BOOK REVIEWS


This is vol. ii in the series “Studies in the Humanities and Social Relations” of the Department of Oriental History at Keio University. Its subtitle reads: “A Study in Semantics.” In the preface its author states that this book is “a preliminary to a larger study on the nature and development of the moral consciousness among the Arabs as mirrored in the history of their language.” Specifically, it studies the ethical terms or “value-words” of the Holy Qur’an and their contextual usage. For his study, the author claims more purpose than “to grasp the guiding spirit of the moral code of Islamic peoples.” “I desire,” he writes on the first page, “to gain some fresh light on the more general theoretical problems of ethical discourse and the rôle it plays in human culture.” Moved by such desire the author seeks to establish “a theory of ethics not distorted by any preconception and not based on the traditional ideas and practices of people belonging to one type of culture” (pp. 2-3). If the moral codes of the whole world were adequately analysed in like manner, the author feels certain “that a sound, unprejudiced normative ethics will [then] become possible,” and that such descriptive analyses would at least open for normative ethics a way out of “its many theoretical muddles” (p. 3). John Ladd’s The Structure of a Moral Code is quoted approvingly for its definition of descriptive and normative ethics. The former, “a branch of cultural anthropology,” is an “investigation of the moral code and accompanying ethical conceptions of a person or group;” the latter “aims at providing knowledge of what to do and guidance for the right evaluation of conduct” (p. 2). The other sources of Mr. Izutsu’s ethical presuppositions are C. L. Stevenson’s Ethics and Language, R. M. Hare’s The Language of Morals and R. Carnap and his followers (p. 17-19).

In the pursuit of this claim, Mr. Izutsu recoursed to the method of semantic analysis which, in his understanding, consists in reversing the learning process of children and observing which conditions should be fulfilled in a phenomenon in order to warrant its appellation by its name. Words, he tells us, have connotation and denotation. In reality men are first presented with things and objects, the denotata. They learn the non-linguistic, non-existential connotations of the names of things through a process of abstraction of the real existential characteristics they meet in things.

The meaning of ethical terms, whether “primary”, i.e., of the nature of humble, generous, pious, etc. (p. 15), or secondary, such as good, bad, etc. (p. 16) is none other than these connotata; and it is these that are the object of pursuit of semantic analysis.

The investment with a name of a series of real-existents which have one or more characteristics in common, is an act, a decision, performed in the history of the language in which it occurs. The subsequent calling of the denotata by their class-name takes place upon the recognition of the presence of those characteristics in that which is named. Thus, every term of a language becomes endowed with a system of extra-linguistic characteristics and these constitute its meaning.
or defined. In this process, however, the author assumes that nothing is necessary. "The defining attributes... by virtue of which an illimitable number of discriminably different persons or acts are categorized into an equivalence class and thus receive a common name" (p. 11) are not a result of "logical implication" (p. 17). The "set of environmental conditions that happen to be correlated... with a certain verbal category" do so accidentally (ibid). The correlation is always a decision, a convention, "a matter of tradition and culture" (ibid).

To discover these "linguistic patterns," one must "describe... the precise conditions and... the concrete situations in which the ethical terms of a language... are actually used, and then... analyze the gathered material with a view to isolating the etymological, situational attributes for each ethical term" (p. 20). This can be achieved only through "the epistemological method of induction" (p. 13). For what is required is the discovery of how the ethical terms in question are actually used in practice. Since linguistic patterns form the speech of a language with "a complete set of channels through which to categorize all moral phenomena" (p. 11) a semantic analysis of the Arabic key ethical terms must reveal "the basic structure of the canonical system through which... all [Islamic] moral evaluation[s] are filtered" (p. 13).

The application of this method by Mr. Itoz to the Holy Book did not result in the discovery of ideas. The Holy Book itself, he asserts, that "there is no fully-developed abstract conception of 'good' and 'bad' in the moral system of the Qur'an" (p. 263). There are many descriptively ethical terms telling that such and such acts are good or bad and a few secondary concepts, properly meta-ethical or classificatory-in-ethical terms. But these "are too sporadic to form a whole system of moral ideas" (ibid). Again, he asserts: "pure value-terms of this type... of the type of the English word 'good' considered in its evaluative aspect" are very few and far between in the Qur'an" (p. 263). No reader can fail to be impressed with the extent and depth to which these Qur'anic terms are interchanged by the author, and each will conclude that there is no facile systematization of Islamic moral ideas. Every key term in a solar system constituting a centre or focus around which revolves a number of satellite terms. The ethical ideas of Islam are galaxies of such solar systems, mutually pulling or repelling, but, apparently, never completely determining one another. However, Mr. Itoz has attempted to discern some determining relationships between these great masses of ideas moving in Islamic space. Thus, for him the whole framework is dissected by one meridian into "two radically opposed categories," constituting "the grand moral dichotomy" (Ch. VIII) which is none other than "the grand dualism of believer and unbeliever" (p. 100). This makes of "the ethical system of Islam... a very simple structure" easily surveyable and measurable by "the ultimate yardstick of belief-unbelief" (ibid).

The field is further divided by two main lines which he calls "the pessimistic conception of earthly life" and "the spirit of ethical solidarity." These are the two "characteristic features of the principle that underlies all the ethical teachings
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of the Qur’ān” (p. 39) features which though given completely new grounds by Islam, are nonetheless an inheritance from Jāhiliyyah or Pre-Islam. Likewise, the four cardinal Islamic virtues of generosity, courage, loyalty and vanity are “pegas moral ideas in Islamic dress” (Ch. VII). On the other hand, the four cardinal vices of Jāhiliyyah “such as trembling fear, humbleness and self-surrender ... the manifestations of the baseness of character ... were raised ... with the advent of Islam ... to the honour of the highest virtues ... the descriptive layer of their meaning remain [ing] the same” (p. 256).

This study has led Mr. Irsæls to a number of false conclusions —

1. The Qur’ānic “grand moral dichotomy” is a dichotomy between value and disvalue, the mood and the bad, and not at all one between belief and unbelief. The believers and the non-believers are its determiners not its connotation which remains through and through ethical. Mr. Irsæls’s observation that ethical considerations “are all rather marginal variations within the bounds of the essential opposition between belief and unbelief” falls far away from the facts. The Holy Qur’an recognizes value outside the circle of Muhammad’s converts among the Jew(s), Jews and Christians and therefore outside belief in the strict sense. True, it does not regard them as unbelievers, but in counting them with the “believers” in this extended sense, “the grand moral dichotomy” becomes much less “grand” and far more vague and misleading. Moreover, the Holy Qur’an tells us that value is interfused with disvalue thus making the dichotomy unclear, when it commands the realization of that which it recognizes as a disvalue but for the sake of a value that is higher still. There is therefore no facile categorization of Qur’ānic ethical Ideas; and it would have been better if the author had remained true to his observation of this fact.

2. Likewise, the so-called “fundamental attitude of Muḥammad”, viz.., his “messianic conception of earthly life” is an utter misunderstanding. He quotes the latter to the effect that “the Arab is by nature not religious” (a thesis Dony establishes by such argument as “l’homme a besoin d’aujourd’hui”) and concludes that the Arab of the desert “remained lukewarm” and always wavering between belief and disbelief” (p. 102). Mr. Irsæls then went to the Holy Qur’an to see whether he could find therein a justification of the Donyan analytical privi claim. Stumbling on XXII: 14-5, he extrapolated a judgment passed on a number of desert Arabs of the early 7th century and predicated it to the Arabs of all times and all places. Irsæls’s method may be empirical; but his application of it to the ethical terms of the Qur’an is far from empirical.

3. Likewise, the so-called “fundamental attitude of Muḥammad”, viz.., his “messianic conception of earthly life” is an utter misunderstanding. Moreover, the evidence adduced therefor is spurious. This thesis, Irsæls bases on two mistaken views : first, that the Jāhiliyyah’s world-view was pessimistic because it recognized “the evanescence of human life”, “the essential vanity of life,” etc. (p. 39 ff). This is a conclusion mistakenly drawn from the Qur’ānic consideration that the Jāhiliyyah had no concept of an after-life and that “this present world with a myriad of its colours and forms is the only world that exists” (p. 43). It is true that the Jāhili Arab had no idea of an eschatological world and of an other life beyond, but sought eternity in this world. This, however, does not imply the condemnation of this world. In their literature the recurring lament
over the evanescence of life is evidence of their world-affirmation, rather than world-denial. And it is in the content of that which is affirmed in this worldly life that Islam brought its great ethical reform. Even if, for impossibly, it is granted that the Jāhili Arabs were pessimists, their being so constitutes no evidence of the pessimism of Islam. Mr. Izutsu does not therefore appreciate the great revolution which Islam brought about in the life of Arabia. Second, that like Ḧadāyik, Islam too is world-denying—a gross error contradicted by the whole culture and history of Islam as well as by the Holy Book itself. World-denial may be Christian or Buddhist; but to attribute it to Muhammad (God’s peace and blessing be upon him) and to Islam as a whole, is, certainly novel. Mr. Izutsu based this thesis on the Holy Qur’an’s ubiquitous condemnations of al-ṣalāt al-dānā (الصلاة الدّانة) and he sees no difference between al-danah (the world) and al-ṣalāt al-dānā (الصلاة الدّانة) (where al-danah and al-ṣalāt al-dānā is an adjective which means the worldly, and the expression as a whole means that life which is dedicated to the pursuit of lower values). In order to establish this fantastic claim, Mr. Izutsu produced copious quotations (pp. 42-68) not one of which is really relevant to the point he wished to make.

3. The other “fundamental attitude of Muhammad”, viz., “the spirit of tribal solidarity” (p. 49 ff) is another notion derived from Mr. Izutsu’s erroneous conception of “the grand moral dichotomy.” Since the latter is construed as being that of Islam-unbelief, it follows, for Mr. Izutsu, that the Holy Prophet had simply replaced the tribalistic ḥaqayqāy of Ḧadāyik with the faith-ḥaqayqāy of Islam. Even this, Mr. Izutsu claims, Islam has not done thoroughly, on principle. The Holy Qur’an, he tells us quoting Surah XXXIII: 6 verse 6, judged “those who are related by the bond of blood . . . closer to one another . . . [than] abnegating the sake of strict brotherhood among all Muslims, whether kindred or stranger” (p. 54). This proves, for Mr. Izutsu, that the new ‘ḥaqayqā of Islam was not much different from the old ḥaqayqā of pre-Islam. But Mr. Izutsu has construed “world” of XXXIII: 6 as “closer” whereas it means “prior.” Furthermore, the aspect in which those who are related by the bond of blood are prior to the believers and Ṣaḥābīyīn (the Hijazi ascetics in Madinah) is that of responsibility, of being referred to in case their children were guilty of misdemeanour and stands clearly stated in the previous verse, viz., XXXIII: 5. To read nationalism in such a passage as that is plainly to import it therein. Islam’s universalistic brotherhood under the Oneness of God, oneness of truth and oneness of value is, in Mr. Izutsu’s view, the same old Ḧadāl ḥaqayqā but with an altered criterion. Indeed, the whole of Islam is a carbon copy of Ḧadāyik as regards the overall life and world-view, the orientation or “fundamental moral attitude.” The negation of this world and tribal solidarity are its most basic principles.

4. Mr. Izutsu’s analysis of ṣawā′ī mīlād him to the view that “Ṣawā′ī in XLIX: 13 means ‘one who is feeling the greatest fear among you’” (p. 47). No one before Muhammad, he argues, could have introduced into the semantic constitution of “fear” the noblest Arab virtue, “timidity and cowardice,” “fear . . . in the eyes of the dākī the most despisable quality possible to man,” the “cowardice” which blind Penn ‘Oubah sang against on the battlefield, the trembling fear which even dākī women despised (p. 47) and whose opposite,
namely "reckless audacity and bravery," the Arabs "counted among the highest virtues" (p. 47). Mr. Irunu has told us point-blank that by "fear" he means al this, "the basic mood [which is] represented by submission, the humble "servile" submission" (p. 62). Is this the Qur'anic meaning of اَلْجُرُوحُ؟ Did the Holy Qur'an introduce these vice into the meaning of أَفْسَلَتْهُ, in the verse, 40:174? And yet, this is by no means all. He understands the {he who stands to be determined by God in his good deed) in terms of this "humble, servile submission" (p. 63) مَسْتَفِقَتْنَا as "fearful;" مَسْتَفِقَتْنَا as "their entertainment" (p. 108) which is "a bad act, a sin, a crime, a weakness" (p. 109). Apparently, the critics Western Orientalist conception that the God of Islam is the fear-inspiring, terrifying, unapproachable, tyrant-potentate, has impressed Mr. Irungu more than all that the Holy Book has said to the contrary, including the ubiquitous pronouncements of Al-Rahman Al-Baghd. 

The foregoing criticisms point to the fact that Mr. Irunu's linguistic preparation has not been adequate for the task he had set for himself. All of his translation mistakes are the same old ones the Western Orientalists had offensively been repeating in our ears for generations. Mr. Irunu's linguistic shortcoming precipitated his recourse to the Arabic Qur'an. He therefore implemented his analysis on the basis of the English translation. The real wonder is Mr. Irunu's unquestioned assumption that an analysis of the English translation is an analysis of the Holy Qur'an. Moreover, this book is full of typographical errors. Quotations from linguistic and Islamic studies are not properly acknowledged (Chs. I to IV) and there is no bibliographical table to which the reader may refer. The English could stand a good deal of editing.

All this notwithstanding, this book is certainly Islamics "in a new key." Its method of semantic analysis has never before been systematically applied to the study of a whole Islamics subject. We have shown that the results it has yielded in this case are poor. But the poverty of the results is certainly due to Mr. Irunu's faulty Arabic and inadequate preparation in Qur'anic studies. Would not a scholar more adept in Arabic arrive at seriously significant results while applying this novel method? Despite its many obvious advantages, Mr. Irunu's method of semantic analysis is not suitable for ethical study.

1. The assertion that "all acts of perception" and, a fortiori, all acts of evaluation are determined by "the social patterns of orientation" (p. 10) commits the author to a denial of all a priori propositions including the analytical. But how could it have ever been possible for man to order a member or series of phenomena into a class and then give their assembly a distinctive name, without a preconceived notion acting as a principle of selection for the editing of the members of that one-class from the stream of the man-fold? The stream itself, could never have furnished the grounds for the empirical generalization which a concept is here claimed to be.

2. This faulty assertion serves as a basis for another. Mr. Irunu claims...
that since all there is to an ethical term is the constant previously abstracted from its empirical concrete instances, to discover the meaning of an ethical term is to discover how in actual usage, that term is applied to the concrete members of the class it denotes. But the question here is, Whose usage? The man in-the-street, the intelligentsia, the government or national spokesmen, or the literature of that language? Can an empirical survey of the literature of any language, even if it were physically possible, be trusted to furnish such answers as ethics seeks? Are such answers to be considered valid which constitute fifty per cent plus one of the total number of times the ethical term has been used? If not, how is contestation as to "actual usage" solved?

3. Granted that these questions are all satisfactorily answered and that we have in our hands a set of meta-ethical propositions which, it has been satisfactorily confirmed, are sound generalizations of the actual ethical usage of the language in question, can such propositions ever exhaust the meaning of the ethical? Is the normative proposition reducible to a set of purely descriptive statements? What would be the return of mankind to the argument: You ought to do this and that because in reality men have used and still use these terms to express such meaning? Is it then not wrong to assume that the meaning of an ethical term is reducible to a set of purely descriptive statements? That the final purpose of semantic analysis is "a sound, unprejudiced normative ethics" has been given us in the preface of the book. The embarrassing question is hence insuperable.

4. To claim the contrary, therefore, is to commit the naturalistic fallacy or the reductionist fallacy and, at any rate, to violate the law of identity.

5. According to Mr. Jotson, such a system is based on the pluralistic theory which holds that people's views as to what is good and bad, or right and wrong differ in different places and different ages, and that fundamentally (p. 5) it is a platitude that people's views actually differ. Mr. Jotson's point is that they differ not only de facto but de jure, legitimately. Where men agree and thus make possible "a number of most general rules of morality which will be common to all human beings qua human beings" (p. 5), is in the realm of the superficial. "The most fundamental issues of morals . . . arise . . . in the much lower realm of empirical facts" where difference is the rule. The fact of this difference necessitates "that the semantic structure (i.e., meaning) of the word 'good' itself must of necessity be different in each case" (p. 5). His claim, "I am not an extreme historical relativist" (p. 4) but his theory leaves no room for anything else. Indeed, the well-thought out relativism is always atomic, and absolute, since the slightest departure from the relativist thesis involves one in self-contradiction. Ethical relativism can avoid self-contradiction only if it finds its motto engrained on a rock by lightning. But this apparently does not worry Mr. Jotson, who advocates on one page the relativist thesis and tells us on another that his purpose is to arrive at a "sound, unprejudiced normative ethics."

6. This method of semantic analysis which is the daughter of relativism in morals and unabashed empiricism in epistemology, is the heir of the Viennese Circle to the English universities. It took root there primarily because of the
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cynicism and disillusionment which the First World War had brought. Dead
European horses, however, have a way of turning up in America, but not in Japan,
from where this book comes to us as a surprise. Indeed, there is nothing Japanese,
or even oriental in this work. It is an extension of the Western spirit, of the
most unworthy intellectual aspect of the spirit vit., logical positivism or reduc-
tionist analysis, into a field—Islam—which has known well the hatreds of
religious entity, of fanaticism and of political imperialism but has been so far
spared the outcasts of the cynics and the sceptics. The Western reader may
feel heartened by Mr. Ismat's work because it reassures him in his old prejudices
by sharing them with him. On the other hand, the Muslim reader who understands
the Arabic Qur'an intuitively, will find this book basically misconceived and full
of the kind of offensive errors with which Western Orientalists have made him
too well familiar.

Kamichi

ISMA'IL F. AL-FARUQI

Alejandro Bosanquet, PERSIA RELIGIOSA (Religions in Persia), Milan 1959, 492 pp.
Prof. Alejandro Bosanquet is already very well-known as an Orientalist in
Pakistan thanks to his works which describe various forms and styles of Pakistani
literature. Moreover he has delivered several lectures on Islamic subjects at
Pakistani universities. It is sufficient perhaps to mention here only his famous
Storia delle Letterature del Pakistan (History of the different literatures of
Pakistan), for which he received the Sitrak-i-Persiyya from President Moazzam
Aryab Khan; and his translations into Italian of the Holy Qur'an and the
Kisa-i-Bukhari of the poet Iqbal.
The Religion of Persia is not merely a religious book but a book in which
the real soul of Persia trembles and vibrates. The author divides the religious
history of Persia into four great periods—first, the ancient religion based on the
dogma of Zoroaster; second, the medieval Mandaic religion; child, the early
period of Persian Islam and finally the modern period when Persia temporarily
deviated from orthodox Islam and its forms exposing the new religion Bahai's.
Is it possible to maintain continuity in these great transitions and periods?
In other words what is the inter-relation between the anachron, the pre-Islamic,
Islamic and the modern Persia? This is a problem which has attracted the attention
of many an Orientalist.
Bosanquet divides his book into three sections to which he gives imaginary
subtitles.
The first section is called The Cycle and the Angel. It describes two
religious concepts—Time and the Angel. Having examined old texts which deal
with the period from B.C. to A.C., 9 Bosanquet concludes that these texts as they
stand contain a theological unity. The Mandaics identify the 'Beginning' with the
'End' (i.e., the End in anticipation). Time is considered exactly contrary to what
it is considered now. In Mandaic theology the concept of Time was peculiar;
Time was an Angel—i.e., a tool for the struggle against evil. The concept of the
Angel must not of course be taken in a Judaic, Christian or Islamic sense of the
Existence of God. In fact the Mandaics do not ask "What is Time?"—"What is
Earth?"—but rather "Who is Time?"—"Who is Earth?" And the
answer is: "He is a young man of fifteen years"—or "He is eka'sumurat.
The