

Bahá'í Ethics in Light of Scripture

Volume 1

Doctrinal Fundamentals

by

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VOLUME 2

DIVINE COMMANDMENTS, VIRTUES

PREFACE

There is a fundamental discrepancy between man *as he is* and man *as he should be*, or, in other words, *as he could be*, if only he recognized his true being and purpose. Ethics is the discipline by which man can understand how he can pass from the first to the second condition.

The term 'ethics' derives from the Greek *ta ethika*, that which pertains to *éthos*, custom, character. It is also called 'moral philosophy', from its Latin root *mos, moris*, meaning custom or manner. When dealing with religious ethics, such as that based on revealed religion, one may call it 'moral theology', the term used in Catholicism.

Ethics is practical philosophy, the academic discipline which deals with morality. Ethics includes such areas as the standards of conduct and moral judgement, human character and human conduct (insofar as these areas depend on general principles), the rational explanation of the meta-ethical foundations of morals and, lastly, the discussion of the moral principles and values themselves and the vindication of their objective validity. Religious ethics¹ has its foundation in the holy texts of a given religion, that is, in revelation, the obligatory frame of reference for moral orientation. In contrast to this, philosophical ethics is characterized by its logical and methodical independence from any kind of revelation. Ethics is not a positive but rather a normative discipline, a vast and complex field, as the following groups of issues show:

The first group refers to the *a priori* structures of the moral subject (i.e. man), to anthropological presumptions and metaphysical objectives. It deals with the image of man: his freedom, moral responsibility and dignity. This subject is expressed in the questions: What is human nature? What is the purpose of life? What is the highest good of human conduct and what are its sanctions?

The second group refers to the origin, derivation and vindication of moral values and focuses on such questions as: What is the ultimate standard of right or wrong? What is the categorical quality of ethical demands, the unconditioned nature of ought? Are there universally recognized values, unconditioned norms, moral principles of good and evil, right and wrong? If so, then where do they come from, how are they to be recognized and why

should they be binding on me?

A substantial part of ethics is dedicated to the concrete norms, values and duties. Ethics tries to find answers to questions such as: What shall I do? How should human beings live in order to become happy? What is virtue? What are the motives which prompt right conduct?

Revelatory ethics, which considers the demands of ethics as an expression of the divine will, raises some additional questions such as the relationship between reason and revelation, the concepts of freedom and law, of liberty and its relationship to obedience, the virtues and their relation to concrete divine commandments. To the catalogues of virtues and vices, and to Aristotle's concept of 'error', must be added the concept of 'sin'.

Religion demands 'the power of reflection'.² The present work is intended as an attempt to analyse the underlying structures and detect the interior architectonics of the Bahá'í moral system, in terms of the philosophical issues enumerated above. It is a step in developing a Bahá'í moral theology, the object of which is systematic reflection on morality (i.e. the good and evil in the human person and in human actions) in the context of revelation. Since Bahá'í ethics is *theonomous*,³ this reflection is an integral part of 'theology'.⁴ It is God who has revealed the tablets of morality 'unto the Prophets of old'⁵ so that the righteous 'may stand faithful unto the Covenant of God, may fulfil in their lives His trust, and in the realm of spirit obtain the gem⁶ of Divine virtue'.⁷

The present project should not be misconstrued as an attempt to squeeze the multifarious moral imperatives of the Bahá'í scripture into the Procrustean bed of a theological system. The author is well aware that ethics is incapable of meeting the natural demands of reason⁸ for an integrated, systematic presentation of material which in its revealed form is seemingly lacking in order, and of satisfying the reader's understandable desire to see and understand the whole picture. Aristotle, 'the incomparable exemplar of descriptive ethics',⁹ wrote that 'all statements concerning matters of action should be made sketchily and not with precision'.¹⁰

This is all the more true when dealing with the ethical principles which are embedded in the revealed texts and which are not easy to detect. Indeed, all attempts at classifying or categorizing the confusing multitude of normative statements in Bahá'í scripture are ultimately doomed to failure. Rationally conceived ideas are dependent on and conducive to such systematic processes, whereas supra-rational matters cannot be classified *more geometrico*,¹¹ i.e. into strictly logical perceptions. Any attempt to fit all its elements into an integrated, closed system, omitting nothing, is soon bound to encounter its limits. 'Genuine truth can never be reduced to a system.'¹² The vital process of systematizing a revelation always entails the danger of reductionism. How could the transient human mind ever grasp the eternal nature of *revealed* truth?¹³ *Deus semper maior*.¹⁴ All we can do here is to provide a descriptive and analytical approach and to try and focus more sharply on the essential features of this theonomic ethics.

'All roads lead to Rome', the proverb goes. Thus one must admit that approaches to the ethical system underlying the revelation of Bahá'u'lláh will be as different as people are from one another in their ways of thinking. A wide spectrum of different approaches will gradually unveil the features and structures of Bahá'í ethics. Some steps have already been taken in this field. Ihsan Halabi published a short essay on Bahá'í ethics which is rich in substance.¹⁵ Completely different in its approach is William S. Hatcher's book on an 'authentic morality'.¹⁶ A first thesis on Bahá'í ethics has recently been published by a scholar of religious studies, Fiona Missaghian-Moghaddam.¹⁷

Ethics and law are normative academic disciplines and are, as the philosophy of natural law demonstrates, closely interconnected, being based on the same philosophical presuppositions. As a lawyer I have always taken a particular interest in ethical issues whilst studying the Bahá'í teachings. Many of my publications deal with norms and values, with issues of individual and social ethics.¹⁸ The collapse of traditional morality, the disintegration of value systems and the need for a global ethic was the subject of an article published in a journal.¹⁹ An outline of basic structures of Bahá'í ethics appeared in my article on the 'new morality'.²⁰ Another contribution on the same subject was a paper presented at an international interfaith congress, organized by the theological faculty of the University of Erlangen-Nürnberg in 2000.²¹ My essay *In a Blue Haze*²² applied Bahá'í ethics in detail to the issue of smoking. Bahá'u'lláh's concept of liberty was the subject of another essay.²³ A study of the relationship between justice and love was published by the *Association d'Études Bahá'ies francophone*.²⁴

In this early period in the history of the new religious dispensation, the results of such a study – one contribution to the beginning of a theological discourse – cannot be but preliminary, inasmuch as the holy texts, in this case the writings of Bahá'u'lláh and the Báb, are still largely inaccessible. The canon of authentic texts has not yet been completed, and many texts still await translation. Moreover, academic research in the field of Bahá'í theology is hardly possible without having access to the original texts, i.e. without knowledge of the Arabic and Persian, the languages in which these texts have been revealed. In normative disciplines, research should be based on terms that are correct and exact, otherwise derivations and conclusions from them will be erroneous and misleading and all results will be built on sand. Precise terminology can only then be achieved if one's analysis is based on the original text. Translations, even those of the highest quality, cannot always impart the precise meaning and the full spectrum of connotations.²⁵ The orientalist Izutsu pointed to the 'grave danger of being led unconsciously into erroneous theories about the nature of morality by manipulating translated concepts and not trying to analyse scientifically and rigorously the original concepts themselves'.²⁶

Hence the author suffers from the grave handicap – especially for this present work – of being able to read neither Arabic nor Persian, even if over time he has gained familiarity with a basic vocabulary of Arabic terms, the knowledge of which was indispensable. Therefore I am much indebted to Ihsan Halabi for numerous insights into the philosophical and theological implications of many Arabic terms and I am indebted, too, to Dr Soroush Shahidnejad for the clarification of some basic concepts and particularly to Dr Armin Eschraghi who, whenever called upon, clarified the underlying Arabic/Persian terms and occasionally provided me with a literal translation of a phrase from the original text and with whom I was able to discuss the ensuing problems. Without his kind assistance, and relying solely on the English translations, I might have missed essential connections.

In view of the complexity, difficulty and vast scope of the subject under investigation, it would be surprising if the critical reader were not to encounter the occasional error or contradiction in my elucidations. Not all of my views and conclusions will meet with universal assent. But I do not think there is any harm in that. In the course of time, everything will be discussed and the truth will emerge. 'Abdu'l-Bahá's statement that 'the shining spark of truth cometh forth only after the clash of differing opinions'²⁷ applies not only to the consultation of assemblies but also to academic discourse, where correct ideas may be vindicated and false ones exposed. Truth emerges out of a never-ending process of humble discussion and exchange.

I hope, too, that this initial attempt at providing an introduction to the subject of Bahá'í ethics will be treated with forbearance by academic specialists. I am a lawyer by

training and my knowledge in the fields of philosophy and theology is self-taught. I am therefore well aware that my knowledge is but fragmentary.

The present work derives from a number of articles originally written for an encyclopaedia which has not yet appeared. These articles have been completely revised, the greater part of them rewritten, with the larger themes retained and linked together. Although not directly related to the subject of this book, one of these articles, which presents a systematic overview of the Bahá'í teachings, has been included as chapter 2 so that the uninitiated reader may become acquainted with the broader theological context in which Bahá'í ethics is embedded. For this same purpose, a brief historical survey has been included at the beginning of the book. A revised version of my article 'Ethics for a Global Society',²⁸ describing the current crisis of morality, appears here as chapter 3.

When one strives for clarity, one should avoid redundancy. I have made efforts in this direction. However, when dealing with a subject as complex as that of ethics, it is inevitable that thoughts which one has expressed earlier are going to reappear and quotations used in one context will be repeated in another. This is necessary with such an abundance of citations, since one cannot expect the reader to remember them from one context to another. In any systematic overview of the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh mention must be made of many issues, in anticipation of further treatment in a later chapter, e.g. the immortality of the soul, which is discussed briefly in chapter 2 but in much greater detail, as one of the underpinnings of ethics, in chapter 7.

Finally, the reader may wonder about the reason for the abundance of quotations from Bahá'í scripture. Apart from the fact that not all readers may have access to these texts, it is my purpose to present the Bahá'í ethical principles 'in the light of the scripture' and not only to promote my own ideas about them,²⁹ inasmuch as the book is also intended as a textbook for deepening Bahá'ís in their own faith and familiarizing them with mankind's spiritual heritage in this field, in particular with the wealth and depth of Bahá'u'lláh's moral teachings.

As to the numerous references to philosophical and theological works and the quotations thereof, it is not my intention to criticize either the views of the philosophers or any doctrinal positions of the churches but rather to illuminate the results of my research by pointing to analogies, differences or contradictions in the philosophical and theological literature. It is my hope that by so doing the positions taken by Bahá'í ethics may be more easily understood. The ethical theories of the most eminent of the moral philosophers, Aristotle and Immanuel Kant, which are based on reason, and the revelatory ethics under discussion are fundamentally different in their meta-ethical presuppositions. Nevertheless, a number of striking analogies are readily perceivable. This is why so many quotations from their works have been included.

I have also quoted frequently from Thomas Aquinas' *Summa Theologiae* as he has, from his Christian perspective, peerlessly analysed the essence and inner structure of the virtues, as well as their connections and positions in the moral order. His results are most illuminating for anyone who attempts to analyse the principles of virtue from a Bahá'í point of view. Moreover, I quote occasionally from the papal Encyclical *Veritatis Splendor*, which, despite fundamental theological differences, brought home to me how many truths Christians and Bahá'ís have in common, how much of mankind's spiritual heritage has fallen into oblivion and how many pearls of truth and wisdom are waiting to be rediscovered. As has been expressed in the 'Declaration of the Parliament of the World's Religions 1993', the unity of the religions is nowhere more visible than in the common 'ancient guidelines for human behaviour which are found in the religions of the world', in the 'consensus concerning binding values, irrevocable standards and fundamental moral attitudes'.³⁰ There is no better

way to demonstrate this transcendent unity than by quoting abundantly from the holy scriptures of the world's religions.

There are several reasons for the frequent appearance of Latin phrases and quotations, with which some readers, not knowing Latin, may be uncomfortable. Firstly, they convey authenticity, as in many instances the English standard editions of various works were not readily available or, in some cases, do not exist, and my own translations of cited works might not have been completely accurate. Secondly, the use of Latin is an integral part of the tradition and literature in the fields of ethics, law and theology, familiar to scholars to which this book is also addressed. Those who know this literature and who are familiar with the Latin sources must not be deprived of this basic textual information. The reader will note that citations from Latin sources have been translated. Lastly, my own scholarly tradition, in both theology and law, has given me an abiding love for the Latin language, not only for its own sake but also for the fundamental role it has played in enriching the vocabulary of many modern European languages.

Since there is no German edition of this book, German equivalents of technical terms are occasionally included in brackets for the benefit of German-speaking readers.

As to the citations from the Qur'án: For purposes of readability in English only, the author has used the translations of Rodwell and Arberrry interchangeably, with apologies to the reader, since the referencing systems of these two English editions differ from one another. Only minor alterations of punctuation or vocabulary have been permitted in either case.

Apart from some parts which have been translated and edited by Dr Geraldine Schuckelt, my drafts of the English text have been largely edited by Nancy Ackerman. Both helped to eliminate errors and odd formulations, improving the readability of the English text, and I am greatly indebted to them for their assistance. I wish also to thank Gerald C. Keil for critically reading the manuscript and his valuable suggestions. In writing this book, I feel fortunate to have had the opportunity to discuss difficult issues with Nancy Ackerman, Ulrich Gollmer, Dr Armin Eschraghi, Gerald C. Keil and Dr Emanuel Towfigh. This discourse yielded many insights for which I am deeply grateful.

I wish to express my deepest gratitude to Peter Scheffel and to Uta and Dr Hartwig v. Both for their financial sponsorship of this book, as well as to Dr Wendi Momen, my editor at George Ronald, Publisher, for her highly competent labours and her valuable comments and suggestions. Collaboration with her has been a pleasure. Last but not least, my warmest appreciation is due to my dear wife, Sigrun, for all the effort she has expended on this book – not only in typing the manuscript, carrying out endless corrections and accommodating countless improvements and insertions but also in long hours of research in libraries and on the Internet, retrieving English-language editions of the works cited and providing me with appropriate texts and references for the quotations. In this she demonstrated love and patience – virtues which are under discussion in this work – and she never failed to give me the necessary assistance and encouragement during my frequent bouts with the material. Without her constant, untiring assistance this book would never have seen the light of day.

The second volume of this book, dealing with the concrete values – the virtues, divine commandments and principles of social ethics – is currently in preparation.

¹ In contemporary philosophy discussed as Divine Command Morality. I refer to Helm, *Divine Commands and Morality*; Quinn, *Divine Commands and Moral Requirements*; and also to an anthology published by Idziak, *Divine Command Morality: Historical and*

Contemporary Readings. The most eminent medieval thinkers of revelatory ethics were Moses Maimonides in Judaism, Thomas Aquinas in Christianity and al-Ghazálí and Ibn Rushd [Averroes] in Islam.

² Bahá'u'lláh, *Tablets* 6:41 (p. 72); 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Paris Talks* 55:13 (p. 175).

³ See below, chapter 5, **footnote to be dropped in**

⁴ The study of the 'speech of God', the study of matters of divinity, one of the meanings of Islamic 'kalám' (cf. *Shorter Encyclopaedia of Islam*, pp. 210ff). As to the use of the term 'Bahá'í theology', I refer to my elucidations in *Beyond the Clash of Religions*, p. 14; McLean, *Revisioning the Sacred*. For the established terms originating from earlier periods of religious history, see Schaefer, Towfigh and Gollmer, *Making the Crooked Straight*, Appendix.

⁵ Bahá'u'lláh, *Hidden Words*, Arabic, Preamble.

⁶ The Arabic *jawhar* has also the meaning of 'inner essence, quintessence'.

⁷ Bahá'u'lláh, *Hidden Words*, Arabic, Preamble.

⁸ According to Kant, it is 'that we may perhaps some day be able to discern the whole faculty of reason' and 'be able to derive all from one principle', as it 'finds complete satisfaction only in a perfectly systematic unity of its knowledge' (Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, p. 329, cn. 2).

⁹ v. Bollnow, *Wesen und Wandel der Tugenden*, p. 27.

¹⁰ *Nicomachean Ethics* II, 2 (1104 a). The whole passage reads as follows: 'But first, let us agree on that other matter, namely, that all statements concerning matters of *action* should be made sketchily and not with precision, for, as we said at first, our demands of statements should be in accordance with the subject-matter of those statements; in matters concerning *action* and expediency, as in those of health, there is no uniformity. And if such is the universal statement, a statement concerning particulars will be even less precise, for these do not come under any art or precept; but those who are to *act* must always consider what is proper to the occasion, as in medical art and in navigation.'

¹¹ Philosophical, didactic method starting with definitions, propositions and axioms, as developed by René Descartes in his *Principia philosophiae* 1644 and Baruch de Spinoza, *Ethica more geometrico*, 1677 (English edition: *The Ethics and Other Works*).

¹² v. Bollnow, *Wesen und Wandel der Tugenden*, p. 201.

¹³ In *The Seven Valleys* Bahá'u'lláh revealed: 'For some hold to reason and deny whatever the reason comprehendeth not, and yet weak minds can never grasp the matters which we have related, but only the Supreme, Divine Intelligence can comprehend them: How can feeble reason encompass the Qur'án/Or the spider snare a phoenix in her web?' (*Wonderment* 4–5 (p. 33); see also Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings* 89:3, p. 176).

¹⁴ St Augustine, *Enarrationes in Psalmos* LXII, 16 ['God is always greater'], which is identical with the Islamic *Alláhu akbar!*

¹⁵ Halabi, 'Ethische Aspekte des Aqdas', in *Aspekte des Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, pp. 275–302.

¹⁶ Hatcher, *Love, Power and Justice*.

¹⁷ Missaghian-Moghaddam, *Die Verbindlichkeitsbegründung der Bahá'í-Ethik*.

¹⁸ Cf. Schaefer, *Imperishable Dominion*, pp. 32ff, 42ff, 81ff, 171ff, 209ff, 222ff.

¹⁹ Schaefer, 'Ethics for a Global Society', *Bahá'í Studies Review*, vol. 4, no. 1 (1994), pp. 47ff.

²⁰ Schaefer, 'The New Morality: An Outline', in *Bahá'í Studies Review*, vol. 5 (1995), pp. 360ff.

²¹ Schaefer, 'Verantwortliches Leben aus dem Glauben. Sittlichkeit, Menschenbild und Erziehung im Schrifttum Bahá'u'lláhs', in Lähnemann, *Spiritualität und ethische Erziehung*.

²² Schaefer, *In a Blue Haze*. The emotionally-charged subject of smoking was chosen as a focus for an attempt to define certain aspects of Bahá'í ethics.

²³ Schaefer, *Die Freiheit und ihre Schranken*.

²⁴ Schaefer, *Justice ou miséricorde*.

²⁵ For example: The legal term *ziná* implies every pre- and extra-marital sexual act. Its translation as 'adultery' seems reductionist, since the latter word connotes only a special case of *ziná* (cf. Bahá'u'lláh, *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, Notes 77, p. 200, and 36, p. 181). In a summary of the laws and ordinances (such as in the *Synopsis and Codification*, D (1) (y) (xv)) or in a non-academic rendering, this difference may be neglected. However, taken as a starting point for an analysis of Bahá'í sexual ethics, it can be misleading.

²⁶ Izutzu, *Ethico-Religious Concepts in the Quran*, p. 5.

²⁷ `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Selections* 44 (p. 87).

²⁸ Schaefer, 'Ethics for a Global Society', *Bahá'í Studies Review*, vol. 4, no. 1 (1994), pp. 47ff.

²⁹ Following Shoghi Effendi's advice to present the Faith 'to others in its pure form' (*Principles of Bahá'í Administration*, p. 11) by 'quoting from the Works of Bahá'u'lláh in establishing our points' (letter to an individual believer 18 July 1952, in *ibid.* p. 25).

³⁰ Quoted in Küng and Kuschel, *Global Ethic*, pp. 14, 18.