

Moderation in Greek and Islamic Traditions, and a Virtue Ethics of the Qur'an

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Abstract

This article looks at some of the salient analyses of the concept of *wasafīyah* (moderation) in the ancient Greek and the Islamic traditions and uses them to develop a contemporary view of the matter. Greek ethics played a huge role in shaping the ethical views of Muslim philosophers and theologians, and thus the article starts with an overview of the revival of contemporary western virtue ethics, in many ways an extension of Platonic-Aristotelian ethics, and then looks briefly at the place of moderation or temperance in Platonic-Aristotelian ethics. This sets the stage for an exposition of the position taken by Ibn Miskawayh and al-Ghazali, which is then used as a backdrop for suggesting a revival of the Qur'an's virtue ethics. After outlining a basis for its virtue ethics, the Qur'anic view of the virtue of *wasafīyah* is discussed briefly and its position on this virtue's nature in terms of the individual and the community is presented.

Introduction

We are living in difficult times. The world in general and the Muslim world in particular need to ground themselves in the ethical wisdom of the ages in order to steer themselves through the contemporary political upheavals. Given

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that humanity is afflicted by various extremist ideas and ideologies, it is very important that we search our ethical documents to get a sense of balance for living our lives. Thus the Qur'anic concept of *wasatīyah* needs to be explored carefully from a variety of angles and disciplinary perspectives at a comprehensive philosophic level. This paper seeks to contribute to the work being done in this area by both Muslim and non-Muslim scholars by looking at some of the salient analyses of this particular concept in the ancient Greek and the Islamic traditions and then using them to develop a contemporary view of this matter.

Greek ethics played a huge role in shaping the ethical views of Muslim philosophers and theologians, and therefore the article begins by overviewing the revival of contemporary western virtue ethics, in many ways an extension of Platonic-Aristotelian ethics. It then looks at the place of moderation or temperance in this stream of Greek ethics briefly to set the stage for explaining the positions taken by Ibn Miskawayh and al-Ghazali. This discussion is then used as backdrop for suggesting a revival of the Qur'an's virtue ethics. After outlining the basis for this, the virtue of *wasatīyah*, or moderation as it appears in the Qur'an's verses, is discussed briefly. A view of the Qur'anic position on the nature of this virtue as regards the individual and the community is also presented.

The Recent Revival of Virtue Ethics in the West

There are currently three major approaches in ethical philosophy: Kantianism, utilitarianism, and virtue ethics. The first two have remained the dominant trends in western ethical philosophy ever since the Enlightenment.¹ Both approaches seek to understand ethical matters in terms of understanding the characteristics of people's actions. Thus they are, so to speak, action-centered approaches. Kantians look at the action's moral quality through the lens of the rule or duty upon which it might be based. This approach is called *deontological*, from the Greek word *deont* (that which is binding).² Thus it is a duty-based approach to understanding ethics. As opposed to this, the various utilitarian approaches seek to evaluate actions in terms of their consequences for all concerned. As a result, these approaches are known as *consequentialism*.

These two dominant approaches have recently been challenged by the revival of an historical tradition of ethics known as virtue ethics, which can be traced back to Homer, Plato, and Aristotle. It was also the dominant ethical approach in Islam and Christianity during the Middle Ages.³ In fact, Confucian ethics is also a virtue ethics.⁴ In essence, this approach focuses on the moral

agent's characteristics instead of the action, for it regards the agent's character as basic for understanding the action's morality .

There is an ongoing debate among adherents of these three ethical approaches in contemporary ethical literature.⁵ Here, however, we are concerned with the virtue ethics approach because it is the dominant ethical perspective in the Islamic religious and philosophical traditions. This section, therefore, gives a brief overview of contemporary western virtue ethics to set the stage for further discussion.

The contemporary revival of virtue ethics is normally traced to the publication of E. Anscombe's well-known paper "Modern Moral Philosophy,"⁶ in which she expressed her despair with modern moral philosophy and argued that the ethical terms of modern philosophy contained no real content. Expressions like "morally wrong" action fail to rule out the possibility that the same action may turn out not to be morally wrong in other circumstances. She also argued that notions like *right* and *wrong* or *obligation* are primarily *legal* notions that presuppose the existence of a *legal* authority. But modern philosophers do not have a plausible notion of such an authority, insofar as they do not attribute this status to God and insofar as their other purported sources of such legal authority (e.g., society, conscience, social contract, or nature) all suffer from various defects.⁷ Therefore, she asserted, if we do not take God to be the source of our ethical "norms," we need to look somewhere else for those norms. She proposed looking for them in human *virtues*.

[J]ust as *man* has so many teeth, which is certainly not the average number of teeth men have, but is the number of teeth for the species, so perhaps the species *man*, regarded not just biologically, but from the point of view of the activity of thought and choice in regard to the various departments of life – powers and faculties and use of things needed – "has" such-and-such virtues: and this "man" with the complete set of virtues is the "norm," as "man" with, e.g., a complete set of teeth is a norm."⁸

Anscombe wanted contemporary ethics to revert to an Aristotelian approach in its search for ethical norms, defined as what is "normal" for human beings in terms of functioning properly in different departments of life. She believes that if one wants to retain the notions of obligation and right and wrong in our ethics, one needs to retain God as the legal authority or source of our obligations. Norms legislated by God need not be in conflict with the requirements emerging out of human nature. Otherwise, one needs to do away with these notions.

This was the first drop of rain for the contemporary revival of virtue ethics. The next major development was the appearance of Alasdair MacIntyre's *After Virtue* (University of Notre Dame Press: 1981), a complex historical argument that placed the resurgence of virtue ethics on a strong footing. MacIntyre, like Anscombe before him, regards modern ethical philosophy as quite hopeless as far as resolving contemporary moral issues through rational argument is concerned. The mind-set generated by what he calls "modern liberal individualism" lacks the resources to produce any agreement on the *premises* of the arguments constituting contemporary moral debates. In his view, one needs to belong to a moral tradition in order to produce such agreement on moral premises. Contemporary liberal individualism belongs to no such tradition and draws its concepts and rules from fragments of traditions.

The surface rhetoric of our culture is apt to speak complacently of moral pluralism in this connection, but the notion of pluralism is too imprecise. For it may equally well apply to an ordered dialogue of intersecting viewpoints and to an unharmonious melange of ill-assorted fragments. The suspicion – and for the moment it can only be a suspicion – that it is the latter with which we have to deal is heightened when we recognize that all those various concepts which inform our moral discourse were originally at home in larger totalities of theory and practice in which they enjoyed a role and function supplied by contexts of which they have now been deprived. Moreover the concepts we employ have in at least some cases changed their character in the past three hundred years; the evaluative expressions we use have changed their meaning. In the transition from the variety of contexts in which they were originally at home to our own contemporary culture "virtue" and "justice" and "piety" and "duty" and even "ought" have become other than they once were. How ought we to write the history of such changes?⁹

Thus modern culture is isolated from the systems of rules and concepts that constituted various traditions. As a result, modernists construct their arguments with fragments that are isolated from a total system of moral concepts. Due to this absence of a total system in which they can house their arguments, they start from different beginnings/premises and fail to find points of agreement for resolving moral differences.

Through a complex historical analysis, MacIntyre develops the argument that from the Homeric/Heroic age through Plato and Aristotle up to the Stoics and then continuing through the Middle Ages and the Enlightenment until the emergence of modernity, there is a sequence of moral traditions, each of which integrates its moral concepts with its own specific social/historical context. In the Homeric/Heroic age, virtues are traits or excellences that required a person

to perform his/her role appropriately according to his/her status in the context of his/her family. In the case of Plato and Aristotle, virtues are traits required to perform one's role appropriately according to one's station as a citizen of a city-state. In both Homeric/Heroic age and Platonic/Aristotelian traditions, virtues are meant to help improve the social order, family, or city-state.¹⁰

For Stoics, however, virtues are neither diverse nor embedded in a social order. They talk of only one virtue, namely, submitting to nature and that too in an individualistic sense. The emergence of the Hellenistic and subsequently the Roman empires diluted the sense of community. Citizens had to act not on behalf of a community, but rather on their own behalf to prove their worth to the empire. According to MacIntyre, this Stoic individualism has emerged time and again throughout history during periods of a weakened sense of virtues.¹¹ This individualism is a precursor of the modern individualistic mindset that Enlightenment thinking brought to a head.

In fact, MacIntyre believes that our very conception of reason underwent a revolution from teleological to "calculative" with the advent of Enlightenment science. As a result, the Platonic-Aristotelian scheme for understanding morality that was adopted without difficulty by the Jews, Christians, and Muslims of the Middle Ages became fragmented at the hands of Enlightenment modernity.

This scheme is complicated and added to, but not essentially altered, when it is placed within a framework of theistic beliefs, whether Christian, as with Aquinas, or Jewish with Maimonides, or Islamic with Ibn Roschd. The precepts of ethics now have to be understood not only as teleological injunctions, but also as expressions of a divinely ordained law. The table of virtues and vices has to be amended and added to and a concept of sin is added to the Aristotelian concept of error. The law of God requires a new kind of respect and awe. The true end of man can no longer be completely achieved in this world, but only in another. Yet the threefold structure of untutored human-nature-as-it-happens-to-be, human-nature-as-it-could-be-if-it-realized-its-*telos* and the precepts of rational ethics as the means for the transition from one to the other remains central to the theistic understanding of evaluative thought and judgment. Thus moral utterance has throughout the period in which the theistic version of classical morality predominates both a twofold point and purpose and a double standard. To say what someone ought to do is at one and the same time to say what course of action will in these circumstances as a matter of fact lead toward a man's true end and to say what the law, ordained by God and comprehended by reason, enjoins. Moral sentences are thus used within this framework to make claims which are true or false. Most medieval proponents of this scheme did of course be-

lieve that it was itself part of God's revelation, but also a discovery of reason and rationally defensible. This large area of agreement does not however survive when Protestantism and Jansenist Catholicism – and their immediate late medieval predecessors – appear on the scene. For they embody a new conception of reason.¹²

This is a key passage in MacIntyre's analysis of why contemporary societies need to revert to a traditional virtue ethics scheme. He also notes the continuity of his argument with that of Anscombe. Without allowing ethical concepts to breathe in their traditional context, we cannot agree on the fundamental premises of our moral arguments and, hence, end up failing to understand or resolve our ethical differences. In Anscombe's characterization, our ethical expressions fail to have "content." MacIntyre's point in this passage is that medieval Jewish, Christian, and Islamic thought blended nicely with the Platonic-Aristotelian tradition to give it a theistic dimension. Virtues and vices became justified by divine law simultaneously with teleological reason, which sought to realize humanity's essence or essential function. Enlightened modernity disrupted this blend by destroying the teleological conception of human reason/nature.

According to MacIntyre, modern moral thinking continues to be emotivist even after emotivism's philosophical retreat as a philosophical theory. It not only lacks the capacity to settle moral debates rationally because of its fragmented nature, but also because it does not have the right kind of moral self in view. Since the emotivist approach obliterates the distinction between manipulative and non-manipulative social relations, our model characters in modern times are all manipulators of persons and pursue goods that he characterizes as "external" to their practices. He gives examples of such characters.

Two of these we have already noticed: the Rich Aesthete and the Manager. To these we must now add a third: the Therapist. The manager represents in his *character* the obliteration of the distinction between manipulative and nonmanipulative social relations; the therapist represents the same obliteration in the sphere of personal life.¹³

Characters like the bureaucratic manager and the therapist want to make wealth or gain power (psychological effectiveness), both goods that are external to their practices, rather than to help people or cure the patient (i.e., goods internal to their practices). Similarly an aesthete, who is rich personally or parasitic on someone who is rich, works incessantly for enjoyment in order to avoid boredom, rather than basing his/her life on anything substantive in terms of work and values.

MacIntyre argues that in order to come out of the current crisis in moral thinking, we need to revert to the tradition of virtue ethics of which Aristotle, according to him, is the greatest representative. Fragmented Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment morality needs to be replaced by a virtuous pursuit of goods internal to various social practices. In fact, he defines virtue with reference to social practices.

A virtue is an acquired human quality the possession and exercise of which tends to enable us to achieve those goods which are internal to practices and the lack of which effectively prevents us from achieving any such goods.¹⁴

According to him, standards of excellence, rules, and goods are the three basic components of such practices. Anybody who enters a practice must accept its standards in order to achieve its internal goods. One can acquire and then exercise the relevant qualities (virtues) to achieve the related goods. The failure to exercise such virtues clearly results in the failure to achieve the relevant internal goods and, hence, is morally blameworthy. As far as the standards of such practices are concerned, they are subject to critical evaluation over time. However, the practices can still have a historical continuity and stability. Entering into such practices to achieve their internal goods provides a narrative structure to our lives, unifies them, and makes them intelligible to us.

For MacIntyre, communities give life and context to these practices, be they in the arts, the sciences, or any other area. Therefore virtues, given that they are related to practices, can be understood only through their relations with the communities in which those practices breathe. Like Plato and Aristotle, he considers the pursuit of virtues a communal activity.

This overall argument for the revival of virtue ethics in the context of community life seems to have tremendous relevance for the revival of virtue ethics in the Muslim community on both the local and global level. Several considerations make it imperative that Muslim thinkers, leaders, and communities revive their traditional virtue ethics approach.

First of all, the fragmentation of ethical thinking that he speaks about in relation to the modern West exists at a far deeper and more comprehensive level in the Muslim community.¹⁵ Due to the colonial interregnum to which the West subjected most Muslim societies, their collective and historical psyches have been disrupted. A great many traditional institutions and social practices were demolished and supplanted with western institutions and practices that did not function effectively, particularly after the colonial powers' departure. As a result, there is a widespread dissatisfaction and political unrest throughout the Muslim world.¹⁶

Second, this disruption has caused widespread confusion, indeed ignorance, about the intellectual heritage of Islamic civilization. The contribution of Islam toward the modern intellectual tradition, science, and technology remains largely unknown even among Muslims. Third, the community's moral fiber has been severely damaged due to the political and economic mismanagement of its affairs by an inept and often corrupt leadership. As a result, the intellectual traditions of the Islamic "golden age," of which virtue ethics was an integral and critically important part, must be revived.

The Virtue of Moderation among Greek and Medieval Muslim Thinkers

Moderation or temperance is one of the four principal virtues in Plato's ethics, the other three being wisdom, courage, and justice. The Greek word *sophrosune*,¹⁷ normally translated as moderation or temperance, does not have an exact equivalent in other languages. It is a virtue or excellence of character that leads its possessors to exercise an all-round moderation, self-control, and prudence in their actions – self-knowing moderation or orderly disposition. Muslim ethicists have adopted the Arabic term *'iffah*¹⁸ for this particular virtue, which connotes, among other things, an all-round self-restraint and purity.

The Virtue of Moderation in Plato

Plato divided the four principal virtues into two groups: wisdom (based in the human soul's rational part, which regulates or harmonizes all other parts) and courage, temperance, and justice (all of which are subordinate to wisdom). Of these, courage corresponds to the spirited part of the human soul. There is no virtue that corresponds specifically to the appetitive part of the soul. Temperance is an excellence or virtue that gives the soul an orderly disposition as regards satisfying its appetites and desires; however, it also ensures which part rules and which ones are ruled over. Justice, finally, is the virtue by which the human soul lets all of its different parts function in harmony and without interfering with each other. There seems to be a close affinity between justice and temperance, insofar as these virtues contribute to the soul's orderly functioning.

This division of the soul into rational, appetitive, and spirited parts is based on the tripartite division of the social order in Plato's *Republic*. The virtues of the ideal city-state are the same as virtues of the soul. The three classes of the ideal social order, namely, the farmers/craftsmen, soldiers, and rulers corre-

spond to the soul's appetitive, spirited, and rational parts, respectively, and need to be governed by the same virtues as the parts of the soul. Plato describes the role of temperance or moderation in the social order as (summarized by James Adam):

This virtue [Temperance] resembles a kind of "harmony" or mutual accord. It is often explained as self-control. Self-control means that the better self rules the worse; and this is surely true of our city, for in it the higher controls the lower, and the irrational desires of the inferior many are subject to the rational desires of the virtuous few. Further, our citizens are in accord with one another as to who shall rule and who shall be ruled, so that Temperance is present in both ruled and rulers, pervading the whole city through and through and rendering it accordant with itself. We may define Temperance as accord between the naturally better and the naturally worse, on the question which of them should rule. 430D - 432A¹⁹

James Adam points out that Aristotle and others seem to have made the mistake that temperance is "the special virtue of the lowest class in the State and the lowest element in the soul."²⁰ This error, he contends, partly arose from a desire to bring a superficial symmetry to Plato's theory by attaching a virtue to each social class. However, in Plato's theory temperance is not unique to the lowest social class or lowest part of human soul. In fact, all parts of the social order and human soul need temperance insofar as it is a concord between the "naturally better and naturally worse."

In Adam's tabulation all three virtues (i.e., wisdom, courage, and temperance) belong to the rulers or philosopher kings/queens, whereas courage and temperance belong to the soldiers and temperance belongs only to the farmers and craftsmen. Justice, which makes all of the other virtues possible, unifies them all by making them carry out their own specific part (i.e., mind their own business) in the state as well as in the human soul. It makes them possible insofar as "the division of duty according to natural capacity"²¹ is the source of each virtue in the state as well as in the soul. Justice is exactly such a division of duty according to natural capacity. Therefore, without justice the other virtues will not even arise. Justice also unifies all other virtues insofar as it has to run through them all to keep them in their own respective spheres.

Although temperance is a disposition for orderly and harmonious conduct of all the parts of the soul or the state, it is different from justice. For instance, it does not make other virtues possible, despite the fact that it must be present in all parts to ensure concord among them. Indeed, temperance must regulate itself to stay temperate for, as Adam notes, "it is a virtue both of the whole

and of each of the parts.”²² But unlike justice, it does not create the division of duties according to natural capacities. All it does is enable concord among the parts so that the better should rule the worse. At the appetitive level of the soul and at the lowest level of the social order, it moderates and properly restrains the appetites of the individual and the relevant social group.

Aristotle on Moderation

Aristotle’s ethics also accepts wisdom, courage, temperance, and justice as virtues. However, unlike Plato, he considers them, along with many others, to be individual virtues, although the social order or city-state helps the citizens realize them. Therefore, temperance is not seen as an excellence or virtue of the social order, but rather as an excellence of individual character like the virtues of wisdom, courage, and so on. His ethics is based on the so-called function argument. After establishing that *eudaimonia* (i.e., happiness or human flourishing) is the supreme good toward which all human actions aim, either directly or indirectly through such instrumental goods as health, wealth, and other things, he presents the following argument.

[W]e still require a more explicit account of what constitutes happiness. Perhaps then we may arrive at this by ascertaining what is man’s function. For the goodness or efficiency of a flute-player or sculptor or craftsman of any sort, and in general of anybody who has some function or business to perform, is thought to reside in that function; and similarly it may be held that the good of man resides in the function of man, if he has a function.²³

The function that humanity does not share with animals and plants, according to Aristotle, is rational thought. It is rationality, therefore, which is a specifically human function. Through the exercise of rationality, man fulfills the basic function of his nature. This intellectual capacity, according to him, has a theoretical and a practical side to it and intellectual virtues of theoretical and practical wisdom are based on it.

Aristotle defines virtues as dispositions or states of the human soul that have been inculcated by habits and thus can provide the proper emotional and rational response in different situations. Inculcated in us since childhood through feeling and acting in certain ways, these dispositions slowly become habits, the totality of which makes up a person’s character. Acting in accord with these habits, however, cannot be considered fully virtuous until they are regulated by *phronesis* (practical wisdom), which helps us discern the most appropriate course of action in a given situation. Aristotle argues that virtue is

a mean between the two extremes of excess and deficiency. For example, generosity is the mean between the excess of prodigality and the deficiency of stinginess. Similarly, courage is the mean between the excess of rashness and the deficiency of cowardice.

As noted by Nussbaum, Aristotle identifies spheres of human experience and then mentions the virtues that correspond to them.²⁴ As a virtue, temperance or moderation corresponds to the sphere of bodily appetites and their pleasures and pains. Bodily appetites like hunger, thirst, and sexual drive need to be satisfied in a temperate way without either excessive indulgence or deficient satisfaction. To discover the mean of satisfying one's appetite one has to inculcate the right habits from the beginning and use his/her practical wisdom, *phronesis*, to act with temperance. In his close study of the Aristotelian virtue of temperance, Charles Young sums the matter as follows:

Aristotle makes moral temperance the product of a different [different from Plato] kind of intellectual temperance. For him, people properly control their appetites when they are properly inflected towards their animality – when they acknowledge it without submitting to it. To have Aristotelian temperance, then, is to embody the recognition that one is animal in genus and rational in species. It is to know one's place in the community of souls.²⁵

It appears that Aristotle gives a kind of a universal role to *phronesis* in the realm of virtues. The exercise of all virtues involves the use of practical wisdom (reasoning), which is itself a virtue, albeit an intellectual one. This universal role of practical wisdom appears to be quite similar to the role of temperance in Plato's scheme, in which the latter is the virtue that ensures that the ruling (reason) and the ruled elements (spirit and appetite) of the soul or the state agree to rule or being ruled. In other words, temperance has a kind of a universal role as far as the exercise of other virtues is concerned.

However, there are three crucial facts one has to keep in mind when comparing Plato and Aristotle in this regard. First, Aristotle does not isolate wisdom, courage, temperance, and justice as principal or what later came to be called cardinal virtues.²⁶ Rather, they are part of a larger group of virtues. Second, he does not extend these four virtues to the social order. Third, his understanding of them is narrower than that of Plato in terms of their conceptual content. For example, Aristotle does not consider temperance as a virtue of the state and, at the individual level, restricts it to the control of appetites involving our sense of touch. Thus it has no role in relation to the soul's spirited and rational parts.

Muslim Thinkers on Moderation

Starting with the early Qur'anic commentators and the jurists, Muslim scholars have been engaged with considerations of virtue all along. During the eighth and ninth centuries, Mu'tazilah and Ash'ariyyah theologians developed elaborate ethical systems. The chief representative ethicists of these schools are Qadi Abd al-Jabbar (d. 1025), a Mu'tazili of the Basra school, and al-Ghazali (d. 1111), one of the most influential Ash'ari theologians of all times. Philosophers from al-Kindi (d. 866) onward addressed ethical issues in their systems, and one finds elaborate ethical doctrines in the works of al-Farabi (d. 950), Ibn Sina (d. 1037), and many others. The greatest ethicist in the tradition, however, is Ibn Miskawayh (d. 1030).

Mu'tazili ethics is deontological in its spirit, whereas Ash'ari ethics is engaged with the issue of divine omnipotence and hence tends to be a voluntaristic ethics. Philosophers like al-Farabi and Ibn Sina are under the Platonic influence in their approach to virtues. Ibn Miskawayh is also influenced by Plato as regards his approach to principal virtues, although his view of happiness is Aristotelian. Elements of neo-Platonism and Stoic ethics are also present in Ibn Miskawayh. Here we briefly note the views of Ibn Miskawayh and al-Ghazali.

Ibn Miskawayh, considered to be the greatest Muslim ethicist of the Middle Ages, accepts Plato's four principal virtues as basic and organizes all of the other virtues around them. Hamid Alavi sums up his position in this regard as follows:

[The] human soul has three different faculties: a faculty related to distinguishing and thinking in the truth of the affaires, which is called intellectual (rational faculty), and its instrument in body is the brain. The second faculty is related to anger, fear, fearlessness and hegemonism, etc. Which is called irascible faculty, and its instrument in one's body is the heart. The third faculty which is related to lust and one's desire to food, residence, marriage and other sensory pleasures are called appetitive, and its instrument in the body is liver. Each of these faculties becomes powerful or weak in accord with temper, habit and education. If the trend of the intellectual faculty is moderate, and it is toward reaching correct sciences, the virtue of knowledge and as a result of it "wisdom" will be created. If the trend of the appetitive is moderate and it surrenders to the intellectual faculty, and it does not involve in its carnal desires, the virtue of chastity will be created from it. If the trend of irascible faculty is seemly and merited, and if it is accompanied with the following of the intellectual faculty, the virtue of "courage" will be created. The product and resultant of these three virtues is a fourth virtue called "justice" that is the perfection of virtues (Ibn Miskawayh, 1992).²⁷

It is plain that his view of the human soul is similar to that of Plato in that he associates the four principal virtues with three aspects of human soul (viz., wisdom, courage, chastity – the translation of Arabic term *'iffah*, used by Muslim philosophers for moderation) and that each one of them plays its specific part (justice). It needs to be noted, however, that his view here is not Platonic for he does not associate these virtues with the social order.

Ibn Miskawayh's view of happiness is at least partly Aristotelian. He argues that Aristotle distinguishes three kinds of happiness: happiness located in the human soul (e.g., goods like knowledge and gnosis), in the human body (e.g., goods such as beauty and health), and in goods external to the human soul and body (e.g., intelligent children, friends, and other resources).²⁸ As far as temperance is concerned, he subordinates a number of virtues to it, among them self-discipline and correct evaluation of the self.²⁹ This ordering goes to show that he is following the original sense of *sophrosune*, which includes self-knowledge and avoiding all forms of excess.

Turning now to al-Ghazali, he, despite his criticism of philosophers, generally follows them in his virtue ethics. Sherif puts the matter in these words:

Ghazali begins the discussion of virtue with what he calls “mothers” (*ummahat*) or principal virtues, the “mothers of character” (*ummahat al-akhlaq*) refer to the same principal virtues. These are listed as four: wisdom (*hikmah*), courage (*shaja'ah*), temperance (*'iffah*), and justice (*'adl*). He derives them from an analysis of the soul and distinguishes them according to its faculties. These virtues and their psychological basis are identical with their counterparts in the Greek philosophic tradition especially in Plato and Aristotle.³⁰

However, al-Ghazali's analysis of the human soul has its own uniqueness despite its roots in the philosophic tradition. According to Sherif's summary, he divides the soul into three parts or faculties: the vegetative (*al-nabaṭīyah*), the animal (*al-ḥayawānīyah*), and the human (*al-insānīyah*). From an ethical point of view, the latter two faculties are crucial. The animal soul is further divided into the motive (*muḥarrikah*) and the perceptive (*mudrikah*).³¹ It is the motive faculty that gives us impulse and is appetitive; desires and anger are based in the appetitive part. The perceptive part has an external and an internal sense. The external sense is comprised of the usual five senses, whereas the internal sense has representative (*khayālīyah*), retentive (*ḥāfīzah*), estimative (*wahmīyah*), recollective (*dhākirah*), and sensitive imagination (*mutakhayyilah*). Lastly, the human part has two parts: theoretical reasoning (*'ālimah*) and practical reasoning (*'āmilah*).³²

The disposition toward virtue is habituated in humanity by practical reasoning through governing all parts of the animal soul. If passively accepted, bodily desires produce a disposition toward vice. The disposition for the virtue of temperance develops when the faculty of desire (*shahwānīyah*) is governed by practical reason. Desires need to be satisfied, and the extremes of excessive indulgence or total insensibility to them need to be avoided. The practical reason strikes the proper mean in this regard, and as long as one submits to the limits imposed by reason one is being temperate or moderate. But Sherif points out that temperance is not limited to desires for al-Ghazali, who also has an extended conception of this virtue:

Influenced by these [i.e., Qur’anic, prophetic, and lexicographic] usages of the term *‘iffah*, Ghazali’s concept of temperance is enlarged, an abstinence and restraint not limited to the objects of the concupiscent faculty alone. In applying temperance to all faculties of the soul and all organs of the body, Ghazali extends its meaning beyond that accepted by the philosophic tradition.³³

Sherif continues to inform us that al-Ghazali extends temperance as a virtue in the direction of restraint from things forbidden by religious law and, ultimately, restraint from all that does not aim at “ultimate happiness” or “religious salvation.” This extended conception, though, seems to bear some resemblance to Plato’s view of this virtue (noted above) as regulating all parts of the human soul and the social order portrayed in the *Republic*. Hence, contrary to what Sherif says, al-Ghazali does not go beyond the philosophic tradition in this matter, although the goal of practicing virtues is, according to Plato, to reach the form of the Good. This does not look like an explicitly religious goal.

Toward A Virtue Ethics of the Qur’an

The Qur’an describes itself as the book of guidance for the *mutaqqīn* (Q. 2:2), those who have the all-embracing virtue of *taqwā*. Translators normally translate this term as “fear of God.” However, such a translation can be misleading because the root word *w-q-y* means “to guard or protect against something.”³⁴ As Caliph Umar is reported to have remarked to Ubayy ibn K’ab, possessing *taqwā* is like walking on a thorny path and succeeding in avoiding all thorns.³⁵ The point of this simile is that *taqwā* is the quality or ability or disposition of being able to remain virtuous at all times and to guard oneself from all vices and evil even in the most difficult of circumstances. Thinkers

like Fazlur Rahman define it as the ability to distinguish right from wrong (conscience) and then actually being able to do what is right without feeling self-righteous.³⁶

From these preliminaries, it can be seen that *taqwā* is not a specific disposition to perform this or that particular virtuous act, but rather a general disposition or a complex of dispositions that one might have to succeed, generally, in choosing and performing virtuous acts in various situations. One can also say that it is a general disposition that gives birth to other specific dispositions for virtuous actions. But if that is so, then *taqwā* is a certain form of character that enables a person to make virtuous choices. A *mutaqqī*, therefore, is a person who possesses a special character that generally inclines him/her toward correct choices and correct action.

It appears, therefore, that the Qur'an describes itself as a book of guidance for those who have the general disposition or character to protect themselves against all vices. This literally boils down to a character disposition for virtue. If this interpretation of *taqwā* is correct, then the Qur'an by its own description is a book of guidance for those who pursue a virtuous life. It follows, therefore, that its ethics would be appropriately interpreted as virtue ethics. This position is also corroborated by the fact that Muslim philosophers and ethicists who were active during the Middle Ages by and large took a similar stance toward Islamic ethics.

One may differ with the above characterization of the matter and say that the Qur'an also describes itself as guidance for humanity as a whole (Q. 2:185, 17:9), which of course includes people who do not possess *taqwā*. This guidance is for everyone and therefore should not be relegated only to those with *taqwā*. This is true; however, it needs to be understood that the Qur'an also says that the ability to distinguish right from wrong (the most fundamental ingredient of *taqwā*) has been granted to all of humanity: "By the soul (*nafs*) and the proportion and the order given to it, and its enlightenment as to its right and its wrong" (Q. 91:7-8). Now if all souls have been given this enlightenment, then all humans have the capacity to receive guidance from the Qur'an. Nobody is barred from this guidance automatically. However, one's consistent failure to exercise this capacity to distinguish right from wrong blocks the emergence of the disposition required for virtuous actions (another ingredient of *taqwā*) and can result in what the Qur'an calls the hardening or sealing of hearts (Q. 2:7). In such a situation, one ends up failing to receive and benefit from this guidance. Perhaps it is in a similar vein that the Qur'an proclaims: "God does not guide the unbelievers" (Q. 5:67).

It is with this background in mind that a virtue ethics of the Qur'an in outline is being proposed here. However, instead of taking Platonic-Aristotelian ethics as a guidepost, it is best simply to allow the Qur'an to speak for itself. The basic contention here is that the Qur'an contains at least five fundamentals of virtue ethics³⁷: (1) sound moral character as the only basis for judging the moral worth of a human being, (2) freedom of choice, (3) conscience, (4) intention plus principle as the criterion of the moral worth of an action, and (5) rejection of self-righteousness.

Why these five elements have been selected as fundamentals of the Qur'anic virtue ethics needs to be explained. A virtue ethics is basically a character-based ethics. It understands the virtuous nature of an action in terms of the characteristics of the person performing the action, rather than the characteristics of the action itself.³⁸ The Qur'anic principle of sound moral character as the only basis for a person's moral worth is, therefore, a fundamental prerequisite for constructing a virtue ethics. It points in the right direction for judging a person's worth and actions from the perspective of a virtue ethics. The other four fundamentals noted here are similarly characteristics of the moral agent, rather than that of an action. Even the fourth one is not purely about the principle behind an action, for it links the principle with the intention of the person performing the action.

The question as to why are these five fundamental elements necessary and sufficient for constructing a virtue ethics of the Qur'an can be answered by noting that they are necessary because they are related to the moral agent's character and that they are sufficient because their generality allows them to answer all of the basic questions about morality. If one has a conscience and can exercise free choice in moral matters with the appropriate degree of humility (rejection of self-righteousness) combined with proper intention and principle, then one can be held responsible for his/her character. And this is what any view of ethics is primarily supposed to achieve. Answers to any other questions of ethics, as well as characterizations of other ethical concepts, can be explained on the basis of these basics.

That is why it is in the framework of these five fundamentals that one can take the Qur'an as proposing all of its ethical and religious virtues. The idea behind these five fundamentals seems to be that one achieves *falāḥ*,³⁹ the Qur'anic term for comprehensive happiness and success, only on the basis of one's character. Therefore, one's character determines one's ultimate moral worth. But to shape this character or develop *taqwā*, a person needs the ability to distinguish right from wrong (conscience) as well as the freedom of choice

to select the course of action that leads to *falāḥ*. A human criterion for deciding an action's moral worth is also required to distinguish virtue from vice so that one can exercise one's conscience effectively in specific situations. Of course, when making these choices a person needs to steadfastly guard against self-righteousness in order to not destroy the moral value of his/her actions. Provided we have these fundamentals, we can pursue specific ethical and religious virtues successfully and achieve *falāḥ*, comprehensive happiness and success in this world and in the hereafter.

I first point out the Qur'anic bases for these five fundamentals and then knit them together to form a basis for a virtue ethics. As for a sound moral character (*taqwā*) being the only basis for judging one's moral worth, we read:

O humanity! We created you from a single (pair) of a male and a female, and made you into nations and tribes, that you may know each other (not that you may despise (each other). Verily the most honored of you in the sight of Allah is (he who is) the most righteous of you. And Allah has full knowledge and is well acquainted (with all things). (Q. 49:13)

The term translated as "the most righteous of you" is a derivative of the same root as *taqwā*.⁴⁰ Therefore, *taqwā* is the sole basis of judgment for determining a person's worth. This *taqwā*-based character is the foundation of each person's moral worth or the moral worth of his/her individual actions. Human beings have been entrusted with freedom of choice to make them responsible for the inculcation of such character. The Qur'an says: "We did indeed offer the Trust to the Heavens and the Earth and the Mountains; but they refused to undertake it, being afraid thereof; but man undertook it; – He was indeed unjust and foolish" (Q. 33:72).

Commentators of the Qur'an take this "trust" to be that of free will or freedom of choice.⁴¹ The idea here is that all other creations in the universe lack this ability. They are subject to the laws of Nature, as created by God, and thus there is nothing more to them. Only humanity undertook this tremendous burden of freedom and the huge risks involved therein. Still, it is this freedom of choice that elevates humanity over everything else in creation. When this free will is exercised responsibly, meaning in combination with one's *taqwā*-based character or propensity to guard against all vices or evils, one chooses the virtuous course for the given situation. It must be added that such a *taqwā*-based free choice propels a person toward doing what is virtuous in a given situation rather than doing what is vicious.

It is obvious that the conscience, a central feature of *taqwā*, helps in this regard. According to the Qur'an, this ability to distinguish right from wrong

is inherent in human nature: “By the soul (*nafs*), and the proportion and order given to it, and its enlightenment as to its wrong and its right” (Q. 91:7-8). So a proportion and an order has been given to the human soul, as well as the ability to know right from wrong. This proportion and order are the soul’s internal harmony in its healthy state, whereas the ability to know right from wrong is the conscience itself. This ability helps the soul or the self to know which alternative is the right one and then to choose it freely because of its propensity for virtue (*taqwā*).

While choosing the right alternative, one needs to evaluate the principle on which such an alternative is based. That judgment involves the use of reason, of course, and so the conscience is assisted by reason or intelligence. Once the conscience judges the principle behind the alternative to be correct or virtue-based, a person can intend to either act upon it or to avoid/oppose it against the dictates of his/her conscience. Thus the correct principle identified by the conscience becomes combined with an intention that will eventually result in some action. The criterion of a good/virtuous action is that the action must be based on a correct principle combined with the correct intention.

Allah will not call you to account for thoughtlessness in your oaths, but for the intention in your hearts; and He is Oft-forgiving, Most Forbearing. (Q. 2:225)

Call them by (the names of) their fathers: that is more just in the sight of Allah. But if you know not their father’s (names, call them) your brothers in faith, or your *mawlas*. But there is no blame on you if you make a mistake therein: (what counts is) the intention of your hearts: and Allah is Oft-Returning, Most Merciful. (Q. 33:5)

Only an intentionally performed action can be evaluated as virtuous or otherwise. An intention to act upon the principled alternative is necessary for the virtuosity of the resulting action. However, one can fall prey to self-righteousness and moral arrogance even when one’s conscience has led him/her to identify the principled alternative and one has formed the intention to act upon it. This can happen if one comes to believe that one possesses the final truth regarding the concerned alternative’s correctness. Obviously such an attitude ignores the possibility of error in the human conscience.

Ignoring this possibility arrogates the human conscience to the position of God, the Knower of the Unseen, and the ensuing arrogance blunts it and destroys one’s propensity for virtue. Therefore, the Qur’an considers arrogance

to be a cardinal sin. In fact, Satan (or Iblis) is arrogance personified as far as the Qur'an is concerned. Hence, the action needs to be chosen by one's conscience with the understanding that its total moral worth is known only to God, the Knower of the Unseen.

A sense of fallibility must always accompany such judgments. This comes out clearly in the Qur'an's description of the conditions of *taqwā* in Q. 2:2-4. One of these conditions is belief in the Unseen. This Unseen is obviously God. But God, being the ultimate embodiment of all values, always transcends human understanding. In other words, the ultimate nature of values cannot be fully comprehended by human beings and thus they can never judge the ultimate worth of their own actions. That is why the conscience of a *mutaqqī* must always take itself to be fallible.

The foregoing remarks give us a basic conceptual structure in which to understand the Qur'anic virtue ethics. The primary thing is to inculcate virtuous character (*taqwā*), defined as the general disposition or propensity to act virtuously in the light of free and conscientious judgment between multiple alternatives in a given situation. This conscientious judgment provides a human being with the occasion to form an intention to act or not to act accordingly. As a general propensity, *taqwā* propels one to act accordingly but without self-righteousness so that the resulting action will be virtuous in that particular situation.

Given this scenario, we need not define virtue as the mean between extremes only. Human conscience can choose the correct alternative in a given situation on several different bases, including the criterion of the mean between the extremes. Other criteria may consist in principles and values rooted in and motivated by the concept of *falāḥ* (comprehensive well-being and success), which is central to the relevant social or religious practice of the relevant community/tradition. Human conscience works in the context of a tradition/society, not in a vacuum.

At this juncture, one might ask what the Qur'an considers to be the salient virtues. This is obviously a large question and far beyond the scope of a small paper like this one. However, one must point out that it explicitly mentions the virtues of wisdom, courage, moderation (or temperance), as well as justice. The Arabic word *ḥikmah* (wisdom) is mentioned twenty times, even if we do not count other variants of its root word *ḥ-k-m*. The Qur'an has this to say about its significance, as per Pickthall's translation: "He gives wisdom unto whom He will, and he unto whom wisdom is given, he truly has received abundant good. But none remember except men [and women] of understanding" (Q. 2:269).

Courage is exhorted upon the Prophet in Q. 46:35, for example, and is mentioned in several other places. Justice as a virtue is a constant theme, as the roots *q-s-ṭ* and *'-d-l*, for *qisṭ* and *'adl*, respectively, occur therein over fifty times in various forms. The Qur'an describes justice as being nearer to *taqwā* (the propensity for virtue):

O you who believe! Stand out firmly for Allah, as witnesses to fair dealing, and let not the hatred of others to you make you swerve to wrong and depart from justice. Be just: that is next to piety: and fear Allah. For Allah is well-acquainted with all that you do. (Q. 5:8)

The word *piety* is used for *taqwā* in this translation by Abdullah Yousaf Ali.

Before I deal with moderation/temperance in the Qur'an, however, it needs to be added that the Qur'an emphasizes a number of other religious and social virtues. The following verse is a good example:

It is not righteousness that you turn your faces Towards east or West; but it is righteousness to believe in Allah and the Last Day, and the Angels, and the Book, and the Messengers; to spend of your substance, out of love for Him, for your kin, for orphans, for the needy, for the wayfarer, for those who ask, and for the ransom of slaves; to be steadfast in prayer, and practice regular charity; to fulfill the contracts which you have made; and to be firm and patient, in pain (or suffering) and adversity, and throughout all periods of panic. Such are the people of truth, the Allah-fearing. (Q. 2:177)

This verse underscores the virtues of faith, benevolence, prayer, justice, and patience. The overall point here is that a system of virtues exists in the Qur'an and needs to be systemized in the light of the Qur'anic worldview.

The Qur'an on Moderation

The trilateral root of *wasatīyah*, the Arabic equivalent of temperance or moderation, is *w-s-ṭ*. It occurs five times in the Qur'an. The most important thing for our concerns here is that the Qur'an uses it both for the *ummah* (social order) and for an individual, thereby revealing that temperance is both a communal/social and an individual virtue. From this point of view, the Qur'anic position is closer to that of Plato and the Platonists than that of Aristotle and the Aristotelians. The Qur'an proclaims:

Thus, have We made of you an *ummah* justly balanced, that you might be witnesses over the nations, and the Messenger a witness over yourselves; and We appointed the *qiblah* to which you were used, only to test those who

followed the Messenger from those who would turn on their heels (from the faith). Indeed it was (a change) momentous, except to those guided by Allah. And never would Allah make your faith of no effect. For Allah is to all people most surely full of kindness, Most Merciful. (Q. 2:143)

Abdullah Yousaf Ali translated *ummataṅ wasaṅaṅ* as “*Ummat justly balanced.*” It basically means a middle or moderate community, which is the idea behind the phrase “justly balanced *Ummat.*” The Qur’an, therefore, characterizes the Muslim community as the middle or moderate or temperate community. The same excellence is also attributed to individuals in the following verse, as per Arberry’s translation: “Said the most moderate of them, ‘Did I not say to you, “Why do you not give glory?’” (Q. 68:28). Here, the Qur’an is talking about people who owned a garden but were stingy and arrogant. When God’s punishment was visited upon them, the most moderate⁴² one reminded them of their failure to glorify God. This, in this particular the virtue of moderation or temperance, refers to an individual.

From these two verses, the Qur’an clearly views moderation as an excellence that can be present both in individuals and communities or the social order. The more fundamental thing, however, is to uncover the nature of this virtue when it is possessed by communities. Why does it describe the Muslim community as the middle or moderate or “justly balanced” community? In what sense can a community possess the virtue or excellence of moderation or temperance? Commenting on Q. 2:143, Fazlur Rahman says:

Most probably what the Qur’an has immediately in mind is the middle position or balancing effect of the Muslim community as between the immobility or rigidity of Jewish particularism on the one hand and the excessively “accommodating” nature of Christianity on the other. But, of course, this immediate objective of the Qur’an can and must be extended by the principle of *qiyās* to other extremes, for example, that between Communism and Capitalism. The term “witness” here, as the Qur’an commentators remind us, has reference to the balance of the two sides of a scale. The idea, then, is that Muslims are the scale or the judge whereby extremes are to be determined and they are also the modifiers whereby those extremes are to be smoothed out. The former is an intellectual or diagnostic function, while the latter is an operational one.⁴³

So the community is expected to perform the dual function of discovering the extremes on the one hand and smoothing them out on the other. Both the functions of the “middle” community can be/need to be performed in history in relation both to the internal life of the community and also its external re-

lations. That is to say, in the external dimension of its role in history a community needs to act moderately in relation to other communities or states. In the internal dimension the community needs to exercise the virtue of moderation in all aspects of its ethical, socio-political as well as religious and spiritual life. In Platonic terms the virtue of moderation regulates all other virtues as well as all pursuits of the community in history. Rahman sums up the Qur'anic view of the role of society in the following words:

To resume our account of the general social philosophy of the Qur'an, human history basically consists of a constant process of the making and unmaking of societies and civilizations according to certain norms which are essentially moral; their source is transcendental but their application is entirely within collective human existence. These norms are called "God's Sunna" (practice or law for mankind which is unalterable):

[Look at] the example of those [Messengers] we sent before you [O Muḥammad!], and you will find no change in Our law. (17.al-Isrā':77) This has been God's practice with regard to bygone peoples, and God's Command [law] is irrevocably determined. (33.al-Aḥzāb:38)

This has been God's practice with the peoples of yore, and you shall certainly not find any change in God's practice. (33.al-Aḥzāb:62)

Are these people [Muḥammad's opponents], then, awaiting only the fate of earlier communities? For they shall surely find no deviation, no change whatever in God's law [or practice]. (35.Fāṭir:43; see also 8.al-Anfāl:38; 15.al-Ḥijr:13; 18.al-Kahf:55; 40.Ghāfir:85; 48.al-Faṭḥ:23)

This is the Qur'an's concept of "judgment in history," which descends upon peoples and nations rather than individuals (who will primarily be judged on the Last Day).⁴⁴

Thus communities, societies, and civilizations are subject to moral norms, the persistent violation of which can lead to their destruction and replacement in history. It appears, therefore, that a "middle" community is the one that follows the transcendental ethical norms while staying persistently within the bounds of temperance. Its laws and values do not transgress the limits of moderation either internally or in its external relations with other communities. Such a community is a "witness" to other communities in the sense of being the standard bearer of temperance. In other words, it provides them with the standard by which they can measure their own conduct in terms of temperance and thereafter smooth out the existing extremes.

On the internal front, following the virtue of moderation would mean, among other things, that the Muslim community is expected to measure all of its laws against the best standards of temperance, thereby ensuring that they handle the relevant situation in a balanced manner. But no law can guarantee such a balanced handling once and for all. With the passage of time, the human understanding of relevant situations and/or the structure of those relevant situations can undergo change. The related laws, therefore, need to be reviewed in the light of those intellectual and social changes. In other words, a community has to appropriately review its own laws in order to ensure that they are balanced and moderate in the light of the current intellectual and social conditions. This seems to be the only way in which the virtue of being a “middle” or temperate community can be practiced by a society in terms of its laws.

However, the contemporary Muslim community is far from being a temperate one. The excessive conservatism of the traditionalist approaches to Islamic law is a far cry from being moderate. The other extreme, that of abandoning the Islamic roots of the law, also violates the communal virtue of temperance. All societies in history have to strike a balance between tradition and change, for none of them can afford to live in the past or abandon it altogether. As the times and climes change, a society’s laws have to be reviewed in a balanced and temperate fashion to make sure that they reflect the current wisdom of humanity and meet the challenges of changed social circumstances.

The idea that the earliest generations of Muslim jurists have legislated on the basis of the Qur’an and the Sunnah for all times to come is simply inconsistent with the Qur’anic and prophetic view of a “middle” or temperate community. Such an assertion denotes excess on the side of conservatism and locks the Muslims’ capability to perform *ijtihad* (creative and critical thinking) in the prison of the past. Although a great deal can be learned from past legislation, a number of contemporary reform-minded Muslim thinkers have argued⁴⁵ that it has to be appropriately adjusted and revised to make it relevant to new times and climes. Otherwise, the community violates the Qur’anic demand that it be a moderate or “middle” community.

What is true of the laws is also true of education. Muslim communities today are caught between the two extremes of traditional *madrasah* education on the one hand and modern education on the other. They are extremes because, in most cases, these two streams of education fail to understand and, where rationally justified, accommodate each other. Education, like law, cannot be divorced from tradition or locked in tradition for good. In the first case it finds itself hanging in an intellectual and moral void; in the latter it becomes stultified and irrelevant. *Madrasah* education has made itself mostly irrelevant

to contemporary times, and its excessive conservatism prevents it from benefitting from contemporary knowledge even in the areas of the social sciences and humanities. It has locked itself away from modern hermeneutical, linguistic, and philosophical methods and ideas to the detriment of the rich intellectual tradition of Islamic civilization. Obviously, such an intemperate approach violates the idea of being a “middle” community.

On the other hand, modern universities in the Muslim world have by and large failed to develop a viable program of general education based on the historical intellectual heritage of Islam as well as of humanity at large.⁴⁶ Without such a comprehensive program, they cannot hope to produce appropriately educated graduates in either the natural sciences or the social sciences and humanities. Given the absence of balance and temperance in their curricula, the education provided by the community’s traditional and modern institutions need to be overhauled to meet the dictates of the virtue of temperance.⁴⁷

We now turn to the political situation. By and large, contemporary Muslim nations find themselves in a political mess. Monarchies, dictatorships, rigged and manipulated “democracies,” and militant radical movements are the order of the day. However, the Qur’an characterizes Muslims as a community that conducts its affairs through *shūrā* (mutual consultation; *amruhum shūrā baynahum* [Q. 42:38]). It should go without saying that this general principle does not discriminate between different sections of society, for all of them have the right to be consulted. The best interpretation of this principle seems to be a genuinely democratic dispensation.⁴⁸ No section or group is given an elitist role in this general principle of governance.

There is, therefore, an obvious clash between the Muslim world’s contemporary political state of affairs and the Qur’anic principle of governance. Governance by *shūrā*, it seems, is the middle course between dictatorships and tyrannies of various hues on the one hand and anarchy on the other. Dictatorships and tyrannies are examples of excessive control and touch the opposite extreme in various ways; anarchy is a lack or deficiency insofar as it recognizes no controlling authority. The Islamic tradition endorses neither of these extremes. This point can be fully appreciated only if one realizes that the Islamic tradition has generally insisted upon avoiding tyranny, dictatorship, and anarchy. As Abdul’aleem Islahi puts it:

Al-Mawardi (991-1058), Abu Ya’la al-Farra’ (990-1065), al-Ghazali (1031-1111), Ibn Jama’ah (1241-1333) and Ibn Khaldun (1332-1406) have all emphasized the need for the state and its religious character....To Ibn Taimiyah

authority is preferable to anarchy. Although he asks Muslims not to obey orders contrary to the commandments of Allah and forbids them to cooperate with an unjust ruler.⁴⁹

Similarly, the Islamic tradition also rejects tyranny and dictatorship insofar as it predominantly recommends electing the ruler in order to promote justice in society. As detailed by Abdi Shuriye, a majority of Muslim political thinkers (e.g., Ibn Khaldun, al-Mawardi, Ibn Taymiyyah, and al-Ghazali) argued for election when it came to choosing the caliph during the Middle Ages: “[The] majority of these thinkers have agreed that election, or the process of choosing the right leader, becomes a necessity (*Darurah*), as people have varied intellectual capacity.”⁵⁰

It appears, therefore, that governing by a process of society-wide *shūrā* in a fair and just fashion is a course that avoids these above-mentioned extremes. In such a situation, the virtue of moderation at the communal level would seem to lie in that form of governance which is fundamentally democratic and thus capable of meeting contemporary societal and international requirements.

Hence, most contemporary dispensations in the Muslim world are violating the virtue of moderation and destroying the community’s median character insofar as they violate the spirit of governance by *shūrā*. Any and all forms of oppression and exploitation carried out by the political establishments, as well as all forms of chaos and disruption perpetrated by radical militancy that one finds throughout Muslim lands today, are therefore a vicious violation of the Qur’anic principles and render Muslims open to God’s judgment in history.

Conclusion

Beginning with a brief look at the revival of virtue ethics in contemporary times, this article traced the virtue of *wasafīyah* (moderation or temperance) through some ancient and medieval ethicists and finally suggested elements of a virtue ethics in the Qur’an. A brief look was also cast at the Qur’anic characterization of moderation as both individual and social virtue. At the social level, Muslims seem to be in gross violation of this virtue today. In such central areas of life as law, education, and political dispensation, Muslim communities can be found at one extreme or the other. The genuine balance of the “middle” community needs to be restored through proper ethical education and the establishment of temperate institutions in all walks of life. Many vices are located at one extreme or the other, and many virtues are rooted in a moderation determined by practical wisdom. The Qur’an exhorts us to “strive as in a race in all virtues” (Q. 5:48).⁵¹

Endnotes

1. See, for example, A. MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 3d ed. (University of Notre Dame, 2007), x, chaps. 4-5; Jennifer Welchman, ed., *The Practice of Virtue: Classic and Contemporary Readings in Virtue Ethics* (Indianapolis and Cambridge: Hackett, 2006), ix-xvi. For an overview of the two approaches, see Larry Alexander and Michael Moore, "Deontological Ethics," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (spring 2015 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2015/entries/ethics-deontological>.
2. See <http://www.thefreedictionary.com/deontology>.
3. MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, chaps. 10-13. Also see Robert B. Kruschwitz and Robert C. Roberts, *The Virtues: Contemporary Essays on Moral Character* (Wadsworth: 1987), 6-16.
4. See, for example, various chapters in *Virtue Ethics and Confucianism*, ed. Stephan Angle and Michael Slote (Routledge, 2013) and Justin Tiwald, "Confucianism and Virtue Ethics: Still a Fledgling in Chinese and Comparative Philosophy," *Comparative Philosophy* 1, no. 2 (2010): 55-63.
5. See, for example, James Dreier, ed., *Contemporary Debates in Moral Theory* (Wiley Blackwell, 2006); Kruschwitz and Roberts, *The Virtues*, 16-17; Timothy Chappell, *Values and Virtues: Aristotelianism and Contemporary Ethics* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2006).
6. E. Anscombe, "Modern Moral Philosophy," *Philosophy* 33 (1958).
7. *Ibid.*, 13-14
8. *Ibid.*, 14.
9. MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 10.
10. *Ibid.*, 133.
11. MacIntyre writes: "Indeed whenever the virtues begin to lose their central place, Stoic patterns of thought and action at once reappear." *Ibid.*, 170.
12. *Ibid.*, 53.
13. *Ibid.*, 30.
14. *Ibid.*, 191.
15. For a good overview of the situation in the Muslim world, see W. W. Cooper and P. Yue, *Challenges of the Muslim World* (Emerald Group Publishing, 2008), particularly chaps. 5-7 and 9-10.
16. See, for example, "The Tragedy of the Arabs," *The Economist*, 5 July 2014 at <http://www.economist.com/news/leaders/21606284-civilisation-used-lead-world-ruinsand-only-locals-can-rebuild-it>; Toby Matthiesen, *Sectarian Gulf: Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, and the Arab Spring That Wasn't* (Stanford University Press, 2013) and Hamid Dabashi, *The Arab Spring: The End of Post-colonialism* (Zed Books, 2012) for an analysis.
17. A. MacIntyre, "Sophrosune: How a Virtue Can Become Socially Disruptive," *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 13 (1988): 1-3.
18. Mohamed Ahmed Sherif, *Ghazali's Theory of Virtue* (State University of New York Press, 1975), 24.

19. *The Republic of Plato*, trans. James Adam (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1902), 232.
20. *Ibid.*, 235.
21. *Ibid.*, 237.
22. *Ibid.*, 236.
23. Aristotle in 23 volumes, vol. 19, trans. H. Rackham (Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press; London, William Heinemann Ltd., 1934).
24. Martha C. Nussbaum, "Non-Relative Virtues: An Aristotelian Approach," *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 13, 35-36.
25. Charles M. Young, "Aristotle on Temperance," *The Philosophical Review* 97, no. 4 (1988): 542.
26. Istvan P. Bejczy, "The Cardinal Virtues in Medieval Commentaries on the Nicomachean Ethics," in *Virtue Ethics in the Middle Ages: Commentaries on Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics, 1200-1500*, ed. Istvan P. Bejczy (Brill, 2007), 199.
27. Hamid R. Alavi, "Ethical Views of Miskawayh and Aquinas," http://www.academicjournals.org/article/article1379169273_Alavi.pdf, accessed December 2014, based on Ibn Miskawayh, *Tahzib al-Akhlaq va Tahrir al-A'raq (Purification of Morality and Refinement of Souls)* (Qom: Bidar, 1992). Also cf. Y. Mohamed, "Greek Thought in Arab Ethics: Miskawayh's Theory of Justice," *Phronimon* 2 (2000): 242.
28. Cf. Ibrahim Abu Bakr, "Some Aspects of Ibn Miskawayh's Thought," *Islamiyyat* 10 (1989): 121, at <http://journalarticle.ukm.my/7607/1/2507-5133-1-SM.pdf>, accessed December 2014.
29. A. Sherif Mohamed, *Ghazali's Theory of Virtue* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1975), 179.
30. *Ibid.*, 24.
31. *Ibid.*, 25.
32. *Ibid.*, 25-26.
33. *Ibid.*, 64.
34. Rahman, Fazlur, *Major Themes of the Qur'an*, at http://ebooks.rahnuma.org/religion/Fazlur_Rehman/Fazlur_Rehman-Major-Themes-of-the-Qur-an.pdf, 20.
35. *Tafsīr ibn Kathīr*, at http://www.qtafsir.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=451&Itemid=36, accessed on April 9, 2015.
36. Rahman, *Major Themes*, 28-29.
37. Cf. M. Ashraf Adeel, "Islamic Ethics in Dialogue with Socrates, Jesus, and Confucius," unpublished.
38. See Welchman, *The Practice of Virtue*, x.
39. *Taqwā* is explicitly linked with *fālāḥ* (success) in such verses as Q. 2:189, 3:130, and 3:200.
40. See *afsīr ibn Kathīr*, at http://www.qtafsir.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=1750&Itemid=105.
41. See *Tafsīr ibn Kathīr*, which takes trust to mean obedience, at http://www.qtafsir.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=1810&Itemid=http://Abul

- Ala Maududi clarifies in his Tafsir that Trust is the freedom to choose between obedience and disobedience. See www.alim.org/library/Qur'an/AlQur'an-tafsir/MDD/33/72.
42. See *Tafsīr ibn Kathīr*, http://www.qtafsir.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=1281&Itemid=124#1.
 43. Fazlur Rahman, "The Principle of Shura and the Role of the Umma in Islam," at <http://i-epistemology.net/politics-a-government/330-the-principle-of-shura-and-the-role-of-the-umma-in-islam.html>, accessed December 2014.
 44. Rahman, *Major Themes*, 35.
 45. There is a long tradition of reform-minded Muslim thinkers from Muhammad Abduh and Jamal al-Din Afghani through Muhammad Iqbal to contemporary times who have argued for such an adjustment. For a masterly philosophical statement of this reform-minded approach, see Muhammad Iqbal, *Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam* (Oxford, 1934).
 46. For example, contemporary American universities require general education courses for all degrees. This general education may vary from one institution to another, but its overall purpose is to expose students to humanity's general intellectual heritage, including its cultural and religious diversity. This kind of structured general education is generally missing in many modern universities of the Muslim world.
 47. For an overview of some educational reform efforts in the Muslim world, see Fazlur Rahman, *Islam and Modernity: Transformation of an Intellectual Tradition* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1982), particularly chap. 2.
 48. Rahman, "The Principle of Shura and the Role of the Umma in Islam."
 49. See Abdul'aleem Islahi, "Economic Thought of Ibn Taymiyyah," Islamic Book Foundation, <http://www.al-adala.de/attachments/article/2699/Islahi%20-%20Ibn%20Taymiyyah%20-%20Need%20for%20a%20State.pdf> [accessed on April 11, 2015].
 50. Abdi O. Shuriye, "The Culture of Election and Democracy in the Taxonomy of Islamic Political Literature in Relation to the Democratic Revolutions in the Middle East and North Africa," *Asian Social Science* 8, no. 1 (2012): 195.
 51. All translations are from Abdullah Yousaf Ali, *The Meaning of the Qur'an* (Beltsville, MD: amana publications, 1999) unless otherwise noted.