

10-11-2006

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Recommended Citation

Sinderbrand, Jake (2006) "The Problem of Ambiguity and Moral Luck for Qur'anic Absolutism," *Macalester Islam Journal*: Vol. 1: Iss. 2, Article 5.
Available at: <http://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/islam/vol1/iss2/5>

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The Problem of Ambiguity and Moral Luck for Qur'anic Absolutism

Jake Sinderbrand '07

This paper argues that the Qur'an succeeds in presenting a basic structure of morality, centered upon faith and charity, but it ultimately lacks the necessary specificity to form a clear picture of righteous conduct to which modern readers can reasonably aspire. More significantly, the dualism of action, belief, and consequence that gives the text its force and certainty does not seem compatible with the recognition that circumstance plays a role in determining what is good and what is bad action.

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On that day no soul shall suffer the least injustice. You shall be rewarded according only to your deeds. (Qur'an 36:55)

Every religion must address the problem of inequality and injustice in its theodicy, especially if it presumes the absolute supremacy of God over evil, as does Islam. Some religious traditions deny any semblance of justice in the world, some insist that evil is never what it seems, while others, including Islam, defend God against the charge of evil by presupposing a system of individual eschatology based upon individual deeds, which is naturally reliant upon the assumption of human freedom. In a monotheistic religion, divinely-granted freedom implies some sort of absolute morality, which the Qur'an reinforces constantly. Furthermore, the Qur'an links its eschatology to each individual's morality (generally as it is manifested through their actions). Even if we accept the existence of freewill in some form, people commit certain actions and make moral choices based upon circumstances over which they have no control. In a Muslim system of eschatology, these actions ultimately weigh in favor of or against the individual on the Day of Judgment and may contribute to the rewards or punishments that they encounter in the afterlife.

Philosophers state that our moral obligations are tied to our *luck* in this life (we have to be patient in the face of poverty only when we are poor, and rich people do not have a moral obligation to be patient in the face of poverty). In addition, the morality or immorality of our actions depends on the results of these actions (the leaders of the American Revolution are heroes because the revolution succeeded, but if it were to fail and result in the execution of hundreds of thousands, they would have been considered forces of evil.) If we assume for the sake of argument that the claims of the Qur'an are genuine (i.e. that the text is indeed the perfect, undiluted word of God), then this fortune of circumstance and consequence, commonly termed "moral luck,"

coupled with the ambiguous nature of what constitutes just action, present an intractable problem for the Qur'an's claim of absolute justice for which it ultimately does not produce a satisfactory solution.

The assertion in the Qur'an of its own uniqueness and truth is not particular to Islam; most religions assert their exclusive status as the sole harbingers of divine truth and judgment, but few texts assert with such force that the details and implications of that truth are naturally easy for the reader to understand, and to understand why the revelation must be true. Ira Zepp notes that this certainty in the validity of the text is the cornerstone of the Islamic system of logic.³⁹ That is, much of the intellectual labor performed by Muslim scholars depends upon this point to a great extent.

The Qur'an is relatively unique in that it is self-aware—the author or authors write with the intention that the book itself be used as a guide for humanity. This self-awareness gives the Qur'an greater force, but does not allow for any imperfections within the text itself, as the text must convey a stronger message than others in order to prove its validity. The Qur'an states that “to God belongs the convincing argument.” (6:149)⁴⁰ Thus the Qur'an frequently declares its own perfection, and implied in this status is ease of understanding for the reader, for it declares, “Thus God makes plain to you His revelations, so that you may give thought,” (2:266) and states in the simplest fashion, “This Book is not to be doubted.” (2:1)⁴¹ Despite this assurance, the text seems relatively vague regarding most issues of law and societal relations, and so a righteous course of action is not always clear to the reader. The Qur'an further complicates this point by saying of itself:

Some of its verses are precise in meaning—they are the foundation of the Book—and others are ambiguous. Those whose hearts are infected with disbelief observe the ambiguous part, so as

³⁹ Zepp, 194-5

⁴⁰ Qur'an

⁴¹ Qur'an

to create dissention by seeking to explain it. But no one knows its meaning except God. (3:6-7)⁴²

This passage reinforces the idea that “God guides whom He will to a straight path.” (2:213)⁴³ The emphasis of the Qur’an lies in the greatness and mercy of God, rather than the actions that inspire such mercy. John Esposito theorizes that the Qur’an’s emphasis must be on God rather than human affairs because that is the most central point that it reinforces. Essentially, the Qur’an, as a perfect text, will say exactly what it needs to say, and the fact that it focuses on the greatness of God and the presentation of radical monotheism demonstrates the centrality of that notion to all aspects of Islamic law and thought.⁴⁴

The clarity on this point reinforces its importance to Muslims, but it leaves specific areas of thought relatively murky. One passage of the text can have several legitimate interpretations, and that lack of clarity can lead to confusion about the actual obligations that will bring reward or punishment to an individual. For example, the Qur’an states in reference to idol worship: “Abraham said: ‘Do you serve what you hew, when God created you and what you make?’” (37:95)⁴⁵ Two scholars, Zamakhshari and Baydawi, responded to this segment in different ways. Zamakhshari took the passage to generally reflect the absurdity of idol worship while Baydawi saw it as emphasizing God’s control over humans and what they accomplish, whether it seems to be for good or for evil.⁴⁶ The Qur’an can legitimately have different meanings to different readers, but when two readers can draw conclusions reflecting different opinions on the issue of freewill versus fate from the same passage, the ease of understanding of the text comes into question, and then it can become unclear what responsibility people have for their actions. Esposito notes that such intellectual activity is crucial to understanding the Qur’an,⁴⁷ but it introduces a realm of

⁴² Qur’an

⁴³ Qur’an

⁴⁴ Esposito, 25

⁴⁵ Qur’an

⁴⁶ Gätje, 224-6

⁴⁷ Esposito, 69

thought—and thereby faith—not available to the lay reader, which seems to give the intelligent and literate a different position in the Muslim world than other Muslims, giving them an advantage in understanding the text, and enabling them to adapt it to their own systems of belief. Of course, even two mutually exclusive interpretations may still be seen equally valid with regard to a certain passage, but the lack of moral certainty is still problematic within a largely dualistic framework.

The main argument of the Qur'an—that of its legitimacy as the one path to God—relies on its force, self-awareness, and the certainty with which it is delivered. Due to this trait, the text presents a very dualistic view of the world. In order to achieve its promised clarity, the text must clearly distinguish what is right from what is wrong, and these must be diametrically opposed in order to establish a straight path. Esposito claims that action, rather than belief, forms the basis of this path,⁴⁸ although the Qur'an itself contains numerous directives regarding faith. Its opening exordium states: "Guide us to the straight path," (1:6)⁴⁹ establishing faith as the means by which to understand the necessary course of action.

It would be unfair to suggest that Islam in general divides the entire world into black and white, as most exegetes and philosophers distinguish between levels of good and bad, both in terms of actions and consequences in the afterlife. Kenneth Cragg points out that the exegetical tradition has been so strong and thorough in attempting to clarify these intermediate points of action because the Qur'an cannot address them specifically and maintain its multi-vocal (as opposed to univocal) nature.⁵⁰ The Qur'an itself makes this distinction occasionally, explaining that God could forgive small sins in light of greater good deeds and emphasizing both action and intention as important aspects of doing good, often repeating the phrase "None should be charged with more than one can bear." (2:233)⁵¹ Nonetheless, the text generally separates the world into two camps: good or evil, divine or profane, blessed or cursed, belief or unbelief. The

⁴⁸ Esposito, 68

⁴⁹ Qur'an

⁵⁰ Cragg, 55

⁵¹ Qur'an

opening of the second *sura*, “The Cow,” first makes this distinction, defining the righteous as those:

Who believe in the unseen and are steadfast in prayer; who give in alms from what We gave them; who believe in what was revealed to you and what was revealed before you, and have absolute faith in the life to come.” (2:2-4)⁵²

It is not the evildoers who are mentioned in contrast, but rather the unbelievers, and they are charged with ignorance and obtuseness as their most heinous sins:

It is the same whether or not you forewarn them; they will not have faith. God has set a seal upon their hearts and ears; their sight is dimmed and grievous punishment awaits them. (2:5-7)⁵³

Even when gradations of crime and equivalent gradations of punishment exist, people are divided according to how “good” or “evil” they appear to be based on their actions, and these distinctions are murky when life situations differ, and particularly when definitions of good and evil differ. Belief and unbelief, for example, do have degrees. Even in describing the resentment of non-Muslim monotheists (People of the Book), the Qur’an reminds its readers that “God chooses whom he will for his mercy.” (2:106)⁵⁴ These monotheists are generally not included in the term “believer,” but neither are they always cast among the “unbelievers.” The Qur’an seems unclear on whether it is unbelief or wrongdoing that distinguishes evil, or indeed what the distinction is between them. Indeed these verses seem to suggest that unbelief is the greatest form of wrongdoing, although that connection is not established. Thus, Islam becomes a religion of compromised dualism, where good and evil, belief and unbelief are set out in a straightforward manner, but their specific nature and consequences remain unclear, beyond the fact that, in general, the good and the believers are rewarded, while the evil and the unbelievers are punished.

Thus, the issue of dualism in the Qur’an is at the very heart of the problem of moral luck. Even though the text

⁵² Qur’an

⁵³ Qur’an

⁵⁴ Qur’an

maintains its ambiguity, people fortunate enough to have earlier or more significant exposure to the Qur'an are ultimately more likely to lead righteous lives according to the broad standards that the text sets. Cragg examines a commonly-held exegetical view that non-believers simply cannot understand the text in the same way as do believers, or at least those willing to believe,⁵⁵ which reminds us that the Qur'an is ultimately a call to faith, and bolstering and inspiring this faith is its central concern. By defining itself as a guide to virtue and implying that anything outside of the text will not lead to virtue, the Qur'an presents its adherents as better people in general. This idea becomes problematic when we consider that exposure to the Qur'an is certainly not equal throughout the world—Islam is not predominant in most of the world, and scarcely has any presence at all in some societies. No degree of clarity or proofs within the text can completely account for inherent positive or negative cultural biases—or ignorance—regarding the legitimacy of Islam as a religion and the Qur'an as a religious text.

Exegesis is a useful tool to come to terms with these issues that the Qur'an does not address directly, as Cragg notes. But he also comments that exegesis can give us "a different justice to the great original."⁵⁶ Ultimately, we must be wary of any interpretation, however rational, that presents a position different than the ideas conveyed in a plain-sense reading. Many exegetes argue that God factors extenuating circumstances into His judgment and knows what actions an individual would take in any circumstance, and the Qur'an claims that all deeds, good and bad, will weigh in favor of or against the individual.⁵⁷ Baydawi uses this passage to argue for a scale of reward and punishment,⁵⁸ but that explanation does not solve all of the problems associated with moral luck. The Qur'an mentions several virtuous and prohibited actions specifically, from grave sins like idolatry to minor ones such as the consumption of pork, and associates them with rewards and punishments. These prohibitions are not numerous, but some of them are culturally-

⁵⁵ Cragg, 15

⁵⁶ Cragg, 75

⁵⁷ Qur'an (99:6)

⁵⁸ Gätje, 178

specific. A person living in a society where adultery is a mortal sin may be less inclined to commit such an act and thus fare better in the afterlife than a person living in a society where it is merely frowned upon.

Furthermore, the Qur'an frequently implies that belief is a division between goodness and evil, even though it does not make that position entirely clear. Belief in itself may denote more than a belief in God, and Esposito singles out faith in the ultimate judgment of God, acceptance of Muhammad as the seal of prophecy, and thereby, faith that the Qur'an is unfailingly accurate as central beliefs to the faith.⁵⁹ The strict laws against the vague concept of "idolatry" may cause a person in a monotheistic society to be automatically rewarded for a natural habit of belief while a person of equal faith in a polytheistic culture may be punished for what he or she assumed was a virtuous belief system. The text frequently uses phrases such as "Those who believe in God and the Last Day, in the angels and the Book and the prophets" (2:177)⁶⁰ to denote the righteous, which implies faith not only in a singular deity, but in the apocalyptic tradition of mainstream monotheism. The injunctions to believe the words of Muhammad seem to imply that faith in the legitimacy of the Qur'an itself is a precondition of being a believer, which by extension implies that its specific injunctions and commandments are necessary components of belief as well. The specific virtuous actions mentioned in the text generally relate to charity and goodwill in human relations, such as "[giving] away [one's] wealth to kinsfolk, to orphans, to the destitute, to the traveler in need and to beggars, and for the redemption of captives" (2:177) or to devotion to God specifically, such as "attending to prayers." (2:177)⁶¹ Although the text does not specifically state that all unbelievers lack virtue entirely, it speaks of evildoers and unbelievers in a similar manner, and generally refers to their destiny as eternity in the Fire, never directly acknowledging the possibility of an unbeliever being accepted into Paradise.

⁵⁹ Esposito, 68-9

⁶⁰ Qur'an

⁶¹ Qur'an

The Qur'an asserts: "None should be charged with more than one can bear," but it sets out absolute principles of faith and action, condemning those who fail to meet certain standards to death and destruction, in Hell if not in this life. This passage assumes then that at least the obvious and fundamental commandments set out by the Qur'an are within reach for all, and it seems to ignore the cultural or personal barriers that may prevent a person from reaching the realizations necessary to live in accordance with the principles of Islam, which reinforces the problematic of moral luck and raises questions about the methods that God uses to judge people.

By setting only limited behavioral standards yet issuing broad polemics against those who do not live according to the way of God, the Qur'an creates some degree of confusion about what makes a righteous person. This problem is difficult for any religion to manage. Some, like Sikhism, set only broad requirements for righteous and evil conduct, and ultimately fail to claim any real moral supremacy as a faith. Others, like Judaism, attempt to legislate every possible aspect of behavior, creating hundreds of thousands of rules that few are able to follow precisely. The confusion in Islam is not necessarily a problem for the religion—the Qur'an reminds its readers that judgment belongs to God alone—but it does raise questions about what sort of specific actions a person must take in order to achieve righteousness in any given situation.

In his book *The Islamic Ethics of Life*, Jonathan Brockopp attempts to find a Qur'anic view of modern issues concerning the most basic religious principles about the right to live with regard to abortion, war, and euthanasia. Examining both the Qur'an and its rich exegetical tradition, Brockopp finds legitimate interpretations that relate to his questions, but ultimately comments that no single Islamic tradition can provide a definite answer to these issues, even though the question deals with an issue as large as the taking of a life.⁶² The imprecision of non-canonical tradition and the absolutist vagueness of the Qur'an itself may leave even the most important issues open to *fallible* human interpretation.

⁶² Brockopp, 218

One of the problems with setting any real absolute standards for behavior is that people will inevitably attempt to judge others based upon those standards, even though the text states that “God chooses whom he will for his mercy” and as such specifically forbids guessing the exact standards that God uses to judge people. Yet by setting good and evil in such sharp contrast, the Qur’an gives people rough guidelines with which to judge human behavior, thus enabling society to condemn or reward people inappropriately and undermining the text’s overall message of submission to the will of God. This confusion of morality affects even those who expressly follow the Qur’an, as it seems to present two mutually exclusive methods of action, forbidding judgment directly yet laying out incomplete standards by which people are able to judge others, namely belief and unbelief.

The hadiths complicate this dilemma, as they show acts of human judgment, by the prophet Muhammad himself. Muhammad makes several categories of actions, and lists specific actions that fulfill certain virtues and those that must be attended to or avoided in order to avoid sin.⁶³ These ideas do not depart from the strictures of the text, but as prophetic utterances it is unclear whether or not they are divinely inspired, and thus whether they can be viewed as true or even binding interpretations. More problematic are those hadiths that speak of conduct toward non-Muslims. Muhammad asks rhetorically, “Do the Jews and Christians who read the Bible and Evangel act on them?” chastising these groups. Yet he also advises, “When the bier of anyone passeth by thee, whether Jew, Christian, or Muslim, rise to thy feet.”⁶⁴ The latter statement automatically separates People of the Book for higher esteem in the eyes of Muslims, while the former implies their general faults as a group. These statements seem to give individual Muslims the authority to distinguish between Muslims, People of the Book, and others, although the invocation that God’s mercy is being unknowable is made in reference to these divisions specifically. Zepp also notes that the hadith tradition is not always historically reliable—despite extensive scholarly research in the Medieval era in order

⁶³ Suhrawardy, 70-79

⁶⁴ Suhrawardy, 60

to compile them accurately, so there is question over whether observing the hadith tradition is following a prophet at all.⁶⁵ Naturally, some human judgment of conduct is necessary in a functioning society, but stories that tell of individual cases of judgment, complimented by condemnations of certain groups (Jews, Christians, and the unspecified “pagan” cultures) within the text itself, seem to encourage humans to judge character based on those standards which “God knows and you know not.” (2:216)⁶⁶

Admittedly, some philosophers—particularly those who have taken a mystical approach to the Qur’an—have been able to present a more satisfactory solution to the problem of moral luck by abandoning the dualism that is implied in the text and focusing instead on those passages which seem to bring the world into greater unity. These trends, such as Sufism, have contributed a great deal to Islamic thought, but have never been dominant philosophies in mainstream Muslim society. The one exception to this rule, in my judgment, is some Shi’i philosophers, although most members of that sect maintain a relatively dualistic view of the world and have a strong attachment to Qur’anic legalism. Sufism is at least the dominant mystical tradition within Sunni Islam. But by stepping away from the dualistic aspect of the Qur’an, mystic philosophers inevitably interpret it in a relatively complicated manner, going beyond the intuitive meanings of the text, and as Julian Baldick notes, seeking to commune with God through experience rather than revelation.⁶⁷ Such interpretations undermine the emphasis on the clarity of the Qur’an and the actions that it proscribes. When the dualistic nature of the text is questioned, the commandments of faith and unquestioning submission to God lose some importance, so it is difficult for Islam to avoid the moral problems brought on by dualism without altering the fundamental nature of the religion.

Qur’anic law is relatively limited in scope, and given that it applies to this life specifically, it is less dualistic, but its regulations are still impacted by the problem of moral luck. Its

⁶⁵ Zepp, 60

⁶⁶ Qur’an

⁶⁷ Baldick, 5

implications stretch far beyond the text itself, with most of the effects of luck felt in the human interactions of the world. The Qur'an discusses inheritance laws excessively, stipulating various family members who receive certain percentages of an estate. In this sense, an individual's place within his or her family grants him or her greater or lesser reward according to divine law. The different rights and duties of men and women in the Qur'an also illustrate the aspect of luck in the rewards of this life. The fact that "a male shall inherit twice as much as a female" (4:10)⁶⁸ implies a moral distinction between the two genders, or at least inequality in the eyes of God. These problems are not so intractable given that this world is inherently imperfect, but factors such as economic status within the world can determine morality. A person with ample leisure time and resources is better equipped to act and give charitably if they so choose, enhancing their capacity to do deeds that may reflect well upon them in the final judgment. A person born wealthy may have intentions no better or worse than a person who cannot rise out of poverty, but the wealthier individual is given the opportunity to act, whereas the poor individual may never know how he or she would have acted given equal opportunity.

The Qur'an also fails to address the issue of pre-revelation morality. It talks of "apostles [of whom] we have already told you" and "others of whom we have not yet spoken" who are "apostles who "brought good news to mankind and admonished them, so that they might have no plea against God after their coming." (4:164-5).⁶⁹ According to the text, prophets have existed in all societies and it mentions certain revelations (the Tawrat or Torah, the Injil or Gospels, and the Zabur or Psalms) specifically. The text also mentions that these scriptures have been corrupted over time, yet notes that God has revealed messages to all peoples.⁷⁰ It is unclear whether early revelations had a binding effect on the actions of people prior to the Qur'an (especially if they were unknown prior to the revelation of the Qur'an), but it presents a problem of justice either way. If early revelations are indeed binding, then the Qur'an must account for

⁶⁸ Qur'an

⁶⁹ Qur'an

⁷⁰ Zepp, 14

its insistence that these books have been either lost or corrupted, and so people have not been given full warning. If not, then revelation seems to be a mixed blessing—an opportunity for those who have access to the Qur'an and reason to believe it and a more demanding standard of justice for those who do not. A. Kevin Reinhart has analyzed various arguments concerning the status of pre-revelation morality, and argues that such strictures are often perceived as non-binding so that they do not undermine the moral importance of the revelation of the Qur'an, but that the actual legal position of the text is decidedly unclear.⁷¹

Universality is crucial to the Qur'an's claim of justice, yet it addresses itself to Arab people specifically, calling itself "a Book of revelations well expounded, an Arabic Qur'an for men of knowledge." (41:1)⁷² The text further claims the inimitability of its language as one of the strongest proofs of its truth. This claim may have been authoritative in the largely non-literary society of Seventh Century Arabia, but it loses some legitimacy in the modern world, where a reader may be able to find equals to its eloquence and style. This claim is even less legitimate in non-Arabic-speaking societies, who read the Qur'an in languages that fail to capture the poetry and wordplay of the original text. Thus, modern readers and non-Arabic-speaking readers are far more likely to disregard the messages of the Qur'an simply because it will not appear as convincing to them, and so they are disadvantaged by the unfortunate luck of the language barrier and their increased literacy.

The Qur'an succeeds in presenting a basic structure of morality, centered upon faith and charity, but it ultimately lacks the necessary specificity and clarity to form a clear picture of righteous conduct to which modern readers can reasonably aspire. More significantly, the dualism of action, belief, and consequence that gives the text its force and certainty does not seem compatible with the recognition that circumstance plays a role in determining what is good action. The few absolute standards that the Qur'an gives for judgment seem to favor some individuals regardless of the choices that they make.

⁷¹ Reinhart, 184

⁷² Qur'an

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