**PHILOSOPHICAL FRAMEWORK OF DIGITAL ETHICS FROM AN ISLAMIC PERSPECTIVE**

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**Abstract**

A wide range of scholarly perspectives on digital ethics from various cultural and religious traditions are currently present in the literature. However, despite the growing significance of issues related to digital information communication technologies, the internet, and social media among the Muslim community, research into the issues of philosophy of information and information ethics from an Islamic perspective is still limited, especially a deeper philosophical and conceptual level. Consequently, this paper aims to pave the path for philosophical discussion on digital ethics from an Islamic perspective. In doing so, it highlights a brief history of Islamic ethics and the diverse range of ethical theories found within the Islamic tradition. This paper then goes on to uncover and outline instances of modern Islamic and digital themes that obscure underlying philosophical and theological difficulties. Finally, this paper also illustrates several places where Islamic perspectives may be viewed to converge or differ from other lines of research on digital ethics. The results of the study imply that by developing Islamic viewpoints on digital ethics, consideration can be given to some potential areas of overlap and disagreement between the onto-centric framework for information ethics provided by the philosophy of information and the theocentric Islamic worldview.

**Keywords**: Information Communication Technology, Digital Ethics, Philosophy of Information, Information Ethics, Islamic Philosophical Framework

1. **Introduction**

A wide range of scholarly perspectives on digital ethics from diverse cultural and theological traditions are now present in the literature on information ethics (IE), philosophy of information (PI), and related topics (Hongladarom, 2018). However, there has been much less scholarly research into the issues from Muslim perspectives at deeper philosophical and conceptual levels, especially that which engages directly with IE and PI, despite the growing significance of issues related to digital information communication technologies, the internet, and social media among the Muslim community at large in general forums of Muslim discourse. Given the wide range of occurrences and phenomena that directly relate to Muslim cultural and religious practices, this is especially striking. For instance, Öhman et al. (2019) found the phenomena of Islamic prayer bots, which denotes a kind of major hybrid human-machine activity on social media platforms. Announcing an artificial intelligence (AI) fatwa service in Dubai also raises some concerns about the direction of religious scholarship (Masudi, 2019).

Additionally, Muslim civilizations have been the focus of various AI developments. For instance, Saudi Arabia declared the Sophia robot the first "robotic citizen" to highlight its technological investments and industries (Bsheer, 2020). The creator of the Sophia robot, Ben Goertzel, is a member of an organization called the "Order of Cosmic Engineers," which raises the intriguing possibility that the robot, by taking on the persona of a modern transhumanist idol, has religious significance. It also makes it more strange that the Saudi system, whose legitimacy is derived from the notion that it was founded on a particular interpretation of Islamic monotheism, would encourage the robot (Pagallo, 2018; Parviainen & Coeckelbergh, 2021).

More broadly, it appears that the Muslim world as a whole has embraced digital transformation, as evidenced by the huge investments made by the Gulf States in smart city initiatives and other digital infrastructure technologies (Chikhale & Gohad, 2018). However, there has not been much in the way of accompanying ethical discourse on these developments that are firmly grounded in an Islamic perspective. Other Muslim nations have shown caution. For example, although it is unclear how much of this was motivated by explicitly Islamic principles, Morocco was among the first country to ban the use of facial recognition technology (Bensalah, 2021).

Thus, this article aims to pave the path for philosophical discussion of digital ethics from a Muslim perspective. Since digital ethics have underpinning philosophical problems that need to be addressed by Islamic scholarship, this article identifies and outlines the issues. It also points out areas where Islamic perspectives may be seen to diverge or converge with other strands of scholarship on intercultural digital ethics. Instead of attempting to give a comprehensive framework for Islamic digital ethics, this paper attempts a preliminary interaction with diverse strands of PI and IE.

1. **Islam and Digital Ethics**

Despite the wide spectrum of developing research, an Islamic framework for digital ethics that takes into account the unique requirements of digital technology has not yet been created (Lukens-Bull & Woodward, 2021). Two papers by Abdallah (2008; 2010) are among the few works that have sought to tackle IE from an Islamic perspective. Abdallah (2008) emphasizes the importance of information ethics and suggests Islamic teachings as a possible framework for resolving information ethics-related concerns (Abdallah, 2010). Both volumes give a brief overview of Islamic beliefs and knowledge sources that serve as the cornerstones of the body of Islamic teachings and regulations known as the Sharia as well as how these sources are used to inform an ethical or legal decision based on the Qur'an, Hadith, scholarly consensus (*ijma*’), and analogical reasoning (*qiyas*).

Based on these sources, Muslim scholars have attempted to abstract more general Islamic law concepts, giving rise to the two legal genres of legal maxims (*al-Qawa'id al-Fiqhiyyah*) and legal objectives (*Maqasid al-Shari’ah*) (Kamali, 2006). The former seeks to encapsulate the fundamental ideas that guide Islamic legal issues, whereas the latter seeks to defend these fundamental ideas and explore the wisdom that underlies them (Kızılkaya, 2021). However, the naive application of these genres of Islamic legal literature can result in temporary solutions that fail to address deeper issues. Both legal maxims and the objectives may be useful starting points for guiding new issues and may be used as a basic framework for technology developers.

Islamic scholars in the early 12th century recognized five goals of the Sharia for promoting social harmony and defending the common good (*Maqasid al-Shari’ah*). Protection of religion, life, lineage, wealth, and the intellect are among these five goals (Garden, 2014). As a result, when faced with novel technologies that raise questions for which there are no established legal precedents, Islamic legal experts may use legal principles or the objectives as part of their *ijtihad* (exertion of juristic effort in the examination, evaluation, and judgement of real-life issues) to offer guidance regarding the general permissibility or permissible forms of the technology (Galadari, 2022).

Sardar’s (1988) essay on "Information and the Muslim World" merits special notice since it is an early attempt to create a plan for information in the Muslim world in the twenty-first century. He investigated the role of information in Muslim cultures from the perspective of the universal conceptions of Islamic teachings three decades ago, and it served as an examination of the role of information in Muslim societies. According to Sardar, Muslim nations could neither ignore nor naively and totally embrace innovations in information technologies. What would be at stake for Muslim peoples was "a complete restructuring of the world according to the ideology of those who manage and control information technologies," (p. 42) as the information revolution applied to the processes of living and thinking as much as it did to the creation of new devices.

The main goal of the previous research was to draw attention to the significant problems that the then-hailed "information revolution" was posing for the Muslim world, problems that could endanger the very "physical and cultural survival" of Muslim communities because "the information age may well turn out to be a new age of colonialism." The primary conundrum Sardar raised was whether Muslim countries should embrace "a compulsive, totalitarian technology" at the risk of creating a new type of dependency or, on the other hand, whether they should ignore information technology developments "and leave their destiny in Western hands." He believed, "In the next few decades, information technologies will become the basic tools of manipulation and control" (Sardar, 1988, p. 3).

Furthermore, Sardar (1988) argued that it is important to comprehend the nature of information and raised objections to the idea that data or information is value-free because its ultimate goal is the promotion of the worldview, value system, and culture within which it is generated. He proposed seven Islamic concepts that have an impact on the creation and dissemination of information. They include unity of God (*tawhīd*), knowledge (‘*ilm*), wisdom (*hikmah*), justice (‘*adl*), consensus (*ijma’*), consultation (*shura*), public interest (*istishlah*), and the global Muslim community (*ummah*). Hence, it necessitates that Muslim societies be in a position of independence from foreign influences.

Based on the above elaboration, because God alone judges what is right or bad in the Islamic ethical framework, which is supported by the revealed sources, Islam has a theocentric worldview. For Muslims, the epistemic basis of the normative moral theory—where good and evil are only defined by divine mandates and prohibitions—is ethical or theological voluntarism. No good or evil (*husn* or *qubh*) exists apart from what was commanded and what was prohibited. According to Al-Attar, "divine orders and prohibitions comprise not only the epistemic but also the ontological basis of morality" (2017, p. 30).

The word for ethics in Arabic is typically *akhlaq* (plural: *khuluq*), which has the same root as *khalq*. It refers to a person's physical constitution. This creates a link between an individual's inner nature and their external appearance. *Fiqh* and ‘*Ilm Al-Akhlaq* are the two religious disciplines that address the external and internal facets of behavior ethics. *Fiqh* is concerned with human behavior. In the moral evaluation of activities, *Fiqh* decisions divide them into five categories: obligatory, forbidden, advised, permissible, or repugnant (i.e., neutral). Decision-making revelatory texts typically contain obligations and prohibitions, while recommended actions are also defined by revelation and understood from prophetic experience.

*‘Ilm al-Akhlaq* is referred to as "the science of character" and is also known as "the science of the states of the heart" (*ilm ahwal al-qalb*) and "the science of conduct" (*ilm al- mu’amalah*). Its goal is to study the inner qualities (i.e., dispositions or virtues) that underlie the full spectrum of human actions that manifest through the senses or the heart. Based on this science, Islam is more concerned with the quality of worshipful action and intention than the quantity of action, as stated in Qur'an:

*˹He is the One˺ Who created death and life in order to test which of you is best in deeds. And He is the Almighty, All-Forgiving* (Al-Mulk, 67: 2).

Hence, individuals may render their actions with higher degrees of goodness and perfection (*ihsan*). The scope of these lessons also includes overcoming oneself and ingraining moral principles that go above and beyond the official legal obligations. Muslim ethical literature spans an incredibly wide range. According to Hashas (2018), Islamic ethical theories address ontological questions about the nature of ethical values and concepts, like the good and the just, as well as epistemological questions about how we can know how these concepts apply to specific situations, such as whether reason or revelation guides us to such knowledge.

1. **The Waves of Digital Ethics**

There are four rounds of study on digital religion. The rise of digital religion is referred to be a distinct phenomenon in the first wave. The second wave saw the beginning of the conceptualization of digital religion from historical and social angles. Theoretical focus on the linkages between online and offline modalities of religion intensified throughout the third wave. The fourth wave considers critical methodologies and theory to address the existential, ethical, and political dimensions of digital religion (Campbell & Evolvi, 2020). Most of the existing research on internet-based Islam and digital religion has focused on anthropological, sociological, and political themes, which tends to ignore the inherent character of the digital. Hence, we must first address issues in digital religion and ethics from a philosophical perspective and ascertain where and how to situate issues of digital ethics within the Islamic tradition to articulate an Islamic viewpoint on digital ethics.

More generally, to avoid the risks and the severe disruption brought by digital technologies, not just to the culture and traditions in Muslim societies but the cultural health of all people, it is necessary to understand the new affordances in our ability to act in the world that has been enabled by the digital (Nagy & Neff, 2015), as well as the constraints in the control and modulation of information it imposes as a political technology (Galloway, 2004). The objectives (*maqasid*) approach, which has gained popularity in contemporary literature, is one approach to ethical dilemmas originating from science and technology. Whether such a strategy is appropriate for tackling problems with digital ethics and the on-life is the matter at hand. As Raquib points out, sound *ijtihad* requires an awareness of the technical context to avoid applying decisions that are intended for other eras, locations, situations, and circumstances, including ontological, epistemological, and ethical circumstances (Raquib, 2012).

The use of the *maqasid* approach may be relatively simple in some contexts, such as in environmental concerns relating to digital infrastructure given the impact that digital infrastructure has on the environment, including the full lifecycle of digital technologies, like resource extraction, material processing, device fabrication, product development, marketing, and efficiency in use. Similar methods could be used to control ethically dubious behaviors like dumping, washing, purchasing, lobbying, and shirking (Floridi, 2021). The Islamic prayer bot scenario offers a great starting point for addressing several intriguing issues regarding the migration of religious practices to digital settings and the new human condition of the digital on-life. The meaning of computational worship in the context of its counterpart in computational propaganda, the development of personal identity online (PIO), the notion of digital selves, the existence of digital records of deeds, the concept of the digital "afterlife," and ontological questions about the nature of artificial agency that arise from autonomous agents acting in the real world are just a few of the issues raised (Öhman et al. 2019; Chaudhary, 2019).

Therefore, it is important to think about whether Islam and the digital are fundamentally at odds with one another or whether the digital transition as it is happening today is compatible with Islamic teachings. That is, whether the digital needs to be re-imagined in line with Islamic teachings and their larger vision for social justice and the flourishing of humanity, or whether Islamic ethical teachings need to be re-expressed to account for the digital as the new backdrop for life. As a result, based on Islamic teachings, the Muslim world has long been home to a great array of ethnic and cultural varieties. Allah SWT mentioned in the Qur’an:

*O humanity! Indeed, We created you from a male and a female, and made you into peoples and tribes so that you may ˹get to˺ know one another. Surely the most noble of you in the sight of Allah is the most righteous among you. Allah is truly All-Knowing, All-Aware* (Q.S. Al-Hujurat, 49: 13)

*And one of His signs is the creation of the heavens and the earth, and the diversity of your languages and colours. Surely in this are signs for those of ˹sound˺ knowledge* (Q.S. Ar-Rum, 30: 22)

The Islamic philosophical and metaphysical tradition and approaches to PI and IE have a lot of potentials to engage in fruitful dialogue, but there may also be unresolvable tensions due to the nature of digital information as we currently understand it and the design of the digital technologies we are now required to use. ICTs, for instance, carry the possibility of new forms of colonialism. These worries have now fully materialized in the imperialistic nature of digital platforms and ecosystems, where businesses and governments force themselves as third parties in every contact.

Ultimately, Islamic teachings focus on developing each person as a moral being to actualize the condition of being God's stewards (*khalifah*) on earth by addressing both the external and internal facets of the human situation. Their purpose is to work internally through "deliberate self-conscious choices of behavior and belief the autonomous subject exercises upon his or her body and soul," as opposed to being an externally imposed method of training (Hallaq 2018, 75). Therefore, it might be claimed that the Islamic tradition offers the most historically pervasive, adaptable, and comprehensive technology of the self because it is based on moral accountability rather than financial gain.

1. **Conclusion**

This article has highlighted important topics on digital ethics, specifically philosophy of information (PI) and information ethics (IE) from an Islamic perspective. A broad philosophical framework that takes into consideration the nature, requirements, and affordances of modern digital technologies has yet to be formed, even though recent literature on Islam and the digital has covered a wide range of issues and themes. This article has given some background on Islamic ethics, including information on its theocentric orientation and some ethical theories that may be used to inform Islamic perspectives on digital ethics. This has allowed readers to consider some potential areas of agreement and disagreement between the theo-centricity of Islam and the philosophy of information, which provides an onto-centric framework for information ethics.

It is argued that aspects of Islamic universal teachings serve as a super-cultural system that has historically supported the development of local culture in relation to the environment, as opposed to the digital, which acts as a system that establishes control over ever-larger portions of reality and hastens the process of forming local culture in place of a global monoculture. These examples were highlighted in the article. In terms of ourselves, the article emphasized how, in contrast to how the digital is being used to instigate actions and form habits to make the individual a servant to the interests of capital and ideology, Islamic teachings aim to bring the harmony that enhances the virtues and the moral constitution of the individual by gaining mastery over the self.

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