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The Moral Function of Revelation in an Age of Reason

Modern believers often encounter scriptural passages that seem to be in tension with their independent moral judgments. The possibility of a clash between revelation and independent moral reasoning is vividly illustrated in Qur'anic stories such as Abraham's sacrifice and the encounter between Moses and Khidr.

This paper consists of two parts. In the *first part*, I argue that when revelation conflicts with our independent moral judgments, it is rational to rely on the latter. My argument is based on the idea that a conscientious believer must *minimize the wrongness of their actions* when faced with such a clash. Specifically, if a believer recognizes that complying with revelation would be seriously wrong, should revelation turn out to be mistaken—but does not know to what extent disobedience would be wrong if revelation proves true—then the principle of minimizing wrongdoing, I argue, would direct them to act in accordance with their independent moral judgments.

However, this conclusion raises an old and pressing concern, which I address in the *second part* of the paper. The worry is that if we should always rely on our independent moral judgments, revelation would become morally *redundant*. This concern has been addressed in numerous Islamic classic books of theology. For instance, al-Ghazālī refers to it as the *Brahima objection* to prophecy, formulating it as follows: “If a prophet is sent to relate something that agrees with the intellect, then it is dispensable for the intellect. In this case, the sending of the prophet is frivolous. If he is sent to relate something that does not agree with the intellect, then it would be impossible to believe and accept it.”

This concern is particularly pressing for my account because, like the first horn of the dilemma, I argue that we must always rely on our independent moral judgments. In response, I contend that revelation not only provides motivational assistance but can also serve as a *religious extension of morality*—meaning that revelation can produce genuinely new reasons for believers.

These reasons align with a principle akin to Raz’s “dependence thesis”, which holds that new reasons generated by revelation should be based on reasons that independently apply to believers. In particular, revelation can generate two types of new reasons: *underdetermination-solving reasons* and *relationship-based reasons*. The former helps believers address *coordination*, *arbitrariness*, and *under-specification* problems in spiritual domains. The latter arises from the *special relationships* we have; since we already have reasons to comply with the wishes of those with whom we share significant relationships, revelation can assist believers in fulfilling those reasons by making God’s wishes known to them.

However, I argue that the religious extension of morality must not conflict with our independent moral judgements. Religious morality should, therefore, *preserve* its core, which is the common-sense morality discovered by reason alone.



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Amir Saemi holds a PhD in Philosophy from the University of California, Santa Barbara, specializing in moral philosophy, philosophy of religion, and Islamic philosophy. His research has been published in leading philosophy journals, including *Ethics*, *Philosophical Quarterly*, *Analysis*, *Philosophy*, *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, etc. His latest book, *Morality and Revelation in Islamic Thought and Beyond: A New Problem of Evil* (Oxford University Press, 2024), examines a new problem of evil raised by the tension between Scripture and morality. He has been an Associate Professor of Philosophy at the Institute for Research in Fundamental Sciences (IPM) and an adjunct professor of philosophy at Rutgers University, Rowan University, The College of New Jersey, and Temple University.