CHAPTER 10

Islamic Ethics and the *Ḥadīth* of Intention

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1 Introduction

The capacity of the doer to give purpose and meaning to the deed, or intentionality, is a major theoretical and practical concern of Islamic ethics. This chapter illuminates this concern by recourse to a study of the Prophetic report often called the *ḥadīth* of intention: "Actions are indeed [evaluated] according to intentions." I approach this report as an entry point into broader debates on human agency in Islamic ethics. To that end, this chapter pursues the following questions: What is the relationship between intention and action? Does the former cause the latter, or does action construct inner life? How do commonly shared motivations create community and how are such motivations cultivated? Where have Muslim jurists and Sufis converged and diverged in their approaches to intentionality? Are intentions performative (embedded in devotional practices and social transactions) or a matter of the heart (presupposing a self that stands behind bodily actions)?

I grapple with these questions in three conceptual frameworks, which is to say that I relate the *ḥadīth* of intention to (1) the dialectic of inside (*bāṭin*) and outside (*ẓāhir*), (2) communal formation, and (3) the distinction between the transcendental and empirical aspects of juridical-moral norms. My argument, simply put, is that studying the *ḥadīth* of intention in relation to these conceptual frameworks reveals the resourcefulness of *ḥadīth* discourse for thinking about ethical agency, since the commentarial literature on this report elaborates a complex view of intention as a psychosomatic orientation that conjoins the self to the Other, the individual to the community, and morality to legality.

At the outset, I find it apropos to mention my personal motivation for pursuing the question of intentionality and *ḥadīth* discourse. I suspect that this chapter is an attempt on my part to grapple with the challenges posed to intentionality by psychoanalysis, especially the writings of Sigmund Freud (d. 1939) and Jacques Lacan (d. 1981). I have especially struggled to come to terms with two challenges stemming from my study of their writings. First, they hold that the subject of consciousness is not fully self-transparent and one often acts without total knowledge of one's latent motivations. Second, they contend that it might be impossible to constantly orient oneself towards a transcendental

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signifier, that is, to constantly focus on God, when most of one's actions are embedded in social networks of recognition.

The commentarial literature on the *ḥadīth* of intention allows us to think creatively about both challenges posed by psychoanalysis. This is so because Muslim ethicists have elaborated nuanced views of interiority that approach inner life as a theatre of struggle between instinct and reason. They have also acknowledged the social nature of action as well as the communal, even political, import of intentionality. Thus, I read the Islamic ethical insistence on the necessity of introspection, the struggle to purify motivation, as an attempt to constantly destabilise the moral certitude practitioners of piety might enjoy about their actions. In other words, by linking intention to self-probing ethical reasoning, the Islamic ethical tradition posits moral action as a site of self-transcendence.

Now, a note on what follows. I commence with a brief discussion of the *ḥadīth* of intention that locates my inquiry in the turn to practice on the part of religious studies scholars. This section also illuminates how thinking about intention through the lens of religious practice involves attention to its historical scene of emergence, its meaning in concrete social contexts, and the "discursive formations" (or what I have called conceptual frameworks) in which it has been historically understood. To that end, the following sections consider the biography of the *ḥadīth* scholar who popularised this report in the middle of the second/eighth century (section 3); how this report has been linked to political action and communal formation (section 4); the textuality of its citation in its *locus classicus*, namely, al-Bukhārī's (d. 256/870) *Ṣaḥīḥ* ("Authentic") (section 5); the reception of this report, and intentionality more broadly, in classical-era Sufi writings (section 6); the necessity of approaching intention in Islamic ethics as simultaneously empirical and transcendental (section 7); finally, the conclusion considers the methodological salience of using *ḥadīth* texts to think about key concepts in the study of Islamic ethics.

2 Intention and the Turn to Practice

The three conceptual frameworks I mentioned above are alluded to in the "the *ḥadīth* of intention," which I cite below:

> Actions are indeed [evaluated] according to intentions, and in fact what belongs to a man is what he intends. So, whosoever migrates towards God and His Messenger, let it be known that his migration is for God and

> His Messenger. So, whosoever migrates to pursue the world or to marry a woman, let it be known that his migration is for what he migrates towards.
>
> AL-BUKHĀRĪ 2011, 1:180–181[1]

The report's ethical significance was clear to classical-era Muslim religious scholars. For instance, the famed jurist Muḥammad b. Idrīs al-Shāfiʿī (d. 204/820) allegedly said: "This *ḥadīth* contains seventy portals into 'religious understanding' (*fiqh*) … and encompasses one-third of 'religious knowledge' (*ʿilm*)."[2] This Prophetic report has thus been cited copiously and continuously in Muslim religious discourses to underscore the ethical principle that the doer's motive is an important source for determining the moral status of the deed. The *ḥadīth* fleshes out this principle by recourse to an example, what I call "ethnographic illustration," that is, an example considering how people might practice the principle at hand.

The *ḥadīth* of intention places motive at the heart of action, a move that has wide-ranging purchase in both legal and Sufi ideas about human agency (that is, the capacity to transform oneself and one's social world through action). Yet the Islamic ethical principle concerning intention (*niyya*) is not only about being conscious of one's motivations; it also involves truthfulness and sincerity: "intention signifies sincerity; it is a unitary act for the sake of God, the One without peers" (Ibn Ḥajar 1969, 1:12). This is what we might call the pietistic understanding of intention, which has often been elaborated in Sufi texts. At the same time, the idea that Sufi theologians are concerned solely with the transcendental aspects of intentionality is also problematic. As the foremost Sufi theologian and Muslim mystical author of the seventh/thirteenth century Ibn ʿArabī (d. 638/1240) writes: "While intention is unitary with respect to its essence, it changes with respect to its object, and so the consequence of an intention, too, depends on its object" (Ibn ʿArabī 1997, 1:256). *Niyya* thus concerns *how* one desires in the heart but also *what* one desires in the world. Muslim jurists, in turn, consider the moral status of devotional rituals, social transactions, and criminal behaviour. The key question here is: How does empirical action mirror inner motive? Jurists answer this question on a case-by-case basis, complicating our understanding of the inside-outside relationship.

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1 This *ḥadīth*, which is the first report recorded by al-Bukhārī in his *Ṣaḥīḥ*, appears with slight modifications in six additional "books" of this collection. Here, I cite the opening version in *Kitāb Badʾ al-Waḥy* ("Book of the Beginning of Revelation"), *Bāb Badʾ al-Waḥy ʿalā Rasūl Allāh* ("Chapter on How the Divine Revelation Started to Be Revealed to Allāh's Messenger"). For an insightful analysis of this report, see de Francesco (2013).

2 The first saying is cited from al-Khaṭīb's (d. 463/1071) *al-Jāmiʿ* ("The Compendium") and the second from al-Bayhaqī (d. 458/1066) (al-Suyūṭī 1986, 42–43).

The broader ethical principle underlined by this *ḥadīth* thus becomes: because bodily action can reveal, conceal, and displace inner motive, we must approach *niyya* in contextual, concrete terms. This is another way of underscoring the centrality of practice and contingency in ethical theory. The fact that Sufis and jurists have accentuated different aspects of this ethical principle does not necessarily imply that we are talking about two different religious practices. Rather, we can take the Sufi insistence on the inside and the juristic emphasis on the outside as reflecting the two sides of religious practice: the transcendental and the empirical. I address the latter conceptual dichotomy below. Here, let me say more on the advantages of approaching intentionality through the lens of religious practice.

Several scholars of religion have argued for nuanced approaches to religious practice. In her influential ethnography of Egyptian Muslim women's participation in the so-called Islamic Revival of the 1990s, anthropologist Saba Mahmood underscores "the morphology of moral actions" (Mahmood 2005, 25, 119). She argues that when examined as micropolitical strategies, Muslim women's practices of piety can no longer be depoliticised as docile submission to authority, as is often done within secular liberal feminist frameworks. In her focus on practice as a site for understanding ethical life, historian of religion and social ethicist Anna Peterson posits practices of "morality as a living, collective, and active undertaking" (Peterson 2020, 6). The sociologist of religion Robert Wuthnow argues that intention cannot be ignored in any examination of religious practice, since practitioners use rituals to "articulate and enact their intentions" (Wuthnow 2020, 104). He further argues that we must attend to the macrostructures in which religious practices are situated and in which intentions are "reinforced, aligned, and favorably [or unfavorably] assessed" (Wuthnow 2020, 104). These macrostructures include "power dynamics, social interactions, and discursive formations" (Wuthnow 2020, 13). The turn to practice in religious studies, therefore, allows us to place intentionality in Islamic ethics in multiple historiographical, political, and conceptual frameworks. In what follows, I have especially attempted to situate the *ḥadīth* of intention in relation to its salient "discursive formations," namely, the dialogue of the inside and outside, political action and communal formation, and the transcendental and empirical aspects of juridical-moral norms.

3 The Popularisation of the *Ḥadīth* of Intention

To appreciate how this report underscores the dialogue between the inside and outside (as well as the implications of this dialogue for the practice of

Islamic ethics), it is important to first study its historical scene of emergence. It was the traditionist Yaḥyā b. Saʿīd al-Anṣārī (d. 143/760 or 144/761) who first brought this report into wide circulation in the middle of the eighth century. A student of the so-called "seven jurists of Medina," Yaḥyā b. Saʿīd was a famed scholar of Prophetic traditions and a master-jurist in his own right. His pre-eminent status as a man of piety – according to some observers he was an urbane ascetic – made him attractive to the administrators of law and order in the Islamic imperium. The Umayyads appointed him judge (*qāḍī*) of Medina around the year 743 (Judd 2014, 158). The ʿAbbāsids followed suit and appointed him *qāḍī* when they established rule in the Iraqi city of Hāshimiyya. The prosopographical literature remembers Yaḥyā for emphasising sincere intentions and pious actions. The Damascene historian and *ḥadīth* scholar Shams al-Dīn al-Dhahabī (d. 748/1348) informs us that "Yaḥyā is the [chief] narrator of the Prophetic report about actions and intentions, and it is from him that this *ḥadīth* became popular. It is said that around 200 people narrated this report from him" (al-Dhahabī 1996, 5:476–481).

Yaḥyā is therefore the "common link" between narrators of this report before his time period and the succeeding generations of narrators. The term, "common link," was coined by the Orientalist Joseph Schacht (d. 1969) to refer to the narrator who popularised a tradition: "the existence of a significant common link (N.N.) in all or most *isnād*s of a given tradition would be a strong indication in favour of its having originated in the time of N.N." (Schacht 1979, 172). The Dutch historian of *ḥadīth* G.H.A. Juynboll (d. 2010) brought a more nuanced view to this phenomenon and joined Schacht in using "the common link" to "establish the date and place of origin of individual *ḥadīth*s" (Motzki 2004, xxxviii). Yet both Schacht and Juynboll associated the common link phenomenon with forged reports. Harald Motzki (d. 2019) challenged their view by insisting that the common link is not necessarily the forger of a tradition, but in many instances a narrator who might be "characterised as an early systematic collector who professionally passed his material on to students in a teaching circle" (Motzki 2004, xl). This view is more sympathetic to the approach of Muslim traditionists, since for them the common link phenomenon did not automatically imply forgery or invention; rather, it only signalled one of the many defects of transmission that must be considered in evaluating a report's authenticity and normative evidentiary status (Aghaei 2020, 114–115).

The point to underscore here is that it was Yaḥyā who popularised the *ḥadīth* of intention, as is brought out in Juynboll's "chain of narration" (*isnād*) for this report:

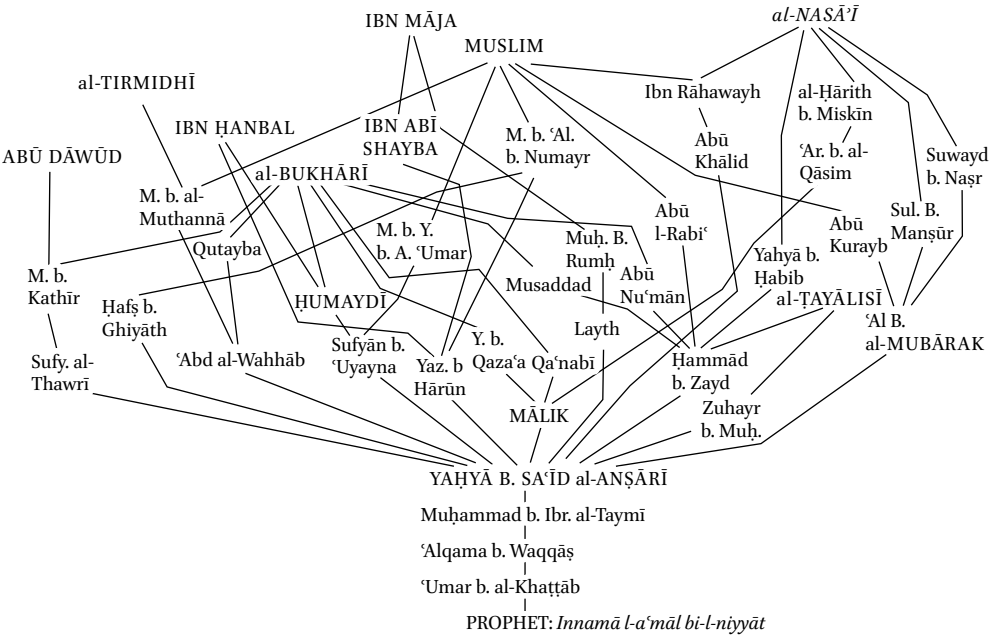

FIGURE 10.1 *Isnād* chart of the *ḥadīth* of intention (Juynboll 2007)

We can only speculate why Yaḥyā might have frequently engaged in the teaching of this *ḥadīth*, since "the early historical literature on *ḥadīth* and *rijāl* does not contain a single clue as to the reason why … Yaḥyā … may have brought the tradition into circulation" (Juynboll 2007, 677). At the same time, Juynboll does insinuate that Yaḥyā's "judicial activities may have dictated the need for such a *niyya* maxim" (Juynboll 2007, 677). This is a valid interpretation because intention is an important aspect to consider when judging human actions in juridical settings. Let me suggest two additional interpretations.

First, the time period in which Yaḥyā was a *qāḍī* coincided with the tumultuous decades that witnessed the transition from the Umayyads to the ʿAbbāsids. While recent scholarship has emphasised a continuity between the two empires instead of the "rupture" presumed by earlier scholars, the two decades of the 740s and the 750s nonetheless saw significant transition in power and patronage. The era was therefore ripe, one might argue, for proliferating a Prophetic teaching that used intention to emphasise loyalty to religion, including in acts of migration. In fact, Yaḥyā himself migrated from Medina to Iraq. This contextualisation allows us to appreciate how ethical ideas accrue value, and how moral practices become normative, in relation to particular social and political dynamics.

Second, the biographical literature on Yaḥyā portrays him to be incredibly learned in *ḥadīth* and jurisprudence and also exceptionally committed to devotional religion (al-Bukhārī 1941–1964, 4.2:275–276; al-Mizzī 1983, 31:346–359; al-Dhahabī 1996, 5:468–481; Juynboll 2007, 668). I would like to suggest that he might have popularised this *ḥadīth* for the sake of exhorting his co-religionists to monitor their motives and to cultivate sincerity. Thus, his profuse transmission of this *ḥadīth* might be seen as an antidote to the habituated, dry practice of devotional religion.

4 Community and Political Action

The attention to Yaḥyā b. Saʿīd enables us to identify the possible social and political contexts in which early Muslims might have cited this report. Yet it is important to underscore that this *ḥadīth*'s linking of intention to political action resonates generally with how intentionality figures in the broader *ḥadīth* discourse. This section first mentions those reports that maintain this link and then discusses the political implications of intention. To begin with, let me mention a report mentioned in Shīʿī sources:

> Actions are indeed according to intentions, and in fact what belongs to a man is what he intends. So, whosoever fights for the sake of what is with God the Loftiest, he will surely find his reward with God the Loftiest. And whosoever fights desiring something of this world, then there is nothing for him except what he intends.
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> al-majlisī 1983, 67:212[3]

3 Let me mention here a few Shīʿī reports in order to illustrate the fact that intentions are central in both Sunnī and Shīʿī *ḥadīth* canons. ʿAlī b. al-Ḥusayn (d. 95/713) is reported to have said: "No action is valid without intention." The Prophet Muḥammad is reported to have said: "The intention of a believer contains more goodness than his action, whereas the intention of the unbeliever contains more wickedness than his action, and every doer does according to his intention." Here, action only brings forth a part of the intention, which contains more goodness in case of a good action and more wickedness in case of an evil action. This view of intention coheres with Ibn ʿArabī's views discussed above, as soul and meaning are the standing reserves of potentiality from which bodies and words derive their actuality. Several reports attributed to Jaʿfar al-Ṣādiq (d. 148/765) are especially illuminating. For example: "The needy and believing servant of God prays, 'Oh Lord! Grant me so that I can do this or that act of goodness. So, because God the Most Sublime and Sanctified knows the truth of his intention, God grants him the same reward that he would have received had he performed that action, for God is All-Encompassing and Ever-Kind." In another narration, Jaʿfar al-Ṣādiq justifies the eternity of hellish punishment and paradisiacal pleasure based on the fact that

Consider also the tradition, "There is no migration after the Conquest of Mecca, but in terms of armed struggle and intention and if you are called to go forth, then go forth [in armed struggle]" (al-Bukhārī 2011, 6:7–8).

In his discussion of intention, the famed Muslim moral theologian Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī (d. 505/1111) mentions the following reports that further link intention to political acts such as warfare and migration:

- Anas b. Mālik (d. 93/712) reports: "The Prophet said during the Tabūk campaign: 'There are many in Medina who, while still in the city, are joined with us in every valley we have crossed, every path we trod that vexed the unbelievers, every provision spent or hunger felt.' The Companions asked, 'How could it be, O Messenger of God, if they were not with us?' He replied: 'They were excusably detained and partook by way of good intention'" (al-Ghazālī 2010, 6:132; al-Ghazālī 2013, 6; al-Bukhārī 2011, 8:619–620).
- "He who fights with the intention only to have his share [of the booty] shall have only what he intends" (al-Ghazālī 2010, 6:133; al-Ghazālī 2013, 6).
- "Fighters fight according to intentions" (al-Ghazālī 2010, 6:134; al-Ghazālī 2013, 7).
- "When the two rows meet, the angels descend to record men their rank: so-and-so fought for the world (*dunyā*); so-and-so fought zealously (*ḥamiyya*); so-and-so fought for clan (*ʿaṣabiyya*). Therefore, say not that this person fell in the path of God, for only he who fights to make God's word supreme is on God's path" (al-Ghazālī 2010, 6:135; al-Ghazālī 2013, 7).

While scholars have questioned the authenticity of some of these reports, these reports do enable us a glimpse of how later authors such as al-Ghazālī underscored the political context in which intention mattered as a concept in early Islam. These reports suggest that communal belonging and political action were especially relevant to early Muslims' ethical thought and practice. Thus, Kevin Reinhart identifies "membership in/leadership of the community" as one of the two primary concerns of formative "Islamic theological ethics," the other being "predestination/moral responsibility" (Reinhart 2005, 250). He insightfully explains that these two issues were "inextricably bound together" and posed a major question for those who aspired to the "moral rigorism of early Islam:" Does "moral failure mean expulsion from the community?" (Reinhart 2005, 250).[4] The moral failure that was linked to political belonging included failures in both devotional rituals and pious intentions.

God has perfect, eternal knowledge of believers' and unbelievers' intentions. For all reports, see al-Māzandarānī 2008, 8:265–268.

4 Roy P. Mottahedeh briefly discusses the link between *niyya* and political loyalty with reference to vows in fourth/tenth century Būyid contexts (Mottahedeh 1980, 65–67).

How do intentions become political? The *ḥadīth* of intention uses the example of migration, namely, the migration of the early believers from Mecca to Medina. We know that according to the standard biographical tradition, the Prophet Muḥammad migrated to Medina after thirteen years of preaching in his hometown of Mecca. For a believer to migrate with Muḥammad implied leaving behind home and family ties. Migration was thus an act of fidelity, which demonstrated one's commitment to an ideological community (instead of a tribal community). However, what if a believer had migrated for a reason other than pleasing God and joining Muḥammad's community? What if one had migrated for the sake of a prospective marriage partner or to sell one's merchandise in a new market? Is this migration also an act of fidelity and does it also secure political belonging? The *ḥadīth* of intention questions this type of migration. *Ḥadīth* commentators state that this report is about a person who had allegedly migrated from Mecca to Medina for the sake of marrying a woman named Umm Qays (Ibn Ḥajar 1969, 1:10; al-Suyūṭī 1986, 37–38). Consequently, the man became known as "the migrant of Umm Qays" (*muhājir Umm Qays*). While the story is hard to verify, it does furnish us with the context needed to understand the practical, and in fact political, implications of intention. The strong connection we see between the *ḥadīth* of *niyya* and community-forming political actions, such as migration and warfare, suggests that the idea of pure intentions served to consolidate loyalty in believers' hearts, so that the onset of adversity and adversaries would not weaken believers' attachment to the faith community. The particular example of "the migrant of Umm Qays" gives an incredibly political charge to intention, signifying intentions as personal and political.

5 Al-Bukhārī's Creative Citation

The above explanations underscore the point that the *ḥadīth* of intention is deeply connected to the dialectic of inside and outside and that intentionality is at once a matter of private devotion and political belonging. I now turn to the *locus classicus* of this *ḥadīth*, namely al-Bukhārī's *Ṣaḥīḥ*, to examine some further aspects. This famed collection of Prophetic speech commences with this report, and it is significant that al-Bukhārī placed it at the beginning of a chapter concerning the lofty theme of divine revelation (*waḥy*), suggesting, albeit implicitly, that the Prophet's sincere search for truth was rewarded in the form of Qur'ānic revelation, for God gifts one according to one's intentions. Recall the Prophet's foundational migration, one that took him from commercial engagements to contemplative experiences on the Mount of Light. By

taking up solitude in a cave outside Mecca, the Prophet Muḥammad intended to find transcendental meaning and message. Because what God gifts people corresponds to their intentions, the Prophet received divine revelation as the reward of his foundational quest/intention to find God. Here, at least two questions must be addressed. First: Why does al-Bukhārī include the *ḥadīth* of intention at the beginning of "The Book of Revelation?" Second: What is the significance of starting with "revelation?"[5] The *ḥadīth* commentator, Ibn Ḥajar al-ʿAsqalānī (d. 852/1449), addresses both questions.

Ibn Ḥajar speculates about al-Bukhārī's possible intent behind the textual decision to commence with this *ḥadīth*. Imagine, the commentator asks his readers, the following words on al-Bukhārī's lips: "I intended to collect the revealed Sunna transmitted from the Prophet Muḥammad – who is the best of all created beings – so that my [sincere] intention would ensure the goodness of my action [of compiling *ḥadīths*]" (Ibn Ḥajar 1969, 1:8; see also al-Qasṭallānī 1996, 1:67). Note how these words posit the Sunna a revealed text, hearkening back to al-Shāfiʿī's point that the Prophet's speech was "cast into his heart" by God.[6] This is also the reason that al-Bukhārī begins a collection of *ḥadīth* with "revelation," accentuating the revealed or scriptural nature of Prophetic speech. Thus, the reader is encouraged both to think of *ḥadīth* as revelation and to engage in an act of purifying his or her intention for engaging in the study of *ḥadīth*. In other words, the reader is indirectly being directed to contemplate this question: What motivates my engagement with divine revelation? In this way, al-Bukhārī's textual decision to commence his collection by coupling revelation and intention performs the communicative work that is usually reserved for exhortative prefaces.

Ibn Ḥajar mentions that some commentators have suggested that al-Bukhārī cites this report in lieu of an opening "sermon" or *khuṭba* ("exhortative preface" in this textual context). This is so because in some traditions it is reported that the Prophet's companion ʿUmar b. al-Khaṭṭāb (d. 23/644) recited this *ḥadīth* "on the pulpit," and in another narration, the *ḥadīth* begins with the Prophet saying, "O people! Actions are indeed according to intentions." These textual cues lend support to the idea that this *ḥadīth* is exhortative in substance, an ideal Prophetic aphorism befitting the sermon genre. We must also mention that by opening with this *ḥadīth*, al-Bukhārī might be merely following tradition, an

5 The *ḥadīth* scholar Muslim b. al-Ḥajjāj (d. 261/875) opens his collection with "Faith," while "Purification" opens the other four books of the six canonical books (*al-kutub al-sitta*) in Sunnī Islam.

6 In his *al-Risāla* ("Epistle"), al-Shāfiʿī (d. 204/820) remarked: "Both [the Qurʾān and the Sunna] came to him [Muḥammad] from God's grace, just as God intended, and just as other acts of grace came to him" (al-Shāfiʿī 2015, 48–49).

established custom of his righteous predecessors. In this regard, the following textual fragment from another Mamluk-era commentator, namely, Badr al-Dīn al-ʿAynī (d. 855/1451), sheds some light: "The predecessors [of the community] have preferred starting their discourse with the *ḥadīth* of intention for the sake of indicating their sincerity" (al-ʿAynī 1970, 1:13). Note that ʿAbd al-Raḥmān b. Mahdī (d. 198/814) is reported to have said, "he who wants to write a book, let him start with the tradition: works are to be judged by their intentions (*man arāda an yuṣannifa kitāban fa-l-yabdaʾ bi-ḥadīth al-aʿmāl bi-l-niyyāt*)" (Juynboll 2007, 676).[7] These explanations attest to al-Bukhārī's success in compiling a text that invites such rich observations on the part of commentators and readers. Let us now examine how other Muslim scholars approached the theme of intentionality.

6 Intention in Sufi Writings

The interplay between inside and outside as being a major feature of the Islamic ethical tradition's understanding of intentionality is especially brought out in Sufi writings.[8] In his *al-Riʿāya li-Ḥuqūq Allāh* ("Observing God's Due"), a text that was "composed in the form of counsels given to a disciple in response to questions on his part" (Smith 1935, 44), the mystical theologian al-Ḥārith al-Muḥāsibī (d. 243/857) defines *niyya* as "the resolution on the part of the believer to align his action to an idea from among ideas. Hence, when he determines that he will perform *this* particular action for *this* particular idea, then such a resolution is called *niyya*, be it for God's sake or for another's" (al-Muḥāsibī n.d., 246). Furthermore, al-Muḥāsibī says, "intention thus covers two meanings: the resolution to do a particular action and doing something while desiring a particular meaning [object of thought]" (al-Muḥāsibī n.d., 246). It is in this sense that I term *niyya* a psychosomatic orientation; it is an inner movement that is expressed by and embodied in physical action.

In his *Qūt al-Qulūb* ("Nourishment of the Hearts") Abū Ṭālib al-Makkī (d. 386/996) adopts a holistic approach to the centrality of *niyya* in everyday ethics: intention pervades not only the formal practices of piety but, also,

> eating, drinking, attire, sleeping, and marital relations, since these are all actions for which one shall be questioned [by God]. If one performs these actions for God's pleasure, then they increase his tally of good works.

7 Ibn Taymiyya (2004, 18:246) makes a similar point in his analysis of this *ḥadīth*.

8 This paragraph and the next two are also discussed in Mian 2022.

> However, if one undertakes these actions in pursuit of lust or for the sake of another's pleasure, then they end up amplifying the tally of evil deeds. This is [the meaning of the Prophet's words] for every man is what he intends.
>
> AL-MAKKĪ 2001, 3:1342

Al-Makkī additionally says that *niyya* is a gift of God and that a single action can contain multiple motivations. In this way, a single action becomes a source of plentiful merit. Such merit, however, is contingent on not only the doer's knowledge of and assent to the revealed norms but also the grace of God (al-Makkī 2001, 3:1343).

In al-Ghazālī's thinking we find a finessed account of *niyya*. He retains the link between action and what al-Muḥāsibī calls idea (that is, between *ʿamal* and *maʿnā*) and also al-Makkī's idea of "multiple intentions." However, instead of "idea" or "meaning" (*maʿnā*), al-Ghazālī opts for a more psychologically-laden word, namely, *gharaḍ* (aim or purpose). To that end, he cites the *ḥadīth* under study in this chapter in a refined discussion of intention as well as sincerity (*ikhlāṣ*) and truthfulness (*ṣidq*).[9] For al-Ghazālī intention becomes especially relevant for highlighting the dialogue between the inside and outside, since he defines *niyya* as an "intermediate attribute" (of the soul). He writes, "intention is the soul's springing forth, direction, and inclination towards what it perceives as its purpose [intended object], in this life or in the hereafter" (al-Ghazālī 2010, 6:155). "The springing forth of the soul" – *inbiʿāth al-nafs*, which one might even translate as the flow of the inner onto the outer – is a beautiful phrase that captures the dynamic way in which *niyya* mediates the inside and outside.

Ibn ʿArabī illuminates the relationship between the inside and outside through three analogies. Intention is like the body's soul; it is similar to the rainwater that nourishes the ground of action; finally, action and intention are akin to word and meaning (Ibn ʿArabī 1997, 1:256–259). These multiple analogies allow us to view intention as source, sustainer, and substance of action. Yet Ibn ʿArabī also encourages us to approach intentions as taking place in a liminal space that is the scene of both coherence and displacement, unity and difference. He further complexifies this view when he posits the relationship between water and intention as ontological and not merely analogical. He does so in his discussion of purification rituals, where he elaborates the

9 Al-Ghazālī approaches *niyya* under five subheadings: the virtues of good intention, its reality, how intention is superior to action, the relationship between action and intention, and the difference between intention and choice.

ingenious insight that the reason why some jurists do not require intention as a necessary condition for ritual ablution is because of the role water plays in this practice. Recall that according to Qur'ānic discourse, water is the source of all life (Q 21:30). In Ibn ʿArabī's imaginal schema, life/soul and intention are structurally identical (*niyya* for him is *rūḥ maʿnawī*). Thus, because water is life, its use in the practice of ablution already presupposes the presence of the soul (read: intention). Hence, there is no need to identify formal intention-making as a condition of ritual ablution, since the liquid substance one uses in this practice assumes the same relationship to flesh as intention does to action (Ibn ʿArabī 1997, 1:397).

7 Scholarship on Intentionality in Islamic Ethics

The deep resonance between the inside and outside insofar as the concept of intentionality in Islamic ethics is concerned has not always been appreciated by scholars. Paul Powers has studied the ritualistic and performative dimensions of *niyya* in Islamic law. He finds fault with those scholars who deploy *niyya* "to look for a 'deep' or spiritual component of ritual" (Powers 2006, 64). For Powers,

> *Niyya* is what one does with the mind while making certain ritualised bodily movements and verbal utterances … The legal texts do not indicate a capacity or mental mode such as "will" that is separate from, and which directs, the *niyya*. Rather, one simply intends, formulates *niyya*, and this is the inner self in a ritual mode. There is nothing "further inside" than *niyya*, no "self" standing back while the mind/body performs the acts of ritual.
>
> POWERS 2006, 203

While Powers rightly draws attention to the "physical, bodily, and praxis-oriented qualities so central to Islamic ritual law and practice," his limited sources reflect only a provisional and partial view of *niyya* in Islamic law and ethics (Powers 2006, 72). For Talal Asad, this position sees ritual prayer, for example, as "an external effect" even if "will and intent are viewed as a conjoined internal cause" (Asad 2018, 81).[10] On my reading, however, Powers effec-

10 Asad further states: "What worries me about this way of looking at the problem is that the most important point of the prayer (the subject learning to articulate her faith) is missed, and the traditional norm being learned is confused with the experience of the performed – that is, with what she thinks the prayer means. The recited words and body

tively partitions the inside and outside, leaving little room for understanding the meaning and function of ritual in the broader framework of Muslim piety.

I thus question Powers' hasty conclusion about "no self" in ritual worship. Unfortunately, he does not engage with works of moral philosophy and legal theory, which do presuppose a moral self and discuss the transcendental consequences of actions.[11] Pre-modern Muslim jurists in fact cited the *ḥadīth* of intention in both works of substantive law and in texts of legal theory. I provide two illustrations to make this point.

My first illustration comes from the Andalusian jurist and littérateur Ibn Ḥazm (d. 456/1064). He justifies his jurisprudential approach to the issue of buying and selling musical instruments by recourse to the *ḥadīth* of intention. On the one hand, the sale of musical instruments is forbidden, argues Ibn Ḥazm, when the buyer intends to use such instruments in sinful behaviour (*fisq*), such as listening to music in a way that arouses illicit sexual desire. On the other hand, the purchase of the same instruments is permissible for someone who seeks self-comfort and pleasure (*tarwīḥ al-nafs*), which in turn might strengthen one's willingness to perform the devotional rituals. "He seeks to enliven himself by means of music," explains Ibn Ḥazm, "and he is obedient and virtuous, and his action [of buying these instruments] is valid" (Ibn Ḥazm 2003, 7:567; cited in Kaddouri 2013, 234). It is noteworthy that Ibn Ḥazm makes repeated references to a self that intends and becomes either pious or impious due to the effects of intention. The invocation of this "self" thus problematises Powers' claim about the lack of a self behind ritual performance.

My second illustration comes from a text of legal theory. The Egyptian Ḥanafī jurist Ibn Nujaym (d. 970/1563) discusses *niyya* in a major text on legal rules and axioms. He invokes the *ḥadīth* of intention in his discussion of the juristic maxim, "there is no reward except with *niyya*." He explains that the *ḥadīth*

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movements in prayer aim not at creating a belief (an intellectual doctrine) but an attitude of reverence and a desire (intention) to get closer to God. I stress that I refer here not to the private experience of every performer but to the point of the prayer as stipulated by the discursive tradition" (Asad 2018, 81).

11 Missing from Powers' account are several important treatments of *niyya* by pre-modern and modern Muslim jurists and theologians. A broader view of *niyya* reveals that a host of traditionists and jurists themselves recognise its spiritual dimensions. See, for example, the following works on *niyya*, which are all missing from Powers' book: Ibn Abī l-Dunyā (d. 281/894), *al-Ikhlāṣ wa-l-Niyya* ("Sincerity and Intention"); al-Suyūṭī (d. 911/1505), *Muntahā l-Āmāl* ("Ultimate Hopes"); al-Qārī (d. 1014/1606), *Taṭhīr al-Ṭawiyya* ("Smoothening the Folds"); al-Kūrānī (d. 1101–1690), *Iʿmāl al-Fikr* ("Activate the Thinking"); Ibn ʿAjība (d. 1224/1809), *Tashīl al-Madkhal* ("Simplifying the Introduction"); al-Ḥusaynī (d. 1332/1914), *Kitāb Nihāyat al-Iḥkām* ("Book on the Goal of Legislation"). In addition to these monographs, there are countless texts in various genres where Muslim authors from a range of disciplinary backgrounds comment on *niyya*.

of intention occasions "a verdict on or a moral assessment of actions" (*ḥukm al-aʿmāl*), which is of two types: transcendental and empirical. The first verdict or assessment "pertains to the afterlife and concerns the question of reward or punishment" (Ibn Nujaym 1999, 17). We can call this "the transcendental *ḥukm*," to borrow words from Ebrahim Moosa (1998). The second assessment – or, "the empirical *ḥukm*" – concerns "the validity or invalidity of actions in this world" (Ibn Nujaym 1999, 17). While a jurist often has to restrict himself to determine the empirical validity or invalidity of human actions, Ibn Nujaym acknowledges that intentions also have consequences in the afterlife and implicate a soul or self, a moral subject (al-Ḥamawī 2011, 1:63–67). The Ḥanafī jurist Aḥmad b. Muḥammad al-Ḥamawī (d. 1098/1687) further clarifies that the Ḥanafīs – as opposed to the Shāfiʿīs – lack consensus on the necessity of *niyya* as a prerequisite for the empirical validity of an action. Yet, the Ḥanafīs unanimously affirm the transcendental implications of *niyya*, that is, its significance for thinking about reward or punishment in the afterlife (al-Ḥamawī 2011, 1:63–67).[12] Thus, the transcendental *ḥukm*, which pertains to the afterlife and implicates a soul, forms a part of the legal discourse about *niyya* (Moosa 1998).

These two illustrations – the first from Ibn Ḥazm and the second from Ibn Nujaym – serve to demonstrate my point, namely, that jurists are cognisant of moral subjectivity and attend to both the empirical and transcendental aspects of norms. I thus remain wary of the claim, on the part of Powers, that Islamic substantive law does not presuppose a moral self. Below I consider how other scholars have studied intention to highlight some alternative perspectives on the subject matter in the study of Islamic ethics.

The legal historian Oussama Arabi has studied *niyya* in the context of modern legal reform by concentrating on the Egyptian jurist ʿAbd al-Razzāq al-Sanhūrī's (d. 1971) efforts to modernise Islamic law. The latter activated a subjectivist notion of intentions in legal practices by turning to the Ḥanbalī, and to a lesser extent Mālikī, treatment of intent or ulterior motive in contract law. The "pietist subjectivist bent of Ḥanbalī law" emphasises both the intent of the buyer and the seller (for example, with reference to an arms seller whose

12 See also Ibn Kamāl Pāshā's (d. 940/1534) discussion of this point in his treatise on the first "book" of al-Bukhārī's *Ṣaḥīḥ* (*Majmūʿ Rasāʾil al-ʿAllāma Ibn Kamāl Bāshā* ["Collection of Treatises of the Scholar Ibn Kamāl Pāshā"]). Already in the late third/ninth and early fourth/tenth centuries, the Egyptian Ḥanafī jurist Abū Jaʿfar al-Ṭaḥāwī (d. 321/933) argued that the report, "actions are indeed according to intentions," does not establish "the principle that the appropriate intention must accompany a speech act for the act to be deemed legally valid. He reinterprets the *ḥadīth* as confirming simply that Divine reward in the hereafter for a given action correlates with the agent's intention in performing the action" (Syed 2017, 160).

customer might use a purchased weapon to execute a mass shooting) (Arabi 1997, 220). This subjectivist bent appealed to al-Sanhūrī because of its resonance with "the modern French theory of the determining cause or motive" (Arabi 204). Al-Sanhūrī's reformist efforts illustrate that Islamic legal traditions can be read in multiple ways to support different ideas about ethics and moral responsibility.

The historical anthropologist Brinkley Messick directly approaches the question of subjectivity: is there a theory of the self that is implied in Islamic legal thought and practice? For Messick, the writings of Muslim theologians and jurists on intention elaborate "crucial components of the legal theory of the *shar'ī* subject" (Messick 2001, 153). Messick emphasises the usefulness of contextualising this ethical subject within "a history of the self and the individual" that is distinct from Eurocentric conceptualisations of subjectivity and individuality (Messick 2001, 151). The contours of the Muslim ethical self also become clear when this self is posited in relation to God. While a "separation of intentionality and expression" does not characterise the divine word, human language indicates a lack of equivalence between thought and expression (Messick 2001, 178). It seems to me that the crucial point here is to appreciate the vulnerability and uncertainty that infuses all human intentions and actions. Thus, a moral action, according to the Islamic ethical tradition, expresses the agency of a self, but its immediate and final meaning remains contingent on two factors that exceed the self, namely, public interpretation and divine judgment.

Arabi and Messick both highlight the need to situate the jurisprudence of intent in broader social, political, and intellectual contexts. Likewise, it is also important to acknowledge the complex intersectional realities in which contemporary Muslims observe norms that they take to be divinely sanctioned, that is, norms based in the Sharī'a. Muslims' everyday practices are situated in networks of local and global histories (of nation-states, market economies, and ethical traditions) as well as vectors of embodied differences, such as race/ethnicity, class, gender, sexual orientation, and bodily capacity. As historian of Islam and Muslim feminist scholar Kecia Ali points out, "Our experiences differ dramatically based on our race and socio-economic status, our family configurations, our sexual orientations, our marital statuses, our geographic locations" (Ali 2016, 205). Thus, in our bid to identify the moral self, or ideas about interiority and subjectivity, we have to be cautious. The sources might reveal a reified self at work, but this generic "un-marked" self will not do for everyone. In other words, after recovering a moral self in classical Islamic law, there still remains the question: How do we bridge the gap between the legal tradition's idealised moral self, one who thrives in textual spaces, and ordinary

Muslim selves, those who survive in physical spaces? The key is to engage in critical and creative acts of translation, whether translating between textual representation or social reality, or interior states and physical actions.

The need to approach intentionality within the contingencies of social life was acknowledged by Muslim moral theologians such as al-Ghazālī. For Ebrahim Moosa, al-Ghazālī saw intention as the elixir that purifies knowledge and practice. A focus on inner motive, Moosa argues, has the capacity to humanise those moral acts that appear as improper or subversive (Moosa 2005, 131). Thus, our judgments about our own actions and others' actions should resist the convenient but crude binary of good and evil. Sometimes, evil intentions lurk behind good deeds and vice versa. It goes without saying that the interpretation of intention is not so easy, but the point here is that attention to intent and motive complexifies, and can thus humanise, a range of actions whose moral status we might not understand at first sight. In his insightful commentary on al-Ghazālī, Moosa also theorises the central dyad that concerns us in this chapter, namely, the relationship between the inside and outside. These two terms animate a paradox that consists of an "inwardness of faith that is incommensurate with its outwardness – an exterior of faith not identical with its interior" (Moosa 2005, 132). This incommensurability, however, sets the stage for approaching Islamic ethics as a project of self-transcendence.

8 Conclusion

This chapter has demonstrated the salience of *ḥadīth* texts as important sources for the study of Islamic ethics as well as the need to engage with ethical themes and questions on the part of researchers in *ḥadīth* studies. In the above analysis, I have situated "the *ḥadīth* of intention" in three discursive formations that illuminate its analytical purchase for the critical study of Islamic ethics. Intentionality in this ethical tradition is a psychosomatic orientation that presupposes the dialogue of self and society and relates to communal formation as well as the legal/moral divide of human actions (which I explored by looking at how intention is important for both the empirical and transcendental valences of juridical-moral norms). To a large extent, these three conceptual points of reference enabled me to grapple with the psychoanalytical challenges to the intentional subject. In the Islamic ethical tradition, the spiritual and material dimensions of intentionality are not easily separable. The actions we undertake with our limbs both extend and inform psychic life. The movements of the heart, too, seek bodily forms. Intention, therefore, is irreducible to inner experience or linguistic or bodily performatives. I have also suggested above that this view of intentionality resonates with scholarship on religious

practices. Finally, I underscored the need to engage in critical and creative acts of translation when thinking about intention at the threshold of the inside and outside.

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