Key Concepts in Islamic Ethics

Concepts are the basic building-blocks of a scientific discipline and as such reflect its theoretical structure and logical taxonomy. Therefore, concepts are excellent entry points to a discipline as a whole. For this reason, various fields and disciplines have developed specialized encyclopedias and various sorts of glossaries to introduce and define these key elements. Moreover, the foundational texts of any discipline can only be understood after proper analysis of their language and the meanings of their vocabulary. In the case of the Qurʾān, lexical enquiry has been central to understanding the text, while lexicography has been a pivotal tool of exegesis from very early on in Islamic intellectual history. Qurʾānic lexicographical sources such as Kitāb al-ʿAyn by al-Khalīl b. Aḥmad (d. ca. 170/787) are indeed on a par with exegetical works such as the tafsīr of the contemporaneous Muqātil b. Sulaymān (d. 150/767). The same is true for the Prophetic Sunna, whose vocabulary was carefully studied and documented, as well as for other Islamic fields and sciences, each of which having its own specialized jargon, and therefore, lexicon. It would indeed be arbitrary to approach a text or a discipline before analyzing the concepts and terms upon which they build their worldviews and base their theoretical approaches.

While most of the Islamic traditional sciences have generally received their fair share of lexical investigations that elucidate the various sciences’ central concepts, much work still needs to be done in the field of Islamic ethics. This is a basic area of inquiry that occupies a distinct place in modern scholarship. In the case of Islamic literary culture, however, its most basic concepts remain scattered across a wide array of texts and disciplines. To be sure, the importance of investigating Islamic ethical terms has been noted by a number of scholars. Some of these works focused on crucial concepts in Islamic ethics such as “justice” (Rahbar 1953), combined a constellation of axiologica—negative and positive—concepts (al-Shamma 1959), or concentrated on a single ethical semantic field in the Qurʾān (Izutsu 1966), or even a single concept (Ḥilalī 2017). This comes in addition to dozens of dissertations and philological studies featuring titles inspired by ethical vocabulary and moral discourse, in fields such as exegesis, Prophetic ḥadīth, Islamic speculative theology (kalām), Sufism and contemporary philosophy. These studies of Islamic ethical concepts, few as they may be, highlighted the importance of this field.
and opened the path to exploring it further. Above all, they demonstrated the fact that framing the meaning of a given concept through quantitative historical lexical enquiry can potentially liberate it from accumulated anachronistic misperceptions. Moreover, the study of a network of ethical concepts in a given field often reveals an ethical system or moral paradigm that becomes more amenable to comprehension, theorization and further construction in light of lexical enquiry.

It should be noted that the importance of consecrated studies that focus on ethical concepts is justified by the following aspects:

1. Ethical concepts are spread among several disciplines and lie at the intersections of various fields of study. Textually, ethical concepts are found in materials from pre-Islamic literature, as manifested in poetry and other genres; these concepts are often “processed” through the semantic shift to which the Qurʾān has contributed by adding its own semantic layers and nuances of meaning. In addition, Islamic-cum-Qurʾānic ethical concepts are abundant in the genres of Prophetic hadiths (narrated verbatim or paraphrased) and hadith interpretation, as well as in philosophical, literary and scientific texts, and appear more specifically elaborated on in the exegetical sciences, Islamic speculative theology, philosophy, Sufism, legal theory and hermeneutics, and Islamic political literature. Naturally, a complex of commonalities and differences exists among these texts and disciplines at the semantic level. Yet each one of them puts forward a distinct meaning, and emphasizes one or more of its particular aspects. Surveying the various commonalities and differences requires an interdisciplinary approach, which this issues tries to accomplish by applying it to key Islamic concepts, for they have not received the necessary attention befitting their use and status (al-Khaṭīb 2015).

2. The study of a concept is a two-dimensional process: theoretical and practical, considering the function of the ethical concept as such varies between theoretical and practical contexts. Surveying a concept would thus result in setting the standard for the theoretical classification and practical function of the subject of ethics and other related sciences.

3. The ethical concepts of Islam are often relevant to other scientific disciplines as well as for interreligious reflection. Ethical meanings are spread over religions and philosophies, and are often shared across traditions. Some of these concepts were present in the moral conventions of the Arabs at the time of revelation, and are markedly present in pre-Islamic poetry; their presence is litera—as a term—, or in the moral character that the text is promulgating—as a notion—using various terms. Also, within the purview of the sciences, other philosophies influenced our understanding of the significance of ethical
concepts, including, *inter alia*, the very concept of “creation” (Ar. *khalq*) itself, from which “ethics” (Ar. *akhlāq*) derive.

4. The presence of ethical concepts in fields whose subject matters vary in terms of content and relevance to “ethics” is also worth considering. There is a notable difference between recurrent and rarely used concepts; and within the recurrent and the rare, there are those that are primary and others that are secondary. Identifying each category can only be achieved through the study of the concept itself within a specific semantic field, which would help in developing standards that enable scholars to assess the importance and significance of individual concepts. As such, the work at hand will serve as an introduction to the general character of the subject of Islamic ethics and the arrangement of its key concepts into different categories and levels of importance in both theory and practice.

**This Thematic Issue**

The present thematic issue contains studies of Islamic ethical concepts approached from a number of perspectives. Some of the studies presented here pertain to ethical concepts in the Qur’an, the Sufi tradition, Islamic theology and jurisprudence; while others represent various critical and methodological approaches that pertain to the various aspects of the concept, such as its philosophical merits, the politics of translation, as well as its relevance to contemporary applied ethics.

Some of the papers included in the volume were presented at the conference “Key Concepts in the Islamic Ethical Tradition: Semantics, Methods and Approaches” organized by the Center for Islamic Legislation and Ethics and held December 2019 in Doha, Qatar. I had the privilege to convene the conference and to follow up on the participants' projects, then facilitate and take part in the rich scholarly exchanges that led to the current publication. The issue also includes reviews of some recent publications on the theme at hand. The articles may be classed under the following rubrics:

1. **Conceptual Issues: Text and Tradition**

Qatar University, Doha, Qatar) surveys the field of the semantics of *taqwā* in the Qurʾān, with a view to the concept’s involvement in justifying practical rulings and generating moral precepts. The study contains a linguistic study of the significance of the notion with a focus on its etymology and its historical development within the text. The paper also provides an analysis of the various contexts in which it appears in the Qurʾān, taking into consideration its semantic development, as well as the meaning of *taqwā* in exegetical commentaries. The article puts forth the claim that the Qurʾānic *taqwā* is an innate human trait, and thereby expresses a natural ethical propensity.

In the paper “`al-‘Insān’ wa-`l-Maʿr” fi l-Qurʾān, aw Bayn al-Māḥiyya al-Mītaṣīziyya wa-l-Shakhṣ al-Akhlaṣī [‘Insān’ and ‘Mar’ in the Qurʾān: Between Metaphysical Essence and Moral Personhood],” Shafiq Agrīgar (Chafik Graiguer, Ministry of Education, Rabat, Morocco) focuses on the Qurʾānic use of terms *insān* and *mar* and attempts to match them with the modern notion of “person” as an ethical subject. Graiguer defines “person” in an ethical sense as a subject possessing identity, responsibility and dignity. He argues that the word *insān* in the Qurʾān does not express this meaning, because of the latter’s metaphysical, rather than moral, connotations. It is the notion of *mar*, rather, that is closest to the philosophical concept of “person,” in the sense of a responsible ethical agent.

In the article “al-Ghinā Mafhumān Akhlāqiyyan `ind al-Ṣūfiyya ilā Hudūd Nihāyat al-Qarn al-Sābi’i al-Hijrī [Wealth as an Ethical Concept in Sufism until the End of the Seventh/Thirteenth Century],” Ḥafīẓ Harrūs (Hafid Harrous, Dār al-Ḥadīth al-Ḥasaniyya, Rabat, Morocco) traces the meaning of *ginā* (wealth, sufficiency) as a key concept of the Sufi tradition. In his analysis he includes a discussion of the ethics of healing the soul from the ailments of material attachment, and the role that the notion of *ginā* plays therein. His analysis surveys the career of the concept in the Muslim canon before it became a standard concept in the mystical tradition.

In the article “Mafhum al-Ḥurriyya fī l-Fiqh al-Ḥanafī: al-Ḥurriyya fī Ufuq al-Maṣāliḥ wa-l-Ḥuqūq [The Concept of Freedom in the Ḥanafī School: Freedom in Relation to Interests and Rights],” ʿAbdallāh ʿItr (Abdulla Iter, University of Gaziantep, Turkey) demonstrates the important role that the notion of “freedom” played in Islamic legislation. Freedom, an established general concept in the Ḥanafī School, acquired a well-defined meaning with applications in legislative matters pertaining to society, economy, family, politics and the judiciary. The concept was equally applied to issues of public interests/welfare (Ar. *maṣāliḥ*) and rights (Ar. *ḥuqūq*). The paper concludes its argument by identifying three pillars that underlie the freedom discourse in legislative literature: interpreting public interests/welfare; providing the logical foundations of “fundamental human rights”; and finally, mediating a network...
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of inter-related legal concepts that include, *inter alia*, humanity, trusteeship, [public] interest, worship and power.

Joseph Lumbard (Hamad Bin Khalifa University, Doha, Qatar) draws in his paper “The Semantics and Gratitude (*shukr*) in the Qurʾān” the connections between the approaches of Toshihiko Izutsu, Ida Zilio-Grade, and Atif Khalil, and expands the linguistic analysis. The paper demonstrates that expanding the analysis of the contextual semantic fields employed by Izutsu to include intertextual semantic fields reveals how *shukr* is related to the cognitive faculties of the human being. The paper concludes by examining how authors such as al-Ghazālī (d. 505/1111), ‘Afif al-Dīn al-Tilimsānī (d. 773/1291), and Aḥmad al-Tijānī (d. 1230/1815) addressed the paradoxes to which this Qurʾānic presentation of *shukr* gives rise.

In her article “Trust, Trusting and Trustworthiness in Ethical Discourse,” Nora Eggen (University of Oslo, Norway) examines the notion of “social trust” (Ar. *al-amāna al-ījtimāʿīya*) through the contributions of four scholars: Ibn Abī l-Dunyā (d. 281/894), al-Kharāʾiṭī (d. 327/939), al-Māwardī (d. 450/1058), and al-Ghazālī. By investigating how these four prominent authors negotiated the issue of “trust” in their works, the author sheds light on a network of ethical concerns that relate to elements of “trust and mistrust” in a single semantic field that includes vocabularies pertaining to *amāna*, *tawakkul*, *thiqa* and ḥusn al-ẓann.

2 Methodological Issues

In “The Etymological Path to Moral Meaning: Adam and the Names,” Ghassan el Masri (Friedrich-Alexander-Universität, Erlangen-Nürnberg, Germany), examines the difference between semantic and historical etymology and argues for the necessity of combining the two strands in a historical analysis of Qurʾānic terms. He spells out the salient reason for this imperative and demonstrates—by means of the example of *zakāt*—the value of semantic etymology in understanding the theological and anthropological dimensions of Qurʾānic concepts.

Lena Salaymeh (University of Oxford, United Kingdom) discuses in her article “Decolonial Translation: Destabilizing Coloniality in Secular Translations of Islamic Law” the problems that are inherent to the translation of the Arabic term *dīn* as “religion,” and *al-fiqh al-Islāmī* as “sharia” (sic.) in English language discourses (mainly American). She relates these to a secular distortion of the law. After giving examples of how secular ideology translates the Islamic tradition, Salaymeh explores the differences between historical Islamic terms and secular ones and concludes that the translated “sharia” is very much part of a
colonial system of meaning, more than being a reflection of the Islamic understanding of law.

Javad Hashmi (Harvard University, Cambridge MA, USA) evaluates the current attempts to develop an Islamic conceptual framework for bioethics in his article “Overcoming Religious Illiteracy: Towards a More Inclusive Approach to Islamic Bioethics.” He argues that the Islamic framework lacks conceptual clarity, which leads to problematic assumptions on the part of both Muslims and non-Muslims scholars and readers. Essentialist and reductionist discourses that privilege majoritarian, authoritarian, and conservative forms of religious and state authority take hold at the expense of competing, dissenting, and reformist voices. He suggests using the principles of religious literacy (as endorsed by the American Academy of Religion) to bring the much needed conceptual clarity to the field. This will advance the understanding of Islamic bioethics as a contested space of academic theology, and will serve to promote a more inclusive discourse.

3 Reviews

Besides the above-mentioned articles, this issue also includes three reviews of works that are relevant to the theme at hand. The first one by ʿAbdallāh Haddārī (Abdellah Haddari, Sultan Moulay Sliman University, Beni Mellal, Morocco), reviews Ṭāhā ʿAbd al-Raḥmān’s work al-Mafāhīm al-Akhlāqiyya bayn al-Iʾtimāniyya wa-l-ʿIlmāniyya [“Ethical Concepts between Trusteeship and Secularism”] (Rabat: Dār al-Amān 2021, 2 vols., 606 pp). The second review by Bernard Freamon (Seton Hall University, South Orange NJ, USA) examines Jonathan Brown’s Slavery and Islam (London: Oneworld Academic, 2019, 448 pp). In the third one, Ali Mian (University of Florida, Gainesville FL, USA) discusses Cyrus Zargar’s The Polished Mirror: Storytelling and the Pursuit of Virtue in Islamic Philosophy and Sufism (London: Oneworld Publications, 2017, 352 pp).

Finally, a word of gratitude is due in acknowledgment of all those who contributed to this special issue, authors, reviewers, and editors, especially Abdurraouf Oueslati, as well as those who participated in the seminar, and whose papers are the core of this volume.

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