Islamic Medical Ethics: How Different?

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It is of paramount importance when studying any ethnical system – in order to understand it – is to understand its roots and principles. If we examine the core of general ethics and morality in Islam, we will find that it has its strong bonds with the main principles of the religion as a belief system, as a law, and as a way of life.

What distinguishes Islam, is that it is a divine revelation and hence, ethics an morality should emerge from that origin and be colored by its colors.

Before we start to explain the concept of ethics in Islam, it is important that we discuss the importance of ethics in Islam. Islam made every effort to build a distinct personality of the Muslim that conform with principles of morality. The value of the individual is determined mainly by noble morals and ethical acts. The Prophet (Peace Be Upon Him) said: Also, the Prophet (Peace Be Upon Him) also said. "I was dispatched to complete morality". He also said "the true Muslim is the one with noble morals".

As regards to the strong relationship between morality and the Shariah laws, it is well known that there are two major types of Shariah regulations. The first encompasses all kinds of adoration rituals such as the prayers and fasting, and the second includes relationship with others and the way they should be treated. Both types would bring up people with noble morals and virtuous behaviors. Said the Prophet (Peace Be Upon Him) "The true Muslim is the one whose hand and tongue are safe". Also, the Prophet (Peace Be Upon Him) said "any one of you would not be truly faithful unless he loves to others what he loves for himself", which makes it clear that Islam has a great interest in building appropriate behaviors among its followers. This also would make it clear that morality, from the Islamic point of view encompasses all aspects of life and relates it very clearly to the belief system and the Shariah laws. Moreover, the concept of worship in Islam includes, not only the adoration virtual, but also the concept extends to include all aspects of human life.

Islam holds that ethics cannot be divorced

from morality. Ethics are not to be split from law. Islamic law is a compendium of ethics, morality and legal rules. Islam considers medical ethics the same as ethics in other aspects of life. The muslim physician is supposed to follow the same rules and principles that all members in the society follow.

There are five purposes of the Shariah laws that should be achieved and protected. These are: the preservation of religion (Addin), life, intellect, progeny and blood linage, and wealth or property. Any action must fulfill one or more of the above mentioned purposes. Also, there are several basic jurisprudential principles (Fiqh principles) that has to be taken into consideration in taking decisions or actions. Of these, the five most agreeable principles are:

Intention (acts are judged by their intentions), certainty (certainty should not be removed by doubts), harm (no harm should be inflicted), hardship (hardship will bring about facilitation) and customs are a source of law. In addition, Islam considered necessity as a determinant of the ethical decision where necessity will render the prohibited as lawful.

The concept of ethics in Islam can also be clarified through comparing it with some philosophical theories prevailing now-a-days especially in the West.

One of these is the obligation-based or deontological theory, which states that morality is the human act based on certain ideals on which everyone agrees and is based on a duty and would not consider utility, desire or affection. Based on this theory utility is totally not considered in judging the ethicality of an action.

The second most popular theory is the utilitarian theory. It affirms that the measure of the ethicality of an action is its utility and consequences, but not its intention. This theory was modified, but then recently criticized for its shortcomings, because it could not stand as appropriate theory in different situations.

In addition to the aforementioned theories and especially in biomedical ethics, philosophers and ethicists went back to an old new theory known as "The principalism theory", which states that there are four principles that govern ethics , if considered and balanced, the action is ethical. These are: respect for human autonomy, non-maleficence, beneficence, and justice. This theory is gaining more and more publicity in recent biomedical ethics. Comparatively, Islam did clearly affirm that non-maleficence is not accepted. There is a well know Fiqh Principles, which is derived from the Prophet (Peace Be Upon Him) saying, that: "Do not inflict any harm". Also, Islam considered justice and maleficence in a very strong and influential statement in the Holly Quran that read: **Verily, Allâh enjoins *Al-Adl* (i.e. justice) and *Al-Ihsân (beneficence*) [i.e. to be patient and beneficent in performing your duties[1]]**

As regards to respect of autonomy, Islam affirms human dignity and autonomy . Allah said in the holly Quran " **There is no compulsion in religion. Verily, the right path has become distinct from the wrong path**" (Albagarah:256). He also said " **We have honored the sons of Adam; provided them with transport on land and sea; given them for sustenance things good and pure, and conferred on them special favors, above a great part of our creation" (Alisra':70)[2].**

Other ethical theories such as the right-based theory, the community-based theory, the relation-based theory and the like, were not found singly to explain all ethical or moral dilemmas. None of them has the attributes of a good ethical theory: clear, coherent, complete, comprehensive, simple, practicable, and able to explain and justify[3].

As regards to the relationship between religion and ethics, and although some of the Western philosophers consider them to be related[4], other thought that they are totally separate[5].

The Islamic ethical theory also includes virtues ethics. The Holly Quraan and the Prophet hadith are full of verses and phrases that affirms the importance of virtues like mercy, honesty, humbleness, patience, and the like. These are not seen separable from general principles of ethics, as it is in some modern philosopher's

opinion.

One can say that Islamic medical ethics theory is a comprehensive and coherent theory. There are no significant contradictions between different principles, it can be easily understood and applied in practice and if apparent contradictions exist, they can be easily resolved. It originate from the religion and aims at both a mundane as well as a religious goals which include those related to the hereafter. It takes humanity through legitimate path to that end, where in Islam both the goals and the means must be legitimate.

As we can see the Islamic theory does really encompass all the above mentioned theories without being one of them. It takes together all the intentions, the duties, consequences, and the rights, as well is virtues without discarding any of them. Emphasis on beneficence and considering custom as sources of ethics gave more flexibility to the Shariea laws, although the main principles are fixed. Hence, to judge any health care practice from the ethical point of views, we need to look back at the Islamic principles, inspiring the scholar's texts, principles, and guidelines before taking any decision or a stance.

We conclude that Islamic ethical theory is distinct because it has the following significant features:

- It is of a divine source, and of worship intent.
- It aims at achieving blessing for human in this life and in the hereafter.
- Intent is highly valued as an ethical standard.
- A great interest in maximizing benefits and minimizing harms, and making a balance between benefits and harms.
- It aims at achieving justice, beneficence and human rights.
- Morals are firm, with absolute principles, but with a great degree of flexibility.
- It maintains a balance between individual and community needs with little contradictions.

- It considers means as it considers consequences.

It follows that, it is not strange that Islamic medical ethics is distinct and different, since the principles are also distinct and different. The way Islam sees like the beginning and end of life, health and disease, seeking medical advice, relationship with patients, abortion, brain death, resuscitation, mercy killing, genetic diseases, cloning and stem cell research may be totally different from other ethical systems.

It is noteworthy to mention that Islamic medical ethics is concerned with all aspects of medical practice. This includes professionalism, professional relations, health care professional character , conduct and accountability, as well as opinions related to contemporary issues in medical practice and research.

It is concluded that Islamic medical ethics is comprehensive, have clear principles that are robust and flexible. Islamic medical ethics has responded clearly to many contemporary medical issues with a great and significant contribution. As Muslims, we should turn to our intellectual and legal heritage as a source of ethical guidelines and make it accessible for others to make use of it for better ethical decisions.

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