtuous society by pinning down the principles of leadership. These principles included the foundations and qualities of leadership, good governance, management of public affairs and struggle against corruption (Bobboyi, 2011:1-13). On the diseases of a society, Mill did not believe that the legislator could simply enact a new set of laws and initiate the reign of virtue, much as Lycurgus supposedly did at Sparta. He criticized sovereigns who acted too hastily: Sovereigns are apt to think, that by a word, or by a law, they can suddenly change the spirit of a nation, and, for instance, render a cowardly and indolent people, courageous and active. They are ignorant that diseases in the state, which are long contracting, require much time in curing; and that in the body politic, as well as in the human, the impatience

of the prince and the sick persons often oppose the cure (Mill, 1965: 356).

In *Masa'il Muhimma Yahtaju ila Ma'rifatiha Ahl al-Sudan* [Important Questions that need to be Known by the People of the Sudan] in 1802-3 and *Wathiqat Ahl al-Sudan* [Letter to the People of Sudan Area] in 1804, Sheikh Uthman ibn Fodiye spell out the revolutionary ideas which informed the change and shows that it was not an affair that can be achieved in a short period of time. He points to the diseases of a society in 'The Letter...' and cautions his followers not to be eager in rebelling from the Hausa kings (Othman Vol. III, 2013:34-35). The Sheikh, therefore, believes that changing the attitude of a state from vicious to a virtuous society can only be possible in a gradual process.

The question of how we become virtuous or good by acting according human nature finds no explicit answer in the texts of the Sokoto scholars. To further explore this topic, we make reference to Abdullahi's view on the foundation of morality alongside the view of utilitarianism. This offers some evidence that the views of Sokoto scholars and the utilitarians are not as dissimilar as they may usually thought to be. While the social and ethical ideal for Abdullahi is the peaceful unification of the state under a just and benevolent ruler (Abdullahi Vol. I, 2013:136), the utilitarians assert that the rightness or wrongness of a unit of behaviour is a quite different function of circumstances (Bentham, 1781:125). That is to say the social and ethical ideal for the utilitarians entails having individuals performing the right action to produce optimistic results. However, this does not exclude the possibility that the two philosophic schools of thought share some very similar views on moral psychology, for they are only disagreeing on the content of what is actually good for human beings in a particular society. Abdullahi's paradoxical remarks on virtue suggest that acting virtuously is not primarily a contrived attempt to fulfil certain goals. This idea finds expression in a famous passage from the *Diya'al Hukkam*, which forms the core of his views on morality and virtue:

It is said in the Prophetic tradition: "There should be neither hurt nor hurting." Al-Matity said: "Hurt is when one of the two neighbours hurt his neighbour (that is, hurt the other), and hurting is when they injure each other." ... there are many ways to hurt... those ways include the smoke of public bathrooms and ovens (chimneys), as well as the dust of crop stacks and the smell of tanners... it is not allowed for a person to initiate a stable of animals near his neighbours house because of their urine and waste as well as their movement at night and during the day because they disturb (the neighbour's) sleep.(Abdullahi Vol. III, 2013:227)

Abdullahi invites us to imagine a simple, ordinary situation, uncomplicated by unusual customs or conventions. He appeals to our intuition and attempts to show that the basis of refraining from doing harm or offering help to others in need is basically one's feeling and emotional response to one's surroundings, a kind of primitive reaction. One may ask, "What is the reason for not hurting one's neighbour?" In reply, Abdullahi would point out that one should have compassion for the neighbour who is about to get hurt. However, there seems to be little room for asking the question "What is the reason for having such compassion?" For, to grasp the meaning and significance of the notion of compassion

implies taking seriously the harm that may affect beings sufficiently similar to us. To put the point here differently, we may say that taking for granted the need to attend to the suffering of the neighbour in this instance itself constitutes the perspective or the attitude of the moral person here: it is not the case that one is left with the question of whether one should care about the well-being of other people after one has already acquired the virtue of compassion.

From this perspective, the very act of asking the question above signals a kind of disagreement that implies deep divergence in ethical attitudes and values: an adequate level of agreement in attitude is lacking in order for the discussion to proceed. We might compare this picture of morality in Abdullahi's writing with certain trends in contemporary thought. Ludwig Wittgenstein states: Giving grounds, however, justifying the evidence comes to an end - but the end is not certain propositions striking us immediately as true, i.e. it is not a kind of seeing on our part; it is our acting, which lies at the bottom of the language-game (Wittgenstein, 1969:204). Abdullahi here seems to hold the view that the justification of morality, as a form of human practice, in the end lies in certain forms of reactions and related attitudes. Human beings, their needs, and reactions in the context of human relationships, give sense to morality. True propositions and beliefs by themselves, isolated from human beings and their activities, have no bearing on moral practices and human conduct. To highlight the importance of attitude and action in comparison with belief, Wittgenstein states that:

I believe that he is not an automaton just like that, so far makes no sense. My attitude towards him is an attitude towards a soul. I am not of the opinion that he has a soul (Wittgenstein, 1953:178.).

From the perspective of human activities and the interactions between human beings, holding the belief that a person is not an automaton is compatible with a variety of attitudes that may have very different practical and ethical consequence. For example, viewing a human being as having a soul can lead to many different kinds of moral attitudes: one may think that the salvation of the soul of a human being depends on the grace of God; or that a human being, having a soul, deserves un-conditional respect. Since such beliefs remain lifeless if disconnected from people's actual ways of living, this suggests that it is attitude or action that gives meaning and significance to human practices. In this sense, attitude and action are important conditions that belong to our complex practices. For Abdullahi, what distinguishes human beings from brutes is morality understood in terms of different kinds, namely certain basic ethical attitudes and reactions. Now if morality is taken to be an expression of some complex combination of attitudes or primitive reactions, the absence of such attitudes or primitive reactions has ethical significance.

For Abdullahi, in an ordinary case where a person is about to get hurt, not being able to respond in any appropriate way casts doubt on the possibility of an ethical discourse. What this implies is that some kind of agreement in attitude is necessary for ethical discussion to go on. The message from Abdullahi's writing can be seen as the claim that virtue is not simply isolated piece of true propositions unrelated to human life. It remains true that how ethical differences can be reconciled will depend on a variety of philosophical and cultural factors. With the absence of some basic agreement and

consensus, a consequence is that virtue can deform into certain self-interested or prudential concerns as in the case when behaviour can only be checked by means of remuneration or chastisement. The perspective been sketched here may provide a means for us to clarify our notion of moral disagreement. Imagine a person who characteristically acts without regard to the suffering or welfare of others - an amoralist, or a Thrasymachus if preferred. It can be misleading to say that the amoralist and a moral person disagree over whether a particular act is right or wrong for the reason that the difference in their moral background and outlook can be so great that it precludes a common morality or a moral language. To say that they disagree over a moral issue ignores the significant possibility that what could constitute a right action for an amoralist can be radically different from that for the moral person.

The worry about a reductive theory of morality and virtue should disappear if we extend our focus to the whole argument that Abdullahi is putting forward. Although primitive reaction plays a fundamental role in moral development, to Abdullahi other factors such as reasoning and cultural understanding are also crucial. Primitive reaction in this sense is at most necessary rather than sufficient for our full moral development. Abdullahi's model of morality and virtue is not a purely intuitionist one that totally excludes the role of thinking and reasoning. He does emphasize that rationality can be used to improve one's moral character, for example in a kind of "extension" where one's concern toward one's family and relatives is extended to other human beings on the ground that they are not significantly different (Abdullahi Vol. III, 2013:250-251). The emphasis on cultural understanding in Abdullahi's work deserves more careful and complete attention.

To a non-philosophical reader of Abdullahi, a large part of the work consists of seemingly unimportant discussion about the question a person operating a mortar or grinding mills at night. For example:

In Islamic jurisdiction, "it is prescribed by the laws that, in giving and receiving, man and woman should not touch each other?" ... "When one's sister-in-law is drowning, does one stretch out a hand to help her?" "Not to help a sister-in-law who is drowning is to be a brute. ... but in stretching out a helping hand to the drowning sister-in-law one uses one's discretion"

(Abdullahi Vol. III, 2013:250-251)

Bearing in mind such example, which emphasizes the importance of the context and the surrounding circumstances of an action, it should become clear that being moral or virtuous for Abdullahi is a complex phenomenon that involves the ability to make fine, sensitive judgments: virtue consists in acting and reacting to particular circumstances in a perceptive way. In this sense, it is possible to say that virtue and the virtuous person are one - the person acts virtuously from virtue by responding to the needs and suffering of other human beings in an appropriate way relative to the surrounding circumstances. In doing so, a virtuous person can be seen as acting spontaneously in an important sense.

Morality, as understood by Abdullahi and the Utilitarian philosophers, is seen as firmly rooted in human and social relationships, and both recognize that actions and attitudes are

important aspects of moral practice. In practical ethics, once actions and attitudes are understood as taking an essential role, it would seem clear that the relationship between actions or attitudes and morality is different from the relationship between belief and morality. Since it is the case that attitudes or actions play an important role in giving sense to our ethical practices, beliefs about virtue and morality by themselves are only part of the complete picture of virtuous or moral behaviour. One might even say that the notion of moral or virtuous behaviour is like a by-product of moral or virtuous behaviour itself: a person can act virtuously and morally by responding appropriately toward the surrounding circumstances, but the conscious belief that one is acting virtuously or morally is neither necessary nor sufficient for the virtuous behaviour itself.

Between three British Classic utilitarian scholars; Bentham, Mill and Sidgwick, only the latter is inclined towards practical ethics like the Sokoto Caliphate scholars. Though Sidgwick has not established a state or empire, he has shown that academic debates by philosophers may not produce proper understanding even within the philosophers, not to talk of the society. To him, changing the morals of any group of people has to go hand in hand with education and practice. This is what Sheikh Uthman ibn Fodiye was able to achieve with the able assistance of his brother Abdullahi and his son Muhammad Bello.

Considering the above perspective on virtue from the scholars of the Sokoto Caliphate, it is clear that their combination of divine and insightful principles demonstrate that moral theory can effectively guide actions. The ethical ideas emphasize the political importance of sound belief about the divine and about the principles of the world. It was by this conviction that they changed the political and socio-economic setting of Hausaland to establish the Sokoto caliphate. An administrative entity which flourished for over a century.

Conclusion

Divine command theory of ethics has more supporters among philosophers than has been generally acknowledged. We are made to understand, however, one factor responsible for obscuring its merits is the heavy-handedness with which philosophers have been led to deal with it as a result of trying to handle too much at once. As a theory of ethics, it can stand for a guiding principle in the law of a given society. According to the common law, the opposite of all evil fall under a divine command. And, with a divine command in effect it is not possible that anyone meritoriously or rightly engage in evil acts, because they are not performed meritoriously. And if they should be done by an earthly pilgrim meritoriously, then they would not be called or named evil. In regard to this, some philosophers understand that any act linked with evil is not commanded by the divine. The paper, therefore, concludes that a society can chose to apply the divine command ethical theory for the moral setting and standard of its people and achieve political, social and economic development.

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