

ARTICLES

PLAYING GOD AND THE ETHICS OF DIVINE NAMES: AN ISLAMIC PARADIGM FOR BIOMEDICAL ETHICS

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ABSTRACT

The notion of 'playing God' frequently comes to fore in discussions of bioethics, especially in religious contexts. The phrase has always been analyzed and discussed from Christian and secular standpoints. Two interpretations exist in the literature. The first one takes 'God' seriously and playing 'playfully'. It argues that this concept does state a principle but invokes a perspective on the world. The second takes both terms playfully. In the Islamic Intellectual tradition, the Sufi concept of 'adopting divine character traits' provides a legitimate paradigm for 'playing God'. This paradigm is interesting because here we take both terms 'God' and 'playing' seriously. It is significant for the development of biomedical ethics in contemporary Islamic societies as it can open new vistas for viewing biotechnological developments.

BACKGROUND

The inspiration for the present work comes from an article by Professor Allen Verhey that he contributed to *Journal of Medicine and Philosophy's* special issue devoted to 'playing God'.¹ Professor Verhey took his position against the Report of the President's Commission on Splicing Life.² The authors of that report understood the phrase 'playing God' in a

manner that took both terms *playfully*.³ They maintained, thus, on the one hand, that the formula had nothing to do with God and, on the other, that there was nothing very *playful* about it either. They asserted that it rather expresses a sense of awe in the face of latest human achievement in these fields. Hence, when somebody responds to a new invention or technology by refereeing to it as *playing God*, he or she, according to this opinion, is only expressing an *emotion* and is not implying that there was some ethical principle which has been violated. Criticizing this position, Professor Verhey took the word 'God' seriously and 'playing' playfully.⁴ He argued,

¹ A. Verhey. Playing God and Invoking a Perspective. *J Med Philos* 1995; 20: 347–364.

² The President's Commission for the Study of Ethical Problems in Medicine and Biomedical and Behavioral Research. 1982. The President's commission for the Study of Ethical Problems in Medicine and Behavioral Research. *Splicing Life: A Report on the Social and Ethical Issues of Genetic Engineering with Human Beings*. Washington: President's Commission.

³ Ibid. p. 67.

⁴ Verhey, *op. cit.* note 3, p. 348.

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moreover, that the phrase at hand does not state a principle but *invokes a perspective* on the world, a perspective from which scientific and technological innovations in genetics are meaningful.⁵

Now, before embarking upon the central task of the present work, i.e. exploration of an Islamic parallel of ‘playing God’ let us make a few general remarks about the *Islamicity* of the very expression that constitutes our subject matter.

Being contrary to the fundamental Islamic belief in the Oneness of God (*Tawhid*), it is unforgivable sin, and the greatest injustice, to worship other deities besides the one True God. The perils of claiming Godhead for oneself, can be inferred *a fortiori*. In this light, it might seem that in Islam one can neither legitimately ‘play God’ nor let others do so and that anyone talking of an Islamic version of playing God must be inviting others to commit either of the two sins just mentioned.⁶ We submit that this impression can only be based on over-simplification of the phrase and on a failure to differentiate between taking an expression *seriously* and taking it *literally*.

THE ETHICS OF DIVINE NAMES

In the Islamic spiritual tradition, a concept akin to ‘playing God’ is that of ‘assuming the divine attributes’ embodied by a famous saying attributed to the Prophet of Islam, *viz.* ‘assume the character-traits of divine names’. The cornerstone of this concept is the fact that each of the ninety-nine ‘most beautiful names of God’ encapsulates a certain moral quality (e.g. *The Beneficent* is from beneficence).⁷ The ethics of divine names (EDN), which follows from the above mentioned prophetic saying, consists in adopting the moral quality underlying a

particular Divine Name, to the extent humanly possible. That there really is a similarity between EDN here and the one known in bioethics as *playing God*, is obvious from the fact that the critics of the former reject it for being an instance of the latter. Such critiques apart, Muslim mystics themselves have identified the *leit motiv* of Sufism itself as assuming the divine character traits. Anyhow, we find the mentioning of this idea in the writings of Abu’l-Qasim al-Qushayri (d.1072), Ibn Barrajan (d.1141) and Ibn ‘Abd al-Salam (d. 1262). The classic on the ethics of divine names, however, remains *Al-Maqasad* of Al-Ghazali (d.1111).⁸ In this work, Al-Ghazali elaborates the meanings of specific divine names and talks about the way mortals can and should assume those meanings. Unfortunately, he does not say anything about the *principles* of EDN. For, instance, he explains the meaning of the Name ‘the Merciful’ and the manner in which we could assume mercy and holds that the qualities implied by certain Names are not be adopted by us, but he does present a *theoretical framework* for making such a distinction between divine names.

With Muhyiddin Ibn ‘Arabi (d.1240), the greatest mystical authority of Islam, the case is bit different. The idea of the ethics of divine names permeates throughout his writings. What is more from time to time he makes general remarks on the subject that can be the source of very important general principles of the EDN. The problem with Ibn ‘Arabi, however, is his *stream of consciousness* and unsystematic manner of writing, especially in his *opus magnum*, *al-Futuh al-Makkiyyah* (The Meccan Illuminations). Hence, though he can be our chief theorist in this regard, it is quite a task to extract a theory out of his writings.

FOUNDATIONS

Although EDN comes from the esoteric part of Islamic tradition, its expounders, especially Ibn

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ From this perspective, a claim such as Professor Abdul Aziz Sachedina’s that human stem cell research is justified because *we are partners with God* in the act of creation might appear very objectionable. See, A. Sachedina. 2000. Testimony of Dr. Abdulaziz Sachedina. In *Ethical Issues in Human Stem Cell Research: Volume III Religious Perspectives*. Rockville, MD: National Bioethics Advisory Commission: G-5.

⁷ According to Islamic Metaphysics, God in as much as His Essence is absolutely unknowable, the only possibility of knowing Him is through the names revealed by Him. The Divine Names, from the ontological and epistemological point of views are the only mean between God and humankind.

⁸ Translated by D. Burrell and N. Daher. 1992. *The Ninety-Nine Beautiful Names of God*. Cambridge: Islamic Texts Society. A partial translation with commentary was in T. Burkhardt. 2001. *Mirror of the Intellect*. Lahore: Suhail Academy: 200–209. The theoretical discussions found at the end of Al-Ghazali’s work are, for the most part, ethically irrelevant.

‘Arabi, have tried to accumulate a number of arguments from the basic Islamic textual sources. Here we consider some of these arguments, in order to highlight the Islamicity of EDN.

1. Islam shares with Judaism and Christianity the belief that ‘God created human beings in His own image’.⁹ ‘Image’ implies here the ‘qualitative likeness’ of God, otherwise it would be very difficult to explain it consistently from the Islamic view of the nature of God.¹⁰ Creation of human beings in the divine image implies, according to Ibn ‘Arabi’s interpretation, that God gave them His attributes.
2. Ibn ‘Arabi refers in this context to the Qur’anic verse, ‘God *taught* Adam all the names’ (II: 31) along with interpreting the word ‘taught’ in his own manner. Some divine attributes are, as a matter of fact, innate and common to every individual, as the humans are gifted with faculties ultimately derived from the seven ‘personal’ qualities of God, namely Life, Knowledge, Will, Power, Hearing, Sight and Speech. In addition to *actually* having these seven qualities in a limited and relative manner, they have the *potential* to acquire the rest of divine qualities. The end of all moral and spiritual strivings of human beings is to realize that potential. It is this potential that marks them off from everything else. Other beings must remain content with what they have been given. Humans, however, are capable of acquiring more. In fact only they can manifest *all* the divine names and attributes. The assumption of divine character traits is thus seen as an implication of human being’s creation upon the divine image.
3. Adam, according to the Qur’an is ‘the Successor of Allah on earth’ (*khalifat Allah, fil-ardh*) (II: 30; 38:26). Ibn ‘Arabi founds the ethics of divine names on this notion of divine successorship which human beings are blessed. He says,

No existent thing is named by all the divine names except man, who has been charged to assume the names as his own traits. That is

⁹ We are referring here to a saying of the Prophet quoted by Muslim. 1981. *Sahih Muslim*. Lahore: Sh. Muhammad Ashraf: vol. IV: p. 1378.

¹⁰ I take this interpretation of the word ‘image’ from Burkhardt, *op. cit.* note 8, p. 221.

why divine succession, deputyship and the knowledge of all names were given to them. Moreover the configuration of human form was the final one within the cosmos, so humans bring together all the realities of the cosmos.¹¹

4. As Ibn ‘Arabi understands it, the ethics of divine names is implied and required by the obligation to love God. A true lover, in his opinion, is bound to assume the character traits of his beloved and the love of God is not an exception to this. Ibn ‘Arabi writes: ‘The sincere lover is he who passes into the attributes of the beloved, not he who brings the beloved down to his own attributes’.¹²
5. The assumption by human beings of the divine character-traits is made possible by the nature of God itself. As God is conceived in Islam, he is ‘the Generous One’ and in the views of Muslim mystics, it was only out of sheer generosity and mercy that God brought the world into existence. It was because of his will to share, so to speak, existence with others. According to Ibn ‘Arabi, the assumption of the character traits of divine names is possible due also to what he calls, divine expansion (*al-Bast al-Ilahi*), derived from the divine name, (*al-Baasit*). Being the Expander *al-Baasit*, God allows the assumption of character traits of His names by His servants according to wisdom, measurement, scale of the Law and the preparedness (*isti’dad*) of each person.¹³

GENERAL PRINCIPLES

Paul Ramsey wrote that we should play God as God plays it.¹⁴ Though it is not accurate to say that ‘God

¹¹ Ibn ‘Arabi. No Date. *al-Futuh al-Makkiyyah*. Beirut: Dar Sadir: 2: 592. English translation in W. Chittick. 1989. *The Sufi Path of Knowledge*. Albany: State University of New York Press: 286. The view expressed in the last line of this quotation is parallel to the ninth century Irish philosopher Eriugena’s doctrine of containment, namely that human beings contain everything of the created nature. See J.S. Eriugena. 1984. *Periphyseon*. Washington DC: Dumbarton Oaks: Book 2: Section 3.

¹² Ibn ‘Arabi. *Ibid*: vol. 2: p. 585; English trans. Chittick, *Ibid*: 72.

¹³ Ibn ‘Arabi. *Ibid*: vol. 2: p. 500.

¹⁴ See P. Ramsey. 1979. *Ethics at the Edge of Life*. New Haven: Yale University Press: p. 203.

plays God', this contention of Ramsey's does point to the necessity of explaining the way we are to engage in this game, if a game it is at all. As far as EDN is concerned, one has to grant that not only we have to assume the divine characteristics but we have to *assume* them in the way they are *exercised* by God. So Ramsey's dictum is acceptable if only it is understood that we are engaged in playing, and God really *has* those attributes in absolute and essential manner. We will have an occasion to elaborate the correspondence between *assumption* and *playing* later. Now let us have a look at two of these general principles:

1. The Divine attributes, connoted by the Divine Names, belong either to Divine Mercy (*al-rahmah*) or to Divine Wrath (*al-Ghthab*). Mercy is the most comprehensive of all divine attributes because, according to the Qur'an, it embraces everything (VII: 156). The divine names such as the Peace (*al-Salam*), the Guardian (*al-Muhaymin*) and the Forgiving one (*al-Ghaffar*) belong to this side of divine nature. The second category includes divine names such as, the Inaccessible (*al-Aziz*) and the Slayer (*al-Mumeet*). According to the tradition, God has ordained, 'My mercy takes precedence over my wrath'.¹⁵ Had Ramsey's expression 'as God plays God' been flawless, one could have said that God plays being merciful more than being wrathful. So if one is to play God as God plays it one must always start with the attributes belonging to divine mercy. This is the first principle of EDN, in other words, of playing God.
2. Every individual possesses all the positive attributes as God's trust, so everyone must strive to handle the trust properly. The perfect servant combines servitude with the assumption of the divine character traits. This means that the ethics of divine names is subject, like everything else, to the scale of the Law. If the Law

might seem to forbid the assumption of some specific character traits then we must avoid them.

SOME EXAMPLES

1. The constant lover (al-Wadood)

The concept of love is very much relevant both to medicine and to biomedical ethics. So much so, that it has been recommended as foundation of the latter.¹⁶ Many divine names are related to God's love or care for the world and human beings. So, by way of example we discuss here a divine name that connotes love, namely *al-Wadood*. This divine name, says Al-Ghazali, is similar in meaning to the name *al-Rahim* (the Merciful). The only difference between the two consists in the fact that mercy is shown towards the needy and distressed ones whereas love does not require this. *Al-Wadood* is the one who acts out of love for others. *Al-Wadood*, according to Ibn 'Arabi, is the one who is constant in love. He considers God's constant love the foundation of His conserving the creature in existence. About the Qur'anic verse, 'He loves them and they love Him' (Qur'an V: 54), he notes that 'His love for us precedes our love for Him'; so His love is not the response we receive in return for our love for Him.¹⁷ In his *Kashf al-Ma'na* Ibn 'Arabi works out the ethical implication of this name, with reference to the element of constancy which pertains to its essence, that is, and says that one's love should be independent of the response of the beloved.¹⁸ He says in his *magnum opus*, 'It is characteristic of the lover that his love neither increases due to the favours of the beloved nor it decrease by the latter's aversion (*jafa*).'¹⁹

2. The creator (al-Khaliq)

God is often introduced in the Qur'an as the Creator out of nothingness. Al-Ghazali, therefore, has said

¹⁵ The saying is related in many of the authentic collections of Prophetic sayings. As the *Sahih* of Bukhari (the most authentic collection of Prophetic sayings in the *Sunni* Islam) has it, 'When Allah completed the Creation', He wrote in His book, which is with Him, on His throne, 'My Mercy overpowers my Anger'. See 1983. Muhammad ibn Isma'il al-Bukhari. *Al-Jami al-Sahih*. Lahore: Kazi Publishers: vol. IV p. 279.

¹⁶ See, for instance, D.J. Macer. 1998. *Bioethics is Love of Life*. Christchurch: Eubios Ethics Institute.

¹⁷ Ibn 'Arabi, *op. cit.* note 12, vol. 2: p. 205.

¹⁸ Ibn 'Arabi. 1996. *Kashf al-Ma'na*. Murcia: Editora Regional de Murcia: 107.

¹⁹ Ibn 'Arabi, *op. cit.* note 12, vol. 2: 353.

that this name really belongs to God and it can be attributed to an individual only in a contingent and provisional manner,²⁰ the manner is described both by Al-Ghazali and Ibn 'Arabi, as creating of obligatory actions (the classical way of putting the phrase 'doing things').²¹ The latter has recognized that human beings can create things in the best of modes.²² If we develop this allusion, we can easily establish that creation and innovation do not constitute stumbling blocks in EDN. The contention made by Sachedina that we are partners of God in the act of creation can be seen in this light. In the context of creativity Human beings can never be accused of usurping the Divine Powers, because God acts through them, and He is the Real Agent (*al fa'il al-haqiqi*) as the Sufi doctrine of the unity of actions states.

CONCLUSION

It is no exaggeration to say that the Islamic mystical tradition provides the most elaborate and articulated theory of what is known as 'playing God'. We claimed in the beginning that in contrast to the two existing interpretations of the phrase 'playing God' here we take both words *seriously*. It is time to show that this indeed is the case.

1. Taking 'playing' seriously

In what sense do we take the word 'playing' seriously? The ethics of divine names, as we saw, is founded, among other things, upon the saying 'Assume the character traits of God.' Now the imperative here is *takhallaqoo*, whose very grammatical form reveals a correspondence to 'playing'. It has the form *tafa''ul* which primarily denotes 'affecting or endeavoring to acquire'.²³ This exactly corresponds to a basic denotation of the English verb 'play', the one which is intended by 'playing

God'. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary* 'play' means 'an attempt to achieve or gain something'.²⁴

'Playing', (in the sense of 'playing this or that type of person' and not in that of 'playing football'), obviously contains an element of pretending and artificiality. Plagiarizing the language of Ibn 'Arabi, one could perhaps express this by saying that 'playing pertains to nothingness', because it must aim at achieving a state of affairs that at present is nonexistent. This is also conveyed by and contained in the imperative '*takhallaqoo*' and some other verbs of the same verbal mode. The proper recognition of this element makes both 'playing God' and the ethics of divine names plausible from the religious point of view. This recognition demands that one always keep in mind that the attributes to be assumed belong to God and that one attempts to achieve them to the extent possible as human beings and not forgetting even for a moment one's essential dependence upon and poverty to God. It also sets 'playing God' apart from claiming lordship for oneself, something expressly condemned by the Qur'an and most religions of the world.

2. Taking 'God' seriously

Unlike the interpretation given to 'playing God' by the President's commission on *Splicing Life*, and in affinity with the one put forward by Professor Verhey, the paradigm presented here takes 'God' very seriously. We have been mainly drawing upon the writings of Ibn 'Arabi in expounding this paradigm, so it would be pertinent to explain 'God' also in the light of his thought. When understood in the sense explained here the phrase 'playing God' presupposes the recognition of and belief in the existence of God and a profound knowledge of the Divine Names and attributes. Playing God is an activity engaged in with a view to attaining God. Now God, of course is one, but Ibn 'Arabi understands God or what he calls 'the divine presence' at three levels.²⁵ First, there is the Divine Essence

²⁰ Burkhardt, *op. cit.* note 8, p. 205.

²¹ See Ibn 'Arabi, *op. cit.* note 18, p. 48.

²² *Ibid*: 44.

²³ See M.S. Howell. 1986. *A Grammar of Classical Arabic Language*. Delhi: Gian Publishing House: vol. 5: p. 261.

²⁴ 1989: *The Oxford English Dictionary*. Oxford: Clarendon Press: vol. 11: p. 1013.

²⁵ Ibn 'Arabi. *op. cit.* note 12, vol. 2: p. 114.

which is absolutely transcendent and unknowable. With this level of divinity no relationship can be established.

Second, there are divine attributes and names. Third, there are divine actions. When we talk about playing God or assuming the character traits of God we are talking about God in the second of these senses. These concepts have absolutely nothing to do with the Divine Essence. This again shows that there is a fundamental difference between arrogantly claiming divinity and what we are talking about. It also sheds more light on the seriousness of playing in the phrase playing God, when we identify it with EDN.

3. Stating ethical principles and invoking perspectives

According to Professor Verhey, the phrase 'playing God' invokes a perspective on the world but does not *state an ethical principle*. We agree with the first half of this contention. In our opinion, *in addition to* invoking a perspective on the world, it does state an ethical principle as well, if its identification with EDN is granted. We have sufficiently elaborated its

ethical nature in the preceding passages. The ethical principle stated by the phrase 'playing God' is no doubt, based on a perspective on the world. This perspective envisages the divine and human spheres of activity in a harmonious and non-conflicting way and it also points to the intimate relationship existing between God and the world, especially the human world. If the paradigm is accepted, then the biotechnical advances can be viewed as the realization of the human potential to assume the character traits of divine names.

The new perspective is significant for the development of biomedical ethics in contemporary Islamic societies, as it can open new vistas for viewing the developments in these areas. If it is positively understood and assimilated, religious objections to certain biotechnological advances on account of usurping the divine specialties would not arise. We must submit at the end, however, that we do not want to imply that every new development in the field of biotechnology is morally unproblematic from the Islamic religious point of view. The paradigm presented here only excludes the raising of 'intrinsic' objections against such advances. It leaves open the possibility of evaluating consequentially any new development, i.e. on the basis of benefit-risk analysis.