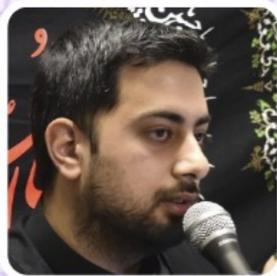


# Dealing With Seemingly Contradictory Ethical Verses & Traditions



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**Article**

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### Dealing With Seemingly Contradictory Ethical Verses & Traditions

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The fact that many youth seem to see apparently contradictory ethical and moral admonitions in the Qur'anic verses and traditions, often becomes the cause of confusion and a barrier to fulfill one's moral duties correctly. Many traditions and verses concerning ethics appear to be defining general principles, or they may be conveying a causal relationship between a moral act and another event. There are hundreds of such examples, but I will suffice with a few to make my point clear. For example, in a tradition attributed to Imam 'Alī (a) – recorded in Ghurar al-ʿIlām – we read: Blessed is the one who endures the temptations of his vain desire, and rejects his aspiration.

In this tradition, it seems that one who rejects his or her aspirations is always praised, and is blessed with glad tidings. We do not see the term aspiration restricted or conditioned to a specific type of aspiration, but rather the word is used in absolute terms. Thus, it appears this tradition is conveying a principle which dictates: anyone who rejects his or her aspirations is blessed. However, is it really the case that anyone who rejects all their aspirations and fights of all of their desires is blessed? This appears contrary to the other numerous teachings within Islamic literature that says we are to work towards our aspirations and fulfill our desires through appropriate channels.

Often a speaker may come to a community and choose to speak on the topic of battling the self, and choose to quote this and many other similar traditions, leaving the audience thinking, chasing aspirations and desires is condemned and immoral. Later, another speaker may come and choose to talk about ways of fulfilling one's natural desires to remain physically and spiritually healthy, and quotes numerous other traditions and verses to establish their point. This often leaves many confused.

There are other traditions that appear to denote a causal relationship between an ethical act and a certain event. There are hundreds of such traditions and verses in Islamic literature. For example, in another tradition attributed to Imam 'Alī (a) in the same work cited above, it says: The cause of poverty is extravagance. Or in a tradition attributed to Imam al-ʿAḍḍīqī (a), it says: The night prayer brightens the face, makes one's odour pleasant, and brings about sustenance. Furthermore, we read in the Qur'an (29:45) Indeed the prayer prevents indecencies and wrongs.

All these cases demonstrate a causal relationship between an act and another event. However, once again, is it the case that every single instance of extravagance brings about poverty, or that every single instance of a night prayer brightens one's face? Are these general principles, not conditioned to anything, and are true in all their instances? We instinctively and through experience realize this not to be the case – so then how do we deal with and understand these traditions and verses that seem to be speaking in general universal language?

There are a few possible solutions theorized here that I am summarizing from a paper written by Muḥammad 'Alimzadeh Nūrī. The research paper was published in the magazine Akhlāq-e Waḥyīn a few months back.

1) The first solution is what the logicians have expressed regarding a proposition that does not explicitly mention whether it is universal or particular (i.e. it does not mention 'every', 'all', 'some', 'a few' etc.). The logicians call such a proposition muḥmal – and argue that it needs to be considered particular, not universal. Meaning, only in some instances (we may or may not know in which case) is this proposition true. In other words, if it says extravagance causes poverty, we presume it to mean “some instances of extravagances”.

While this solution works within logic and when dealing with strictly philosophical propositions, it does not work when dealing with traditions whose language is that of the general populous. In other words, it can be claimed and argued that the apparent meaning of these traditions in the understanding of the general populous is in fact universal.

Furthermore, recourse to this method presented by logicians only works when a tradition or verse does not explicitly make use of terms such as 'every', 'some', 'none', etc. This is while we have numerous traditions that do use terms such as 'all', 'every', etc. For example, we find in a tradition attributed to Imām 'Alī (a) saying: Everything is possible except [changing and] transferring of natural dispositions. Or a Prophetic (p) tradition saying: Stinginess and faith will not gather in one heart, ever.

2) Another way to resolve this challenge is by resorting to a principle discussed in legal theory (Uḥūl al-Fiqh) that dictates: absolute words are to be understood in context of their most complete instance (إِنَّ الْمَطْلُوقَ يَنْصَرَفُ إِلَى الْفَرْدِ الْكَامِلِ). For example, if a tradition says extravagance results in poverty, this is referring to the most extreme case of extravagance, and not everyday instances where one is limited in their extravagance.

Scholars of legal theory have stated this principle is only applicable when a certain word is commonly and excessively used in such a way amongst people. Otherwise, if a tradition – for example – uses the word 'scholar', or 'human', and passes some judgement regarding them, there is no reason to assume it is referring to the most learned scholar, or the most perfect human (i.e. the Prophet). Furthermore, even if we were to accept this principle, it would not be applicable in cases where a word such as 'every', 'all' etc. is being used.

3) A third possibility is to consider these propositions to be conveying a common natural occurrence that subsequently follows a certain ethical acts, but not that the act is the only single and complete cause for it. In other words, it is possible for an ethical act to have such consequences if all things remain equal, but in a situation where various variables and barriers are involved, it will not immediately have these consequences. This is tantamount to saying, eating an apple is in it and of itself permissible, but under certain conditions it may become prohibited, like if it is usurped. In other words, the judgement made in a proposition between an ethical trait and its consequence is to be understood in context of a scenario where all things are equal. Otherwise, practically speaking it is probably true that in most cases, the mere performance of a certain ethical act does not result in the consequence mentioned in a verse or tradition. This is because there are numerous variables at play practically speaking.

In day to day use of language, it is not possible to detail all conditions of a given relationship between an ethical trait and its consequences. As a matter of fact, doing so may even be self-defeating, and the audience can lose sight of the essence of the message. To summarize this point, essentially the ethical act is to be considered the complete cause of a consequent if all things are equal. For example, if all things remain equal, it is possible that the performance of prayers on its own would prevent wrongdoing. Though given the numerous factors humans encounter, we see that many people who perform their prayers still end up committing indecencies. Thus, one of the practical implications of this theory is that these ethical propositions are in fact not general, but rather restricted to specific conditions and scenarios.

4) Another explanation argues these verses and traditions do appear to be universal, but upon further research and through intellection we may conclude that these principles are conditioned to other factors. To determine this, one must exhaustively research the matter and see whether enough external context exists (whether it be the intellect, verses, or traditions) by which the very apparent meaning of a tradition or verse becomes conditioned. In other words, after exhaustive research, we may conclude that these apparently universal principles are in fact not universal at all, and the speaker had no intent of making such a universal claim to begin with.

5) A final explanation suggests that the meanings of these words are to be understood gradationally. To give a simple example, if we were to say, 'a certain food causes cancer', this does not mean that the moment a person tastes and digests this food they will get cancer. Rather, what it means is that if one persists on eating this food, it will gradually result in cancer. This understanding allows us to continue to understand the tradition or verse in its universal sense, and we do not have to restrict it by any external factors either necessarily.

For example, in the tradition cited earlier, extravagance was deemed a cause for poverty. Based on this understanding, we can say that the first instance or even the second instance of extravagance won't bring about poverty to the extent that a person becomes homeless. However, continuously spending extravagantly will result in poverty. This general principle remains true, because every instance of

extravagance is detrimental, immoral, and it brings one closer to poverty, even if its effects are not seen and its harms are not felt immediately.

## **Conclusion**

From the five solutions presented above, the first and second option are far-fetched and not very convincing. The third, fourth, and fifth solutions may seem independent of one another, but they can be reconciled together. By knowing that ethical propositions in the verses of the Qur'<sup>ʿ</sup>ān, or in the traditions of the Prophet (p) and his progeny (a) can be restricted to certain conditions, or can be understood in a gradational context, or can be a combination, one can begin to understand these moral admonitions & guidelines more precisely.

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