



Shame, Morality, and Emotions: Understanding the Prophetic Model of Intelligence

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Author Biography

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Abstract

The Prophetic model of intellect or *'aql* is a combination of divinely inspired moral intelligence and emotional intelligence. A complete moral education strives to perfect one's moral identity by focusing on five areas: (1) moral compass development; (2) moral sensitivity calibration; (3) moral commitment; (4) moral assertiveness; and (5) a moral problem-solving capacity. These five areas collectively formulate a complete moral intelligence. Moral shame, due to its intrinsic connection to identity, is seen as a positive behavior modifier in spite of the criticism surrounding it. This paper defends the centrality of shame and explains why mature, justified shame is a positive emotion for both individuals and communities. Lastly, this paper highlights the negative consequences of individual and societal ambivalence for one's moral identity.

Introduction

إِنِّي كَأَنِّي أَرَى مَنْ لَا حَيَاءَ لَهُ ... وَلَا أَمَانَةَ وَسَطَ الْقَوْمِ غُرِيَانَا

In France, just days before I wrote this article, an Algerian woman was denied French citizenship because of her moral identity. She refused to shake hands with a strange man because of her religious identity. For this she was denied the “privilege” of a French identity. Why is it that a country that bears the flag of liberal values and enlightenment feels the need to regulate moral judgments and values? Without a shadow of doubt, the increasingly “progressive” and ultra-pluralistic broader societal shifts have thrown a deadly left hook at the Prophetic ideal of moral intelligence and our religious identity and our knees have begun to buckle. But we need not lean against the ropes.

Over the last few years, I have become increasingly interested in studying the major trends and societal shifts in thought regarding ethics and morality which

have occurred over the last two centuries. My intention is perhaps best articulated by an Arab poet who said,

عرفت الشر لا للشر.... ولكن لتوقيه

I study evil not for evil itself but rather to protect myself from it.

It is with the intent to protect myself and others from the intellectual and cultural trends within our society which uproot the foundations of faith that I present the following discussion on a very fundamental aspect of our religious identity and the threats posed against it. We mustn't throw in the towel, so to speak, due to the aggressive nature of these attacks but rather we should put up our guard, study closely the style of our opponents and, with precision, strike accordingly. Our offense will be our best defense as explained in *The Art of War*. Looking at the Prophetic mission of Muhammad ﷺ and all of the other prophets of Allah as well, we see that one of the functions—and perhaps the primary function—that they served was building within their respective communities both individual and collective moral intelligence.

Moral Education and Moral Identity

The time period before the coming of any prophet or the span of time between two prophets is often referred to the age of ignorance because of the absence of divine moral intelligence. The current confusion that exists within the hearts and minds of many Muslims around the world is, in my estimation, due to insufficient moral education. Broadly speaking, when we speak about the Prophetic model of *'aql*, or intelligence, we are speaking about a divinely inspired moral and emotional intelligence. Moral education aimed at increasing the moral fortitude of Muslims should be built around what I will call the framework of Moral Intelligence. This framework consists of five areas critical to moral education: (1) moral compass; (2) moral sensitivity; (3) moral assertiveness; (4) moral commitment; and (5) a moral problem-solving capacity. Each of these areas are vital to our individual and collective moral and religious identity. If we survey the prophetic narrations¹

¹ يَقُولُ: لَا تَقُومُ السَّاعَةُ حَتَّى يَسَافِدَ النَّاسُ فِي الطُّرُقِ تَسَافِدَ الْحُمَيْرِ. *Muṣanaf Ibn Abī al-Shaybah*, 37277

which speak about the end of times we see that the primary element that will be taken away from Muslims—and people of religion in general—will be the right to their own moral identities.

Moral sensitivity is *'aql's* version of a lane departure warning. I recently rented a Toyota Camry and was completely caught off guard as the car automatically realigned my steering wheel when I began to drive outside of my lane. I remember that when this feature first began to appear in cars, the car would simply notify the driver through a sound that they were moving out of their lane. Now we have reached the point where not only will basic sedans automatically adjust your steering wheel, but higher-class cars can drive you all the way to work or school without you having to do anything at all. Moral sensitivity can be equated to that annoying beeping sound that tells that you are doing something wrong. What we should also understand is that these warning notifications and steering wheel correction systems can only work if the computer assumes an ideal driving style. The correction system works because it assumes that driving within one lane is the ideal and drifting from lane to lane is wrong and potentially harmful. In fact, even our ability to manually drive to and from work is based on a collective agreement with, and commitment to, a set of shared principles like stopping at red lights, turning right on red, and other commonly understood laws of the road. When a person switches lanes without using their signal, we become upset because they have breached the shared principles; thus, we honk our horn. I think we can all agree that all systems function smoothly due to each member of the system sharing the same assumptions. This is why we honk and feel frustrated when those rules are broken.

Moral sensitivity is directly related to the moral idioms available to a person. The list of terms associated with moral approval include: forthright, unassuming, generous, faithful, honorable, considerate, trustworthy, modest, courageous, honest, pure, conscientious. The list of terms connoting moral condemnation include: corrupt, cruel, treacherous, envious, petty, hypocritical, selfish, greedy, cowardly, obsequious. These are provided by language, tradition, and culture. A

sound moral education involves teaching people which moral idiom to apply to which situation. When a person can apply these idioms to the situations they encounter and even to themselves, their moral education is complete. When a person learns the meanings of these words (i.e., the moral idioms) and then learns the actions to which they are attributed, they develop a moral identity, or in other words a moral ideal, which they themselves may or may not reach but nonetheless remains the ideal.

Ambivalence and Moral Identity

Zygmunt Bauman in *Modernity and Ambivalence* explains the crux of moral ignorance: a state of cultural ambivalence. Simply put, he explains that ambivalence is a language disorder in which we fail to name things. It is “the possibility of assigning an object or an event to more than one category.”² Think of a small child to whom you are teaching basic words. “This is big” or “This is small” teaches the child a word that can be used in the future to classify or segregate or differentiate between various things. Likewise, the statement “This is an animal” provides the mind of the child with a mental box within which other animals can be placed. Bauman explains that we naturally and rightfully feel a sense of anxiety when confronted by ambivalence. In my estimation, this is because humans have a divinely gifted capacity to know the world around them and learn more from that world. In the beginning of the Qur’an we are told about the creation of Adam and the initial education which he received. The Qur’an tells us that he was taught the “names of everything”³ which clearly tells us that he was given the basic ability to categorize the world and subsequently learn from that world. Perhaps this verse is indicating that mankind’s ability to know what things are, name them, and thereby classify them constitutes the hallmark of human intellectual ability and the role of the *‘aql*. The problem with modernity, as explained by Bauman, is that we have shifted into a state of collective ambivalence. Words like *generous*, *faithful*, *honorable*, *considerate*, *trustworthy*, *modest*, *courageous*, *honest*, and *pure* fail to classify actions and therefore chaos or

² Bauman; *Morality and Ambivalence*, 1991.

³ Qur’an 2:31.

as he puts it, “the other of order” ensues. To a child, words have meanings but for the enlightened postmodern mind words mean nothing.

Moral Identity and Shame: Two Sides of the Same Coin

Once a moral ideal has been formed within the *‘aql* of a person, any subsequent failure to meet that ideal should naturally produce a sense of shame or *ḥaiyā* within. A mature and justified shame plays an important positive role for the person who experiences it and holds a central position in the moral sphere of the individual and the broader society. In one narration, the Prophet ﷺ defined shame as the single most identifying characteristic of Islam.

مَالِكٌ، عَنْ سَلَمَةَ بْنِ صَفْوَانَ بْنِ سَلَمَةَ الزُّرَقِيِّ، عَنْ زَيْدِ بْنِ طَلْحَةَ بْنِ رُكَّانَةَ يَرْفَعُهُ إِلَى النَّبِيِّ صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ قَالَ: قَالَ رَسُولُ اللَّهِ صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ: لِكُلِّ دِينٍ خُلُقٌ. وَخُلُقُ الْإِسْلَامِ الْحَيَاءُ⁴

The Prophet ﷺ said, “Every religion has a distinguishing characteristic and for Islam that characteristic is shame.”

Another narration attributed to the Prophet Suleiman (peace and blessing be upon him) defines shame as “the string of the necklace of faith,” suggesting that an individual’s loss of shame destroys his or her religious identity.⁵

Shame’s central role in the moral intelligence sphere is proven in that it is directly connected to identity. The feeling of shame begins when one feels that they have failed to meet their own ideal. It forces a person to reexamine their moral identity and reconsider their closeness to that moral ideal and it informs them about weakness in their moral character. The powerful corrective nature of shame over behavior has even led some academics to suggest that modern American law

⁴ *Muwattaʿa*, 3358, 687

⁵ Al-Māwardī, *adab al-dīn wa al-dunyā*

should use shame instead of imprisonment.⁶ Islam, being a religion that is concerned with creating a culture of God-consciousness, takes shame as the defining characteristic of Islam. And the Prophet ﷺ informed us, “If you have no shame, you will do whatever you like.” The problem with shame according to Williams is that it is a very social emotion which means it is far too dependent on one's environment.⁷ Shame by definition makes a person simply a victim of the norms of the environment within which they live. Doesn't this negate the potential benefit of shame? Shame's dependence on the communal gaze has led many people to feel that because it is too dependent on the society to be given primacy in an individual's moral sphere. People often feel ashamed for things which they should not feel ashamed about but only because of the general collective moral standards of the society in which they live. Minorities, women, the disabled, and menial workers may feel an unwarranted sense of shame which is clearly the result of the ethos of the culture within which they live. In other words, shame is far too heteronomous to be a good indicator of one's moral character. The proponents of this argument hold that true morality must be more autonomous, coming from within a person. Before I deconstruct this view, it should be noted that the Islamic definition of shame within the prophetic moral intelligence is complex and consists of three levels.

Imam al-Māwardī explains in his book *Adab al-dīn wa al-dunyā* that there are three levels of shame that can be found with a person. The first is shame before Allah. This is supported by a narration in which the Prophet ﷺ encouraged his companions to “be shameful before Allah as His Majesty deserves!” The companions, not quite understanding what he meant, enquired for further explanation. The Prophet ﷺ explained, “that you protect your mind and what it contains, that you protect your belly (conscious consumption), that you leave behind overindulgence in the world, and that you remember death.”⁸ The second level of shame is social shame or *shame before the people* as al-Māwardī describes it, and the third level is an internal shame of one's own self. The first and third

⁶ Dan M. Kahan, “What Do Alternative Sanctions Mean?” *The University of Chicago Law Review*, 63 (1996), 591-653.

⁷ Williams, *Shame and Necessity*, p. 100.

⁸ Al-Māwardī, *adab al-dīn wa al-dunyā* p. 396.

levels of shame from one perspective can be seen as completely indifferent to the environment and therefore are not necessarily social emotions. This position has been explained and defended very well by Cheshire Calhoun and Jennifer C. Manion⁹ in their respective defenses of the positive value of moral shame. Calhoun explains that mature or justified moral shame would only be sensed when one is criticized by people whose opinions we respect and value.¹⁰ Only those people have the power to shame us simply because we agree to the same moral standard which we ourselves have autonomously chosen. The power we give to others to shame us is simply a reflection of our own standards which we share with others. Likewise, we can minimize the moral perspective of some people to the point where we aren't affected at all by their criticism; this is a sign of moral maturity. I caution Muslims against taking this perspective on shame and morality in general because the moral code in reality is not autonomous. It is imposed on us by Allah Himself. The autonomy simply lies in your choice to follow or not follow. But the fact of the matter is that you really don't have a choice regarding what the moral standards are. However, Calhoun's breakdown of mature moral standards plays a critical role within Islamic moral education in that we are instructed to develop a thick skin for unwarranted critique.¹¹

The third level of shame from the Islamic position involves a completely personalized shame. Moral education will create what is called in Qur'anic terminologies *Nafs al-lawwāmah*, or a self-criticizing soul. The Muslim who has been morally educated and whose moral compass has been calibrated will develop this type of *nafs* and she will feel ashamed regarding transgressions even when completely alone. This feeling is not dependent on the views of others because she operates as what Calhoun and others call a "lone moral pioneer."

The *moral pioneer* archetype was introduced as a solution to the aforementioned problem regarding shame's seemingly natural dependency upon others for its functionality. The moral pioneer is a person who has reached a level of morality that surpasses the morality of her society. The conundrum that she finds herself in

⁹ Manion, J., The Moral Relevance of Shame. *The American Philosophical Quarterly*: v. 39 (2002), pp. 73-90.

¹⁰ Calhoun C., An Apology for Moral Shame. *The Journal of Political Philosophy*: v. 12 (2004), pp. 127-146.

¹¹ Quran 5:54 "And they do not fear the blame of the critic."

is that if she treats her people according to their level of morality she would ideally speaking feel a sense of shame within herself because she is not upholding her standard of justice. Nonetheless she would be free from any blame from the external environment. On the other hand, were she to deal with the people according to her enlightened understanding of morality, she would be at peace with herself for upholding her ideals, but she would be morally critiqued by the broader community. What is the solution?

If we look at all of the Prophets of Allah, we can easily conclude that the movements they inspired were clearly meant to cause moral revolutions within societies. The divinely inspired changes that they brought sought to recalibrate the collective moral compass. North became south and south became north. When approached by his uncle who pleaded with him to refrain from disrupting the social norms and peace of the city, the Prophet Muḥammad صلى الله عليه وسلم was a moral pioneer. He was the lone custodian for a new standard of appropriateness, a standard of morality that far exceeded the existing standards in his society. Many saw him as the epitome of evil, corrupting the youth of his time. With that said, we see that he nonetheless dealt with the people according to the new standard which he was given. His ultimate shame was a shame before Allah first and then before himself. It was not based on the people's gaze, for the most part. On the contrary, shame before the people was what he tolerated in order to fulfill the command of Allah. I say "for the most part" because a very interesting account, which is related to us through many different narrators, tells us not about the sensitivity of the Prophet himself but rather his reaction to being in the presence of someone who also had a very intense sense of shame. 'Āyesha, the wife of the Prophet صلى الله عليه وسلم tells us, "The Prophet صلى الله عليه وسلم was once in my house laying down, resting with his thighs or shins exposed. While he was in that position, Abū Bakr came to the door and asked permission to enter. The Prophet, still laying in the same position, granted him permission and they began to converse. A short while later 'Umar bin al-Khattāb arrived at the door and also sought permission to enter. He, too, was given permission and the Prophet did not change his position as they began to converse. Finally, 'Uthmān sought permission to enter. Whereupon the Prophet immediately sat up, straightened out his clothes,

and then allowed ‘Uthmān to enter and join in the conversation. After they all left, ‘Āyesha asked the Prophet why he didn’t fix his clothes and change his position when the other companions entered but did so when ‘Uthmān entered. The Prophet replied, “Should I not be shy before a person before whom even the angels are shy?”

This narration regarding the relative nature of the Prophet’s shame and its relation to his environment brings us to the second level of shame—social shame. The collective ethos and the extreme social disapprobation within the Muslim community can, for some, feel suffocating. Like my friend who turns off the lane departure notification feature on his car because of how intrusive it can become. Similarly, some people feel that the moral sensitivity and the strong moral disapprobation within the Muslim community has little to no positive moral influence. But the positive function of social shame which is felt when moral ideals are not met does not diminish the moral relevance of shame. Shame naturally forces one to question two very important factors: 1) why we feel shame; and 2) who we value enough to give the ability to shame us. For a moment, I would like to look back at the roads we drive on every day because there seems to be a divergence between how we view practical morality and how we view practical social constructs such as the laws that dictate our behavior on the road. The most intrusive shaming mechanism we use daily is the car horn. When we see or encounter a breach in road etiquette (i.e., a shared standard of conduct) our first means to modify behavior is the car horn. The horn serves as a strong corrective tool because it brings attention to the misconduct of a driver, whoever they may be, and points out their failure to uphold agreed-upon driving norms.

A single collective moral identity is difficult to achieve within a broad nation-state and has forced religious Muslims to adopt two different standards in public, one Islamic and one pluralistic. The problem with this approach is that shame reflects your personal identity, it reflects your ideal moral self. And our identity should remain constant. The public pluralistic worldview devalues shame and celebrates the individual. In other words, protecting and preserving each driver’s choice to drive upon the road as they see fit is the ultimate good. Shame is seen as stunting growth and as a tool of old days used to control the masses and dull individual

potential. Today you must be your own judge, jury, and it seems even executioner if need be. The problem that ensues when shame is devalued and demonized is that collective identity and trust are completely lost. As predicted in perhaps the most oft-quoted narration regarding shame, in which the Prophet ﷺ said, “If you have no shame you will do whatever you like.”

The truth that lies in this narration is why the very concept of moral shame is attacked so fervently. The enlightened revisionist realizes all too well the moral power of shame. This is why they feel they must free humanity from the leash preventing them from exploring their true potential.

If we allow moral sensitivity to revolve solely around identity and give the power to shame only to those with whom we share common ideals, then I only foresee the further fractionation of the community. This fractionation is seen in the development of religious “safe spaces,” where people can come as they are and be safe from the annoying simplistic rants of people who hold the entirety of the *ummah* to a single moral identity. These places are designed to serve those whose identity is felt to be too nuanced for the general community and those who feel they aren’t understood by the general community. But these safe spaces will eventually reach an interesting crossroads where they too will form a common identity between members and they too will intentionally or unintentionally agree upon tolerable and intolerable actions which naturally results in moral identity-related shame—the very thing from which they themselves were fleeing. The individual members of these safe spaces will begin to look at themselves as an extension of the group and they too will have shame before other members with whom they share a common identity. By now it should be clear that we cannot remove shame without removing identity.

The difficulty that Muslims in America face is the dual standard of shame which they must learn to navigate—meaning that they will constantly shift between two different moral identities. Moral immaturity, or a lack of moral education, allows a person to easily fall victim to unjustified and unwarranted shame. Moral education within our communities should work to re-center our values and teach community members what criticism to give weight to and how to maintain the moral ideal

without completely pushing people away. But most importantly, it should also strive to maintain a collective ideal of morality because this ideal formulates our collective moral identity. And we should differentiate between those who are simply failing to meet the ideal because of human error from those who are actually purposefully attempting to change that identity. The Islamic tri-level construct of shame is beautifully encapsulated in a saying which was related by Imam al-Māwardī,

وَقَالَ بَعْضُ السَّلَفِ لِابْنِهِ: إِذَا دَعَاكَ نَفْسُكَ إِلَى كَبِيرَةٍ، فَارْمِ بِبَصْرِكَ إِلَى السَّمَاءِ، وَاسْتَحِ مِمَّنْ فِيهَا، فَإِنْ لَمْ تَفْعَلْ فَارْمِ بِبَصْرِكَ إِلَى الْأَرْضِ وَاسْتَحِ مِمَّنْ فِيهَا، فَإِنْ كُنْتَ لَا مِمَّنْ فِي السَّمَاءِ تَخَافُ، وَلَا مِمَّنْ فِي الْأَرْضِ تَسْتَحِي، فَاعُدُّ نَفْسَكَ فِي عَدَدِ الْبَهَائِمِ

One of our pious predecessors said to his son, ‘When your passions call you to a major sin, then cast your gaze upon the heavens and feel shame before those in the heavens witnessing you. And if that does not create a feeling of shame within you, then cast your gaze to those around you on this earth and feel shame before those witnessing you on the earth. If you don’t feel any shame at these two levels, then consider yourself to be from amongst the beasts.’

So how do we create a community that doesn’t suffocate people who transgress or slip away from the ideal? This article is only one section of my forthcoming book on the intelligence of the Prophet ﷺ. It is my understanding that the emotion intelligence framework which I discuss at length is the means by which we transfer this moral ideal to others. By studying that side of the prophetic model of intelligence or *‘aql* one learns how moral intelligence is successfully transferred across cultures and across generations.