

Different Methodological Approaches to Spirituality



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In this paper, the author discusses, in brief, the methodologies used by scholars in studying spirituality. He classifies it into three approaches, i.e., the philosophical approach, the mystical approach and the scriptural approach and discusses the importance of all three of them.

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In the previous paper we discussed about the significance of self-control and self-purification. In this paper we will review and briefly discuss different methodologies among Muslim scholars in studying spirituality in general and morality (*akhlaq*) in particular. In general, we can classify the attitudes of scholars into three main approaches:

- The Philosophical Approach
- The Mystical Approach
- The Scriptural or Text-Based Approach

The Philosophical Approach

Many Muslim scholars have found the outlook of some Greek philosophers, especially Aristotle, to a large extent appealing as a way in which to speak about the human soul. According to this view, the human soul has three different faculties (*quwwah*) responsible for action; they are:

1. The rational faculty (*al-quwwah al-'aqliyyah*) is the faculty responsible for knowledge. It helps us to understand matters and enables us to engage in discussion. If this faculty functions properly, one can attain true wisdom (*hikmah*). This does not mean that one should strive for an excess of the rational faculty, as this is one of the causes of scepticism; rather, it means that we must be concerned with maintaining a balance. If a person is not rational enough, he can be too accepting and believe whatever he hears. This type of person can be easily deceived. Ibn Sinna, in a profound statement says "*Whoever is used to accepting an argument without any reason is no longer a human being.*" This is because a fundamental part of humanity is rationality and human being is often defined by philosophers as "rational animal". Therefore one needs to strike a balance, and not to be too rational and critical or too receptive.
2. The faculty of anger (*al-quwwah al-ghadabiyyah*) is the faculty that controls our temper. Without this faculty, we would not have the motivation to protect ourselves from danger. However, if someone allows this faculty to be extreme, they would be aggressive and always ready to attack. On the other hand, if a person lacks the faculty of anger they would be a coward. The philosophers in this school of thought encourage us to attain a balance between these two, so that we can attain the virtue of bravery. A good person, therefore, is one who knows when to become angry and to the right extent.
3. The appetitive faculty (*al-quwwah al-shahwiyyah*) is the faculty which mostly consists of sexual appetite, but also includes our appetite for food and other things. If the force of sexual desire did not exist in man, the continued existence of the human species would be endangered. This faculty must also be brought to a balance where a person is chaste and modest.

Therefore, if one were to strike a balance in all these faculties he would have wisdom, bravery and chastity; this is all one needs to attain justice. This means that one who is just or *'adil* is one who has attained perfection in every aspect of his soul. Being *'adil* is not merely about abstinence from sins, but it is also about the perfection of every faculty.

This school of spirituality sets out a very rational response to the question of self-building. Although it is rational, some feel that it is too abstract and lacks the inspirational and emotional qualities that can really engage people and leave them motivated to change. We are taught to strike a balance with our faculties but it can be difficult to know where that balance is in different circumstances. This approach is useful, but not sufficient; we must add practical and inspirational elements to our view of self-building.

The Mystical Approach

The mystics consider the whole process of self-building as a journey towards God or perfection and as a matter of gradual growth. The difference between the previous approach and this approach is as follows:

According to the first approach, the relationship of the soul and self-building can be considered in the following way. Imagine there is a house which you wish to beautify; there are a number of things you could do. You could take out the rubbish, then start decorating the house, and furnishing the house in a wise way. If one manages to remove the rubbish and all the ugly items from the house, and furnishes it with beautiful items, then the house becomes attractive.

In the same way we can consider the house which we wish to beautify as the soul we wish to cleanse and adorn with good character. We must remove bad qualities from our hearts in order for Allah (SWT) to let the light in and furnish our hearts with a good character. For example, we read in a hadith, "*angels do not enter a house in which dogs are kept*".¹ In a similar way we must consider the state of our hearts, and if they are aggressive like a dog, ill tempered or diseased we cannot hope for angels to enter.

Therefore, this process involves three main stages

- *Takhliyah* – clean out
- *Tahliyah* – adornment
- *Tajliyah* – starts shining (starts to happen automatically after you do first two).

Although this approach is inspiring to an extent, and can provide us with a framework through which to self-build, it is not a dynamic approach, as it does not fully explain where one should precisely start and finish the spiritual journey. It does not say what we should clean first or what to adorn ourselves with. Again, this approach is useful, but not sufficient in itself as a complete plan of self-building.

According to the second approach, the relationship of the soul and self-building can be considered in the following way. A person is like a flower, and a flower can grow but not without care. A flower can grow like any other that has grown in the past; it is not a unique thing. A flower is gradually growing if everything is carefully looked after. This is similar to how a child grows into an adult. One cannot be a teenager before being a toddler. In the same way, one cannot give the food of a toddler to a teenager or vice versa.

Therefore, the second approach i.e. the mystical approach looks at spiritual growth in a dynamic way as a carefully planned procedure. One needs the guidance of the people who have been to this process, who can provide advice for what to do at each stage. With this approach, every stage must be undertaken separately.

This means that the expectations in each stage should be different. What is good for one person at one

level may not be necessarily good for another person at a higher level. For example, if a small child memorises *Surah Al-Fatihah* (the Opening) and recites it people would commend the child and would be impressed, but if the *Imam* of the prayer recited the *Surah* in the same way, people would criticise him and not pray behind him. Everything is therefore a matter of comparison as to what we should expect from ourselves in different situations. It is a constant journey from one level to the next.

The Scripture–Text Based Approach

According to this view, the best approach is to refer to the Qur'an and Sunnah of the Holy Prophet (SAW) and his family (AS). Those who advocate this approach therefore felt there was no need for a philosophical framework, and instead they listed the desirable and undesirable qualities of man based on the Qur'an. For example, for the vice of greed they would extract verses from the Qur'an which reveal that greed is an undesirable quality and provide evidence and some solutions from hadith.

What should be our own attitude?

All these scholars have made great contributions to Islamic moral thought. However, each of these approaches have their strengths and weaknesses and if we wish to benefit the most we must create a synthetic approach in which the advantages of each school of thought can be incorporated.

Requirements for an Adequate Approach

1. Our moral outlook should be compatible with the Qur'an and Sunnah, as there is no one better than Allah (SWT) and the Holy Prophet (SAW) to guide, as to what is good or bad. All truth is from Allah (SWT), no matter if it is relayed to us, by the mystics or the philosophers.
2. The ethical system has to be comprehensive. No aspect of the human being can be ignored. We do not want to have a person who is only developed in one aspect. A human being must grow in all different aspects.
3. The ethical system must be rational and supported by rational arguments, but it also must be practical and engaging.
4. The framework must be consistent and no contradictions should occur.
5. The ethical system must tell us what to do in different positions and stations as self–building is a dynamic process and is not static. In no field of study or practice can a person say they do not need consultation or advice.
6. Islam is a religion which considers reason to be very important. There is nothing irrational in Islam. There are many things taught by revelation, but this is not because they are *against* reason; it is

because they are *above* reason.

To illustrate the difference between something being against reason and above reason let us consider an example. If someone was asked how many people are in the next room, using their reason alone, they could not tell you. This answer does not come through reason. However, if someone answered that there are one million people in the next room, knowing the size of the room, we could say that this answer is against reason.

Conclusion

We need a moral system based on the Qur'an and Sunnah, while at the same time has rational and philosophical grounds. The system must also have clear priorities, and if two things are in conflict, the system must show which is more important. Lastly, we must be able to find out what we can expect from each stage, usually by those who have passed the stage we are now in, as their advice and help is extremely important. Among our contemporary scholars, there have been brilliant teachers of spirituality who have combined these schools of thought, and whom we can learn from, such as: Imam Khomeini, Allamah Tabatabai, Ayatollah Mutahhari and Ayatollah Javadi Amuli.

1. See e.g. Bihar al-Anwar, Vol. , p. 56, p. 177.

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