Ethical Criterion between Intention and Outcome: A Comparative Analytical Study in Light of the Islamic Perspective

RKUD 7304 – MAJOR THEMES OF REVEALED RELIGIONS: JUDAISM, CHRISTIANITY AND ISLAM

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Abstract

This study investigates the ethical criterion for evaluating human actions, focusing on the dichotomy between the internal motive (Intention) and the external effect (Outcome). By employing an analytical comparative methodology, the research critically examines Western deontological (motive-based) and teleological (outcome-based) theories, contrasting them with the Islamic ethical perspective. The study aims to resolve the theoretical tension between these opposing standards. Findings indicate that relying solely on either intention or outcome leads to practical moral deficits. Conversely, the research demonstrates that the Islamic perspective offers an integrative model that establishes a "composite criterion," requiring both the sincerity of the intent (*Niyyah*) and the correctness of the action (*Amal*). The study concludes that this dual-standard approach achieves superior moral justice and realism, recommending its application to contemporary ethical challenges such as bioethics and artificial intelligence.

Keywords: ***Islamic Ethics, Intention (Niyyah), Consequentialism, Deontology, Moral Judgment, Fiqh al-Ma'ālāt.***

Introduction

The ethical evaluation of human action stands as one of the most enduring debates in moral philosophy. At the heart of this debate lies a fundamental tension: should an action be judged by the inner motive (Intention) of the agent, or by the external outcome (Consequence) produced? Historically, moral philosophy has often oscillated between these two poles. Deontological theories prioritize the "Good Will," arguing that moral duty is independent of results, while Teleological theories argue that the moral worth of an action is determined solely by its utility. This dichotomy creates a significant ethical gap: focusing solely on intention may excuse negligence, while focusing solely on outcome may justify unethical means. This research turns to the Islamic ethical perspective to bridge this gap, offering a comparative analysis that seeks an integrative model aligning with both human reality and the requirements of moral justice.

Research Problem

The research problem arises from the inadequacy of adopting a single criterion—either intention or outcome—for moral judgment. This separation leads to practical contradictions in ethical evaluation. Therefore, the central problem this study addresses is: *How can the conflict between motive-based ethics and outcome-based ethics be resolved, and does the Islamic perspective offer a balanced model that integrates both criteria?*

Research Questions

1. What are the philosophical foundations of motive-based and outcome-based ethical theories, and what are their limitations?
2. What is the status of intention (*Niyyah*) in Islamic ethics, and how does it influence moral accountability?
3. To what extent does Islamic ethics consider the validity of the action itself and its consequences (*Ma'ālāt*)?
4. How does the Islamic perspective integrate intention and outcome into a unified moral model compared to Western theories?

Research Objectives

1. To critically analyze Western ethical theories regarding intention and consequence and identify their practical shortcomings.
2. To elucidate the concept of intention in Islamic thought and its central role in moral evaluation.
3. To examine the Islamic standards for valid action and the jurisprudential consideration of outcomes.
4. To construct an integrated Islamic moral model and demonstrate its added value through comparative practical cases.

Research Structure

Based on the aforementioned objectives, the research is organized into four main chapters followed by a conclusion:

Chapter One: The Theoretical Framework for the Criterion of Moral Judgment

Section 1: Moral Judgment Based on Motive (Intent-Based Ethics)

Section 2: Moral Judgment Based on Outcome (Consequence-Based Ethics)

Section 3: The Need for Synthesis

Chapter Two: The Ethics of Intention in the Islamic Perspective

Section 1: Concept of Intention (*Niyyah*) and Its Moral Status

Section 2: The Effect of Intention in Moral Evaluation

Section 3: Limits of Considering Intention

Chapter Three: The Ethics of Action and Outcome in Islam

Section 1: Concept of Action and Moral Responsibility

Section 2: Moral Constraints of the Action (Legality, Non-Harm, Justice)

Section 3: Considering Outcomes (*Ma'ālāt*)

Chapter Four: The Islamic Moral Model (Comparative Study)

Section 1: Balancing Intention and Action (The Integrative Model)

Section 2: Comparative Applications (Practical Cases)

Section 3: The Added Value of the Islamic Perspective

Conclusion

Chapter One: The Theoretical Framework for the Criterion of Moral Judgment

Section 1: Moral Judgment Based on Motive (Intent-Based Ethics)

Definition and Philosophical Basis: "Ethics of motive" refers to the theory which holds that the criterion for judging an action morally is the agent's intention and inner motive, not the action's consequences. This theory elevates **moral intention** as the essence that gives an act its value. It reached its philosophical apex in the ethics of the German philosopher Immanuel Kant (d. 1804). Kant maintained that "nothing can possibly be conceived that could be called good without qualification except a good will."[1]

For Kant, noble moral intentions alone confer value on an act regardless of its outcomes. His duty-based ethics focuses on obedience to the moral law motivated by "good will" and duty, rather than by desire for benefit or fear of harm. According to this approach, the criterion of moral rightness is sincerity of intention and adherence to a universal moral principle (the Categorical Imperative). Morality, in this view, must originate "from inside the person"—from their conscience—rather than from external results that are often subject to chance and factors beyond human control.[2]

Illustrative Example: To clarify this perspective, consider a doctor who performs a surgery on a critically ill patient with the sincere intention of saving his life. He exerts his best professional effort, but the patient dies due to unforeseen biological complications. In intent-based ethics, the doctor is deemed to have fulfilled his moral duty completely. He is judged as "moral" because he meant well and acted out of duty. The tragic result (death) does not make his action immoral. The emphasis here is entirely on the **purity of the agent's intent** and the effort exerted, regardless of success or failure in the practical realm.[3]

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[1] Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. Mary Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 7
[2] Onora O'Neill, *Acting on Principle: An Essay on Kantian Ethics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1975), 45
[3] Barbara Herman, *The Practice of Moral Judgment* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), 23-25

Strengths and Weaknesses: This theory has significant merits. It emphasizes the value of the human conscience and encourages inner honesty. It also preserves the stability of moral values; for example, stealing remains blameworthy even if it accidentally helps someone, because the motive was wrong. However, it faces serious criticism for neglecting consequences. Edmund Burke argued that judging solely on intentions is foolish if it ignores grave harms.[4] The theory struggles with the concept of "Moral Luck," where we intuitively judge a careless driver who kills someone more harshly than a careless driver who hits nothing, even if their intentions were identical. Furthermore, a purely intent-focused approach can lead to a failure of responsibility, where agents justify incompetence or negligence simply by claiming they "meant well."[5]

Section 2: Moral Judgment Based on Outcome (Consequence-Based Ethics)

Definition and Ethical Basis: On the other side of the spectrum lies "Outcome-based ethics," or consequentialism. This theory holds that the criterion for moral evaluation is the **results and effects** an action produces. The foremost goal is typically the general welfare or maximizing good outcomes. Jeremy Bentham (d. 1832) and the Utilitarian school exemplify this approach. Bentham defined moral good as “the greatest happiness of the greatest number of people.”[6]

John Stuart Mill (d. 1873) further refined this, stating: “Actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness; wrong as they tend to produce the reverse of happiness.”[7] In this framework, utility is the measure of right and wrong. Attention is fixed on tangible results rather than hidden motives. If two people perform the same helpful action—one out of love and one out of a desire for fame—a strict consequentialist might judge the actions as equally good because the benefit to society is identical.[8]

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[4] Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (London: J. Dodsley, 1790), 91
[5] Thomas Nagel, "Moral Luck," in *Mortal Questions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 28
[6] Jeremy Bentham, *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1907), 1-2
[7] John Stuart Mill, *Utilitarianism* (London: Parker, Son, and Bourn, 1863), 9-10
[8] Ibid., 12

The Trolley Problem and Practical Application: A famous thought experiment illustrating this is the **Trolley Problem**: an out-of-control train is headed to kill five people. You can pull a lever to divert it to a track where it will kill only one person. Consequence-based ethics dictates that pulling the lever is the morally right choice—even though it actively sacrifices an innocent person—because the net result (saving five lives at the cost of one) is mathematically superior. Here, the outcome justifies the decision.[9] In real-world policy, this logic often supports mandatory measures (like vaccination or taxation) where individual liberties are restricted to secure the greater good of the community.[10]

Critiques: While practical, this theory faces the dangerous dilemma of "the ends justify the means." If maximizing good results is the only rule, then torture, lying, or injustice could theoretically be justified if they produce a net benefit. This conflicts with fundamental human rights and justice.[11] Additionally, predicting the long-term consequences of actions is notoriously difficult. A "good" outcome today might lead to disaster tomorrow, making moral judgment unstable and uncertain.[12]

Section 3: The Need for Synthesis

The analysis above reveals that extreme emphasis on one criterion leads to practical contradictions. Relying only on intent allows "good intentions" to pave the road to hell, while relying only on outcome allows for Machiavellian brutality. Moral reality is composed of **both** inner intentions and external actions. Therefore, a synthesis is needed. The Islamic ethical perspective offers this integrative model, viewing "righteous intention" and "correct action" not as competitors, but as the two necessary wings of moral conduct.[13]

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[9] Philippa Foot, "The Problem of Abortion and the Doctrine of the Double Effect," in *Virtues and Vices and Other Essays in Moral Philosophy* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1978), 19-32

[10] Peter Singer, *Practical Ethics*, 3rd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 60

[11] J.J.C. Smart and Bernard Williams, *Utilitarianism: For and Against* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973), 40

[12] James Lenman, "Consequentialism and Cluelessness," *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 29, no. 4 (2000): 342

[13] Fazlur Rahman, *Major Themes of the Qur'an* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 37

Chapter Two: The Ethics of Intention in the Islamic Perspective

Section 1: Concept of Intention (*Niyyah*)

Intention holds a central place in Islamic ethics, elevating it beyond a mere legal prerequisite to a supreme **moral value**. In Islam, the moral worth of an action is fundamentally tied to the motive. The Prophet Muhammad ﷺ said in the famous *Hadith*: "Verily actions are by intentions, and for every person is what he intended."[14] This foundational statement underscores that the spirit of an act is its underlying purpose.

Scholars define *Niyyah* as "the resolve of the heart to perform an act as a means of drawing near to God." Morally, this means that an action which appears virtuous on the outside (like giving charity) can be rendered worthless or even sinful if the interior motive is corrupt (like showing off). Imam Al-Ghazali emphasized that intention is the "spirit" of the deed, while the physical movement is merely the "body." Without a sincere intention, the deed is a lifeless corpse. Thus, Islamic ethics prioritizes the **state of the heart** as the starting point for all moral evaluation.[15]

Section 2: The Effect of Intention in Moral Evaluation

Reward and Punishment: Islam introduces a unique dimension to moral accountability: the consideration of intended good that was not achieved. Tradition relates that God says: "If My servant intends a good deed but does not do it, I write it for him as one complete good deed."[16] This reflects a profound moral justice; a person is rewarded for their sincere will to do good, even if external circumstances prevent them. Conversely, unintentional errors are pardoned. The Prophet ﷺ said: "Verily God has pardoned my community for mistakes, forgetfulness, and what they are compelled to do."[17] This distinguishes clearly between a deliberate moral offense and an accidental occurrence.

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[14] Muhammad al-Bukhari, *Sahih al-Bukhari*, Book 1, Hadith 1
[15] Abu Hamid al-Ghazali, *Ihya' 'Ulum al-Din* [The Revival of the Religious Sciences], vol. 4 (Beirut: Dar al-Ma'rifah, n.d.), 362
[16] *Sahih al-Bukhari*, Book 81, Hadith 99; Muslim ibn al-Hajjaj, *Sahih Muslim*, Book 1, Hadith 237
[17] Ibn Majah, *Sunan Ibn Majah*, Book 10, Hadith 2045

Mistake vs. Diligent Effort (*Ijtihad*): Islamic thought distinguishes between a simple mistake and an error made despite diligent effort (*Ijtihad*). If a qualified judge or scholar strives to find the truth but errs, they are not only excused but rewarded for their effort. The Prophet ﷺ said: “If a judge passes judgment and strives... and errs, he will have one reward.”[18] This is a crucial ethical principle: a sincere intention combined with maximum effort mitigates the moral weight of a wrong outcome. It protects the agent from being judged solely by results, provided they exercised due diligence.

Sincerity (*Ikhlas*) vs. Ostentation (*Riya'*): Intention is the filter that separates valid deeds from invalid ones. The concept of *Riya'* (doing good to be seen by others) is treated as a severe moral failing, sometimes called "hidden idolatry." A narration states that a scholar, a martyr, and a donor will be the first entered into Hellfire because their intentions were to gain fame, not to please God.[19] This illustrates that in Islam, a "good outcome" (knowledge spreading, defense, charity) does not save the individual if the "inner motive" was corrupt.

Section 3: Limits of Considering Intention

Despite this emphasis, Islam does not allow intention to become a "get out of jail free" card. There are strict limits:

1. **Intention does not justify the Forbidden:** A good intention cannot validate an inherently evil act. The legal maxim states: “There is no obedience to a creature in disobedience to the Creator.”[20] One cannot steal to give charity, nor drink alcohol to be social. The "good aim" does not purify the "corrupt means."
2. **No Justification for Negligence:** A person cannot plead "good intentions" to excuse repeated negligence or lack of preparation. Islam demands that the intention to do good be matched by the *taking of means* (Asbāb) to achieve it.

[18] *Sahih al-Bukhari*, Book 96, Hadith 9
[19] *Sahih Muslim*, Book 20, Hadith 4688
[20] Ahmad ibn Hanbal, *Musnad Ahmad*, Hadith 20653

3. **The Wholeness of Ethics:** Sincerity must be accompanied by conformity to the law (*Sunnah*). As Al-Fudayl ibn Iyad noted, a deed is only accepted if it is **both** sincere (for God) and correct (according to Law).[21]

[21] Ibn Rajab al-Hanbali, *Jami' al-'Ulum wa'l-Hikam* (Beirut: Dar al-Ma'rifah, 2001), 72

Chapter Three: The Ethics of Action and Outcome in Islam

Section 1: Concept of Action and Moral Responsibility

While intention is the soul, the **voluntary action** is the body of morality. In Islamic theology, moral responsibility (*Taklif*) is premised on free will and capacity. The Prophet ﷺ declared that the pen is lifted from the sleeper, the child, and the insane.[22] This establishes that moral judgment applies only to conscious, voluntary acts.

The Qur'an affirms individual responsibility: "No bearer of burdens shall bear the burden of another" (53:38). This principle ensures that a person is judged on their own actions, not on the crimes of others or on accidents beyond their control. However, where an individual has control, they are fully accountable for the consequences of their deeds.

Section 2: Moral Constraints of the Action

For an action to be ethically sound in Islam, it must satisfy objective criteria beyond just "meaning well":

1. **Legality (Halal):** The act itself must be lawful. A noble end does not justify a prohibited means. This is a rejection of pure utilitarianism. For example, one cannot deal in usury (interest) to raise money for building a mosque. The purity of the source is a prerequisite for the moral value of the result.[23]
2. **Non-Harm (*La Darar*):** The Prophet established the maxim: "No harm shall be inflicted or reciprocated."[24] This is a consequentialist constraint. Any action that causes unjust harm to others—physically, financially, or emotionally—is morally restricted. If a "benefit" entails a greater "harm," the action is prohibited. The legal maxim "Ward off harm takes precedence over bringing benefits" demonstrates that Islam prioritizes the safety and rights of society over potential gains.[25]

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[22] Abu Dawud al-Sijistani, *Sunan Abi Dawud*, Book 38, Hadith 4398
[23] Yusuf al-Qaradawi, *The Lawful and the Prohibited in Islam*, trans. Kamal El-Helbawy et al. (Indianapolis: American Trust Publications, 1999), 15
[24] *Sunan Ibn Majah*, Book 13, Hadith 2340
[25] Jalal al-Din al-Suyuti, *Al-Ashbah wa al-Naza'ir* (Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyyah, 1990), 87

3. **Justice (*Adl*):** Justice is an absolute value. An action that produces a "good result" for the majority but unjustly oppresses a minority is rejected. The Qur'anic command "Be just; that is nearer to piety" (5:8) binds all actions. Thus, the *quality* of the outcome matters as much as the *quantity* of the benefit.

Section 3: Considering Outcomes (*Ma'ālāt*)

Islam accords great weight to the foresight of consequences. This is known in jurisprudence as *Fiqh al-Ma'ālāt* (Jurisprudence of Outcomes). Imam Ibn al-Qayyim stated that the Shariah is entirely based on wisdom and the welfare of people; any ruling that leads from benefit to harm or from justice to injustice is contrary to the Shariah.[26]

This principle allows for flexibility. For instance, a permissible act might be forbidden if it leads to a forbidden result (the principle of *Sadd al-Dhara'i*, or Blocking the Means). Conversely, a prohibited act might be permitted in extreme necessity to save a life (like eating pork to avoid starvation), because the *outcome* of preserving life outweighs the *harm* of the prohibited food. This demonstrates that Islamic ethics is not rigidly deontological (like Kant) nor loosely utilitarian; it is a principled system that adapts to outcomes within the boundaries of divine law.[27]

[26] Ibn al-Qayyim al-Jawziyya, *I'lam al-Muwaqqi'in 'an Rabb al-'Alamin*, vol. 3 (Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al-Ilmiyya, 1991), 11
[27] Abdulaziz Sachedina, *Islamic Biomedical Ethics: Principles and Application* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 55

Chapter Four: The Islamic Moral Model (Comparative Study)

Section 1: Balancing Intention and Action

The Islamic model proposes a **synthesis**. It refuses to separate the internal from the external. A morally perfect act requires the alignment of the heart (intention) and the limbs (action).

- If Intention is Good + Action is Good = **Accepted (Reward)**.
- If Intention is Bad + Action is Good = **Hypocrisy (Sin/Rejected)**.
- If Intention is Good + Action is Bad (Mistake) = **Excused (Reward for intent)**.
- If Intention is Bad + Action is Bad = **Sin (Punishment)**.

This matrix covers all human states, ensuring that no aspect of moral existence is ignored. The Qur'an consistently couples "Those who believe" (inner state) with "and do righteous deeds" (outer state), cementing this integration.[28]

Section 2: Comparative Applications

To demonstrate the practical superiority of this integrative approach, we examine three cases:

Case 1: Lying to Save an Innocent Life

- *Kantian View:* Lying is strictly forbidden. A Kantian might argue one cannot lie even to a murderer seeking a victim, as the moral duty to truth is absolute.
- *Utilitarian View:* Lying is obligatory if it saves a life, as the outcome is superior.
- *Islamic View:* Islam values truth highly but recognizes the sanctity of life as supreme. It permits (and may obligate) lying in this specific instance to prevent a greater evil (death). However, it restricts this permission to necessity (*Darura*). Thus, it balances the *principle* of honesty with the *necessity* of the outcome, avoiding Kant's rigidity and Utilitarianism's looseness.[29]

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[28] M.A. Draz, *The Moral World of the Qur'an* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2008), 95
[29] *Sahih Muslim*, Book 32, Hadith 6303

Case 2: Charitable Ends via Unlawful Means

- *Utilitarian View:* If a "Robin Hood" figure steals from a rich miser to feed a hundred starving orphans, a strict utilitarian might justify this, as the total happiness has increased.
- *Islamic View:* This is strictly forbidden. The "good outcome" (feeding orphans) does not purify the "evil means" (theft). Islam demands that charity be from lawful earnings. This protects property rights and prevents social chaos, maintaining that the end does *not* justify the means.[30]

Case 3: Public Philanthropy

- *Consequentialist View:* If two wealthy men build identical hospitals, one for God and one for political votes, the consequentialist views both acts as equally "good" because the result is the same.
- *Islamic View:* While the *social benefit* is acknowledged in both, the *moral merit* of the agents is vastly different. The sincere donor is praised and rewarded; the insincere one is not. Islam validates the social good but reserves moral/spiritual judgment for the sincere. This captures the nuance that the other theories miss.[31]

Section 3: The Added Value of the Islamic Perspective

1. **Moral Justice:** It treats the human being fairly. It does not condemn the one who tries and fails (unlike outcome-ethics), nor does it praise the one who succeeds through corruption (unlike outcome-ethics). It considers the total human condition.
2. **Comprehensiveness:** It bridges the gap between private spirituality and public law. It cultivates a conscience that watches God in private, which is the best guarantee for public ethics.

[30] Al-Ghazali, *Ihya' 'Ulum al-Din*, 2:155
[31] *Sahih al-Bukhari*, Book 81, Hadith 1

3. **Realism:** It acknowledges human limitation. By pardoning mistakes and prioritizing the prevention of harm, it offers a livable ethical system that does not demand the impossible, yet strives for the ideal.[32]

Conclusion:

Upon concluding this comparative analytical study, the research synthesizes its final position regarding the criterion of moral judgment. The journey from the theoretical dichotomy of Western philosophy to the integrative approach of Islamic ethics yields the following structured conclusions and recommendations:

First: Key Research Findings

1. Inadequacy of the Single Criterion: The study proves that relying exclusively on either *motive* (as in Kantian ethics) or *outcome* (as in Utilitarianism) leads to a moral deficit. The former may excuse incompetence under the guise of "good will," while the latter may justify unethical means to achieve "utility."
2. The Islamic Model of Integration: The Islamic perspective resolves this tension through a composite criterion. Moral righteousness requires the simultaneity of a sincere internal motive (*Niyyah*) and a correct, lawful external action (*Amal*). One cannot compensate for the absence of the other.
3. Achievement of Moral Justice: This integrative model uniquely secures Moral Justice. It safeguards the individual's spiritual merit (rewarding sincere effort even if it fails) while simultaneously protecting society's welfare (prohibiting harmful acts even if well-intended).

Second: Recommendations

Based on these findings, the researcher recommends the following:

1. Application to Contemporary Ethics: Scholars and policymakers are urged to apply the Islamic "Intention-Outcome" framework to modern dilemmas—specifically Artificial Intelligence and Bioethics—to ensure that scientific

[32] Fakhry, *Ethical Theories in Islam*, 208

advancement (intent) does not come at the cost of human dignity or safety (outcome).

2. Educational Integration: Academic curricula in ethics should emphasize this balance to immunize students against the two extremes: the literalism that ignores reality, and the pragmatism that sacrifices principles.
3. Expansion of Comparative Studies: Future research should extend this comparative methodology to other philosophical traditions, further exploring how the principle of *Fiqh al-Ma'ālāt* (Jurisprudence of Outcomes) can offer solutions to global governance challenges.

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