

Ethical Transformation of Individual Managers through Spirituality: A Sufi Perspective

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Abstract

The business ethics literature appears to focus more on philosophy and to have overlooked spirituality. Though spirituality has started to be taken into consideration in the field of Management, the Islamic perspective is still neglected. In this paper we aim to address this knowledge gap in the field of business ethics through Sufism representing Muslim spirituality. We do so, by drawing upon the written works of a great Sufi sage, Imam Al-Ghazali and a contemporary Sufi master, Etsko Schuitema, who is using his Sufi teachings to impact managers and their practices. From their writings we identify two key Sufi messages that are having a transformative impact on managers: the *inward growth* requiring a correctness of the self and dealing with one's intention and the inner realm, and the *outward growth* requiring a transactional correctness and service to others, cultivating an awareness of the outer world. This paper shows how we can use these messages from Sufism to spiritually transform management practice. By introducing a Sufi perspective we start a much needed and overdue conversation in business ethics literature on ethical transformation of individual managers through spirituality and how we can approach it from Sufism.

Introduction

Much contemporary ethical literature seems concerned with the external practical manifestations of an ethical system rather than the underlying theoretical and ideational universe that leads to these manifestations. Therefore, there is a need to explore different fundamental assumptions and inner worldviews supporting ethical thoughts and behaviors. Meanwhile, as mainstream Western business ethics seem to be showing obvious signs of exhaustion in the wake of the Global Financial Crisis and the corporate scandals since the dawn of this millennium, calls has gone out to look into insights from non-Western perspectives (e.g., Jones and Millar, 2010). Also, drawing on Islamic perspective, we seek to explicitly inaugurate a research agenda on Sufism and business ethics in this paper.

Westwood and Ul Haq (2012) point out in a recent comprehensive review of Islam in management and organization studies that this area is registering increasing interest among scholars. The business ethics field is no exception to this trend. While the research directly related to Islam and business ethics in Western academic business ethics journals is miniscule compared to other areas, it is expanding at an increasing pace. For example, in the *Journal of Business Ethics*, the number of results related to “Islam” as a key word increased from 10 to 55 results in two decades between 1990-1999 and 2000-2009. This small but growing body of Islamic business ethics scholarship has covered a wide range of topics from both normative and descriptive perspectives. In order to determine what Islam has to say on a particular topic e.g., employment principles (Syed and Ali, 2010), scholars have directly resorted to their understandings of the primary sources of Islam, especially the Qur’an. Direct access to the primary sources has sometimes been supplemented with references to *fiqh*. The latter refers to the corpus of Islamic jurisprudence crafted over the centuries by *ulema* i.e., religiously trained scholars in Islamic law, analogous to rabbis in Judaism. Thus, the Islamic business ethics research tends to either use the primary sources of Islam and/or Islamic legal scholarship to articulate an Islamic view on some ethical issues in business e.g., stock market speculations (Naughton and Naughton, 2000).

This Islamic business ethics literature has ignored a major tradition within Islam for addressing ethical questions. This tradition has played throughout the centuries a major role in shaping Muslim collective and individual consciousness, particularly in the realm of ethics (Howell and Van Bruinessen, 2007). That tradition is Islamic mysticism known popularly in the Western world as Sufism and as *Tassawuf* in the Muslim world. In our review of the top journals comprising the Islamic business ethics field, particularly the *Journal of Business Ethics* and *Business Ethics Quarterly*, we came across not a single article that discussed Sufism in the period from 1999 – 2009. Only recently in 2010 has the Islamic business ethics field started a conversation with Sufism.

This conversation has started with an article by Karakas (2010). Karakas (2010, p. 75) defines Sufism as follows:

A lifelong Islamic discipline which builds up the character and inner life of a person by purifying the heart spiritually and investing it with virtues.

It is also known as the mystical philosophy of Islam that focuses on diminishing the ego through multiple ways including regulating physical need. The ultimate aim is to reach the pure love of God that is believed to be the ultimate satisfaction.

In short, Sufism among the *uloom* (sciences) of Islam is that *'ilm* (science) of Islamic learning that is focused primarily though not exclusively on the inward aspects of a human being. It is the Islamic science of purifying the heart so that a human being has inner strength to follow the exemplary life of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) which is the gateway, according to classical and contemporary Islamic scholarship, for tasting and experiencing the Divine (Yusuf, 2004).

We wish to build on the conversation about Sufism in Islamic business ethics initiated by Karakas. Karakas' paper asks how can the spiritual experiences of managers be conceptualized using categories from Sufism, particularly Anatolian Sufism. We prefer a different but related question: What messages from Sufism can and are being practically mobilized to awaken spirituality in managers and make work into a spiritual vocation?

To address this question, we draw on the teaching of one of the greatest Sufi scholars in Islamic history, Imam Abu Hamid ibn Muhammad Al-Ghazali (d.1111 CE), in order to see what new insights can be gained from Al-Ghazali's thoughts in ethically transforming managers so that the current managerial ethical crisis plaguing us can be mitigated and future ones can be averted. We also draw upon the entire written works (four in total) of a contemporary Sufi master, Etsko Schuitema (also known as Shaykh Ibrahim). The author of these works is a traditionally trained and prominent Sufi Master. He is based in South Africa and has been running a highly successful international management consulting firm called the "Human Excellence Group" over the last two decades.

Our paper being a conceptual and theoretical piece rather than an empirical one adopts the following structure. We address our above mentioned research question by a close reading of the above mentioned texts and sources following the practice of writing conceptual pieces in management and organization studies based on close readings of texts (e.g., Khan and Koshul, 2011), including in business ethics scholarship (e.g., Feldman, 2004). Among the four texts, we rely and focus primarily on two texts (Schuitema, 2004; 2011) as they are the ones most directly written for a management audience. From our close reading, we trace two key Sufi messages that run through these texts and how in practical terms they are being unpacked and translated by Schuitema for a contemporary management audience to produce profound spiritual experiences in them that make their work more meaningful. We then draw out some implications of these messages for enriching and conclude with some suggestions for future research directions opened up by this paper.

The word Sufi is derived from *Safa* meaning pure. Therefore, the first thing a Sufi undertakes is the purification of the heart. Tasawuf is a journey of the heart. It requires devoting the self to purification and servitude. The Quran is talking about tazkiya of the nafs in the Quranic verse: "Qad aflaha man zakaha wa qad khaba man dasaha: the one who nurtures his soul is the one who has success, and the one who stunts its growth is

destroyed" (91:9-10). Therefore, tazkiya is about nurturing and growing. What are the requirements for such growth? How this growth occurs?

Drawing on Sufism teaching as developed by Imam Al-Ghazali and on Schuitema's practical studies, we identify mainly two dimensions of the process of growth. First, an inward growth requiring a correctness of the self and dealing with one's intention and the inner realm. Second, an outward growth requiring a transactional correctness and service to others, cultivating an awareness of the outer world.

Inward growth: Focus on Intention (*Niya*)

In his teaching related to ethics, Al-Ghazali emphasizes the importance of intention giving it precedence over action. Purifying one's intention of anything that is opposed to God's will is a prerequisite to connecting one's heart to the celestial world (Alavi, 2007). Obviously, on a daily basis we have to make decisions and take actions. How can we know that we are doing the right thing? An authentic hadith (saying of the Prophet Mohammed peace be upon him) states: "Actions are by intentions". All our actions are rooted in intentions. Therefore, we should first turn our attention inwardly towards intentions. Referring to Schuitema (2004), the inner growth is translated into a maturation process. This process is about the transmutation of intention from being here to get, to being here to give. Life is presented as a journey from birth to death. "We arrive getting it all and we leave giving it all" (p.3). The distinction between maturity and immaturity lies with intentions. The bird of maturity starts when the self is engaged in the moment based on what the person is giving to the other rather than what the self is taking. Schuitema (2004) identifies two types of intentions: one malevolent linked with immaturity and one benevolent associated with maturity.

Malevolent Intention (Immaturity stage)

Conditional motive, control, manipulation, managing outcomes, and taking are indivisible facets of immaturity. When an adult acts on the basis of a self-serving motive focusing his attention on: "I am here to get" which is characteristic of the infantile stage, he is seen as immature. A self-serving intention destroys the other as the other is reduced to the status of a resource for the use of the self. This intent derives from a view of the world as a competitive place where only the fittest survive. The existence of the self is therefore confirmed by the negation and manipulation of the other. The key quality of the inner state of malevolence is arrogance (*Kibr*). Actions based on arrogance will seek to trivialize the other as one's regard the self to be superior to others. They will be presumptuous and dismissive (p.49). When the self is arrogant, the other would tend to trivialize the self. When someone uses people as the means to get a job done, he is taking from them and naturally they will resist to him leading to discontentment from both sides. This discontentment comes from the fact that the intention is opposite to the source of fructification and fulfillment.

Benevolent Intention (Maturity stage)

Life starts with birth and end up with death. Death is the ultimate argument for benevolent intention. When we die, we give it all away. If we have not been prepared to give away, everything will be taken away (p.74). Consequently, maturity requires to get rid off expectations, engendering greed and frustrations, and focus on intent rather than outcomes. A mature person would shift his or her attention from “I am here to get” or “I give to get” to: “I am here to give”. This implies a worldview based on the assumption that the universe is compassionate which generate gratitude and allow to act with generosity. The inner attribute of benevolent intention is submission. Thus the mature person will submit to the moment and to what the situation requires. Among the qualities this person should have: trust and gratitude. The inward attribute of trust enables the outward act of courage as gratitude enables generosity. A benevolent person would build intentions not on conditional motives and manage without expectations. By focusing on the quality of what he does to the other, one’s can always be happy and at peace because how he responds is in his power (p.70). This way, the person will be elevated and will grow.

Schuitema (2004) compares the journey from immaturity to maturity to a transition from dark to light moving from a malevolent intention considering the other to be there to serve the self to a benevolent intention where the self is there to serve the other (p.74). However, in tis journey there is a point of conflict in the middle where there is a lack of clarity of purpose and a mixture of motive. This situation would trigger a review of motive and help advance one step further toward benevolent intention and highly evolved souls. Also, during the process of maturation, a person goes through different configurations of the self, progressing along a continuum going from dark to light. This spiritual development requires an inner struggle against the self, known as *Mujahada*.

Stages of inward growth

In a fine-grained conceptualization, based on classical Sufi texts, Schuitema (2004) developed six aspirations representing categories of inner growth. These categories enable further refinement of our understanding of the process of maturation. Hence, in the journey from immaturity to maturity, people would go through 6 identified stages corresponding to different concerns and aspirations. The source of contentment of people would also very from stage to the other as summarized in the following table:

Stages	Aspirations	Contentment
1	Body	Full belly
2	Emotion	Command other
3	Mind	Significance from the other
4	Community	Co-operation
5	Annihilation	Service
6	Going on	Unconditional surrender of the self

Noticeably, through the six stages of human's journey, the self is sublimated into a higher form (*hal* and *maqam* using Sufi terminology). The elevation and movement in the direction of maturity happens when the current state is transcended based on correctness and benevolent intention. However, when we keep acting based on malevolent intention, we get stuck and prevent the self from growing. One important criteria and condition to the human spiritual evolution and growth is to move from seeing things around as functional to being more meaningful. When we start this journey as young children, we believe that "all is function" turning our attention to: "I am here to get". When facing with resistance, we recognize the necessity to appease the other in order to get what we want: "I give to get". At this stage, we see "meaning as functional". Later on, as we recognize the importance of attributes such as love, generosity and kindness, we start making things work practically subscribing to the logic: "function is meaningful". At later stage, we realize that our lives have meaning because the very nature of the relationship between consciousness and the rest of existence is meaningful. Therefore, "all is meaning".

In this quest for meaning, the person undertaking the inner struggle to grow the self, learn how to be prepared for the ultimate station and the gateway of departure, namely death. Therefore, in the advanced stages of maturation, a person would shift the focus from needs, rights and duties to values. She or he would do the right thing and see things as they are, without blame, judgment or expectations. In this voyage towards spiritual transformation and inner growth, a person would reach at stage 5 the station (*maqam*) of *fana'* (annihilation) and ultimately at stage 6 the highest *maqam* of *baqa'* (going on). At these levels, aspirations are about nullifying all conditional intent as they destroy the self itself. "When intent is absolutely unconditional, the self is no longer conditioned"

(p.119). To be truly unconditional suggests having no concern about outcomes. This level of maturity implies a change of the inner worldview. When the suspicion that the universe is a dangerous and competitive place is replaced by the assumption that the world is a friendly place governed by compassion, we tend to be more generous than greedy. The patterning of intent would become: "I have received in greater measure than I could possibly want, therefore I give" (p.120). At this stage, a person is no longer having a conversation with the "social other", she or he is engaging in a conscious conversation with the "Totality of the other". The "Totality of the other" assumes the station of Lord, while the self assumes the station of servant (p.121). This inward growth through the maturation of intent preparing the self to be at the service of the other will naturally lead to an outward growth.

Outward growth: Service to others

In the journey from immaturity to maturity and from dark to light, intent and actions should coincide. By rectifying the inward and moving one's intention from getting to giving unconditionally, the process of growth will expand and reflect in the outward. According to a traditional saying: "the leader or master of a group is the one at their service" (*sayyidu'l qawmi khadimuhum*). Therefore, a master is a person who is in the situation to give. True leadership is more about service than power and domination. It requires self-mastery first leading to correctness towards others allowing to "do the right thing". In a hadith of the Prophet (peace be upon him), it is stated: "*Kullu kum ra'in was kullu ra'in mas'oolun an rai'yatatihi...*" meaning that "*Everyone of you is a caretaker (steward), and every caretaker (steward) is responsible for those in charge.*" Therefore, since everyone is held responsible towards the other, it is imperative to know how to fulfill this responsibility and how to become a true leader.

Schuitema (2011), based on Islamic teaching and a solid practical experience in the managerial field, proposes a model of leadership based on care and growth. He starts by making a distinction between management and leadership. Unlike the manager who is responsible for achieving a result and is driven by needs, the leader holds the responsibility to look after and serve those in charge and be value-driven. This responsibility implies accountability and transactional correctness. For that, one's need both generosity and courage. Generosity has a sense of compassion and empathy with the other and can be equated with love and mercy. The inner enabler of generosity is gratitude. Hence, a leader has to reach an advanced level of maturation of the self to allow gratitude to create the conditions for generosity and be able to give unconditionally. Leadership is most often associated with change. To change what is wrong, it requires courage. Courage necessitates an inner sense of justice and is enabled by trust.

In a judicious metaphor, Schuitema (2011, p. 47) associates the job of the leader to that of the gardener:

Both are concerned with nurturing. The criteria of care and growth apply to both gardener and leader. The intention of the gardener should be benevolent translated into a willingness to serve the garden. Very few garden implements are designed to do pleasurable things to the plant. The

benevolence of care in the heart of the gardener is translated into steel in the hands.

It is easy to do the care part of leadership and show generosity. However, it is more difficult to do the growth part since it requires courage to fight mediocrity and strive for excellence both inwardly and outwardly. Leaders should pursue transactional correctness in all situations whether others like it or not.

If the inward growth is translated into a process of maturation of the self, the outward growth refers to the process of empowerment of the other (subordinate). This process is concerned with the maturation of souls as well. It aims to produce accountable people and push them to realize the best in themselves. One definition of empowerment is encapsulated in the famous saying: “Do not give a man a fish, enable him to fish”. Therefore, we have to provide this person with the means to fish, teach her/him how to do it, and set clear standards of what is required from her/him. Beside means and ability, the person has to be held accountable for what she or he has been entrusted with. Accountability refers to consistent reward and punishment for performance against a standard. (p.73)

The leader should not tolerate mediocrity or be nice out of mercy and generosity. To allow growth, he should have the courage to hold the subordinate accountable. Transactional correctness and unconditional care will be demonstrated only if standards are not allowed to be compromises. As nicely stated: “One should be soft on people and hard on standards” (p. 85). By doing so, the leader will become a coach.

Coaching: the ultimate growth

Coaching can be assimilated to the role of the spiritual leader. In order to move from dark to light, be able to see things as they are and reach the stage of giving unconditionally, we need someone who has undertaken this journey and has walked the path to enable us and help us achieve the ultimate fulfilment of human existence. We need to be empowered in order to empower others. We have to grow to let others grow and unleash their potential. In an interesting metaphor, Al-Ghazali (2005, p. 34) compares the role of the spiritual master to the work of the farmer (*Fallah*): “The significance of instruction is comparable to the work of the farmer who uproots thorn-bushes and removes weeds from the midst of the crops, so that his plants are in a proper condition, and his yield is brought to perfection”.

Similarly, the spiritual guide has to work on the obstacles veiling and darkening the human heart such as the love of wealth and rank, covetousness, greed, conceit and hypocrisy leading to immoral behavior. Instead, he has to cultivate virtues such as patience, prayer, gratitude, reliance on God, certitude, contentment, self-composure, mildness, humility, knowledge, sincerity, modesty, fidelity, dignity, silence, deliberateness in acting (Al Ghazali 2005, p.36).

It requires an elevated soul and a great deal of discipline and patience to coach people. The main value of coaching is enablement of the other and making oneself replaceable.

As pointed out by Schuitema (2011, p.88), most managers do not see their jobs as assisting subordinates to think through problems. Those are willing to coach others admit to do it but for conditional motives. However, the more conditional the motive for coaching is, the weaker it will be. Coaching necessitates a constant benevolent intention turned towards giving unconditionally. As we will die and leave as naked as the day we came in there is nothing to be preserved. Only what we give away and hand over will endure. Therefore, the pursuit of excellence and growth both inwardly and outwardly becomes an end itself.

The process of Tazkiya, purification and growth, implies to act on the basis of what is correct for the self (maturation) and for the other (empowerment). It requires a constant awareness and fundamental attributes such as gratitude, compassion, generosity, courage, patience, trust, justice and love to walk this path towards fructification and fulfillment.

Discussion

In order to enable people we need to have an understanding of the process of maturity. Organizational theory is concerned with understanding people in organizations or work places based on either psychological or sociological paradigms. The inner reality and the outward world are seen to be distinct and mutually exclusive areas of concern. The Sufi approach allows to take into consideration simultaneously the inner and outer dimensions and explore the core of being human. The process of growth oscillates between the poles of reflection/intent (inward) and action (outward).

Current dominant organization theories derive mainly from a technocratic worldview where society requires the pursuit of self-interest to function, management is reduced to controlling people with sticks and carrots, people are considered as “human resources”, and managers are kept at the early stage of human growth where “meaning is functional” (Schuitema, 2011).

Sufism offers rather a theory on leadership that changes one’s heart and mind and takes into account both worldly and other-worldly considerations. Through the process of Tazkiya, individuals will purify their hearts and acquire virtues promoting good behavior which will lead to deliverance (*Khalass*) and salvation (*Najat*) (Al Ghazali, 2005. p.28).

Interestingly AL Ghazali is using the word *Najat* (salvation) rather than *Najah* (success). The reason is that success does not refer to any ethical dimension. Moreover, it does not imply continuity. A person can be successful without having a good morality. However, this success will be temporary if we take into consideration the long term perspective (hereafter) not only the now and here. This dimension is pertinently captured by Al Ghazali (2005) in this reminder: “Live as long as you want, but you must die; love whatever you want, but you will become separated from it; and do what you want, but you will be repaid for it” (p.14).

Therefore, one needs to remain conscious of the hereafter and work for his salvation (*Najat*) seeking an everlasting success and prosperity. This latter is captured in the word and concept of *Falah*. This word has been given the meaning of everlasting prosperity

and blessing. It has the same root than *fallah* (farmer) meaning “to cultivate land” (Ahmad, 2006). It implies an ever going endeavor and strive to be righteous and remain in the straight path.

From a Sufi perspective, it is an individual responsibility to seek *Najat* and *Falah* through the purification of the self. Noteworthy, the constant ablutions, part of formal worship in Islam, symbolize the need for inner purity and moral cleansing (Alavi, 2007). Interestingly, the call for prayers (5 times a day) is also a constant reminder and invitation to seek *falah* through *Salat* (prayer/concrete actions). [come to salat, come to falah]

Conclusion:

Max Weber had a rather dim view of Sufism (Turner, 1974). In a recent review of Weber’s thoughts on Sufism, Bashier (2011, p. 135) notes that Sufism according to Weber “created apathy, passivity and stagnation in the Islamic community; its rejection of the world did not result in mastery of the world”. Contemporary scholarship (e.g., Huff and Schulucter, 1999; Bashier, 2011) on Weber and Islam points out that Weber was incorrect in holding such simplistic thoughts about Sufism that he derisively referred to in his words as “the dervish religion, with its orgiastic and mystical elements, with its essentially irrational and extraordinary character.” (cited in Bashier, 2011, p. 135).

Based on our paper, we would tend to concur with this view that Weber incorrectly understood Sufism. While we can only sketch out in the space constraints of an article length the faint contours and that too briefly of Sufism and its Tazkiya process being utilised to have a positive impact on the world of managers, what we have articulated tends to indicate that Sufism is far from being passive and fatalistic. It is an active and shaping force that is positively impacting the world (Howell and Van Bruinessen, 2007). Sufis such as Etsko Schuietema are not sitting idly by withdrawn from the mundane but are engaged with managers and organizations trying to make them better. We would encourage ourselves and future business ethics researchers to return to Sufi texts and practices to see further how to map out other teachings and approaches contained within them influencing the world of management and organizations.

We would also encourage researchers in Islamic business ethics to identify other Sufi spiritual masters that are working to improve organizations. This will add to our knowledge base of the diverse ways in which Sufism is transforming the contemporary workplace and what key messages and practices it is using to accomplish these transformations. This research will help us gain a better appreciation of the nature and extent of Sufism impacting today’s management practices, particularly in the Muslim world where it is most active.

When researchers will start documenting these Sufi masters and their engagement with the managerial world we are confident that they will come across important Sufi insights that can be brought to conversation with existing concerns within the Islamic business ethics research and the wider business ethics field on the dynamics involved in translating normative ethical prescriptions into managerial action.

In sum, our suggested future research directions indicate that we wish to explicitly inaugurate a business ethics research program based on Sufism, a call that was somewhat implicit in Karakas (2010). We hope such a program will result in scholars in business ethics beginning to appreciate research based on the wisdom in Sufism and its practical efficacy for addressing today's ethical challenges. As a consequence of all this, we look forward to a robust Sufi Islamic business ethics literature being developed which will help in healing the hearts and in nourishing human beings to their full potential.

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