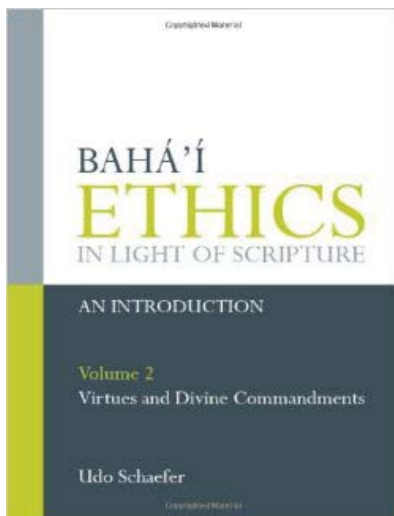


Book Review



Bahá'í Ethics in Light of Scripture – An Introduction, Volume I: Doctrinal Fundamentals, by Udo Schaefer, George Ronald, Oxford, 2007, xvii + 409 pages, including appendices and index.

Bahá'í Ethics in Light of Scripture – An Introduction, Volume II: Virtues and Divine Commandments, by Udo Schaefer, George Ronald, Oxford, 2009, xxi + 775 pages including appendices and index.

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Udo Schaefer's *Bahá'í Ethics in Light of Scripture*, volumes I and II, is a magisterial achievement in two dimensions—depth and breadth. In regard to breadth, it studies entire available Bahá'í Writings vis-à-vis

their relationship to ethics and often even brings in relevant material from other religions. This breadth makes possible an overview of Bahá'í ethics such as we have never had before. As if this were not enough, his study goes into considerable depth, beginning in volume I with a thorough discussion of the meta-ethical foundations and nature of Bahá'í ethics and continuing in volume II with a study of the specific virtues and guidance that follow from these fundamentals. Volume I is necessary because, without understanding the meta-ethical basis of any ethical system, our knowledge of that system is incomplete. It would be like trying to understand the blueprints of a house without paying any attention to the foundation that determines the kind of structure we can build. Of course, some variety is possible, but there are limits to what can be done. For example, in ethics, if we begin with the existence of God and a divine-command theory of what is good, it is not logically possible to proceed to an ethical system modeled in nature. Lack of logical coherence weakens any ethical system because it leads to contradictory conclusions, which, in turn, reduce its usefulness in real-life situations. This brings us to the importance of volume II in Schaefer's magnum opus. Volume II lists, catalogs, and explains in painstaking detail the specific virtues enjoined by the Bahá'í Writings and in doing so provides an irreplaceable overview of Bahá'í ethics. The second volume also

makes clear that the Writings favor virtue ethics over deontological and utilitarian ethics, which are the other two major ethical systems.

In these two volumes, Schaefer undertakes an enormously challenging task, namely giving logical order to topics that are spread throughout the Writings. Such ordering is necessary because the Bahá'í Writings are not systematic philosophical treatises but revelations about specific questions in which philosophical positions are embedded. In this way, Schaefer allows readers to see how the Writings actually embody an architectonic ethical system built up from the foundational principle of God's omnipotence, the fundamental necessity of Manifestations, and the power and limitations of reasoning.

Having such an overview is advantageous for four reasons. First, it is essential insofar as it helps Bahá'ís attain a broader and deeper understanding of the Writings and further strengthens and develops their faith. Indeed, more knowledge, more reflection, and more discussion help not only the individual but also the intellectual and spiritual life of the community in which the individual lives. Second, the improved understanding also assists Bahá'ís in explaining the Faith to others by having a clear and coherent understanding of the Writings and presenting them in logical order. After all, someone seeking information about the Bahá'í Faith is seeking clarity, not confusion. The third reason Schaefer's overview is important is

that it makes apologetics, the proper defense of the Bahá'í teachings, much easier if we have a clear understanding of what they are and how they are related to each other. Once we have a coherent understanding of Bahá'í ethical teachings, it is much easier to defend them against even the most sophisticated criticism. Finally, a broad and deep overview enables us to participate more meaningfully in interfaith dialogue, especially with those religions that have strongly developed philosophical traditions. Among these are Roman Catholicism, Judaism, Islam, and Buddhism. Such knowledge allows us to go beyond surface phenomena and get into the deeper issues to find new sources of unity.

Schaefer's book covers such a wealth of material that no review can refer to, let alone do justice to, all the topics covered. I have chosen those that, in my view, are relevant to some of the major issues touched on by Schaefer.

Volume I deals with the "doctrinal fundamentals" of Bahá'í ethics by explicating Bahá'í meta-ethical ethical principles and some of their consequences. Schaefer begins, as logic suggests, with the metaphysical foundations of Bahá'í ethics because every ethical system is ultimately embedded in a metaphysical theory of reality. After all, an ethical position is always a response to something in reality and takes place in a particular context. The metaphysical bedrock of Bahá'í ethics is the existence of an omnipotent, omniscient, and changeless God, Whose decrees are unchallengeable

by any other being. Since God is the source and determiner of all beings, it follows logically that Bahá'í ethics are “divine command ethics” or, as Schaefer calls them, “divine voluntarism” (vol. I, 161). Paraphrasing Bahá'u'lláh, Schaefer states that God’s “will has no reason to will as he wills other than that he wills it so” (vol. I, 161). His will is its own reason and justification. Consequently, God decides what is morally good or not. This, in Schaefer’s view, is the Bahá'í answer to one of the perennial problems in theistic ethics—the Euthyphro Dilemma¹—which asks whether an action is morally good because God commands it or whether God commands it because it is intrinsically good. If the former is true, God is—so the Euthyphro Dilemma says—a dictator or tyrant Who imposes His own arbitrary will on us; if the latter is true, He is not omnipotent because the inherent goodness of some actions forces God to choose them. Schaefer clearly shows that in the Bahá'í view God’s choice makes an action morally good. Whatever God decrees is just, good, and reasonable because, as the Manifestations tell us, that is God’s nature. If humans disagree or cannot understand a decree, they should study the revelation of the appropriate Manifestation to guide their thinking in the correct direction. Schaefer also deals with the argument that “divine voluntarism” pits humanity against a divine tyrant, saying that

God is not “a tyrant. His actions are neither senseless nor capricious, despotic or arbitrary” (vol. I, 161). Rather, God created humanity as the recipients of His mercy, love, and grace and not as a “whipping boy.” Furthermore, the standard critique of divine voluntarism overlooks that an omnipotent God is free to choose to act according to reason—as illustrated in the orderliness of nature—and compassion, as all the Manifestations have taught.

The divine voluntarism of the Writings present Bahá'ís with a challenge insofar as the ethical theories that dominate today’s discussions are secular and, therefore, out of alignment with any God-based ethics. Utilitarianism, Sartrean existentialism, Marxism, most forms of feminism, and secular humanist ethics are not easily reconciled with the meta-ethics of divine voluntarism, even though there may be coincidental agreement on specific issues. However, readers should be aware that Bahá'í divine voluntarism is in alignment with various forms of Christian ethics, such as neo-Thomism, Christian existentialism, as well as Jewish and Islamic ethics.

An immediate—though not always obvious—consequence of God’s omnipotent, omniscient, and changeless nature is the necessity for Manifestations as intermediaries between God and mankind (Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings* 64). The existence of Manifestations is essential for our understanding of ethics because our ethical knowledge comes to us through the

1 Plato, *Euthyphro*. <http://classics.mit.edu/Plato/euthyphro.html>.

Manifestations Who reveal God's will. Mankind's limited mind cannot "reach up" to God because God is unlike any being we can conceive of: He is not at a particular point in space, is not in time, and is not subject to change. Therefore, to make God's will known to us, an intermediary is needed, a being who has both a divine and human station, who possesses infallible knowledge and, is, therefore, perfectly reliable as "God's representative" (Schaefer, vol. I, 164). Because of his divine station, the Manifestation's pronouncements should "not be judged according to human standards" (Schaefer, vol. I, 167) for the obvious reason that human understanding does not know the ultimate ends of these commands, and without knowledge of ultimate ends no final judgment is possible (Schaefer, vol. I, 266). This is easy to illustrate. If we enter a room in the middle of a mysterious experiment of which we know nothing, we cannot easily pass judgment on what is happening. To make such a judgment, we have to ask about the end or purpose of the experiment—and completely rely on the word of the experimenter. There is no rational alternative to accepting his word. Similarly, relying on the Manifestation's word is equally rational from the theist point of view and is the only way of knowing the end or purpose of creation or of humanity.

The reason we do not know the way on our spiritual evolutionary path is because, as Schaefer says, "the universal values of morality do not grow on the tree of reason but are rather

the fruits of the divine revelation that have come to all peoples" (vol. I, 157). Powerful and important as it is, reason alone lacks full knowledge of the means and the ends to be able to develop a complete and coherent ethical system. This is because reason is not "an infallible source of knowledge" (Schaefer, vol. I, 262), as we can clearly see for ourselves when the reasoning process yields contradictory answers and is often led astray by personal interests and biases. As 'Abdu'l-Bahá points out, reason is not self-sufficient; it requires the assistance of the Holy Spirit (*Some Answered Questions* 297). As Schaefer says, "although man has the gift of rational thought, he is not immune to extremely irrational use of it" (vol. I, 264). However, at this point, a caveat is called for insofar as he overstates the case vis-à-vis the limitations of reason. Schaefer claims that in regard to metaphysics, reason must be silent because "reason is incapable of grasping the transcendent nature of things" (vol. I, 266). In other words, reason is limited to the phenomenal world. He also says, "If, as Bahá'u'lláh says, reason 'giveth man the power to discern the truth in all things, leadeth him to that which is right,' then it seems correct to conclude that man's reason enables him, *at least to a certain extent*, to recognize moral principles" (vol. I, 270, emphasis added). In this quotation, Schaefer admits—seemingly with some reluctance—that reason does, after all, have a place in ethics. Indeed, the use of reason is unavoidable as we apply the divine commands in

various situations. Equally important is the problem posed by the assertion that “reason is incapable of grasping the transcendent nature of things” (Schaefer, vol. I, 266). What then are we to make of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s statement that the “existence of the Divine Being hath been *clearly established*, on the basis of *logical proofs*”?² It is significant that He accepts the validity of logical proofs of God’s existence—the most important transcendental issue of all—as being “clearly established” without the slightest suggestion that we should doubt these results. The applicability of reason to spiritual (i.e., transcendental) matters is also shown in the statement, “Therefore, it must be our task to *prove* to the thoughtful *by reasonable arguments* the prophet-hood of Moses, of Christ and of the other Divine Manifestations” (*Some Answered Questions* 11, emphasis added). Obviously reason is not limited to the phenomenal world but is also applicable to metaphysical and theological subjects and deemed sufficiently reliable to be used in this way.

The subject of reason is of extraordinary importance because in a militantly secular age it is essential to establish that reason and religion are not necessarily in conflict, and are certainly not in conflict in the Bahá’í Writings. The following statement by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá sounds the keynote on reason and faith:

² *Selections from the Writings of Abdu’l-Bahá* 46, emphasis added. See also *Some Answered Questions*, 225, in regard to logical proof for immortality.

If religious belief and doctrine is at variance with reason, it proceeds from the limited mind of man and not from God; therefore, it is *unworthy of belief* and not deserving of attention; *the heart finds no rest in it*, and *real faith is impossible*. *How can man believe that which he knows to be opposed to reason?* Is this possible? *Can the heart accept that which reason denies?* Reason is the first faculty of man and the religion of God is in harmony with it. (*Promulgation* 231, emphasis added)

In effect, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá is recommending reason as a tool for assessing the authenticity of religious claims—which includes claims relevant to transcendence and ethics. Finally, regarding the needs of this age, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá declares that “*in this age* the peoples of the world need the arguments of reason” (*Some Answered Questions* 7, emphasis added), showing, thereby, the special need for rationality in our time. Consequently, it is especially important to ensure that our understanding of reason, its nature and role, is clear. If we do not clarify our thinking on this subject, there will be seekers and opposers who will point out the shortcomings in Bahá’í efforts to teach others about their beliefs. In my view, the subject of reason in the Bahá’í Writings will require additional study, but I believe that Schaefer’s views verge too closely to fideism.³ As I understand

³ See Ian Kluge, “Reason in the Bahá’í Writings.”

them, the Writings do not encourage such a wide distance between faith and reason.

One of the most important issues in meta-ethics is natural law—the theory that both nature and humankind exemplify moral principles in the way they are constituted. Schaefer insists that there is no natural law theory embedded in the Writings. Schaefer states that “[m]an cannot find the path to happiness solely through the guidance of nature” (vol. I, 125). In other words, humans cannot rely on nature to provide them with ethical guidance, romantic visions of nature notwithstanding. In short, Schaefer rejects ethics based on nature for at least two major reasons. If nature could provide us with the necessary guidance, there would be no need for the Manifestations. Like Lao Tze in the *Tao Te Ching*, or Emile in Rousseau’s eponymous pedagogic novel, we would only need to observe nature to learn the morals we need. This is not as simple as it looks. Shall we model our behavior on the cooperative, ecological aspects of nature, or shall we model the brutally harsh struggle for survival? To show why naturalistic ethics of either kind does not work, Schaefer quite rightly refers to Hume’s “is/ought” distinction, that is, the distinction between a *description* of the facts about something and a *prescription* about what we are obligated to do. A description—“Jane always cooks dinner”—cannot logically lead to a prescription—“Jane *should* always cook dinner.” Hume’s discovery is the

logical death-knell of all purely naturalistic ethics and, indeed, for any attempted “scientific” ethics.⁴

When Schaefer discusses the philosophy of humankind (“philosophical anthropology”) in the Writings, he notes, “The Bahá’í Faith does not support the idea of an innate, natural, moral law inscribed by God in human nature” (vol. I, 151). Human beings are neither moral nor immoral but have the capacity or potential to be either and, therefore, require the guidance of the Manifestations to live an ethical and spiritual life. Humankind obviously has the potential to be moral, but this potential must be activated by the teachings of the Manifestations. This moral potential is inherent in our spiritual nature, which is intended to control the animal nature we need to live in the phenomenal world. It is this animal nature that brings Schaefer to one of the most important yet delicate subjects in contemporary ethics and political theory or theory of governance: “liberty and its limits” (vol. I, 313). The Bahá’í view, as Schaefer rightly presents it, is that our spiritual nature makes it inappropriate to follow our animal inclinations no matter how attractive they seem and no matter how prevalent they may be among animals. Our behaviors must be appropriate to our specifically human nature. Schaefer quotes Bahá’u’lláh: “Say: True liberty consisteth in man’s submission unto

4 See Ian Kluge, “Review of Sam Harris’ *The Moral Landscape: How Science Can Determine Human Values*.”

My commandments. . . . Were men to observe that which we have sent down unto them from the Heaven of Revelation, they would, of a certainty, attain perfect liberty (*Kitáb-i-Aqdas* 122).” In other words, “true liberty” is to act in a manner that is appropriate to our spiritual nature in accordance with the guidance of the Manifestations. To act “freely” like an animal is to be captive to an aspect of ourselves that is only a temporary vehicle in the phenomenal world. Schaefer recognizes that there is no avoiding the obvious: Bahá’í ethics are on a collision course with the dominant moral and social outlook of contemporary Western societies on this and related issues. This dilemma presents us with a stark choice. On one hand, we can accept the reigning moral, social, and political ethic, which allows and even encourages us to give free rein to our animal natures and to exalt this kind of freedom as the highest value. On the other hand, we can recognize the inherently destructive and self-destructive nature of this choice and choose instead the path of Bahá’u’lláh. Schaefer is to be commended for his courage in setting this choice so clearly before us.

In volume II of his monumental study, Schaefer provides a massive catalog of the Bahá’í virtues with precise references to the Writings. This makes it clear that virtue ethics dominate Bahá’í ethical thinking. Briefly put, virtue ethics, which have their main source in Aristotle, emphasize “the virtues, or moral character, in contrast to the approach which emphasizes

duties or rules (deontology) or that which emphasizes the consequences of actions (consequentialism).”⁵ There are, of course, also deontological and utilitarian or consequentialist aspects to Bahá’í ethics. The deontological aspect is visible insofar as actions can be judged as being “‘permitted’, ‘commanded’ or ‘prohibited’” (vol. II, 2) by God, that is, by adherence to rules. They are consequentialist or utilitarian insofar as the virtues are focused on creating the best possible outcome for most, if not all, people. However, what determines the primacy of virtue ethics is their goal of forming a good character, which reflects “the attributes and names of God” (Bahá’u’lláh, *Kitáb-i-Íqán* 100). In other words, we obey God’s rules in order to become a good character who will “do the right thing” even if there are no specific rules to guide us. The emphasis on good character is a tremendous advantage for virtue ethics because it gives them the flexibility to meet the infinite possibilities of life situations that humans encounter in the enormous variety of geographical, cultural, and historical situations of human societies. This flexibility is what allows the virtues to remain timeless in themselves but adapted to the actual exigencies of life in their actual application. Furthermore, virtue ethics are necessary to progressive revelation, which requires both

5 “Virtue Ethics,” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/ethics-virtue/>.

ethical unity and ethical adaptability. As Schaefer explains, since God is unchangeable, “his attributes are likewise unchangeable across the ages. Virtues, which correspond to the divine attributes, are consequently identical in all religions even if some of them may not have been disclosed in one or the other of them. This implies that the virtues of individual ethics are timeless. . . .” (Schaefer, vol. II, 2). These virtues are an irreplaceable component of the essential oneness of all religions and the eventual unification of humankind. However, how these virtues are actualized under differing historical conditions may vary. For example, courage—the willingness to do something that is necessary and good but highly dangerous—may be seen in the physical courage to rescue a child from a burning house, or it may be seen as being honest with a friend over a difficult issue.

Schaefer divides the virtues into three broad categories: the “theocentric virtues,” which are focused on our relationship to God; the “virtues of the path,” which cover our personal virtues vis-à-vis ourselves; and “the worldly virtues,” which deal with our relationship to others and to society. Each of these virtues is necessary to actualize our fullest potential as human beings. Schaefer then analyzes and discusses the virtues in great detail. This is of invaluable assistance to individual Bahá'ís who want a deeper understanding of Bahá'í ethics and to philosophical scholars who want to correlate Bahá'í ethical teachings

with other schools of thought as recommended by Shoghi Effendi.⁶ Indeed, one hopes that this volume will inspire detailed analysis and comparison with the other forms of virtue ethics that have arisen since Rosalind Househurst, G. E. M. Anscombe, and Philippa Foot sparked the revival in Aristotelian virtue ethics—with which Bahá'í virtue ethics are in harmony. Schaefer's work helps reveal the order and rationality inherent in the portrayal of ethics in the Bahá'í Writings, a perspective that might not otherwise be nearly so apparent or accessible.

As with all such catalogs, the strength of volume II is also its weakness: it is easy to get the impression that all the virtues can be tidily packed away into little boxes, labeled either “theocratic virtues” or “virtues of the path.” From my perspective, that would be an unfortunate misunderstanding because the Writings are architectonic—all the teachings are built on a metaphysical foundation that leads us to consequences in epistemology, theory of humanity and ethics, social theory, and even “theology,” the study of the supernatural aspects of human existence. The virtues are interconnected among themselves. More detailed explication of these interconnections would have led to a greater understanding of Bahá'í ethics. While I recognize that such detailed explanations would have meant either a longer or a somewhat different book, I also

⁶ Shoghi Effendi, quoted in *A Compilation on Scholarship*, 4, 17–8.

feel it is important for readers to be fully aware of these interconnections.

Similarly, volume II would have been stronger if space used to establish, in overwhelming detail, points already well-established had been used instead to give concrete examples of how virtue ethics might work in actual messy, real-life situations. This would have given volume II a practical element that it unfortunately lacks. Such real-life examples might have attracted more readers to this enormously important book.

Udo Schaefer's *Bahá'í Ethics in Light of Scripture* is an essential book for all persons—Bahá'í or not—who wish to deepen their understanding of the moral teachings of the Bahá'í Faith. This clear, precise, and thorough explication of the subject makes the book, at least for the foreseeable time, the point from which all studies of Bahá'í ethics must begin. It is, in a word, foundational. However, the work is also foundational for another reason: Schaefer's work inspires systematic questioning and discourse about ethical issues in the Bahá'í Writings, and that is, in my view, its greatest gift to the active investigation of truth. A work of scholarship can give no greater gift—and Udo Schaefer's *Bahá'í Ethics in Light of Scripture* has made us all very rich.

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