

## Prophetic Ethics As A Universal Standard: Critique On Nietzsche's Moral Philosophy

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### Abstract

Since the influx of the enlightenment and renaissance ideas, the concept of a sacredness or an intrinsic goodness in humanly activities has been diminishing among the Western society. Utilitarianism or consequentialist perfectionism which values actions based on their outcomes rather than their inherent moral value has become dominant. Nihilism of the modernity and unleashing the self-ego have had a lasting influence on the thoughts of moral philosophers. Nietzsche's concept of morality rejected the objectivity or authenticity of moral values, narrating as a construct of the strong to control the weak or an offshoot character from the latter such as humility.

Thus, ethical standards are seen as fluid as per the societal needs or subjective creations of values. This study will follow a critical method on the concept of *Übermensch* proposed by Nietzsche and the ultra-relative view on morality. Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) emphasized an ethical framework which had concern of human civilization, societal welfare and behaviour of individuals. The research does analyse the prophetic ethics as a universal standard which transcends certain communities or period of time while criticising Nietzsche's reductive approach of morality restricting to certain communities or circumstances. The paper will also criticise his view of putting morality as a personal or subjective one while he upholds the nihilistic world view. The study claims that the prophetic ethical standard is rooted in the absoluteness and divine origin of morality as it can be seen in the matter of justice (*adalah*) and fairness (*Qist*). The Qur'an states "O you who have believed, be persistently standing firm in justice, witnesses for Allah, even if it be against yourselves or parents and relatives" (Quran 4:135).

**Keywords;** *Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), moral absoluteness, Nietzsche, Übermensch, moral relativity.*

### Introduction

Nietzsche has been a role-model for the Modern Western man. This research focuses on Western ethics and its shift into decadence by the in-

fluence of Nihilist philosophers like Nietzsche and Kant. It also problematizes the moral autonomy in light of critique rooting in Prophetic ethics. Islam proposed the cohesion and communal responsibility, rejecting the notion of master-morality proposed by Nietzsche. Prophetic life and ethics deserve deeper exploration more in criticising these philosophers. The study focuses the rooted-revivalist techniques in the critique by exemplifying scholars like Taha Abdurrahman.

### **Conceptualizing Western Ethics**

The Enlightenment marked perhaps the most profound paradigm shift in Western philosophy during which reason and religion parted ways for the establishment of secular ethics. The separation thus made room for anthropocentric ethical models, perhaps most radically culminating in the philosophy of nihilism by Nietzsche. The ethical concept focusing on moral subjectivity and autonomy starring Kant and culminating in Nietzsche, has far-reaching repercussions in the making of modernity. Nietzsche's negation of the existence of objective moral standards came famously in the form of an announcement that "God is dead", opening the door to relativistic morality and freedom of the individual to unleash the plight of modern man.

West has encountered several teachings on ethics starting from ancient Greeks and Christian scholasticism culminating in rationalist ethics of Enlightenment. The researcher will use of the term 'ethics' to name the field of study developed by Socrates and Plato which attempts to provide a rational response to the question of how humans ought to live. Because rather than a normative one, 'ethics' serves as a code of conduct and a standard for moral setting in society. Although many scholars sought to implement the 'golden mean' or perfect moderation philosophy of Aristotle, the society was still inflicted by the ideas of the contenders of the philosophy of 'do no harm' at their ambiguous subjective morality. In the classical period, followers of Plato advocated for the existence of universal ethical standards. Though Plato maintained a virtue-based eudemonistic conception of ethics, it was not purely subjective but rather tied to the immutable world of forms or eternal truths that could guide human action as an analogy between human affairs and cosmic harmony. The scholarly evidences highlights a similarity between this view of Plato and Thomas Aquinas's Natural Law Theory which held that moral principles could be perceived through reason, as they were conformed to God's eternal law. Thus, the existence of a universal standard for ethics was a long-standing method for associating people with ethical framework while maintaining the religious affiliation. The paper engages in a

critical study of Nietzsche's ethical schema-most significantly his ideas of the \*Übermensch\*, master-slave morality, and perspectivism-before proposing prophetic ethics as a superior and necessary alternative for the contemporary world.

### **Nietzsche and the Enlightenment: The Rise of Moral Autonomy**

The Enlightenment's privileging of reason entailed the renunciation of religiously anchored ethics, since Immanuel Kant making moral autonomy an indispensable condition for ethical conduct as such itself. Through his works, he called for taking responsibility for their ending up own actions, by recommending to people to free themselves from any instructions such as God's commandments.

This rupture laid the foundation for Nietzsche's moral philosophy, with its dislike toward traditional moral prescriptions on the basis of their weakness and life-denial. This point of Argument from Nietzsche was specifically borne out of his disregard towards Christian moral teachings such as turning the next cheek if he is slapped by an evil person. But this was just being isolated to depict Christianity spiritually and ethically superior than other religions. This was also a point misused by many for denying the worldly life and elaborating religion poetically which was later harnessed by Enlightenment rationalists to turn against the very concept of religion. There were abundant methods to highlight the concept of universal love and care for humanity in religiosity other than the call for 'turning the cheek' which was deployed by Chateaubriand in emphasising the perfection of Christianity. Many contenders for Christianity deviated from the essence of religion and ethics to create a Utopian system comprising an ethical version of religion themselves. Contrary to the social concepts of religion, this stimulation of ethical decision by individual conscience facilitated the efforts of seculars to privatize religion. Nietzsche's Übermensch embodies the apotheosis of this secular freedom, shaping a value-creating individual whose grounds are in strength and autonomy, liberated from the clutches of religious morality. However, to many philosophers, Nietzsche's version of autonomy ultimately devolves into moral anarchy.

Alasdair MacIntyre regards this as the symptom of a much more profound failure in Enlightenment ethics, which, in its rejection of divine guidance, left Western thought in a state of moral vacuum. As moral precepts fell to individual will, society fragmented, and shared ethical norms eroded. Tariq Ramadan similarly critiques this "individualization of morality," warning that it leaves societies devoid of collective responsibility

and moral cohesion. By contrast, prophetic ethics helped to establish a context of divine moral guidance in which autonomy is put tandem with responsibility.

The Quran and Hadith provide what is needed to anchor personal autonomy within the service of a greater good. But the scripturalist trend which calls for a free interpretation of Basic code in Islam must not be welcomed. The proposals of this trend will cause dangerous repercussions in the Ummah by giving a false impressions of moral autonomy. For instance, Prophet Muhammad's insistence on mutual consultation and social justice keeps individual freedom from eclipsing communal responsibility altogether. As it is truly said within the Quran itself: Prophetic ethics represent a form of autonomy that elevates the individual's moral development within the boundaries of divine guidance, convincing one of responsibility to oneself and others. (Quran 42:38).

### **Master and Slave Morality: A False Dichotomy**

In the work *On the Genealogy of Morals*, Nietzsche introduces his famous distinction between "master morality" and "slave morality." The former, exemplified in the strong and noble, creates values from, or out of, self-affirmation; the latter, born among the weak and oppressed, propounds a morality of resentment. For Nietzsche, Christianity represents the apotheosis of slave morality, extolling virtues such as humility and pity as a way in which the weak can rationalize their existence.

However, critics like Martha Nussbaum believe that Nietzsche's stark dichotomy is no less trite as it is morally perilous, while Nussbaum adds, "It glorifies dominance and force while deriding compassion and civic duty. She further maintains that if such a philosophy were taken up by the strong then it might easily result in subjugation of weaker elements. Wael Hallaq criticizes this Nietzschean emphasis on power as one that leads to a form of moral solipsism that threatens well-being at the social level. The Prophetic Ethics does not believe in the position whereby morality is divided along an axis of strength and weakness. But the moral framework put forward by Kant and Nietzsche created an unbreakable connection between morality and autonomy. We cannot ignore the assumption that Nietzsche was influenced by evolutionary paradigm which he sought to apply in morality also. By this application, individual can unleash his self and uphold the autonomy as an attribute of individuals themselves to prescribe moral law to themselves. Thus, the master morality proposed by Nietzsche will be rendering God "morally superfluous" and nesting the individual and God in the same "moral community".

Instead, prophetic ethics insist that true strength comes in forms of humility, justice, and compassion—those very areas of human life which Nietzsche associates with weakness. Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) said, “The strong is not the one who overcomes people with his strength but the one who controls himself while in anger”. This ethical paradigm put forward by Islam, offers a model system whereby moral strength emanates from self-control for societal improvement, in contrast to any notion of dominance or selfish affirmation forwarded by Nietzsche.

### **Critique of the Übermensch: Egoism Over Virtue**

Nietzsche’s Übermensch, alternatively “overman,” is held out as an ideal—a person breaking through the clutches of conventional society and creating new values by sheer will. Nietzsche does not believe in any universal morality; instead, he holds that it is a sign of true strength when one has created a personal moral system. This is contrasted with the Islamic ethical system, where divine morality and universal standard for ethics suitable for all, is upheld.

Critics like Leszek Kolakowski points out the ominous consequences of this Nietzschean ideal. Writing in his book *Modernity on Endless Trial*, Kolakowski suggests that Nietzsche’s exaltation of the powers of the individual promotes malignant egoism at the expense of social cohesion. Besides, the celebration of Nietzsche of power as a moral good risks justifying violence and oppression. There were many critics for this concept, one of the pioneers was Bernard Williams who portrayed the major problems of self and the Kantian theories, especially Utilitarianism. He voiced when he says that Nietzsche’s hostility to universal morality favours moral relativism hence leading to ethical anarchy. Prophetic ethics, in contrast, provide the figure of the Prophet Muhammad PBUH as an ideal—a moral paradigm who exemplified virtues that go beyond individual egoism.

While Nietzsche’s Übermensch creates morality to fit his power, the Prophet Muhammad, on the contrary, lived a life of modesty, service, and self-control, promoting values of collective good and justice. Indeed, his life is a real-life example of the belief that greatness does not lie in dominating people but rather in serving humanity. Prophet Muhammad’s rule in Medina, which depicted a model of beautiful co-existence of the people from diverse religious and cultural backgrounds. His valedictory sermon, in which he insisted upon the equality of all individuals without regard to race or status, stands as an eternal moral ideal against the egoistic ends of Nietzsche’s Übermensch.

Some Implications of Nietzsche’s Perspectivism

Nietzsche's perspectivism holds that there are no facts, only interpretations—a belief that lies at the core of his critique of traditional morality, this means that there can be no standards of ethics. In this sense, his thinking leads directly to moral relativism, where the individual becomes the only one who can determine their moral values.

The consequences of such ethical perception run deep. According to Tariq Ramadan, such a perspective undercuts any basis for collective ethics and makes societies everywhere susceptible to Balkanization and strife. Wael Hallaq also asserts that moral relativism suggested by the modern West is a cause of a crisis of ethical thought in which considerations of collective well-being are overlooked by the pursuit of individual autonomy. His thesis is similar to his previous use of the term 'solipsism' which is used to describe a form of autonomy which rejects any knowledge outside of his own mind. The irony is that they call this 'ism' something which reinforces self-awareness for doing good.

### **Separating Ethics from Religion**

Modernity stated that the essence of humanity is rationality. However what the moderns have come to believe, seems to be so vulnerable to serious flaws as it will be submissive to individual instincts and impulses. This emphasis on of reason and intellect was borne from the misconception that the rationality is what distinguishes human beings from the animal. But truth to be told, it is ethics that sets apart human from the animal because the latter does enjoy rational faculty and intelligence albeit inferior to what humans have. Taha Abdurrahman views that attribute of ethics (al-akhlāqiyya) is the one which plays a decisive role in distinguishing humans' quiddity from others. He goes on categorising rationality into two; one is stripped from ethical content and that will be shared by man and animal, second is guided by ethics and that will be unique aspect of humans which makes them what they are.

We can see that modernists led by Nietzsche reject this categorisation and they go on dividing schools of ethics individually, creating chaos and contradictions in the reality. It could be realized that the major problems in the contemporary era have been from the reinforcement of modernity, yet we fall into the concept of modernity in constructing solutions to the problem it has created. By following the Western concept of ethics, we are only reinforcing the problem until we recognise that the proposed solution must be penetrating the innermost dimensions and depths of the human self. They could project a denuded reason and ethics which called for remedies abiding to the modernity's structure itself. Here, Muslims

adopted a worldview which embraced an enhanced rationality which fundamentally proposes that there is no ethical life without religion and no religion without ethics. The rejection of religion as a ground for ethics, is borne from a reductive understanding of 'religion' as mere rules which suggested my men themselves to experience the world due to his failure to perceive the natural causes of things. What Nietzsche and modernity have done to ethics is so far from considerations as it denounced the relation of religion and ethics including the complex historical, psychological, social, logical, epistemological and ontological interconnections. Totally the proposed ethical theories by Kant and Nietzsche paved way for dismissing the conventional order of religion into a secularized version of religious doctrine. This creation of "secular" was made possible by carving out a new social and epistemological truth-space for "non-religion". The reification of "Religion" as an instrument was the result of the social and intellectual struggle of Europeans to free themselves from the monopoly of the overarching assertion exercised from the social, political, intellectual and material institution of the Christian Church.

### **Spirituality without Religion**

The concept of *Übermensch* proposed by Nietzsche, suggested a new world-order where an autonomous system of morality seemed possible. Modern world started believing that the more sophisticated the science gets, it should reduce or eliminate the metaphysical elements from the world. Taha argues that with the more developed science, humanity can get along with secrets and wonders of the world and contemplate God. But the disconnected man from the Western modernity seems to have lost the meaning in life because he is oblivious of the wondrous workings of the world.

As Nietzsche held a concept of superior autonomy and perfectionist ideologies which is devoid of any spirit, Taha's solution becomes relevant. In Taha's vision, materialistic modernity must be necessarily accompanied with spiritual modernity (*ḥadātha rūḥiyya*). We see the modernity is upholding many so-called noble values such as justice, equality, freedom, tolerance, and brotherhood which will surely suffer damage if they are confronted with material interests alone, denuding spirituality. By creating a secular self, Nietzschean modernity succeeded in destructing the notion of ultimate truth and constructing an authenticity with transitory feelings and experiences. Thus, 'Spirituality' was re-created from a series of impulses that abide with individual appetite. We see the current trends by US adults identifying as "spiritual but not religious", and it becomes compulsory for us to realize that the secular encouragement of daily med-

itation and spiritual mindfulness is non-other than the modernity trying to make sense of humanity's natural disposition (fiṭrah). In essence, the spirituality without religion shifted one's servitude from the God to the self.

### **Nietzsche and the making of Nihilism**

Nihilism released into the modern world by Nietzsche first raised its attack on truth-system by devaluating the truth and leading society into post-truth era. Nihilism meant the rejection of all religious and moral principles, rooted in the belief that life is meaningless. Although the 'death of God' was put forward by Nietzsche for a positive civilizational development, it went on unleashing nihilism in modern Europe. People forgot the concept of *Übermensch* and immersed in nihilism because their utopian vision of ethical schools of thought did nothing but helping to raise a totalitarian state. According to Ellul, man was far freer in the past when "Choice was a real possibility for him." By contrast, today, "The human being is no longer in any sense the agent of choice." And, as for tomorrow: "In the future, man will apparently be confined to the role of a recording device." Robbed of choice, he will be acted upon, not active. He will live, Ellul warns, in a totalitarian state run by a velvet-gloved Gestapo.

Applying his vision to technical age, Nietzsche uses the term 'self-hypnosis' to describe people turning into technology in order to zone out. There are many works which centre this concept such as *Nihilism and Technology* by Nolen Gertz. There are many instances in which Nietzsche describes Nihilism as pathological state cause by mental exhaustion. But he does not succeed in providing any solutions non-other than blabbering that this situation can be overcome. This only can be overcome by the genuine exploration of problems such as those clearly stated by Philip Phenix, he numbers out; the sceptical tendency which dominates the domains of science and philosophy, depersonalization of complex societies by industrialization, overabundance of both things and information and rapid rates of change which causes constant feeling of insecurity to modern man. The problems are not limited into certain numbers as it will transcend normal human conceptualizations borne since Enlightenment. An ethical system which seeks to address the moral void left by secularism and Prophetic guidance which provides cohesive vision for individual and collective flourishing, can be the only true solution to nihilism.

### **Prophetic Ethics and Contemporary Society: A Required Moral Guiding Force**

It could be observed that Nietzsche's ethics are relativistic and egoistic while prophetic ethics are universal and transcendent and necessarily originate from the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH). These

ethics confirm virtues like justice, compassion, and humility emanating from the divine will and pertaining universally to all human beings, Regardless of their personal inclination and condition might be.

As Anmerie Schimmel says, prophetic ethics offers a “comprehensive moral compass” that extends across cultural and temporal divides. The Prophet’s emphasis on mercy, charity, and justice stands out as part of a fundamentally holistic view of humanity, wherein the life of one individual touches all others and ultimately is answerable to their collective plight. Contrary to the Nietzschean emphasis on domination and power, prophetic ethics stress moral responsibility toward others and toward the greater good.

Taha Abdurrahman, in his work *The Spirit of Modernity* (2006), presents an ethical framework that is grounded in transcendence and most applicable in an era of moral relativism. With prophetic ethics, he says, there is the moral absoluteness which Nietzsche’s view lacks. And herein lies a Quranic injunction that reminds us, “Stand firm in justice” (Quran 4:135); moral truth is not relative or subjective but real and rooted in divine reality.

## **Conclusion**

Nietzsche’s critique against traditional morality was intellectually provocative, by resulting in fragmentation and chaos in the ethical landscape leaves power, egoism, and relativism as the order of the day. On the contrary, prophetic ethics provide a holistic and universal moral system, rooted in the Divine and related to all people. As societies deal with the consequences of moral relativism and ethical anarchy, a needed, morally absolute alternative can be found in the timeless teachings of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH). The prophetic call for justice, compassion, and humility offers one path toward both individual and communal flourishing.

In this version, I am trying to insert more focused criticisms of Nietzsche’s perspectivism and implications of his concepts, while simultaneously broadening out the way in which prophetic ethics offer a unique and universally enhanced viewpoint. Each paragraph introduces one of the prophetic ethics that functions as a kind of challenge to some specific aspect of Nietzschean or modernist perspective. In this technologically disrupted era, there is lot more to expose regarding the implications and serious repercussions the modernity has cause upon our society. We should uphold the words of Taha; “Early Muslims and all the generations of the centuries considered Prophet Muhammad as the highest embodiment of

ethical exemplarity because he was the earthly locus of God's message to humankind."

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