The Taking of Life: Killing Someone in the name of Preserving Another
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I

The purpose of this paper is to examine the taking of human life in the name of preserving another. It is going to be discussed considering religious and ethical concerns. The taking of life is prohibited by various religions because they assert that only God has the authority to give and take away life. Although the taking of life can be regarded as a religious problem, it has also ethical concerns. For example, in Kantian ethics, the taking of human life is always wrong. According to Kant, all human life is to be revered and no one may ever be killed for any reason, even if one's life is threatened by another. However, there are those who advocate that killing someone is necessary to preserve innocent. This view depends on that assumption: People have a moral obligation to protect any innocent lives including their own lives. This argument is to be seen plausible at first sight but if we examine that argument in detail, we can see that it creates violence. In other words, the main criticism of this argument is that violence tends to breed more violence, and that once the killing of humans is allowed, even in defense of the innocent, no one knows where the violence will end.

Human life is generally considered essentially valuable in itself. Such consideration depends on the idea that we, as human, are ethical and moral beings.[2] What do we mean by ethical and moral? When we speak of people as moral or ethical, we usually mean that they are good people, and when we speak of them as immoral or unethical, we mean that they are bad people. When we refer to certain human actions as moral, ethical, immoral, or unethical, we mean they are right or wrong. Nevertheless, in ordinary language, whether we call a person ethical or moral, or an act unethical or immoral does not really make any difference (Thiroux 1980: 2). That is, those terms can be used interchangeably in daily life. As it is well known, in the history of philosophy, there is a great deal of discussion on the origins of ethics and morality. One of the most accepted view on the origin of the ethics and morality is religion. According to this view, the rules of ethics or morality are derived from the commands of God and they are considered as absolute. An act is right if and because God commands it, and wrong if and because God forbids it. Without God there would be no right or wrong. Just as Legislator enacts laws, God commands moral rules. The objective difference between right and wrong rests on the existence of God as the source of morality (White 1999: 104).

Religion can be considered as one of the oldest institutions created by human beings. We can say that morality was embedded in the cultural traditions, customs, and religious practices in the earliest times and religion served as a kind of sanction for getting people to behave morally (Thiroux 1980: 9). Ethics or morality, for example, for early Christians was a matter of attitudes or habits. Although the Jewish Law played a central role in it, Christian morality was primarily based on the practice of a number of virtues, such as love, hope, justice, forgiveness, and patience. Consequently, it was committed to fight vices such as hate, envy,

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[2] For detailed discussion, White, James E. *Contemporary Moral Problems*, 6th ed. (USA:Wadsworth Pub Co., 1999)

lust, and anger (Van Gerwen 2004: 204). The relationship between morality and religion can be taken as one of the aspects concerned with the application of morality. I believe that in regard to the application of morality, the most important aspect derives from the relationship between human beings. I will call it a social aspect. What I mean is that the most important moral conflicts arise from when human beings come together in social groups or in a society. In this sense, morality should be taken in the course of actions performed by human beings in relation to one another. However, I do not want to say that religion does not contain ethical systems, but I would like to say that it is not true that all ethical systems are religiously based (Thiroux 1980: 20).

Immanuel Kant formulated a new way of understanding morality and ourselves as moral agents. At the center of Kant's ethical theory is the claim that normal adults are capable of being fully self-governing in moral matters. In Kant's terminology, we are "autonomous". Autonomy involves two components. The first is that no authority external to ourselves is needed to constitute, or inform us of, the demands of morality. We can each know without being told what we ought to do because moral requirements are requirements we impose on ourselves. The second is that in self-government we can effectively control ourselves. The obligations we impose upon ourselves override all other call for action, and frequently run counter to our desires. We nonetheless always have a sufficient motive to act as we ought. Hence no external source of motivation is needed for our self-legislation to be effective in controlling our behaviour (Schneewind 1992: 309). In this sense, morality is a human creation and its legislation comes from the rational will of the human beings but not the external authority. Kant is emphatic that morality does not rest on religion but the other way around: Religious faith is founded on morality. Kant contrasts moral theology which bases the concept of God on moral reason, with theological morality which superstitiously bases moral conception on religious ones. The aim of Kant's moral arguments is to show how morality is independent of religious beliefs (Wood 1992: 403). In the following quotation we can see how Kant seperates morality from the religious beliefs. He claims that,

> So far as morality is based upon the conception of man as a free agent who, just because he is free, binds himself through his reason to unconditioned laws, it stands in need neither of the idea of another Being over him, for him to apprehend his duty, nor of an incentive other than the law itself, for him to do his duty. At least it is man's own fault if he is subject to such a need; and if he is, this need can be relieved through nothing outside himself: for whatever does not originate in himself and his own freedom in no way compensates for the deficiency of his morality. Hence, for its own sake morality does not need religion at all (Kant 1960: 3).

II

So far I have tried to clarify two aspects of morality. The first one is the relationship between morality and religion, the second one is the relationship between morality and human beings. Considering first one, moral or ethical rules are derived from the God's commands. This view depends on the idea that God gave us the rules and we have to obey those rules without interrogation. The second one which is also called the social aspect of morality depends on the idea that the rules of morality stem from rational human beings. According to this view, since the moral rules derived from the God's commands do not have rational foundation, we cannot consider those rules as a guide for human actions. Nevertheless, although these two aspects of morality have different foundations, both of them prohibit killing.

I will take, as an example of religious morality, the Islamic philosophy on killing. According to Islam and its Holy book the Qur'an, one of the greatest sins is to kill a human being.

Murder is also defined as unlawful, premeditated killing of a human being by another. Informally, murder is an unpleasant, troublesome or dangerous state of affairs; in legal terms, murder is the killing of a human being with malice and a premeditated motive. The killing of a person in Islamic jurisprudential terms is the destruction of a structure God has created and given life to. It also deprives the victim of the right to life and is an act of aggression against the victim's family. Regarding suicide, God said: 'And kill not your selves; surely, Allah is most merciful to you' (4.29). In another verse, God cautions people against endangering their lives: 'And do not throw yourselves into destruction' (2.195). The Prophet reinforced this ban, drawing a graphic picture for those who commit suicide. He said: Whoever throws himself from a mountain and kills himself will throw himself in hellfire forever. And whoever poisons himself and dies would carry his poison with his hand and takes it in hell forever. And whoever stabs himself with a piece of metal and kills himself would carry his weapon and stab himself with it in hellfire forever. It has been reported in an authentic hadith: 'That who kills himself with a weapon, will be punished with the same weapon on the Day of Judgement.' This is based on the principle that the punishment should fit the crime. Islam considers the killer of one soul as the killer of the whole human race (Berjak 2006: 430). Islam prohibits killing of innocent human beings that whoever kills a human being, unless it be for murder or for couseing mischief in the land, it is as though he has killed all of mankind and whoever saves alive, it is as though he saved the whole of mankind (5:32). Consequently, according to the Qur'an, one of the greatest sins is to kill a human being who has committed no fault: If someone kills another person - unless it is in retaliation for someone else or for causing corruption in the earth - it is as if he had murdered all mankind. And if anyone gives life to another person, it is as if he had given life to all mankind (Surat al-Ma'ida: 32).

As I have mentioned above, Kant's idea of morality does not depend on religion. He formulates his idea of morality within human reason. He claims that two things fill the mind with ever new and increasing admiration and awe...the starry heavens above me and the moral law within me (Kant 1959: 2). According to Kant, moral or immoral actions stem from an autonomus will. An autonomous will is one which is free, self-ruled, self-governed, self-legislated. Every person by virtue of his being human is autonomus, that is, has a free will, and no power on earth or in heaven can force one to will other than he chooses for himself (Sahakian 1965: 98). Kant's moral theory is deontological: actions are morally right in virtue of their motives, which must derive more from duty than from inclination. Duty is the necessity to act out reverence for the law. According to Kant, the ultimate principle of morality must be a moral law conceived so abstractly that is capable of guiding us to the right action in application to every possible set of circumstances. So the only relevant feature of the moral law is its generality, the fact that it has the formal property of universalizability, by virtue of which it can be applied at all times to every moral agent. From this chain of reasoning about our ordinary moral concepts, Kant derived as a preliminary statement of moral obligation the notion that right actions are those that practical reason would will as universal law. This moral law is inviolable. As an autonomous and rational being, man is capable of formulating the moral law and gains access to Kingdom of Ends (Sahakian 1965: 99).

The essence of Kantian ethical theory is reverence for the moral law, respect for the categorical imperative. Morality then is the relation of actions to the autonomy of the will, that is, to the potential universal legislation by its maxims. An action that is consistent with the autonomy of the will is permitted; one that does not agree is forbidden. Moral laws in Kant's philosophy are Categorical Imperatives that tell us what we ought to do but do not

depend on any prior conditions or subjective wants and wishes, and contain no qualifications. As it is well known there are two versions of categorical imperative. The first one is known as the principle of universalizability and the second formulation of the categorical imperative is *treat humanity as an end-in-themselves*. I will not discuss these imperatives in detail. Considering my aim, I will take these imperatives as normative ones without examining their validity. In the Metaphysics of Morals, Kant claims that willfully killing oneself can be called murdering oneself only if it can be proved that it is in general a crime committed either against one's own person or also, through one's killing oneself, against another. Killing oneself is a crime. It can also be regarded as a violation of one's duty to other people…A human person is bound to preserve his life simply by virtue of his quality as a person and whether he must acknowledge in this a duty to himself. Moreover, he adds that a human being cannot renounce his personality as long as he is a subject of duty (Kant 2006: 177). From that quotation we can conclude that, according to Kantian ethics, a human being cannot harm him or herself in any case. Kant does not limit the idea of one's duty to oneself. Considering other human beings, every human being also has a duty to others. He says that every human being has a legitimate claim to respect from his fellow human beings and is in turn bound to respect every other. Humanity itself is a dignity; for a human being cannot be used merely as a means by any human being (either by others or even by himself) but must always be used at the same time as an end (Kant 2006: 209). We can understand from that claim, that Kant is against all forms of killing. Both suicide and murder are defined as violations of moral laws and duties, that is of the categorical imperative.

III

So far I have examined two different aspects of morality regarding killing. The first one is the religious aspect. This aspect of morality depends on the idea that human beings have to obey the God's commands since they are absolute. From the Islamic perspective, killing human beings is always wrong. Both suicide and murder, even in the war, are strictly prohibited. In the Qur'an, one of the verses on war says that *Do not transgress, God does not love the transgressor* (2.190).[3] The second aspect of morality comes from within human reason. This aspect of morality often refers back to the moral laws formulated by Kant. According to Kant, any action that violates human dignity cannot be considered as morally right. Obeying moral laws, self-respect and respect for other human beings are the supreme principles of this morality. To conclude, although they have different premises, both of these aspects of morality prohibit the taking of life. Every human being has a value in itself and every human being has also the right to defend himself or herself against any violation of his or her person. Nevertheless, this does not mean that they have a right to kill another person to preserve themselves or to kill one to save another since both of these actions are religiously and morally wrong.

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[3] For detailed discussion practical and theoretical implications of the commands of the Qur'an, please see Abdel Haleem, Muhammad *The Qur'an.* (USA: Oxford University Press, 2008)

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