

An Examination of the Ethics of Submissiveness

SABA FATIMA

This paper examines the trait of submissiveness within the framework of virtue ethics. Submissiveness is generally regarded as a vice, particularly when evaluated in reference to patriarchal systems. This paper argues that there is something valuable about the trait of submissiveness—when it functions as a virtue—that is lacking in secular contexts, and this lack detracts from the possibilities of a good life.

Anyone who accepts other than submission as his religion, it will not be accepted from him, and in the Hereafter, he will be with the losers.
Qur'an 3:85

Introduction

Submissiveness, a trait that is viewed as a negative attribute in feminist literature, is perceived to be a high virtue in Islam. Complete submission to God is the best life possible for a Muslim. This paper examines the trait of submissiveness and the possibilities of it being a virtue within a virtue ethics framework, specifically focusing on the submission of humans to God in Islam.

Within the Islamic context, the claim is made that though submissiveness is not a virtue in normal human relationships, it is a virtue in relationship to God. The central question is this: given that some contexts (purely human relationships) do not enable one to practice submissiveness as a virtue, and other contexts (a Muslim's relationship to God) do encourage it, should one seek out contexts that enable one to practice the trait of submissiveness as a virtue? That is, is there something valuable about submissiveness, when it functions as a virtue, that is lacking in secular contexts, the lack of which diminishes the possibilities of a good life?

Before examining whether or not the trait of submissiveness is a virtue, it is important to set criteria for evaluating virtue. In *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle defines virtue as "a state of character concerned with choice, lying in a mean, i.e., the mean relative to us,

this being determined by a rational principle, and by that principle by which the man of practical wisdom would determine it.”¹ Virtue, for Aristotle, is a disposition toward making the right choice. With the aretaic turn in contemporary ethics, there have been major developments in virtue ethics. Rosalind Hursthouse regards virtue as more than an attitude or a disposition to act in certain ways; the virtuous person reasons in characteristic ways. Attitude can be an isolated state of mind; however the person with virtue takes relevant things into consideration and reasons in a pertinent manner.²

For Hursthouse, the reason for a trait to be a virtue lies outside the intrinsic good of the trait itself. One is not an honest person simply because honesty is a good trait. She lays out the framework of Plato’s requirement on virtue. 1) Virtue makes the possessor a better human being, i.e., virtues are needed in order to live well, to live a good eudaimon human life, thus, honesty enables us to live well. 2) Virtues are beneficial to the possessor of virtue, i.e., they enable the person to lead a eudaimon life, thus, honesty leads to good events.³ Considered together, the fulfillment of both these requirements can lead toward the validation of certain traits as virtues. The connection between virtue and a eudaimon life is a strong one for Hursthouse. A “virtue is a character trait a human being needs for eudaimonia, to flourish or live well.” Virtues are states of character that are necessary for eudaimonia.⁴ There is no explication of what a eudaimon life constitutes, except that the notion is similar to true happiness, the “sort of happiness worth having.”⁵ Hursthouse also states that in evil times, it may be impossible to flourish in such situations, virtues may not benefit the possessor, or may not be sufficient to lead a eudaimon life. That is to say, under adverse circumstances virtue is neither sufficient nor necessary for a eudaimon life. Despite this, Hursthouse maintains that being virtuous is the most reliable path to a eudaimon life.

For the purposes of this examination, it is sufficient to say that the notion of virtue is close to Hursthouse’s description. Unlike

1. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), II. 6:1106b-1107a.

2. Rosalind Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 10–11.

3. *Ibid.*, 167.

4. *Ibid.*, 166.

5. *Ibid.*, 9–10.

habits or a series of actions, virtue concerns deeper aspects of the character, such as emotions, perceptions, sensibilities, and a range of relevant considerations. In Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, virtue is exercised excellently by finding the mean of extremes through one's reason and choosing that mean. Even from an Islamic perspective, a virtuous life requires one to lead a life with balance.

The paper departs from Hursthouse in the conception of what constitutes a eudaimon life. In Islam, a eudaimon life is one that satisfies God and ultimately leads one to heaven in the life hereafter. In this case, the "sort of happiness worth having," is the peace of mind that one is leading a life in alignment with the Islamic understanding of God's will for mankind, that one will be granted heaven. Thus being virtuous is not just a reliable path to a eudaimon life, it is also necessary and sufficient.

For Hursthouse, "evil times" may make it impossible to lead a eudaimon life until times are better; however, from a religious perspective, even in evil times it is necessary to habituate traits that are considered virtuous in normal times. Religiously speaking, eudaimonia is not contingent on conditions of the time. Many religious figures lived in harsh conditions, yet are considered to have lived eudaimon lives that contained the happiness worth having (Moses, Jesus, Muḥammad, peace be upon them). There is no direct connection between feeling pleasure and living a eudaimon life. In an Islamic eudaimon life, one undergoes tragedy or disaster and still lives a eudaimon life by living virtuously.

Briefly, from an Islamic perspective, the way to test the validity of virtue is to determine if it will lead one to heaven, since that is the result of a truly eudaimon life; a eudaimon life not only in the sense of living in an eternal time span in conditions one deems perfect, but also having the peace of mind that one's behavior is pleasing to God during life in this world.

This does not imply that virtue is only instrumentally valuable but rather that virtue is a trait that has the property of being necessary for a eudaimon life. Examining whether or not a trait will lead to heaven is a validity test to determine if an action is virtuous, it is not meant to evaluate the worth of the virtue itself. Leading a virtuous life is in itself considered valuable within an Islamic framework, not only to make one's life easier in this world, but to respect other creations of God.

This paper does not elucidate or expand on the concept of eudaimonia beyond what is required to examine the trait of submissiveness. The purpose here is to explore whether a life that embodies the trait of submissiveness as a virtue is a better life than one in which submissiveness is not a virtue. In order to determine this we must evaluate various contexts, and ask whether or not the trait leads toward a eudaimon life. The first half of the paper that deals with submission to humans views eudaimonia similar to Hursthouse's notion of eudaimonia, i.e., with the criteria: does the trait of submissiveness lead one to flourish in life? A eudaimon life is one in which one has the sort of happiness worth having, in which the virtue makes the person a better human being and in which the person utilizes his or her reason. The second half of the paper, which deals with submissiveness to God, expands the notion of eudaimonia to include life in the hereafter.

Submissiveness and its Functioning

Submissiveness is defined as yielding completely to another's authority. This can be differentiated from obedience or simply following instructions, as these do not require giving up one's will. For example, one can be an obedient worker without actually agreeing with the employer. Submissiveness, on the other hand, demands that a person completely and wholeheartedly accept another being's will. It requires one to reason and agree with the other, and it goes beyond just agreeing. It requires desiring, for the right reasons, the same as the other. When one does that, one's will becomes congruent with the one submitted to. In such a situation one may be regarded as passive, docile, or meek (though I refute this interpretation).

If the ideas associated with submissiveness are ones that have negative connotations, such as passivity and docility, when, if at all, does it make sense to submit to someone? Aristotle sketches an argument in *The Politics*, stating that it is "good" for the naturally inferior, in particular inferior with respect to reasoning ability, to subject oneself to someone else's rule.⁶ Carrying Aristotle's argument over to the trait of submissiveness, it makes sense to submit to someone with more rationality than oneself. For Aristotle, virtue requires one to exercise one's reason excellently. One would not be exercising one's reasoning ability in the best possible way if

6. Aristotle, *The Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), I.5:1254a.

one submitted to someone who was less rational than oneself. For instance, Aristotle's understanding of a slave is that he or she is naturally inferior, that is to say, the slave is incapable of reasoning. He can however, recognize that his master's reasoning abilities are superior to his, and therefore, he knows, in view of this recognition, that he should submit to the master.

Such a situation can occur in two different scenarios: one in which there is false consciousness, i.e., one erroneously assumes the superiority of another's reason, and the other situation in which there is true superiority of reason that one should possibly submit to in order for one's life to be enhanced. The paper explores both situations, weighing them within two distinct categories, namely, submission to human authority and submission to God. The following two sections examine specific situations within the category of submission to human authority to see if it leads toward eudaimonia and highlight ways in which submissiveness to God is vastly different from the former category, in an effort to uncover the unique value of a life in which submissiveness is a virtue.

Submission to Human Authority

THE SLAVE AND THE WOMAN

Aristotle's controversial claim that slavery is best for both the master and the slave brings out the essence of Aristotelian reasoning on why it is justified to submit to a being. However, his inferences from his (false) premises lead to a false conclusion, thus justifying slavery. But his argument constructs a hierarchy that allows the more rational to rule over the irrational.

Aristotle's conclusion about one being a slave by nature makes good sense if one accepts the natural hierarchy between the slave and the master's reasoning ability. The obvious criticism to Aristotle has already been dealt with in feminist literature that exposes the system of patriarchy (for Aristotle, racism). Like the slave, the woman was traditionally characterized as being incapable of knowing what is best for her. Until recently, it was considered virtuous for a woman to be submissive because it was thought that it contributed to making her life a better life, a life in which she would flourish. Society was set up in such a fashion that it appeared that the trait was a virtue for her biological role. Such a situation parallels that of the slave. Simone de Beauvoir states:

there are deep similarities between the situation of woman and that of the Negro . . . In both cases the former masters lavish more or less sincere eulogies, either on the virtues of “the good Negro” . . . or on the merits of the woman . . . the submissive woman. In both cases the dominant class bases its argument on a state of affairs that it has itself created. . . . This vicious circle is met with in all analogous circumstances; when an individual (or a group of individuals) is kept in a situation of inferiority, the fact is that he is inferior.⁷

Her comparison of a woman’s subjugation to a slave is unfair, but for the purposes of this exercise it is sufficient to note how a good slave and a good woman were defined, or what it meant for a slave or a woman to lead a good life as determined by the criteria of the dominant class. Elsewhere she states:

The slave is submissive when one has succeeded in mystifying him in such a way that his situation does not seem to him to be imposed by men, but to be immediately given by nature . . .⁸

Beauvoir brings out the essence of natural hierarchy, except, in this case, it is imaginary but feels very real to the oppressed. Nancy Snow illustrates the condition of the oppressed:

Oppression . . . excludes persons from full and equal participation in public life, imposes economic burdens and restrictions, curtails personal choices, stunts growth and the development of talents and abilities, and, perhaps, worst of all, is psychologically internalized so that victims of oppression lose a healthy sense of self. In short, it forecloses possibilities for human flourishing.⁹

Snow emphasizes the graveness of such imposed hierarchy, in which inculcating the trait of submissiveness definitely does not benefit the possessor, i.e., to live a life that is eudaimon. It is clear that such a form of unconscious or often coerced submission hinders one from

7. Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (New York: Vintage Books, 1989), xxix–xxx.

8. Simone de Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity* (New York: Citadel Press, 1996), 85.

9. Nancy Snow, “Virtue and the Oppression of Women,” *Feminist Moral Philosophy* (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 2003), 34.

leading a eudaimon life, because it diminishes one's conception of self and hence does not help one to attain the sort of happiness worth having. However, there may be some instances in which an argument, albeit a weak one, can be made for one human's superiority over another; weak because the superiority is not absolute, as illustrated through the examples below.

THE SOLDIER

In a military environment, not only are soldiers encouraged to be obedient to their superiors, but they are also sanctioned for acting out of their own will, if it is in contrast to the will of their superior officers. However, what most soldiers possess is conditional obedience to authority and not submissiveness. The obedience is conditional because the soldiers understand that they as individuals still remain subject to humanitarian laws and should use their own rationality to consider the course of their individual actions. It is also possible that they cannot bring themselves to follow a particular order due its nature. Therefore, they may obey commands but still remain incongruent to the will of their commander.

However, not all soldiers exhibit conditional obedience. Some soldiers can be submissive because they have faith in their superior's abilities and/or are completely committed to their cause and believe this commitment requires submission. Submission here may stem from an unconscious desire to serve their country, and if indeed submissiveness is the root of their ability to fight well then the trait may be of a positive nature for soldiers. Here, the implication is not that the trait is a virtue, but that the trait operates constructively to the functioning of a certain kind of profession, in this case being a soldier. A good soldier is not necessarily a good human being.

The distinction between thriving in a profession and leading a eudaimonistic life may be obvious here. A profession necessitating or favorably viewing a trait does not make the trait a virtue. In the case of soldiers, if they blindly follow the orders of their state or commander, then they run the risk of giving up their rational ability to the extent that they are no longer able to differentiate between a just war and an unjust one, or question the validity of an order.

THE SON

The tradition of a son submitting to a mother's will is evident in many Asian societies. It is a trait that is highly regarded, the absence

of which blemishes the character of the offspring. So if the offspring, particularly the eldest son, does not live with his parents, take care of them, give in to their wishes, etc., he is seen as a bad person and it is then assumed that he will not flourish in his life (because he is violating religious customs, not benefiting from the wisdom of his mother, and/or because he is collecting ill wishes of his parents etc.).

To brand these norms as necessarily bad would be too simplistic because it is not far fetched to assume that there is a hierarchy of wisdom in which a mother is wiser than a son. However, if one looks closely, one realizes that what is revered in eastern culture is obedience that is conditional to a code of morality and this is not submissiveness. In fact, submission to any human authority, whether in religion or any other matter, is not considered a virtue within the Islamic framework. So although a son may listen to everything his mother says, and may even follow it through, his will does not have to be congruent with his mother's. He can think that his mother is mistaken, but simply give her the respect that she deserves as his mother; he can obey her wishes (or pretend to obey them in front of her). The Islamic framework does not allow the son to claim excuse or justification on account of his mother.¹⁰ His chances of inculcating other virtues may be seriously and irreparably damaged, if he indeed does choose to submit.

THE PATIENT

A more subtle example of submissiveness is observed when a person submits to "expert" opinions. For example, when a doctor gives her recommendation on a course of action, one usually does not question her authority. However, this, of course, is not always the case, because people do get second opinions. But let us consider the example of an uneducated person living in a rural village, with

10. The Qur'an says: *Such is a community from the past [referring to Jacob, Abraham, Ismail, and Isaac]. They are responsible for what they earned, and you are responsible for what you earned. You are not answerable for anything they have done* (2:134). One can infer from this that one is not responsible for the sins of one's forefathers. Islamic jurisprudence also maintains that criminal offenses do not transfer to children upon the death of parents. However, debts may be taken from inheritance. God also states in the Qur'an (just after the verse quoted in the previous footnote, asking one to respect one's parents), *But if they strive to make you join in worship with Me things of which you have no knowledge, obey them not; yet bear them company in this life with justice (and consideration), and follow the way of those who turn to me (in love): in the end the return of you all is to Me, and I will tell you the truth (and meaning) of all that you did* (31:15).

access to few qualified medical practitioners. Such a person would be expected to accept and follow the advice of any doctor as if it were the best possible route to take. This uneducated person knows that it will be advice from someone who knows more than she does about how to stay healthy. In such a situation, the education of the doctor makes the doctor an authority on medicine, such that the white unmarked pills that need to be taken three times a day do not appear suspicious, but rather a blessing. The layperson may not think of her actions as submitting to the will of the doctor, but in reality, that is exactly what may be happening.

If the doctor is wrong in her diagnosis and harms the health of the patient, the patient may in fact become an accomplice since she did not question the doctor's decision. So, one can listen to expert advice from a doctor or heed a mother's wisdom, but use one's own rationality to make one's own decisions.

The dilemma for the patient arises because she may not have other options than to follow the doctor's advice, since the patient is certain that the doctor is less fallible than she is, in regard to medicine. So, even when the doctor (or the army commander) makes a mistake, that mistake is probably "better" than if one were to make a mistake oneself.

HUMAN DIGNITY, FREE WILL, AND THE LIKE

When is it sensible to submit to another human being? There is a difference between one being more knowledgeable and one having better reasoning skills. Person X and person Y can have equal reasoning capabilities, but person Y may have formal medical knowledge that person X may not have. Similarly, both person A and person B may have an equal amount of medical schooling, but person B may be more intelligent than person A. In both scenarios, it is not sensible for person X and person A to submit to person Y and person B, respectively.

The claim is that by submitting to another human being, we take something away from our intrinsic belief in the equality of humans. It is obvious that humans are not equal in natural ability, intelligence and/or opportunity; however, they do deserve equal respect by virtue of being human. The question arises: in what respect are all humans equal? Avishai Margalit sketches an argument in his book, *Decent Society*, in which he argues that all human

beings deserve equal respect, based on the fact that all humans bear the capacity to change.

Margalit's justification may have its flaws,¹¹ however, his argument appears intuitively sensible and the essence of his argument, that is to not humiliate others, is applicable to the case against submitting to another human. He defines humiliation as "any sort of behaviour or condition that constitutes a sound reason for a person to consider his or her self-respect injured."¹² When a person submits to another, there is a certain amount of self-respect that is damaged in the process, violating a common sense notion of equality. This equality does not refer to equality in biology, intelligence, ability or opportunity, rather equality in reference to one's "conception of the good" being as valuable as another's. In *A Theory of Justice*, Rawls states that self-respect is a "primary good," as it is an essential element to the quality of an individual's life. He identifies self-respect as "a person's sense of his own value, his secure conviction that his conception of the good, his plan of life, is worth carrying out," and "a confidence in one's ability, so far as it is within one's power, to fulfill one's intentions."¹³ Submitting to another human being eats away at the core of one's confidence in one's own plans for life.

An additional argument against submitting to another human being may be that, if one submits to a human authority and it is necessary for one to give up one's will (a will that enables one to make choices according to one's own desires and reasoning), one becomes morally absolved for one's acts (whether they be praiseworthy or deserving of blame) because one is no longer the source of his or her actions. By no longer being morally responsible, one not only runs into a judicial problem (who is to be held responsible for an act?) and loses the enjoyment one might have from praiseworthy actions, but one also hinders the ability to habituate his or her disposition to making the right choice.

To be the source of one's action requires one, among other things, to choose one's path using one's own reason. For Aristotle, the virtuous agent is disposed to choose the mean of extremes, a

11. Different people bear different capacities to change and consequently may deserve differing degrees of respect.

12. Avishai Margalit, *Decent Society* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), 9.

13. John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971), 440.

habit of making the right choice. Aristotle also draws a distinction between a virtuous agent and a continent agent. The virtuous agent does right, without any inner conflict, whereas the continent agent has to control the temptation to do wrong. In order for the continent agent to develop a disposition to make the right choice, to become fully virtuous, she must develop the habit of making the right choice. If one were to submit to another, one would completely lose his or her ability to choose his or her path and hence could never hope to develop and exercise his or her ability to choose the mean of virtues. Moral responsibility would be absolved because the moral agent could not have done otherwise in a situation in which he or she chooses to submit to someone.

The significance of moral responsibility carries over to situations in which one person knows more than the other. The person who is less knowledgeable and/or intelligent still needs to make use of her own reasoning capabilities and not blindly follow the will of another, because one can only exercise choice in relation to one's own life and hence hope to develop virtues overall. The person who is intrinsically and equally deserving of respect, but has better knowledge and/or reasoning ability, may be able to better guide and habituate a virtue (or contribute something positive to some aspect of life) but to develop virtue in general and/or in view of the whole of life, one must keep the exercise of choice alive and functioning and make use of that functionality in reference to one's own circumstances.

For example, in the case of the physician, if one recognizes his or her medical expertise and realizes that there is no opportunity for a second opinion in a rural village and therefore submits to the physician's diagnosis and prescription, then one loses one's ability to choose anything other than what the physician prescribes. There is nothing wrong with the picture thus far because the physician indeed knows what is best for the patient in the patient's sphere of medical treatment. However, only the patient can assess his or her circumstances and make a decision that enables the exercise of his or her reasoning faculty. Perhaps being virtuous requires that he or she not follow the physician's prescription but spend the cost of the treatment on something else. Secondly, and perhaps more relevant to Aristotle, it is essential to habituate the ability to exercise choice in order to lead a virtuous life. The example of soldiers who submit

to their superiors can be noted; they may become so accustomed to following orders (albeit good ones from their commanding officer) that they harm their decision-making capabilities in other aspects of their lives.

Submission to God

*Have they not seen all the things created by God?
Their shadows surround them right and left, in
total submission to God, and willingly.*

Qur'an 16:48

The second category of submission is one's submission to God; this section works from the premise that the central Islamic principles are true.

The basis of Islam demands complete submission to God and prescribes it as the ultimate virtuous life. Only through submission is one able comprehend the true significance of life and inculcate other virtues for all the right reasons. It is necessary to habituate the trait of submission to God in order to lead a eudaimon life; a eudaimon life is one in which one reasons that God (who is just and righteous) is pleased with one; further, inculcating the trait is prescribed as beneficial because God determines who enters heaven. The nature of God is just and merciful; God enjoins humans to do good works and emphasizes God's mercy. God enjoins humankind to think and differentiate, to do good deeds (90:13–18), and make the choice to lead a virtuous life (90:4–12, 13–19). The Qur'an states that the virtuous believer will be rewarded:

*Whoever does good, whether male or female, and he is a
believer, We will most certainly make them live a happy
life, and We will most certainly give them their reward
for the best of what they did. (16:97)*

If one believes in Islamic principles, then submission is the ultimate virtue for a Muslim. Then what of the objections raised in the previous sections that highlighted the implausibility of submission being a virtue? The problems discussed in the previous section in the various cases of submission in human relationships do not apply in the case of God.

The Objections and their Inapplicability to God

1. One of the first objections raised in the previous section relates to the possibility of the person submitted to being self-interested. In the case of God, this objection does not apply because God is a supernatural being conceived as Perfect, Omnipotent, and Omniscient; God has no need to advance His interests.
2. The second objection is that there is no natural hierarchy among humans, at least a hierarchy in which submission makes sense. The need for a natural hierarchy exists not only because of Aristotle's reasoning about the more rational ruling over the less, but also because of the sense of equality among humans. In the case of God, who is all-knowing, there is a clear and definite natural hierarchy, because God is the creator. God has infinitely more knowledge and better rationality, and can weigh the consequences of our actions within the larger spectrum of the entire cosmos, something humans are unable to do. To accept the assumption of God's existence is to recognize the natural superiority and the perfection of God in all matters.
3. The third objection is that one may lose the ability to choose one's own path after one submits. In the case of God, the question is how humans exercise free choice if God is all-knowing.

The first issue at hand is the significance of one's will and one's ability to exercise choice in Islam. While God has created humans and their will, and is all-knowing and aware of the future, this knowledge does not limit the sphere of human freedom. Human beings can choose their actions *and* inculcate the virtue of being submissive to God. God's knowledge of human will is not the same as dictating its choices. The one significant factor that distinguishes humans from other mammals (and other forms of life on earth), a factor that is emphasized throughout the Qur'an, is that God made humans rational beings and expects humans to use that rationality to distinguish wrong from right. Therefore, God's knowledge of outcomes does not limit a person's choice; God does not compel anyone to commit any action. In fact, using our rationality to make decisions in our lives is part of submission; if

we do not use our rationality, then we are no longer submitting to the will of God. Ibrahim Syed comments on the significance of critical thinking in Islam:

The Qur'an repeatedly provokes and challenges the reader to think and contemplate the signs of Allah so that she/he can understand . . . There is a dynamic relationship that exists in Islam between faith and reflective thought. And has not the Qur'an said, "*(Here is), a Book which We have sent down unto thee, full of blessings, that they may meditate on its Signs, and that men of understanding may receive admonition*" (38:29). In fact, "*verily in that are Signs for those who reflect*" (30:21) is a constant theme throughout the Qur'an, which, among other things, underscores the point that meanings of the sign of Allah cannot be read just off the face of the signs but require thinking and reflection.¹⁴

A second noteworthy point is the significance of the human will in moral responsibility. Moral responsibility is key in Islam, because people are judged by their actions. One must consciously choose their thoughts, words, and actions. This habituation of good thoughts, words, and deeds must be developed over time. The Qur'an states: *Every human being is responsible for his own works* (53:39). And, *We shall set up scales of justice for the Day of Judgement, so that not a soul will be dealt with unjustly in the least, and if there be (no more than) the weight of a mustard seed, We will bring it (to account): and enough are We to take account* (21:47).

The emphasis on utilizing one's reason in the Qur'an and the significance of human will in moral responsibility show how submission to God does not require blind obedience or oppression to the word of God, rather one must contemplate the Qur'an in order to recognize the truth of a virtuous life. This emphasis on reflection highlights the way in which submitting to God encourages one to develop a virtuous disposition.

The Nature of Submission to God

In Islam, following God's will is submission in its strongest sense. One who submits not only follows God's will in action, but also

14. Ibrahim Syed, "Critical Thinking," *Islamic Research Foundation International, Inc.* http://www.irfi.org/articles/articles_101_150/critical_thinking.htm (October 6, 2008).

honestly believes that it is the right thing to do. This is the kind of submission that can only be accomplished by the most virtuous, those who *want and desire* God's will for all the right reasons. It encompasses and goes beyond reasoning and rationality.

Perhaps many may consider the basic difficulty of a partnership between free will and an all-knowing God, one that seemingly makes it paradoxical. What if one follows God's will and uses one's reason when making decisions; and, the decisions one makes contradict what God clearly and specifically ordains in the Qur'an. Hence, in following God's will, one also contradicts God's word.

When Muslims accept that there is a God, they accept the limitations of their knowledge in comparison to that of God. This follows from the acceptance of a natural hierarchy. Let us suppose that after reasoning, certain Muslims realize that it is not in their interest to follow God's word. In such a situation, they are going against the word of God, and hence reclaiming the supremacy of their rationality over God's word. If they do that, then they forgo the belief in Islam, because in Islam God is supreme to humans in all aspects. However, if they do not want to forgo the belief in God and God's word, then they have to realize that since God is supreme, any variation from the path prescribed is a result of temptation rather than a "rational realization." This seeming paradox does not exist for the true believer. If Muslims find a justification that gratifies their minds (on an individual basis), then it is good; however, if they are unable to find a reason that satisfies them fully, then they can acknowledge the superiority of God's knowledge and rationality and be content knowing that God is just and knows what is best.

The Contribution of the Trait

In an effort to illuminate the specific contribution of the trait of submissiveness, we ask, what does this trait add to one's life, what does an opportunity to engage in submissiveness contribute to a good life?

It is logical to ask, what distinguishes a virtuous person from a non-virtuous person? Let us suppose that both perform the same good deed; one does so consciously submitting to the will of God by utilizing one's rationality and the other does so just by utilizing one's rationality and not with the intention of submitting to God. Within a religious context, both people, the one that submits and

the one that does not, would be equally rewarded for their actions. Rewards are often the logical flow of our actions. So, even if one's will matches that of God, and one does not submit to it, one can still lead a eudaimon life in the present world as we know it. However, in the afterlife, one's intentions have a role in determining one's fate.

Beyond the added advantage of being rewarded in the life hereafter, the person who believes and submits to God has an easier time dealing with what Bernard William called the "moral remainder." Moral dilemmas that result in moral remainders are situations in which the moral agent is required to take action. The agent has compelling moral reasons to do (or not do) two (or more) actions, but performing both (or all) actions is not possible. So no matter what the agent does, he will do something wrong (or fail to do something right). The famous example in *Sophie's Choice*¹⁵ illustrates the moral dilemma excellently. Sophie, imprisoned in a Nazi concentration camp, is confronted with choosing which one of her two children will live, while the other will be killed. Her problem is compounded by the fact that if she does not choose a child, both will be killed. For obvious reasons, Sophie has an equally strong reason to save both her children and regardless of which she saves, she will experience enormous guilt for the consequences of that choice. This guilt is appropriate; in fact if Sophie did not experience remorse, others would view her as amoral or immoral, even though she is not responsible for her tragic dilemma. This is a situation in which a virtuous agent is faced with enormous guilt as a result of a dilemma, so much guilt that he or she may not recover from its consequences. Hursthouse states:

The actions a virtuous agent is forced to in tragic dilemmas fail to be good actions because the doing of them, no matter how unwilling or involuntarily, mars or ruins a good life. So to say that there are some dilemmas from which even a virtuous agent cannot emerge having acted well is just to say that there are some from which even a virtuous agent cannot emerge with her life unmarred—not in virtue of wrongdoing (for *ex hypothesi*, in making a forced choice, the agent is blameless), and not in virtue of having done what is right or justifiable or permissible

15. William Styron, *Sophie's Choice* (New York: Bantam Books, 1980).

(which would sound very odd), but simply in virtue of the fact that her life presented her with this choice, and was thereby marred, or perhaps even ruined.¹⁶

For Hursthouse, although a virtuous agent may know that their life before the tragic dilemma has been a good life, they may emerge from the dilemma unable to continue a virtuous existence because remorse and guilt will forever tarnish their character. The virtuous agent may forever lose the opportunity to lead a eudaimon life.

For virtuous agents who believe and submit to God, the feeling of regret, blame, extreme remorse and/or excessive guilt is present, but less than that experienced by non-submissive virtuous agents. This is because they know that they have done their best, and that they have submitted their action and its consequences to God, with the belief and acceptance that whatever will happen is the best possible outcome from that particular permutation of actions.

In order to illustrate this claim, let us consider base deeds as defined by Michael Stocker in "Dirty Hands and Conflicts of Values and of Desires in Aristotle's Ethics," in which he considers base deeds as "among those severe disasters that can make eudaimonia difficult if not impossible."¹⁷ Stocker presents Aristotle's hostage case, where a man has to choose between his family dying and a base act. Whichever choice this man makes, he will go through enormous guilt afterward, as there is no right course of action characteristic of a virtuous agent. Let us suppose that this virtuous man, who has inculcated submissiveness to God as a virtue, chooses the base act. His family is saved but he feels extreme remorse for performing the base act that was uncharacteristic of him. However, he rationalizes that God is aware of the circumstances in which he performed this action. He is also aware that God is Merciful. He knows he will be judged with those factors in consideration, that God knows that he did not choose to be in such a situation. His awareness that he will be judged by a Perfect Being helps him recover from that remorse more easily. Hence, the tragic moral dilemma may not destroy his character to a point that he cannot recover.

Submission to God provides for humble groundings. A moral agent can see himself as a part of a larger cosmos. Hence, when

16. Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics*, 74.

17. Michael Stocker, *Plural and Conflicting Values* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 65.

faced with a tragic dilemma, a submissive virtuous agent may be able to forgive themselves, with the mindset that it was God's will. The virtuous submissive agent knows that God is just and merciful. They also know that God has reasons for humans to face certain unavoidable circumstances.¹⁸ Therefore, the submissive virtuous agent is encouraged to overcome feelings of despair due to wrongdoings and inculcate virtuous traits.

The claim is not that a religious virtuous person would feel no moral remainder whatsoever or that a non-submissive virtuous agent may never recover. According to Islamic belief, tragedies can happen to anyone and the way human nature is structured, time has a healing quality. So everyone has a possibility of recovery eventually. The claim is that a submissive virtuous person is able to recover more easily from the tragic dilemma.

The claim is not that there should be no trace of moral remainder left in a person. In certain situations, it is imperative to have regret and/or shame. For example, political leaders may have to choose the "lesser of two evils" in the process of serving the greater good. Yet for them to remain good leaders, they must retain some element of moral remainder and not become used to these choices (put in layman's term, not let power corrupt them).¹⁹ Submitting to God helps one to go on pursuing a virtuous lifestyle, it does not necessarily erode all traces of moral remainder.

If one is to believe in the premise that God exists, then it follows logically that submitting to God is a virtue. Given that premise, submission is a meta-virtue because if one submits completely to the will of God, and God commands the inculcation of all the other virtues, then it implies that the virtuous moral agent who submits to God desires, for all the right reasons, the inculcation of those other virtues. Additionally, submission to God has its own merits. A life in which submission is a virtue has something of value that is lacking in a life in which submission cannot be a virtue, and that value adds more possibilities for leading a eudaimon life for the virtuous moral agent.

18. Whether these circumstances are tests for our characters, or part of a larger picture, or both, we do not know.

19. For a fuller discussion of this, refer to Michael Walzer, "Political Action: The Problem of Dirty Hands," *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 2, no. 2 (Winter 1973) 160–180 and Michael Ignatieff, *The Lesser Evil* (Pinceton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004).