



## A Study on the Compatibility of Moral Realism with Theistic Ethical Foundations\*



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### Abstract

This study, drawing on Aristotelian essentialism the view that every being possesses an essence with intrinsic properties argues that the development and actualization of the human being, as one being among others in the world, are grounded in his essential nature, namely rationality. This essential nature inclines human beings toward the pursuit of the good, which is recognized as the final cause (telos) of the actualization of their essence. Moreover, human choices are not detached from the beings of the world. Rather, the objects of moral good and evil are the very entities and essences that exist in reality. Moral judgments, therefore, concern these concrete and real beings; they shape human actualization and take part in the causal order of the world. Therefore, since the actualization of beings is inseparable from their essences, the creator of the essences of the world and the legislator of moral laws must be one and the same. In the course of this study, we arrive at the

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conclusion that every doctrine other than religious moral realism ultimately confronts some form of relativism. Even moral relativism, insofar as it claims to endorse realism, is incapable of providing a foundation for an absolute and objective higher good. Accordingly, through rational inquiry and on the basis of Aristotelian essentialism, the possibility of discovering reality for human beings is established, along with the justification of moral realism and, ultimately, the compatibility of moral realism with the foundations of theistic monotheism.

### **Keywords**

Realism, Essentialism, Actualization, Ethics, Monotheism, Moral Realism.

## Introduction

From a philosophical standpoint, the criterion for affirming the reality of any entity is the ability to establish its existence. In this sense, if one can posit an objective referent for moral judgments, it becomes plausible to claim that just as scientific propositions reflect the relationships and truths of external entities moral propositions likewise possess such referential validity. Accordingly, contemporary ethical theories are commonly divided into two major categories based on their stance toward the reality of moral judgments: moral realists and anti-realists.

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“Non-cognitivists deny that moral utterances describe the world. They claim that such utterances do not express beliefs, but rather emotions, prescriptions, or commitments.” “According to moral realism, moral facts exist independently of our beliefs and determine whether those beliefs are true or false.” (McNaughton, 1991, p.5-6).

Given that every entity in our world is situated along a path toward its actualization, we must first examine the relationship between the human being as a natural entity and moral prescriptions. My response is that the human, as one among natural beings, by virtue of possessing the essential faculty of reason, attains new levels of perfection and actualization through each of their choices. Clearly, this intrinsic capacity places before the human a spectrum of good and bad, of oughts and ought-nots.

For this reason, we aim to explore by drawing upon the human being’s intrinsic capacity for understanding and discovering reality the notion that the referents of moral judgments possess objective and real existence. They partake in reality and exert tangible influence within the world. For instance, while falsehood itself is not directly observable, its referent such as property obtained through deceit has a

concrete and real impact on the actualization of the human being. I emphasize that both good and bad are real and objective, for that which is unreal cannot produce effects. In contrast, moral good and bad each generate consequences and exert distinct influences on human actualization. Therefore, the discovery of the greater good plays a vital role in the perfection and development of the human being.

On the other hand, we must remember that moral good and bad reflect the manner in which the human being relates to the actualizing factors of their existence namely, the objective entities of the world such as food, clothing, shelter, spouse, and so on. But why are these entities sometimes deemed good and at other times bad? For example, if a person lies, commits murder, or steals in order to obtain life's necessities, such actions are morally wrong. Whereas striving and working to acquire a home and basic provisions is considered morally good. Accordingly, once the connection between moral judgments and objective realities and their role in human actualization is clarified, their dependence on causality also becomes evident and self-evident. This is because the essences of the world and the laws governing them constitute a unified reality.

In fact, through this intrinsic connection, it becomes evident that moral prescriptions delineate the boundaries of human engagement with objective realities. On the other hand, anything that influences the actualization of a being plays a role in the causal structure of the world; hence, it is real and contingent upon a cause just as light affects the actualization of a plant, and scientific propositions reflect this causal process in the realm of reality. Accordingly, each of the requisites for the actualization of human essence such as wealth, food, and spouse when subjected to moral injunctions like truthfulness, theft, honesty, justice, and fidelity, exerts

causal influence on the process of human and worldly actualization. For instance, wealth, under varying conditions, assumes different causal roles within the framework of moral judgments.

Yet, although both good and bad refer to objective and concrete realities, by what foundation or criterion can moral value be determined? On the other hand, human beings by virtue of their intrinsic nature and varying cognitive levels do not possess a shared understanding of good and bad. Consequently, each individual perceives the greater good in something distinct from others, such that moral relativism emerges as a consequence of the absence of a unified foundation for discerning the highest good.

Moreover, it must be emphasized that a being endowed by nature with reason and volition cannot be coerced into action; if an individual does not perceive the likelihood of attaining a greater good through a given act, they will refrain from performing it. Accordingly, it becomes imperative to cultivate a shared understanding of ethical commitment grounded in a theistic foundation, so that all individuals may be oriented toward and bound by their true moral good.

Given that the relationship between human nature, ethics, and religion has not yet been philosophically examined in a rigorous and systematic manner within existing philosophical literature and even among theistic philosophers and scholars, one rarely finds a philosophically grounded study that substantiates this connection the innovation of this research lies in its foundational approach. Independent of any specific religious belief, and based on essentialist principles, this study seeks to demonstrate how monotheism can offer an absolute, non-relativistic theoretical foundation for ethics. Therefore, what remains absent in current philosophical research is the critical question: Why is a religious foundation the most complete and authoritative source for moral judgments? And how, amidst the

multitude of ethical frameworks concerning good and evil, can one identify the greater and more authentic good within monotheistic moral teachings?

### **The nature of realism**

Since the question of reality arises specifically for human beings, any account of realism must begin by recognizing the human being as one among the entities of the world. Only then can we inquire whether humanity possesses a path toward the discovery of reality. It is, indeed, the unique attributes and faculties of the human being that render such a discourse on reality possible.

It is wrong always, everywhere, and for anyone, to believe anything upon insufficient evidence." (Clifford, 1886, pp.339–363). This perspective, originally formulated by John Locke and later expanded by Clifford under the title of evidentialism, came to be recognized as one of the most significant approaches in the field of epistemology at the dawn of modernity. Indeed, what greater evidence could there be than the fact that we comprehend the world and actively seek to uncover reality? Put more clearly, if the human being required any additional faculty to achieve such understanding, it would necessarily resort to it. Thus, the apprehension of the external world is an intrinsic feature of the human mind.

In affirmation of this view, Aristotle maintains that the being of things is the first object apprehended in the perception of reality. Knowledge of 'being qua being' constitutes a fundamental principle in understanding the world, for being cannot be separated from any entity. Consequently, the judgments pertaining to being are inseparable from existence itself. Aristotle further asserts that entities are identifiable by virtue of their essence, since each thing is precisely what is apprehended; and if it lacked a distinct essence, it would

neither be perceived nor be knowable." (Aristotle, 1995, 100b6–25).

Avicenna, in agreement with Aristotle, asserts that the essential attributes of a thing which distinguish it from other entities require no justification beyond the essence itself. One cannot ask why a particular thing is not something else, for in the world, each entity is itself by virtue of its essential properties. That is, a thing is what it is because of the essence it possesses. Therefore, essences do not require separate instantiation, and it is impossible for an essence to exist without its essential attributes." (Avicenna, 2005, p. 112).

In his *Metaphysics*, Aristotle states that if entities lacked essence, they could neither be distinguished from one another nor be the subject of thought or discourse (Aristotle, 1995, 100b6–25). He argues that the best explanation for why things possess essence as we encounter them is simply that they do possess essence (Ibid, 1010b27–37).

As Aristotle states, even if no human or perceiver existed, things would still exist in the same manner (Aristotle, 1995, 1010b30–31). In his view, each entity possesses its own specific essential attributes, and there are limits to which attributes it can possess. No entity can embody all essential properties, for this would violate the principle of non-contradiction, undermine our capacity for perception, and negate the multiplicity of entities and their properties. In such a case, all things would collapse into one, rendering differentiation impossible and definition meaningless (Ibid, 1006b4–11).

In addition to perceiving the real and essential distinctions among entities in the external world, the human being also recognizes that every entity apprehended by the mind has a cause. In fact, humanity possesses the capacity to comprehend causality and, consequently, the ability to seek and discover causes. This is a

distinctive feature of human cognition. The human intellect discerns that each entity, in its actuality and essence, is unique and particular and that these characteristics are themselves caused. Therefore, if such features were not real, the discovery of causes would be impossible, and the human being would not pursue causal explanation. Hence, the perception of causality is an intrinsic feature of the mind, embedded within human nature prior to any empirical cognition, through which the causal structure of the world is understood. In light of Aristotelian essentialism, it becomes evident that each entity is nothing but itself, defined by the totality of its inherent attributes.

Aristotle asserts that since the world is entirely composed of potentiality and actuality and is without end, and since these characteristics determine the essential properties of each being, pure actuality must precede the world. That which precedes holds the form of things in potentiality, while in that which is actual, there exists neither deficiency nor potentiality (Aristotle, 1924, IX, 1046a11–1051a3). In other words, since ontological differentiation and existential limitation are intrinsic to the nature of beings, the necessity of causality becomes a self-evident principle within the realm of contingent entities. This fundamental and universal principle expresses a form of realism one that reflects the stable and metaphysical condition governing the entities of the world.

The perpetual flow of causality within the cosmos signifies that the transition from potentiality to actuality constitutes a universal ontological principle. Every individuated entity, by virtue of its existential finitude, is engaged in a continuous process of actualization and ontic development, since differentiation and limitation are intrinsic to its essence and inseparable from its being at any given moment. Human beings, as entities within the cosmos, are likewise

subject to the same ontological principle and thus move along a path of development toward their ultimate end. Given that every being possesses an intrinsic essence, the human being too is endowed with causal faculties and latent capacities. It is precisely these causal potentials that enable beings to undergo transformation and attain actuality. (Ellis, 2012, p.71).

Accordingly, the intrinsic nature of each being determines its path toward actualization and perfection. In other words, every entity, in order to sustain itself in accordance with its essence, requires the utilization of actualizing factors that enable it to attain the telos inherent in its nature. For instance, the human being depends on light, water, nourishment, shelter, sleep, and various instruments of life to progress toward its existential fulfillment.

The metaphysical principle of causality entails the significant and universal conclusion that all beings, in their very existence whether directly or indirectly are ontologically dependent upon the totality of other beings within the cosmos. This necessity arises from the intrinsic differentiation and limitation that characterize every entity. That is, each being possesses existence only to the extent permitted by its essence, and in actualizing its being, it necessarily relies on that which lies beyond itself. Moreover, the actualizing factors of any given entity cannot be definitively determined, and the very elements required for the actualization of an entity's essence are themselves dependent upon other factors. This causal chain unfolds in an unceasing and uninterrupted manner. Consequently, the entirety of the cosmos must be regarded as the cause of each individual being. Since all entities share this fundamental ontological condition namely, intrinsic limitation and dependence they are perpetually interconnected and mutually reliant.

Accordingly, since all material entities are in constant need of one another, none of them can be regarded as the ultimate cause. This condition is universally shared among them, and no single entity possesses ontological superiority or the capacity to bestow existence upon another. Given that a cause which itself is dependent cannot truly be a cause, the true cause must be that which is entirely free from dependency. Moreover, the entities of the world are perpetually engaged in the transition from potentiality to actuality. Therefore, the ultimate cause must be devoid of all potentiality and constitute pure actuality. It is evident that the human being, endowed with a unique intrinsic faculty among beings, is capable of comprehending the causal structure governing the cosmos and possesses the capacity to discern the principle of causation.

In this account, the immaterial cause is understood as the universal form of the cosmos, extending from eternity past to eternity future, and serving as the principle underlying both the origination and perfection of every being. This transcendent cause possesses the immaterial form abstracted from the matter of all entities, and is itself devoid of any ontological distinction or existential delimitation. As it encompasses the totality of the world while remaining unbounded and imperceptible to the senses, it cannot be apprehended through empirical perception. Yet without this immaterial actuality, none of the finite beings each marked by essential limitation would be intelligible or capable of attaining ontological reality.

On this basis, within the sensible world, anything that possesses an essence also possesses real existence and contributes to the teleological movement of the cosmos. Each such entity inevitably plays a role in the causal nexus that governs the unfolding of reality. This foundational principle will serve, in the following section, as the basis for establishing moral realism.

### **Moral Realism: Ethics as the Human Relation to the World**

In this section, I aim to examine the following questions: What is ethics, and why does it emerge exclusively within human societies? Through this inquiry, I intend to explore the nature of the relationship between ethics and the human condition, ultimately leading to insights concerning moral realism.

As previously noted, the human being does not encounter any existent independent of causality. He comes to realize that even his own actuality as a natural being is contingent upon a cause. Through his innate cognition, the human being comes to understand that each of his choices exerts a distinct influence upon his actuality an influence that differs from the effect of any alternative choice. In other words, the perception of good and evil is nothing but the perception of causality. Therefore, if good and evil were not real entities, they would not be intelligible to human consciousness. When a human being intends to perform an action or movement, he must first conceive of the act and affirm the benefit that results from it. Subsequently, he develops determination and will toward the act, followed by a desire to carry it out. Finally, a physical inclination toward the act arises within his bodily faculties. (Mulla Sadra, 1981, vol. 6, p. 342).

Thus, the human being seeks the greatest good that contributes to the actualization of their potential. In this view, the concepts of good and evil for each individual are linked to their rational reasoning in identifying and distinguishing the greater good. As Ellis notes, human free will, choice, and decision-making are among the causal properties of the person. (Ellis, 2012, p.71).

Therefore, the necessity inherent in moral judgments is of a causal nature. (Motahhari, 2000, vol. 6, p. 372) Mesbah Yazdi also maintains

that ethical propositions pertain to external realities and convey information about the world as it is. However, he emphasizes that moral imperatives what ought to be or ought not to be are always in relation to voluntary actions, and it is the human will and choice that confer necessity upon them. (Mesbah Yazdi, 2009, p. 27) It is evident that when real phenomena occur in the world, their effects are independent of human acknowledgment or commitment. For instance, even if one is unaware that light contributes to plant growth, light still exerts its influence on the plant.

Once again, we return to the essence of the human being and the significance of free will and cognitive faculties in discovering the correct criteria for choosing moral actions. Ellis argues that individualistic moral principles are intrinsic ethical norms that are independent of any historical or cultural context. These are natural virtues that are universal and do not require any form of legislation. (Ellis, 2012, p. 24) Accordingly, the human being naturally seeks those things that contribute to their perfection things rooted in their essence and innate nature. However, in order to make decisions and exercise will regarding any action, one must engage in rational evaluation to discern the greater good. This implies that knowledge precedes action; thus, every action that is performed is based on an apprehension of its goodness.

On the other hand, human choices are not separate from the realities of the world. Therefore, the objects of good and bad are objective and real. A person understands, for instance, that lying may serve their personal interest, or that stealing could lead to arrest and imprisonment, while abiding by social laws may result in greater benefit. Sometimes, even in the illusion of gaining an advantage, one may violate the rules. Thus, it is evident that every behavior whether deemed good or bad is ultimately aimed at attaining real goodness and

maximizing benefit. Accordingly, the discourse on good and bad as factors influencing human actualization is meaningful only within human societies.

Due to the causal relationship between moral judgments and human beings and given that the actualization of every entity affects the entire world and is, in turn, affected by it human moral choices can sometimes result in harm to other beings. Therefore, all individuals are obligated and responsible for discovering moral reality. Accordingly, because of the differences in humans' cognitive capacities in discerning the greater good, commitment to a sound moral foundation holds particular significance. Since moral judgments are connected to the objective external world and directly influence the evolutionary and causal processes of existence, it follows that if human moral behavior does not adhere to a proper framework, both the individual and the broader natural order including other human beings may suffer harm. Clearly, if a person fails to discover the greater good necessary for their actualization and development, they distance their essence from its purposeful perfection.

In other words, the concepts of good and bad are rooted in human nature. Even when we believe we are choosing what brings greater pleasure or benefit, if our choice does not align with true goodness, then genuine good is absent and we unknowingly fall into badness. (Avicenna, 1957, p. 327) According to Avicenna, the good of each thing is its specific perfection, toward which it moves in accordance with its inherent potential. (Avicenna, 1957, p. 225).

In this regard, teleologists hold that every being including the human being possesses a purpose and an ultimate end. When this end, which constitutes the good for that being, is attained, its perfection is also realized. Aristotle refers to this ultimate good as eudaimonia, or happiness. From his perspective, happiness means "living in a way

that befits a human being” and actualizing one’s human faculties and potentials. (Aristotle, 2019, Book I, Ch. 7, 1098a16–1098b8).

However, this intrinsic human disposition is not always accompanied by the accurate discernment of the greater good, and may be subject to cognitive error. Therefore, when seeking a definition of “good” among human beings, no absolute reference point can be found. As Moore argues, good and bad are simple and indefinable concepts. (Moore, 2004, pp. 6–10).

Moore’s view can be interpreted to mean that all human beings share an innate understanding of good and bad this is a fundamental feature of the mind. However, since the discernment of good, bad, and true goodness depends on human knowledge and cognition, a criterion must be established for real goodness and badness one that reason universally affirms. Just as concepts like utility, pleasure, and power are also simple and indefinable, varying from one individual to another, no standard can be set for them except their correspondence with reality. Therefore, notions such as goodness, happiness, pleasure, power, and any human-based foundation for ethics are ultimately arbitrary and relative.

This raises the question: how can one predict benefit and harm, or determine what constitutes true goodness and advantage? How can we know where real benefit lies, and how can we assess the degree of goodness, utility, or pleasure that each action entails? It is evident that even in the presence of the same perfection, one person may perceive its pleasure while another may not. This is because the intellect must recognize the goodness of a thing for the individual; mere sensation or being in a state of perfection does not necessarily generate pleasure. (Avicenna, 1957, pp. 326–328).

Thus, it becomes evident that the perception of pleasure depends on the foundational principles of each individual. However, since the greater good is inherently tied to the essence of every being, it is that greater good which, in the course of human development, yields the greatest benefit, the greatest pleasure, and the highest form of goodness. Therefore, the best foundation is one that reveals the greater good governing the causal structure of the world.

### **The Interdependence of Moral Realism and Theistic Ethical Foundations**

It has been stated that true happiness and genuine goodness for a human being are attainable only through the realization of their essential nature. For true happiness and goodness are achieved in light of attaining the ultimate purpose of each being. Thus, Avicenna holds that any pleasure other than true pleasure is merely animalistic and non-human, offering no developmental value for the essence of the soul. (Avicenna, 1957, pp. 326–328).

It is evident that the human role in discovering the greater good renders them a unique being. Aristotle, too, interprets happiness in terms of rational activity, asserting that acting in accordance with reason is itself a virtue. Thus, human happiness is achieved through the activity of the soul in accordance with virtue; and if there are multiple virtues, the criterion for happiness is alignment with the most complete of them. (Aristotle, 2019, 1098a16–1098b8; 1177a12–1178b7).

As previously noted, human standards and even moral realist schools of thought are not entirely free from relativism and cannot definitively identify true goodness. Each framework defines goodness according to its own foundational principles. For instance, not all individuals consider pleasure to be the ultimate good, since the pursuit of greater pleasure may sometimes require lying or violating the rights

of others, and at times, one's own rights may be sacrificed so that others may attain more pleasure. Therefore, we must still seek to anchor moral realism to an absolute foundation one that is universally applicable and capable of promoting collective benefit.

For example, contractarianism has its roots in the thought of Thomas Hobbes, who believed that values arise from social contracts. In his view, human beings in their original state lack any normative judgments. However, the conditions prevailing in the state of nature compel them to accept certain limitations in order to preserve their own interests (Rachels, 2012, p. 84).

Utilitarianism is also one of the well-known ethical schools, rooted in the liberal tradition. Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill are considered pioneers of utilitarian thought. Bentham believed that there is only one principle in ethics the principle of utility. That is, among several possible choices, one should act in a way that produces the greatest benefit for the greatest number of people involved. (Rachels, 2012, p. 98–99). However, Mill's utilitarianism was more perfectionist in nature. He regarded intellectual pleasures as superior to sensory ones and emphasized the quality of pleasure, showing greater concern for human dignity and moral worth (Mill, 1863, p. 14).

Therefore, a morally right action is one that, under any circumstance, is supported by the strongest possible reasons for its performance. This constitutes a general logical necessity that all individuals regardless of their particular moral positions must accept. However, moral judgment is not always easy, as one of its major obstacles is the challenge of discerning "reality."

The inherent human inclination toward uncovering the reality of a transcendent being constitutes a universal trait, rendering the formulation of moral prescriptions a self-evident necessity. It is

evident that a being who itself requires the discovery of reality cannot be qualified to provide a foundation for what is good or bad for human beings. Charles Hodge argues that if human beings were the authors of moral laws, such laws would inevitably be relative. Therefore, the legislator of moral commandments cannot be human. He states that humans believe in the existence of God for the same reason they believe in the external world, and thus do not require instruction to do so. From the moment humanity began to doubt the external world, it also began to doubt the existence of God (Hodge, 1871, pp. 199–202).

Thus, the existence of a cause in a world where each entity possesses its own intrinsic essence is a necessity. There must be one who is the creator of beings endowed with distinct essential properties, and who, by nature, possesses knowledge of the reality of these essences, their process of development and actualization, and the truth of the causal structure of the universe thereby knowing the objective good and evil inherent in it. Hence, since no human being has created themselves, nor holds the authority to legislate what is good or bad, and since moral judgments concern the relations among beings relations that are contingent upon their essences the sole source and knower of the good that aligns with the ultimate purpose of all beings, including humanity, must be singular.

Therefore, universal moral judgments must be formulated in such a way that they guide all beings toward the realization of their ultimate ends. It follows that there must be a single cause one that is both the creator and the legislator of the universe's causal laws. For with the creation of each essence, its corresponding laws and ultimate purpose are also brought into existence. Hence, human beings are not capable of legislating good and evil, nor does anything become good or evil merely by human decree. Good and evil are intrinsically linked to the essences of beings and determine the manner of their

actualization, exerting a real and objective influence on the overall development of the cosmos.

Moreover, every instance of actualization involves an infinite number of material causes, the knowledge of which is beyond human capacity. Conversely, the actualization of the human being as a natural entity exerts influence on the actualization and development of other beings. Accordingly, each human choice carries significant implications not only for the individual but also for other entities within the cosmos. For this reason, the human being is compelled to adhere to an absolute model and foundation, so as to consistently choose the greater good.

What links moral realism to the existence of God is the recognition that good and evil are understood through their ontological and causal impact effects that human beings perceive and experience. As Aristotle asserts, “there is nothing apart from being,” and thus maintains that only being truly exists, and that non-being is not a separate reality (Aristotle, 1924, *Metaphysics*, Book IV, Chapter 2, 1003a21–25).

Therefore, to demonstrate that good and bad are real causes that influence the development and actualization of the human being, it is sufficient to consider the intrinsic human capacity for evaluating actions. Accordingly, the perception of good and evil as another manifestation of causality reflects their external and objective reality in the world, serving directly as causal factors in the actualization of the human essence.

Furthermore, in explaining the relationship between good and bad and God, it must be stated that God, as the Creator of all essences in the world and the architect of the causal system, possesses knowledge of the actualization of beings in accordance with their

ultimate ends. Therefore, God does not arbitrarily legislate moral judgments. In this regard, Oberman maintains that although the divine will serves as the immediate cause of every act, such actions are by no means arbitrary outcomes of a sheer volitional impulse. Instead, God's volition is governed by the dictates of His necessary wisdom even if the underlying rationale remains inaccessible to human understanding (Oberman, 1963, pp. 98–99).

In other words, what God wills is not due to any compulsion or necessity imposed upon Him; rather, what occurs must be right precisely because He wills it so (Idziak, 1979, p.95). This is because the foundation of the cosmos is governed by the principle of causality. Descartes considers the causality of moral judgments to be of the same kind as God's causal relationship with other phenomena equating it with the creation of moral attributes by God (Descartes, 1981, p.14). He maintains that nothing limits God's will, and asserts that divine freedom is synonymous with everything that has come into being or will ever occur (Descartes, 1974, Vol. 2, pp. 248–249).

Thus, the notion of causal necessity in moral judgments implies that the imperatives embedded in ethical laws function as causes that produce real effects; adherence or non-adherence to them results in specific consequences. In this sense, moral injunctions serve as causal agents in actualizing the human essence an actualization so profound that it influences the entire cosmos. Accordingly, human actualization constitutes the most lawful and delicate evolutionary movement within existence. Thus, essentialism necessitates that there be only one true foundation for human felicity. Consequently, monotheistic moral injunctions represent the sole criterion for ethical good and evil in the process of human actualization and development, a path made possible through rational reflection and volitional commitment.

## **Ethics and Religion: Intersections and Tensions in Human Communities**

When we say that the human being is “by nature” a moral being, this means that one wills their actions based on their understanding of good and evil. Furthermore, by affirming the reality of moral judgments, it becomes necessary for the human to discover the reality of their actions. Therefore, the understanding of good and evil and the pursuit of greater good are not dependent on religion or any ethical school, but are rather an inherent feature of human existence. John Locke maintains that morality is founded upon natural rights, and that every human being, even without religion, has a need for morality. However, these natural rights originate from God. Therefore, he considers religion and morality to be aligned, and believed that religion contributes to the reinforcement of moral principles (Locke, 1988, pp. 105–130).

In this section, we aim to assess the relationship between religion and morality with greater precision, as there are notable differences among philosophers and even theologians in explaining this connection. For instance, Brian Davies, in his book *An Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion*, argues that most responses to the question of how religion and morality are related can be categorized into three theories “Some people have argued that morality supports religion. Others have argued that morality is part of religion. Still others have argued that morality and religion are opposed.” (Davies, 2004, pp. 190–192).

Given that no prior discourse has approached the relationship between human nature and morality from an essentialist perspective, such claims appear self-evident. However, it can now be clearly stated in a single sentence: religion contains a comprehensive framework

through which the human being may attain the laws necessary for realizing their intrinsic telos.

However, despite its comprehensiveness, religion leads to practical commitment only when the individual, through rational reflection, attains a volitional awareness of its greater and genuine good. This is because faith precedes action and serves as its condition; such that the religious individual consistently regards themselves as bound by the prescriptions of divine law.

Al-Farabi maintains that the identification of the path to happiness and moral virtues is achieved through reason (Farabi, 1996, p. 82). Regarding the role of rationality, he states: rationality is the faculty of reflection and inference concerning noble and virtuous matters, which truly leads the human being to the supreme good and their ultimate end, which is happiness (Farabi, 1405 AH, p. 55). John Locke, by stating that God has created us with a specific nature, emphasizes that faith in God is entirely rational, and that faith is a matter intimately connected to human knowledge and intellectual understanding (Locke, 1975, Book IV, Chapter 18).

It may be stated that, since God is the creator of essences, even the faculty of rationality is not a contingent or arbitrary attribute. Allameh Tabataba'i holds that this natural inclination is embedded within the essence of every natural being, driving it toward the pursuit of its ideal perfection. The human being loves their actions because of the perfection that is attained through them, for they perceive them as good (Ṭabāṭabā'ī, 1386, pp. 215–220). Therefore, from this perspective, it becomes incumbent upon the Creator to establish a system that articulates moral prescriptions for discerning true good and evil.

Therefore, since the human being, as a natural entity, possesses intrinsic characteristics, they like other beings strive toward their own

perfection and seek to fulfill their essential needs such as food, shelter, clothing, companionship, wealth, comfort, leisure, knowledge, and offspring. It is evident that whatever accords with the nature of a being is considered good for that being. Accordingly, moral laws do not aim to prohibit the requisites of one's essential perfection. As Ibn Rushd affirms, good is that which all people naturally desire to attain (Ibn Rushd, n.d., p. 63). From his perspective, whatever draws the human toward their ultimate end is good, and whatever obstructs that end is evil (Ibn Rushd, 1998, p. 144). He holds that human happiness is realized through voluntary actions (Ibn Rushd, 1998, p. 147).

Thus, evil is that which is not chosen on the basis of the good. Accordingly, every being that progresses in accordance with its nature partakes of goodness. Just as the human essence necessitates access to true goodness in order to realize its own good. Al-Farabi considers human goodness to be actualized through the use of reason and will (Al-Farabi, 1992, p. 49). He maintains that by adhering to ethical principles, a person attains goodness and happiness, for it is through such conduct that one reaches their ultimate end and realizes their true human essence (Al-Farabi, 1405, p. 46).

For this reason, if God is not the originator of moral laws, it becomes evident that anyone, at any level, would be entitled to legislate. This is because the identification of the highest and most complete intellect is never fully realized within human societies, and human judgments are always partial and relative. Consequently, no one is legitimately authorized to compel others to abide by moral laws. In reality, the guarantee for the enforcement of religious rulings lies in their divine tawhīd-based origin. Moreover, these divine laws encompass the greatest possible good in existence.

Thus, it becomes evident that mere knowledge of good and evil does not necessarily lead to practical obligation. Indeed, there are

individuals who, despite knowing that lying is morally wrong, employ it as a means to attain what they perceive as probable good precisely because they do not believe in the adverse consequences of falsehood. In truth, if individuals were to believe in the causal relationship inherent in moral rulings, then the innate human inclination toward goodness would compel them to adhere to these ethical principles (Misbah, 2008, p. 229).

It is evident that establishing principles for discerning true goodness, pleasure, and optimal benefit is among the foundational pillars of social life. Excessive self-interest on the part of one individual may jeopardize the natural and necessary enjoyment and benefit of others. This is because the essential requisites for the intrinsic perfection of each being constitute its inherent right, and no other human through greed or disregard for moral laws is justified in depriving others of these necessities. Thomas Hobbes believed that human beings, in their natural state, are inherently self-interested creatures. To prevent chaos and disorder, he argued that moral laws are necessary. He viewed religion as a tool for maintaining social order (Hobbes, 2008, pp. 168–170).

Given these clear arguments, the multiplicity of ethical schools and foundations collapses. This is because all the means by which a human being seeks perfection are inherently pleasurable, beneficial, good, and conducive to well-being. Therefore, pleasure, utility, and benefit cannot serve as effective criteria for evaluating moral actions.

As the hedonistic utilitarian Jeremy Bentham asserts, there exists only one intrinsic value namely, pleasure and all other things are considered good and valuable only insofar as they produce pleasure (Bentham, 2007, p.1). In contrast, W.D. Ross argues that there is no single intrinsic value such as pleasure or happiness; rather, there are multiple distinct goods (Stratton, 2002, pp. xii–xiii). Based on this

view, it becomes clear that any pleasure or benefit is only truly valuable when it does not violate the rights or boundaries of other beings. Therefore, no individual is justified in committing theft, deceit, oppression, or injustice merely for the sake of greater personal gain.

### **The Challenge of Moral Conflict and Overlap: A Comparative Study of Ethical Schools and Monotheistic Ethics**

Can acts such as lying and injustice ever be deemed morally good or ethically recommended? Could principles such as honesty, fidelity, and benevolence ever be considered morally wrong or subject to prohibition? At times, the problem of moral conflict arises not only among ethical theories but also within monotheistic religious traditions. For instance, from the perspective of Kantian deontological ethics, moral imperatives are absolute and cannot be subject to conflict; lying, therefore, is impermissible under any circumstance. Accordingly, it is necessary to first examine the possibility of conflict within human moral systems and divine moral laws, in order to determine whether such conflict truly exists and if so, what philosophical or theological solutions may be proposed to resolve it.

It is evident that, when comparing various ethical frameworks, the existence of moral conflict is self-evident and requires little elaboration. However, can such conflict arise within a single ethical system? Consider, for instance, a situation in which an individual must lie in order to save the life of an innocent person. Here, two moral imperatives truthfulness and the preservation of life come into direct conflict. This raises a critical question: who possesses the authority or epistemic competence to determine which moral obligation should take precedence in such cases?

Even within religious ethical frameworks, certain actions such

as abortion, lying, killing, or the consumption of carrion and wine may be deemed permissible under specific circumstances. Martyrdom may be valorized, while suicide remains strictly prohibited. This demonstrates that within monotheistic moral systems, identical actions may acquire divergent moral attributes depending on context. In contrast, Kantian deontology, despite its prominence and philosophical rigor, remains unable to adequately address such moral conflicts, insisting instead on the absolute and exceptionless nature of moral imperatives. It appears that the discernment of moral duty in complex situations requires a high degree of epistemic awareness and moral insight, such that error in identifying the greater good may result in harm not only to the individual but to the broader moral order.

Kant famously asserted that the only thing that is good without qualification both within the world and beyond it is the good will. Yet this raises a critical question: can a morally good will produce harmful or morally negative consequences? There are instances in which dutiful individuals, acting from a sincere sense of obligation, perform actions that result in harm to themselves or others. It appears that the good will, like other virtues and moral goods, is intrinsically valuable when considered in itself and apart from its consequences. However, when evaluated in relation to its outcomes and the ends it serves, it may, under certain conditions, lead to morally problematic results (Pojman, 1999, p. 138).

In his ethical framework, W.D. Ross distinguishes between *prima facie* duties and actual duties. He attributes an ontological status to *prima facie* duties, viewing them as inherently binding in virtue of their moral nature. In contrast, actual duties are not necessarily universal; rather, they are context-dependent and possess an epistemological status. Ross considers them as judgments that assist the moral agent in arriving at a justified ethical decision within a particular situation.

Ross proposes the distinction between “prima facie duty” and “duty proper” as a solution to the problem of moral conflict. We may affirm the existence of general, absolute, and exceptionless moral principles at the level of prima facie obligation principles that, by virtue of their intrinsic moral characteristics, always bind us to act accordingly. Duties such as truth-telling, promise-keeping, beneficence, saving human life, justice, gratitude, and recognition of others’ rights are, in their own nature, universally binding and appear absolute at first glance. Moral conflict arises precisely at this level, where the agent must carefully examine the ethical context in which they are situated in order to determine which of the competing prima facie duties carries greater moral weight and urgency. That more pressing obligation constitutes our “duty proper” or “actual duty,” and it alone is morally binding; the conflicting duty, though prima facie valid, is no longer obligatory in that specific context (Ross, 2002, pp. 17–18).

Jonathan Dancy argues that moral judgments are entirely dependent on the context in which they arise, and that no ethical decision can be made outside of its situational framework. According to his particularist view, properties such as “loyalty” or “harm to others” do not possess intrinsic moral valence; they are not inherently good or bad, nor do they always function as reasons for action. Their moral relevance is contingent upon the specific circumstances in which they appear (Dancy, 2000, pp. 131–132). This position leads to a form of ethical relativism, wherein no moral principle can be regarded as universally reliable or exceptionless.

It is evident that such matters cannot be easily evaluated without a reliable moral criterion. Human reason is capable of grasping general moral principles and distinguishing between general notions of good and evil, but it lacks the precision required for

discerning moral judgments in specific and complex situations (Mesbah Yazdi, 2008, p. 162). One of the key criticisms of Ross's theory is the ambiguity surrounding the distinction between prima facie duties and actual duties: it remains unclear how such a differentiation is to be made, or which duty should initially present itself to the moral agent. There is no clear method or instrument for making this distinction, and the process itself requires a normative standard. As Jonathan Dancy also notes, the identification of the morally relevant feature in a given context is itself dependent on a criterion that is not always available (Dancy, 2003, p. 102).

Given that the foundation of moral prescriptions in monotheistic ethics is the attainment of the greater good, it is plausible to assume that human ethical systems also pursue the same end. However, the central challenge lies in determining who possesses the epistemic authority to identify what constitutes the greater good. This question resurfaces in the context of moral conflict: how can human beings reliably discern the greater good in situations of ethical tension or competing duties? Such dilemmas suggest that human reason alone may be insufficient, and that non-human namely divine ethical foundations are necessary even in cases of moral conflict. In this light, what appears to be a conflict may in fact dissolve when moral absolutes are understood as grounded in divine command. Thus, moral absoluteness may be preserved, provided it is anchored in the transcendent source of monotheistic moral law.

For example, all human beings appreciate fidelity to promises and regard it as a good and nature-conforming act. But in the case of fulfilling a promise to an oppressor, can it truly be considered an instance of promise-keeping, such that it would raise the question of moral conflict? The point is that, by adhering to monotheistic ethical

foundations, no covenant is made with an oppressor in the first place, so the issue of fulfilling such a promise does not arise. Just as in monotheistic ethics, killing may at times be obligatory in the form of retributive justice (qīṣāṣ), because according to divine command, the greater good lies therein. Therefore, resolving moral conflict consists in giving precedence to one side. Thus, there must be something by which the validity of competing duties is measured, so that we may determine which side possesses a stronger criterion in relation to that standard (Mesbah Yazdi, 2008, p. 339).

Therefore, moral conflict arises from an incomplete and fallible human perspective, whereas individuals who adhere to monotheistic moral prescriptions are able to discern their duties in various situations. This is because the comprehensiveness of religion ensures that each moral ruling is articulated independently. Accordingly, one may affirm the absoluteness of moral laws and regard conflict and tension as merely the result of superficial reasoning and the inadequacy of human ethical systems in applying moral principles across diverse contexts and temporal conditions. That is to say, it is the divine legislator who issues distinct moral rulings for different human actions, since the moral value good or bad of each ruling depends on the intrinsic nature of things in the world and the effect they have on the actualization of the human essence.

Accordingly, schools of thought such as non-cognitivism which hold that moral judgments are nothing more than expressions of emotion and desire are invalid. For example, abortion cannot be deemed morally good or bad, even though abortion itself is a factual occurrence (Rachels, 2012, pp. 52–55). This challenge can only be resolved through a holistic perspective on a comprehensive set of moral prescriptions, which can be found exclusively within a divinely revealed religion.

## Conclusion

It can be stated with certainty that without recognition of the self-evident rational knowledge inherent in human nature, neither the existence of a Creator for the essences of the world can be affirmed, nor can the relationship between human beings and morality be properly understood. This study has shown that the connection between religion and ethics is intrinsically linked to the essence of the human being, and without establishing the relationship between religion and humanity, no meaningful distinction can be made between the moral commitment of religious individuals and that of non-religious individuals. The significance of monotheistic religion lies in the pre-religious faith that is, without belief in the Creator of essences and the Legislator of moral laws, practical moral commitment does not emerge. Hence, belief in God's creatorship alone is insufficient to produce moral adherence. Religion possesses an ontological reality because it is rooted in the human essence; and without it, the human being lacks the epistemic capacity necessary for discovering moral truths and the actual scope of ethical prescriptions. So This study demonstrated that religious ethics are grounded in human nature, and without them, the recognition of moral realities is unattainable.

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