Honesty as a Foundational Virtue According to Islamic Mystical Ethics: Introduction and Definition

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Honesty in Islamic mystical ethics, at a superficial level, refers to the correspondence between speech, action, and intention and purpose. This application of honesty has been analyzed in depth in mystical ethics, and the analysis has resulted in honesty being considered as the foundation and basis of other virtues from five aspects, from which it can be understood that many of virtues are not virtues without honesty. In fact, these five aspects provide important and various meanings of foundational virtue in mythical texts. Considering this, one can find different levels and types of the virtue of honesty in mysticism and assess the obstacles in its path. A deep analysis of dishonesty and distinguishing self-deception are among the most important results of this specific approach to honesty. It is also in view of these analyses that mystics can explain how honesty can result in important ethical fruits, such as love for others, altruism, and abstaining from utilitarianism and egoism in actions, and how it leads to important psychological states, like happiness, satisfaction, hope, and strong inclination to virtues.

Keywords: honesty, foundational virtue, ethical mysticism, self-deception, phenomenology.

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Introduction

In Islamic mysticism, honesty holds fundamental importance; it is introduced as the rank before prophethood or as the condition of prophethood, and has been said to be the origin of all ethical virutes and spiritual states. According to *Misbah al-kifayah*,

> Honesty is the second rank of prophethood, and all of the worldly and religious prosperity is the result of the matrimony between honesty and prophethood. If honesty did not carry the seed of prophethood, the children of *ghayb* (the unseen/hidden) would not be born [i.e., honesty is the foundation of prophethood]. Therefore, the foundation of all good is the rule of honesty, and the reality of honesty is an element from which all branches of ethics and favorable states branch out. (Kashani n.d., 344)

In *Hada'iq al-haqa'iq*, it is stated, "Honesty is the pillar, order, and the entirety of the work of the wayfarer and is the second stage after the rank of prophethood (Razi 1422 AH, 154). Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya, also, has a comprehensive discussion of the centrality of honesty in the mystical journey and its rank according to the mystics (Ibn Qayyim 1425 AH, 495-98). What will be discussed in the rest of this article shows the serious emphasis of the mystics on this important ethical virtue.

In the third, fourth, and fifth centuries AH, an important definition for honesty took shape in Islamic mysticism and profound views were presented in the analysis of its nature, so much so that it can be said that these definitions and views formed a mystical movement, which provided the foundation for later analyses. As an example, Harith Muhasibi (d. 246) engaged in important discussions regarding the topic of honesty in two treatises, *al-Qasd wa l-ruju' ila Allah* (Intention and Return to God) and *Adab al-nufus* (Manners of the Souls). In the former, while analyzing honesty, he divides it into three levels: speech, action, and intention (Muhasibi 1986, 254). He continues by discussing the conditions of motivating honesty, its emotional characteristic, and

that this analysis can be compared with ethical, psychological, and phenomenological descriptions and analyses (Muhasibi 1986, 257). In *Adab al-nufus,* he addresses the issue of self-deception in honesty and explains how, in some cases, an action is considered honest, whereas it stems from personal benefits and desires. Muhasibi, also, speaks about how to be saved from this self-deception (Muhasibi 1428 AH, 89-91). Abu Sa'id Kharraz (d. 286) can be mentioned as another example in this regard. In his *Kitab al-Sidq,* he focuses on the topic of honesty and studies its levels and types (Kharraz 1421 AH, 12), specifically how the virtue of honesty is present in other virtues, such as modesty, love, and patience (Kharraz 1421 AH, 10-59).

Among the figures of the fourth and fifth centuries AH, who had important discussions on the topic of honesty, one can mention Abu l-Qasim 'Abd al-Rahman b. Muhammad al-Bakri (d. 380 AH) in *al-Anwar fi 'ilm al-asrar wa-maqamat al-abrar*, Kharkushi (d. 407 AH) in *Tahdhib al-asrar*, Sulami (d. 412 AH) in *Majmu'at athar al-Sulami*, 'Abd al-Karim Qushayri (d. 465 AH) in *al-Risalah*, Khʷaja 'Abd Allah Ansari (d. 481) in *Manazil al-sa'irin,* and Imam Muhammad Gazali (d. 505 AH) in *Ihya' 'ulum al-din*.

In the later centuries, the mystics continued mostly in the same vein, analyzing the topics related to honesty and truthfulness, topics such as the definition of honesty, analysis of honesty, levels of honesty, types of honesty, its characteristics and fruits, how honesty is related to the nature or perfection of other moral virtues and spiritual stages, self-deception in honesty and its cure, and how one can attain honesty.[1]

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1. See, for instance *Manaqib al-Sufiyyah* by Qutb al-Din Mansur Marwazi (d. 547 AH), *Mashrab al-arwah* by Ruzbahan Baqli (d. 606 AH), *Futuhat al-makkiyyah* by Ibn Arabi (d. 638 AH), *Manarat al-sa'irin ila hadhrat Allah wa maqamat al-ta'irin* by Najm al-Din Razi (d. 654 AH), *Hada'iq al-*

The efforts of the mystics in exploring the focal characteristics of honesty is related to mystical hermeneutics. With their interpretive method, the mystics apply a type of analytical method to different topics, including honesty, that gives significant results. An example of such results in the topic under discussion is the presence of honesty in all actions, states, and characteristics that are considered virtuous, positive, laudable, or valuable.

1. Meaning, Nature, and Analysis of Honesty

In defining honesty, the mystics have a deeper meaning in mind than the common meaning of honesty. In a primary definition, honesty is the correspondence between meaning and reality (Imam al-Sadiq 1400 AH, 35). Meaning is the concept of something in the domain of intention and motive, and reality is the concept of something that is manifested by man. Therefore, in various texts, honesty is defined as the correspondence between the external and the internal (see, e.g., Kharkushi 1427 AH, 170). 'Izz al-Din Kashani states, "Honesty is a firm virtue in a person's soul, which necessitates harmony between man's inner and outer aspects and conformity between his apparent and hidden sides; his words must be in accordance with his intentions, and his actions must conform to his states; he must be as he presents himself" (Kashani n.d., 344). In this statement, two types of correspondence between the external and internal has been pointed to:

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haqa'iq by Muhammad b. Abi Bakr al-Razi (d. 660 AH), *Awsaf al-ashraf* by Khwaja Nasir al-Din Tusi (d. 674 AH), *Sharh Manazil al-sa'irin* by Afif al-Din al-Tilimsani (d. 690 AH), *Istilahat al-sufiyyah* and *Sharh Manazil al-sa'irin* by 'Abd al-Razzaq al-Qasani (d. 730 AH), *Misbah al-hidaya wa miftah al-kifaya* by 'Izz al-Din Mahmud Kashani (d. 735 AH), *Madarij al-salikin* by Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya (d. 751 AH), *Nashr al-mahasin al-ghaliya fi fada'il mashayikh al-Sufiyya ashab al-maqamat al-'aliya* by 'Abd Allah al-Yafi'i (d. 768 AH), *Tariqat namah* by 'Imad al-Din Faqih Kirmani (d. 773 AH), *Tasnim al-muqarrabin* (a Farsi commentary of *Manazil al-sa'irin*) by Shams al-Din Muhammad Tabadkani (d. 864 AH), and *Nata'ij al-afkar al-qudsiyya fi bayan sharh al-Risala al-Qushayriyya* by Zakariyya b. Muhammad al-Ansari (d. 926 AH).

the correspondence between words and intentions and the correspondence between actions and states. From these definitions, one can understand that the mystics were concerned with a focal point regarding honesty that causes it to be considered as a virtue. The virtue of honesty apparently does not mean speaking correctly or truthfully; what makes honesty honesty is abstaining from deception—deception as in the dualism of the different existential domains of man, the opposite of which is honesty: the unity and consistency of the existential domains of man with one another. In a tradition from the Prophet (s), which is narrated in mystical sources, we read: "Put aside that which causes self-deception, because honesty is settlement [inward settlement, as in the unity and consistency of the soul] and dishonesty is deception [as in the dualism of the existential domains]."(Majlisi 1403 AH, 2:359; Ibn Abi Jumhur 1403 AH, 3:330) The terminology used in the definition of honesty in the abovementioned narration is the word "*tuma'nina,*" which indicates tranquility, peace, settlement, and unity, and is the opposite of deception. In Persian, honesty is referred to as *rasti* (uprightness) and in Arabic as *istiqama* (perseverance) and *istiwa'* (equality) (Ibn Qayyim 1425 AH, 496). All three words—equality, perseverance, and uprightness—indicate unity, consistency, and continuity of the faculties and levels of man.

Based on the above definition, honesty holds a position not only in speech but in all existential domains of man. This is why the mystics, in counting the instances of honesty, have repeatedly mentioned the honesty of speech, honesty of intention, honesty of heart, and honesty of actions (see, e.g., Muhasibi 1986, 254; Razi 1422 AH, 154). The honesty of speech is the correspondence between a person's statement and intention and between the words of a promiser and his action, and the honesty of action is one's serious effort to attain the object of intention.

This analysis and its conclusions in the works of the mystics is in accordance with the verses of the Qur'an, which emphasize on the necessity of accompanying and following those who are honest, God being with those who are honest, and the honest benefitting from their honesty in the Hereafter. Most of the commentators and scholars have defined honesty in these verses in a more profound way than the common meaning so that it may accord with the qualities and predications ascribed to it in these verses.

However, the mystics have not stopped at this analysis of honesty; they have tried to explain why honesty is a virtue in the abovementioned meaning and whether a more fundamental quality can be found that is the root of the virtuous nature of honesty. In order to answer these questions, the mystics refer to the consistency and unity of the internal and the external. The internal refers to the existence of man with all his domains, and the external refers to the existence of the world or existence in the absolute meaning of the word. Whatever is in man has roots in existence; man's existence is essentially a level or domain of existence. Thus, the coordination of the faculties and domains of man in a wider scope is the unity and coordination of existence. The root of all virtues is existence itself, and it is existence that manifests itself as unified and coordinated in its different and various levels and domains, and not as contradictory, antithetical, or factious. Man's being, which is a part of existence, also possesses virtue and worth in accordance with existence. Therefore, in the end, apart from the inner coordination, the existential domains of man must conform and be unified with all of existence so that this inner conformity can be referred to as the conformity of the existential domains in a wider horizon and so that it may have value (see Bakri 1421 AH, 179, 181; K. Ansari 1417 AH, 74; Razi 1422 AH, 154; Tilimsani 1371 Sh, 1:245; Kashani 1385 Sh, 379, 380). Explaining honesty as the mirror of reality and truth or the criterion for truth falls in the framework of the abovementioned meaning.

2. Honesty, the Foundational Virtue of Islamic Mystical Ethics

In mystical sources and texts, it has been stated that all ethical virtues and spiritual stages are in a way dependent on honesty, and it is with honesty that other virtues and stages are attained. Najm al-Din al-Razi states, "Honesty is the axis of all stages, and it is not possible to reach the final rank except through honesty" (Razi al-Asadi 1425 AH, 143). According to the mystics, in the final mystical rank, all the ethical virtues are present in the mystic's existence. Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya also regards honesty as the source of all mystical stages and ranks (Ibn Qayyim 1425 AH, 495). In mystical sources, it has been narrated from the Prophet (s): "Honesty guides towards *birr*" (Z. Ansari 1428 AH, 3:254). The word "*birr*" in Arabic refers to all types of goodness and virtue, and therefore the abovementioned hadith indicates the guidance of honesty towards all goodness and positive ethical qualities. In regard to this hadith, al-Muhasibi states that "honesty is the origin of all good (*birr*)" (Muhasibi 1986, 255). With the abovementioned examples and other instances that will be mentioned, it becomes clear that honesty must be considered a *foundational virtue* in mystical viewpoint. By "foundational virtue," we mean a virtue which a group of virtues or positive moral characteristics, in a way, depend on, are conditioned to, or take root in. Considering this definition and by studying mystical texts, we find that honesty is the most foundational moral virtue and is also counted as a foundational virtue in relation to other foundational virtues.

In the following discussion, it will become clear that the profound meaning of honesty makes it foundational in six different senses: (1) derivation, (2) pre-requisite, (3) overlapping with another virtue, (4) absolute companion, (5) companion of perfection, and (6) standard. We will name every virtue or action/characteristic of moral foundation as B (basis), moral agent as A, every moral action/characteristic as M, and every resulting moral action/characteristic that is somehow a

consequence of the ethical action/characteristic under discussion as affective action/characteristic F. We will also show the foundational nature of a moral action/characteristic for one or more affective ethical actions/characteristics with B(f). We will also show foundational in the six abovementioned meanings in the following way: (1) DB (derivation), (2) PB (prerequisite), (3) OB (overlapping), (4) CB (absolute companion), (5) IB (companion of perfection), and (6) SB (standard). In the same way, Ax will show the attribution of the moral agent to a moral action/characteristic like X.

2.1. Derivation

Foundational in the sense of derivation means that one or multiple moral actions/characteristics (A) are derived from one or multiple other moral actions/characteristics (M) in a way that M is an external and sufficient cause for A. Therefore, a foundational moral action/characteristic in this meaning becomes a cause for the existence of other characteristics/actions, and one can consider the attribution of the moral agent (S) to it in order to result in his/her attribution to another action/characteristic or other actions/characteristics. In this frame, this meaning of foundational can be defined as follows: M is foundational for F in the sense of derivation (DB) if and only if the attribution of A to M (Am) is a sufficient cause for the attribution of A to F (Af).[1]

2.2. Prerequisite

Foundational in the sense of prerequisite is that one or more moral actions/qualities (F) depend on a moral action/quality (M) in such a way that M is a necessary condition for F. Therefore, foundation in this meaning is an incomplete cause for the existence of other actions/qualities and not necessarily a sufficient cause. Therefore, the attribution of the moral agent (A) in this meaning of foundational must

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1. See, for instance, Kharraz (1421 AH, 12); Muhasibi (1428 AH, 76; 1986, 255); Razi al-Asadi (1425 AH, 143); Kashani (n.d., 344-45); and Ibn Qayyim (1425 AH, 495).

be considered as the necessary condition for his attribution to other moral actions/qualities. Thus, foundational in this sense can be defined as follows: M is foundational for F in the sense of prerequisite (PB) if and only if the attribution of A to M (Am) is a necessary condition for the attribution of A to F (Af).[1]

2.3. Overlapping

Overlapping is foundational in the sense that the realization of one or multiple moral actions/qualities (F) coincide with the realization of another moral action/characteristic (M) in a manner that the realization of M can replace the realization of F; that is, if F did not realize, a moral defect would not occur. Thus, having an overlapping foundational action/quality, the moral agent would not need to attain one or multiple other moral actions/characteristics. Thus, foundational in the sense of overlapping can be defined as follows: M is foundational for F in the sense of overlapping (OB) if and only if the attribution of A to M (Am) is equivalent to the attribution of A to A (Af).[2]

2.4. Absolute Companion

Foundational in the sense of absolute companion is the effect of a moral quality/action (M) in the nature and essence of one or more moral actions/qualities (F) in a manner that without M, the essence of F is not formed or is incomplete. Thus, the absence of a foundational action/quality in this sense places the action/quality of a moral agent in a state of non-virtue or negative worth. Considering the abovementioned points, foundational in the meaning of absolute companion can be defined as follows: M is foundational for F in the

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1. See, for instance, K. Ansari (1417 AH, 73, 165); Kharkushi (1427 AH, 169-70); Ghazali (1416 AH, 153); and Razi al-Asadi (1425 AH, 143).
2. See, for instance, Kharkushi (1427 AH, 166-65) and Sulami (1369 Sh, 1:491).

meaning of absolute companion (CB) if and only if, with the attribution of A to M (Am), M is effective in the attribution of A to F (Af) as a formative part.[1]

2.5. Companion of Perfection

This meaning of foundational refers to the impact of a moral action/characteristic (M) on one or multiple moral actions/qualities (F) such that, without M, F would not be perfect. Thus, the absence of the foundational action/quality in this sense places the action/quality of a moral agent in a state of non-perfection or decreases its value. Thus, this meaning of foundational can be defined in the following way: M is foundational for F in the sense of companion of perfection if and only if with the attribution of A to M (Am), M is influential in the attribution of A to F (Af) as a formative component of F in its state of perfection.

2.6. Standard

Foundational is used in the sense of standard when one or multiple moral actions/qualities (F) or their values are measured by another moral action/quality (M) in a way that M is a standard for F or its worth. The attribution of the moral agent (A) in this meaning of foundational is considered a standard for his attribution to other moral action/quality or moral actions/qualities. Thus, this concept of foundational can be defined as follows: M is foundational for F in the meaning of standard (SB) if and only if the attribution of A to M (Am) is the standard for the measurement of the attribution of A to F (Af).

3. The Stages of Honesty

The above discussions showed that honesty is not a simple virtue; rather, its scope is so vast that it is considered a necessary condition for

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1. See, for instance, Imam al-Sadiq (1400 AH, 34); Muhasibi (1420 AH, 371; 1986, 344, 352; 1428 AH, 65); Kharraz (1421 AH, 8, 14, 19, 28, 35, 42, 47, 53, 56, 59); Qushayri (1422 AH, 175); Ghazali (n.d., 4:107); Siraj al-Tusi (1914, 217); Sulami (1369 Sh, 1:491); and Tusi (1373, 17).

all other virtues. It also manifests itself in various ways and from different aspects, and, as a result, different names have been ascribed to it. In other words, honesty has a gradational reality, and each of its levels has its own properties.

In order to show this gradation in honesty, the mystics have sometimes used the expressions "levels of honesty" and "types and categories of honesty." One of the common divisions of honesty is its division into honesty in speech, actions, and states (Razi al-Asadi 1425 AH, 143; Razi 1422 AH, 154). Sometimes, honesty in intention has also been included next to honesty in speech and actions (Tusi 1373 Sh, 17; Qasani 1426b AH, 2:459; 1380 Sh, 493). That which appears to be the most accurate expression is suggested by Khʷaja ʿAbd Allah Ansari, who writes in his pivotal *Manazil al-saʾirin* on the gradational nature of honesty and confirms that each of its stages has different characteristics. He first mentions a common genus between all types of honesty and then discusses the distinguishing differentia of each type. Regarding the common genus between all types of honesty, he states, "Honesty is the name for the reality of something in terms of attainment and existence" (Qasani 1385 Sh). With this explanation, the correspondence between attainment and existence in the existential plane, according to the mystics, is defined as the fundamental reality of honesty.

3.1. The First Level of Honesty: Godly Intention/Intending God

This level of honesty is about honesty in intention; it refers to the dedication of all intentions to God. To the extent that a mystic allows anything or anyone other than God to be present in his intention, he distances himself from honesty. Khʷaja introduces duplicity as the opposite of honesty at this level: "Honesty is the intention and seeking of something without duplicity in any form" (Tilimsani 1371 Sh, 1:242).

Honesty at this level is foundational in the second meaning of foundational virtue, because in Islamic mysticism, honesty in intention is the condition for the realization of every virtue. No action or quality would have a virtuous aspect without attention to the presence of God and working only for him. In reality, at this level, the mystic possesses honesty of "singular direction" (Tilimsani 1371 Sh, 1:380) and is only concerned with God. The shared genus (i.e., the correspondence between attainment and existence) in this stage of honesty is the fact that God, who is present in the mystic's intention, is the one who truly exists.

Among the characteristics of honesty at this level is that the one who possesses it does not see his own action at all, because the action is something other than God, and attention to anything other than God causes duplicity, which is against honesty. Among the signs of the realization of this level of honesty are ceaseless efforts of the mystic and his strong inclination to the spiritual journey toward God.

3.2. The Second Stage of Honesty: Attaining Life with God

According to Khʷaja ʿAbd Allah Ansari, at this level, one does not desire life except for God and does not witness in his soul except deficiency (Tilimsani 1371 Sh, 1:243). In his commentary on this statement, Tilimsani says, "And this is the quality of the honest, which leaves no share for his soul" (Tilimsani 1371 Sh, 1:243).

In the second stage of honesty, while preserving the common genus of correspondence between attainment and existence, the reality appears for the mystic as it is. The reality is that all perfections exclusively belong to God, and the mystic has no independence before God. Therefore, attaining life with God is manifested for him, and this is the most truthful reality that exists in the world, which also allocates to itself the content of personal unity in Theoretical mysticism.

Honesty is foundational in this stage in the sense of absolute companion, or rather companion of perfection, because this quality accompanies all the virtues of a mystic; all perfections belong to God and the perfections of a mystic are nothing but the shadows of the perfections of God. The more this honesty is realized by way of the certainty of truth (*haqq al-yaqin*), the more the other virtues attain their perfection.

3.3. The Third Stage: Attaining Perfection with God

In this stage of honesty, after attaining life with God, the mystic must know that his responsibility in this world is attaining similarity to such an absolute perfection; he is honest to the extent that he has achieved similar perfections and dishonest to the extent that he has distanced himself from those perfections. While preserving the common genus—i.e., correspondence between attainment and existence—in order to explain this level more precisely, one can benefit from the linguistic meaning of honesty suggested by Khʷaja ʿAbd Allah: "Honesty is all the power/potential of something" (Tilimsani 1371 Sh, 1:241).

After traversing the two previous stages of honesty, the mystic achieves the constant presence of God in intention and continuous life with Him in action and existence. Now he must abide by the necessities of attaining this life and realize within himself the perfections for which he has the potential. This is the most complete correspondence between attainment and existence and the most important meaning of foundational.

4. Self-Deception and Honesty

Taking into consideration the foundational meanings of honesty and also the nature and stages of honesty, one can conclude that the foundation of every virtue is honesty and that virtue itself can be considered an effect of honesty. Therefore, if a virtue is realized lacking

the characteristics of honesty, it is in fact a branch without root and a type of deception (Muhasibi 1428 AH, 76). This is the same notion that has been addressed many times in the Qur'an:

> Say, "Shall we inform you about the biggest losers in regard to works? Those, whose endeavor goes awry in the life of the world, while they suppose they are doing good." They are the ones who deny the signs of their Lord and the encounter with Him. So their works have failed. On the Day of Resurrection, We will not set for them any weight. (Qur'an 103-5)

The faculty of imagination, at times, counts an attribute related to a virtue as a real virtue, and this leads to self-deception (Muhasibi 1428 AH, 89). The mystics consider dishonesty the first sign of self-deception: "The first sign of duplicity is one's satisfaction with being ignorant of the honesty in intention in his actions (Kharkushi 1427 AH, 168). It is clear that the abovementioned divisions of honesty also apply to self-deception: parallel to honesty in intention, actions, and states is self-deception in intention, actions, and states. In other words, self-deception is realized to the extent of deficiency in honesty. It is for this reason that one of the ways for abstaining from self-deception is practicing honesty in action and even love for honesty. If one is concerned about the praise and vilification of others rather than being concerned about the pleasure of God, who is the criterion of honesty, he is afflicted accordingly with self-deception (Muhasibi 1428 AH, 90).

This relation between honesty and self-deception completely clarifies the foundational meaning of honesty as a standard, because the existence of honesty negates self-deception in all other virtues, and its absence proves the presence of self-deception. Therefore, sometimes honesty is referred to as a state that draws the soul towards temperance (Bakri 1421 AH, 32).

5. Conclusion

1. Honesty (*sidq*) in mystical ethics refers to the conformity of the internal and external aspects of man and, more profoundly, the conformity and harmony between man and existence (reality).

2. The most important moral characteristic of honesty in Islamic mysticism is its being foundational in relation to all other virtues.

3. The foundational character of honesty in mystical texts can be explained in six types or meanings: (1) derivation, (2) prerequisite, (3) overlapping, (4) absolute companion, (5) companion of perfection, (6) standard.

4. Considering the foundational place of honesty, different levels and stages have been counted for honesty in mystical ethics.

5. In mysticism, self-deception in ethics has a direct connection to dishonesty, and honesty eliminates self-deception.

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