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Research Article

A Critical Assessment of the Criterion for Distinguishing between Major and Minor Sins

Syed Abdurrauf Afzali[1*]

1. Department of Philosophy and Mysticism, Faculty of Philosoophy and Religious Studies, al-Mustafa Internationa University, Qom, Iran.(Corresponding Author).*

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ABSTRACT

SUBJECT & OBJECTIVES: Ḥayāt ṭayyibah (pure life) represents a pure and virtuous life accompanied by faith and righteous deeds, through which individuals attain genuine peace and spiritual contentment by obeying divine commandments and avoiding sin. Within Islamic theology, sins are fundamentally categorized into major (kabīrah) and minor (ṣaghīrah). Historically, Shiʿi and Sunni scholars have proposed numerous viewpoints to determine the criteria for distinguishing between them. Grounded in reason and tradition, this study aims to present a novel solution for this classification.

METHOD & FINDING: Employing a descriptive-analytical approach, this study endeavors to organize and compare the perspectives of previous Muslim scholars while introducing a refined methodological solution. The proposed framework asserts that whenever a definitive scriptural text (naṣṣ) exists, priority must be given to it and it should be strictly followed; however, in the absence of such canonical text, one must resort to rational criteria which, in turn, are endorsed by the Sharīʿah; this is precisely why there exists a necessary correlation between the decree of reason and the decree of the Sharīʿah, and one must act accordingly. This balanced approach appears to have been endorsed by prominent intellectual figures such as Abū Ḥāmid Ghazālī and Mullā Ṣadrā.

CONCLUSION: The findings indicate that the criterion for distinguishing major from minor sins is neither purely rationalist nor purely textualist. Despite their individual merits, both approaches encounter significant theoretical challenges in various domains. Therefore, the optimal resolution lies in reconciling revelation and reason: adhering strictly to authoritative scriptural texts (naṣṣ) when available, and relying on rational methodologies when explicit textual evidence is absent.

***Corresponding Author:**
Email: *rafzali1350@gmail.com*
ORCID: *0000-0002-8889-4779*

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Introduction

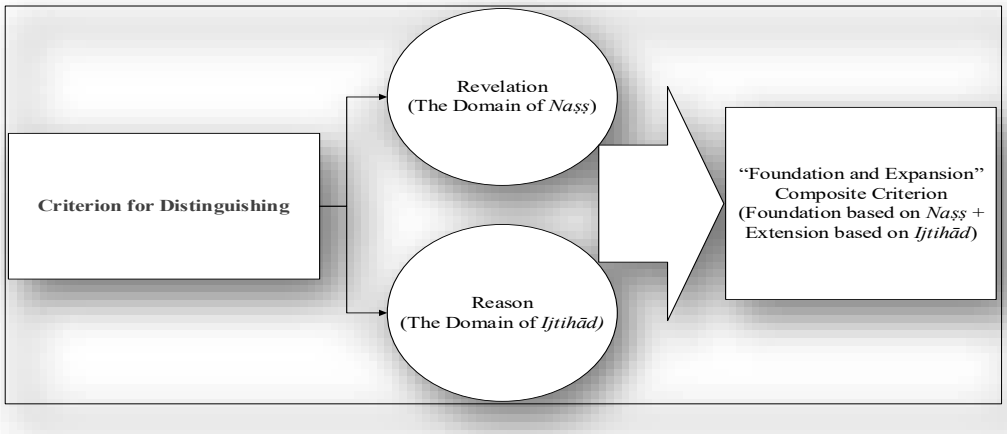
In Islam, sins are categorized into two types. The Holy Quran mentions this distinction in several places, using different expressions. In Sūrat al-Kahf (18:49), these two categories are referred to as major and minor (kabīrah and ṣaghīrah)—terms that remain commonly used today. However, in Sūrat al-Nisāʾ (4:31), instead of ṣaghīrah, the term sayyiʾah (misdeed) is used, while Sūrat al-Najm (53:32) employs the word lamam (small faults). Each of these two categories of sins carries its own rulings. For instance, minor sins may be forgiven without repentance, simply by avoiding major sins, whereas major sins are not forgiven without repentance or merely by abstaining from minor sins (Quran 4:31). Also, besides repentance, acts such as iʿtikāf (spiritual retreat in a mosque) can also lead to the forgiveness of major sins (Rostami et al., 2025: 3).

The core question of this study is: How can the existing perspectives regarding the criteria for distinguishing between major and minor sins be classified, and ultimately, what defensible criterion can be established for this distinction? This study aims to present these perspectives within a specific framework, compare them, and then propose a new approach called a combined approach.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework of this study is a hierarchical-integrative model for the classification of sins, which is illustrated in the diagram below and discussed in the body of the article:

Diagram 1: Hierarchical-Integrative Model



[Figure: flow diagram — "Criterion for Distinguishing" → two branches: "Revelation (The Domain of *Naṣṣ*)" and "Reason (The Domain of *Ijtihād*)"; both converge → "Composite Criterion (Foundation based on *Naṣṣ* + Extension based on *Ijtihād*)". Caption as given.]

This model gives due attention to both reason and revelation. It is designed to resolve the inherent tension between two traditional but ultimately incomplete

paradigms: pure textualism and pure rationalism. It structures the relationship between scriptural revelation (naṣṣ) and human reason not as a choice between two alternatives, but as a sequential, prioritized process. The framework is built on a two-tiered decision-making structure:

1- The Primacy of Revelation (The Domain of *Naṣṣ*)

The initial and foundational step in classifying any sin is to consult the scriptural sources (the Quran and authentic Sunnah). The guiding principle at this stage is submission to the text. If a clear and explicit naṣṣ designates a sin as "major", either by name or by associating it with a severe punishment (e.g., the threat of Hellfire), the classification is considered definitive. At this level, reason's role is limited to understanding and correctly interpreting the text, not overriding it.

2- The Application of Reason (The Domain of *Ijtihād*)

This tier is activated only in the absence of an explicit scriptural designation. When scripture is silent or ambiguous on the status of a particular sin, the framework mandates a turn to rational criteria. This is not unbridled reason, but a form of reasoned judgment (ijtihād) that operates within the overarching principles of the Sharīʿah. The criteria here might include assessing the degree of harm to an individual or society, the level of defiance against God, or the violation of one of the core objectives of Islamic law (Maqāṣid al-Sharīʿah).

In essence, this model conceptualizes the relationship between text and reason as one of foundation and extension. The naṣṣ provides the unassailable foundation and core set of major sins, establishing the paradigm. Reason then extends this paradigm, using principles derived from the foundation to classify new or unmentioned cases. This framework validates both sources of knowledge by assigning them to their proper domains, thus creating a comprehensive and coherent system that is both faithful to revelation and intellectually robust.

Literature Review

The background of the debate concerning the criterion for distinguishing major sins from minor sins has consistently oscillated between two principal approaches: the text-centered approach, which relies on identifying specific instances in Quranic verses and narrations, and the ijtihād approach, which seeks to discover a general criterion or universal rule. These two approaches not only encompass the classical views advanced on this issue, but have also continued to influence contemporary perspectives.

Within the first approach fall such significant contemporary works as Gunāhān-i Kabīrah by Martyr Dastghayb (2012), which, in a case-by-case manner and with reliance on scriptural texts, enumerates and explains major sins.

In the same vein, the article by Fāḍil Lankarānī (2017), through presenting four precise juristic criteria—(1) explicit designation in narrations, (2) threat of Hellfire, (3) being graver than explicitly designated major sins, and (4) being graver than sins for which a promise of punishment has been given—constitutes a prominent example of systematizing the text-centered approach within a rule-based framework. Likewise, the article by Ṣāliḥī Khenār and Mīryān Akandī (2023),

through a comparative analysis of the views of Ghazālī and ʿAllāmah Ṭabāṭabāʾī, examines both perspectives but ultimately gives preference to the text-centered view and regards it as more robust. The same is the case with Qarāʾatī, who points to factors such as mention in the Quran or narrations (ḥadīth) and the like, though he does not prioritize any one of them over the others (Qarāʾatī, 1998).

In contrast, the ijtihādī approach seeks to offer a criterion that goes beyond explicitly mentioned instances. The study by ʿAlīshāhī Qalʿeh-Jūqī and Bakhtiyārī (2021) exemplifies this effort. After critiquing and rejecting certain existing criteria, it proposes "being incompatible with knowledge of God" as a spiritual and epistemic standard for determining whether a doubtful sin should be classified as major. Nevertheless, as can be observed, all of these studies remain confined within the binary framework of text (reliance on sacred scripture) and ijtihād (the effort to formulate a rational or inferential rule).

Accordingly, a theory capable of moving beyond this dichotomy should be regarded as a new theory—one that the present article seeks to articulate and elaborate. This theory takes into consideration both reason and revelation but in a hierarchical and innovative manner.

Rationalist Perspectives

Most of the views presented on the criterion for major and minor sins fall under rationalist perspectives. These perspectives are based on the premise that religious sources have divided sins into major and minor and assigned specific rulings to each, yet they have not explicitly defined them or provided a clear criterion for distinguishing between the two.

1. The Equilibrium Perspective

Among Sunni scholars, the Muʿtazilites hold the view that a major sin is one where the punishment for committing it outweighs the rewards of the sinner's good deeds. The key point is that an equilibrium must be struck between rewards and punishments—regardless of how this equilibrium is maintained. The balancing may be hypothetical (muqaddarah) or actual (muḥaqqaqah). It is that for which the doer's punishment is greater than his reward, either actually or hypothetically (Qāḍī ʿAbd al-Jabbār, 2001: 427).

The distinction between hypothetical and actual balancing serves to avoid differentiation between believers and disbelievers. For a believer, the balancing is actual because they possess good deeds. However, for a disbeliever, the balancing is hypothetical—meaning that if they had performed good deeds, a comparison would be made between the reward for those deeds and the punishment for their major sins. In other words, divine justice necessitates that this balancing principle applies not only to believers but also to disbelievers.

From this perspective, the standard for a minor sin is the opposite of that for a major sin: if the rewards of a sinner's good deeds throughout their life are less than the sin committed, it is a major sin. If their rewards outweigh the sin in question, then it is considered a minor sin (Ibid).

Fakhr Rāzī, in explaining the theory of equilibrium, presents three hypothetical scenarios. In the first scenario, a perfect balance is established between divine

reward and punishment. However, the other two scenarios present an imbalance—either punishment outweighing reward constituting a major sin or reward surpassing punishment rendering it a minor sin. Fakhr Rāzī considers the first scenario of perfect equilibrium to be purely theoretical, with no actual manifestation in reality (Fakhr Rāzī, 2000, vol. 10: 60–61).

While this perspective originally stems from Muʿtazilite thought, some Shiʿah theologians have also shown considerable interest in it. ʿAllāmah Ḥillī outlines three distinct views when explaining the definitions of major and minor sins. However, the theory he himself appears to favor essentially reverts to the Muʿtazilite concept of equilibrium. According to ʿAllāmah Ḥillī's understanding, a major sin is one whose punishment perpetually exceeds the rewards accrued from the sinner's good deeds (Ḥillī, 1993: 441).

Fāḍil Miqdād similarly cites this criterion in an approving manner. In his view, according to the Muʿtazilites, the term "major" has both absolute and relative applications. In its absolute sense, the punishment for a major sin always exceeds the rewards of its perpetrator. In its relative application, a specific sin is weighed against a specific act of obedience—if the sin's punishment outweighs the reward of that particular act of obedience, it constitutes a major sin; otherwise, it is minor (Fāḍil Miqdād, 2001: 446).

While this perspective is commendable for its alignment with divine justice, its practical implementation proves problematic. Applying this theory requires comprehensive knowledge of all an individual's good deeds and their corresponding rewards, as well as precise knowledge of the punishment for their sins, to establish a balance between them—knowledge accessible only to God and His chosen saints. Moreover, as some scholars note, this balancing approach fails in certain cases. Consider someone who spends his life in worship but consumes a single sip of alcohol: according to this theory, he would not have committed a major sin since his good deeds' rewards far outweigh this sin's punishment. Yet consensus holds he has indeed committed a major sin (Fakhr Rāzī, 2000, vol. 10: 60–61).

2. The Perspective Centered on the Essentials of Religion

Ghazālī is among those who have proposed this viewpoint. In Iḥyāʾ ʿUlūm al-Dīn, he explicitly states that the primary objective of divine laws (at least in the Abrahamic religions) is to attain closeness to God.

We know through the evidences of the Sharīʿah and the illuminations of insight that the aim of all divine laws is to guide creation to the proximity of Allah Almighty and the bliss of encountering Him (Abū Ḥāmid Ghazālī, n.d., vol. 4: 19).

This cannot be achieved without knowing Allah, His names, and His attributes. And they cannot attain that except through the knowledge of Allah, His attributes, His scriptures, and His messengers (Ibid.).

Since the knowledge of God cannot be attained without the preservation of life and property, the protection of individuals' lives and wealth is also secondarily emphasized in divine laws.

Thus, the preservation of worldly life also becomes a secondary objective for the sake of religion, as it is a means to it.

What connects this world to the Hereafter are two things: souls and wealth (Ibid.).

This worldview not only reminds us of obligations but also clarifies prohibitions and major sins. Consequently, based on this perspective, anything that strengthens the knowledge of God and safeguards lives and property is considered a virtuous and obligatory act. Conversely, any action that leads to the neglect of divine knowledge or the destruction of lives and property is deemed forbidden and among the major sins (Ibid.).

On the other hand, actions that lack these characteristics are, by default, considered minor sins. Based on this criterion, it can be said that a major sin is opposition to what is universally accepted across all religions—a point that Ghazālī himself explicitly affirms (Abū Ḥāmid Ghazālī, n.d., vol. 4: 20). Shāṭibī also leans toward this perspective. In his view, violating the essentials upheld by divine laws—namely, religion, human life, progeny, intellect, and property—constitutes a major sin.

Major sins are confined to violations of the necessities recognized in every religious community: religion, life, lineage, intellect, and wealth. Everything explicitly mentioned in religious texts relates back to these, and what is not explicitly mentioned falls under the same consideration, encompassing all that scholars have mentioned and what they have not, as long as it aligns with that meaning (Shāṭibī, 1999: 349).

Among Shīʿah sages, thinkers such as Mullā Ṣadrā have inclined toward this perspective. In his view, the criterion for distinguishing between minor and major sins lies in whether an act contradicts the essentials of religion. Although Mullā Ṣadrā does not explicitly define the criterion for major and minor sins, his statements on the degrees of major sins clearly indicate that if an act conflicts with religious foundations, committing it constitutes a major sin. Conversely, if it does not, then by contrast, it would be considered a minor sin. Mullā Ṣadrā elaborates on this view in several stages.

The purpose of divine law is to elevate humanity to the peak of perfection. Human beings are not created perfect; they suffer from various deficiencies at birth. Physical and bodily shortcomings are gradually resolved with time and maturity, but intellectual and spiritual deficiencies can only be remedied through engagement with religious teachings. According to Ṣadrā, religion exists to lead humanity to God and thereby compensate for their spiritual shortcomings.

The purpose of all divine laws is to guide creation to the proximity of Allah and the bliss of encountering Him, elevating them from the depths of the self to the heights of perfection, and from the lowliness of base bodies to the nobility of sublime spirits (Mullā Ṣadrā, 1975: 497).

This goal cannot be achieved without knowing God, understanding His attributes, and believing in other religious teachings. Through knowledge of God and His attributes, an attraction and inclination toward Him as the ultimate perfection arises within humans, leading them to devote their time and resources to attaining nearness to Him.

This objective is realized in the worldly life. The world not only provides the means for physical and bodily development but also facilitates spiritual perfection. This is why, in

religious terminology, the world is referred to as the "field of the Hereafter" (mazraʿat al-ākhirah). Therefore, preserving worldly life becomes necessary as a secondary obligation to preserving religion—since safeguarding religion is impossible without safeguarding worldly existence.

By "worldly life," what is meant are souls and wealth. Without souls, there would be no agents to practice religion. Similarly, without wealth and resources, the survival of the soul would be impossible. Hence, the preservation of wealth becomes obligatory as a consequence of preserving life.

Mullā Ṣadrā, based on this worldview, also establishes the criterion for major and minor sins. In his view, if we examine this worldview, we find that a good deed is one that promotes the knowledge of God, the preservation of the soul, and the protection of wealth—though the goodness of the deed itself is not fixed in a single rank, as it depends on its function. The deed that leads to the preservation and promotion of the knowledge of the Divine is considered the best. Following that are deeds that preserve life and wealth.

Once the best deed is identified, by analogy, evil deeds can also be determined. The worst deed is one that leads to the destruction of divine knowledge. Deeds that result in the loss of life or wealth naturally rank lower in terms of their moral ugliness. If we temporarily set aside the ranking of good and evil deeds, we must say that, from Ṣadrā's perspective, a major sin is one that leads to the loss of divine knowledge, human life, or people's wealth. Any sin that does not fall under these broad categories is not considered a major sin (Ibid.: 498–500). Major sins are of three types: the greatest major sin is that which blocks the path to knowing God. Following this is the sin that endangers human life, and lastly, the sin that pertains to wealth.

Thus, the greatest of major sins is that which blocks the path to knowing God. Next is that which endangers the lives of souls, followed by that which disrupts livelihoods—the means by which souls sustain their lives (Ibid.: 499).

As for anything beyond these, by analogy, it can be said to be a minor sin. Thus, it can be argued that, from Mullā Ṣadrā's perspective, the criterion for distinguishing between major and minor sins is their conflict or non-conflict with the essentials of religion.

This viewpoint is a highly robust rationalist perspective that, in comparison to rival views, is comprehensive and supported by countless pieces of evidence. Unlike other perspectives that rely solely on linguistic indicators or purely rational arguments, this theory is grounded in a profound religious worldview endorsed by all heavenly religions. According to this view, preserving religion, human life, and wealth—which are essentials of any religion—is obligatory, and violating them constitutes a major sin.

However, some argue that the problem with this view is that, based on it, certain sins mentioned in religious texts would not be considered major (Ibn Abī al-ʿIzz, 1971, vol. 1: 419). Yet this objection is unlikely to invalidate the theory, for if the theory is sufficiently strong, then suspected cases of major sins should be examined in its light. Through such an examination, the status of ambiguous

cases would become clear. If these cases can be traced back to major sins, then they are major; otherwise, they are minor.

3. The Perspective Centered on Linguistic Evidence

It seems that many Muslim scholars have relied on linguistic evidence to distinguish between major sins (kabāʾir) and minor sins (ṣaghāʾir). All those who emphasize concepts such as "warning" (waʿīd), "prescribed punishment" (ḥadd), "divine curse" (laʿn), "divine wrath," or "emphatic particles" use linguistic evidence in some way to identify major sins. However, the use of these indicators can take two forms: first, one may consider these elements as evidence for understanding the criterion distinguishing major from minor sins, regardless of whether religious texts explicitly link these elements to major sins; second, one may treat these elements as conditional evidence, provided that religious texts establish a cognitive connection between them and major sins. Proponents of the "evidence-based approach" employ these elements in the first manner.

Among the Sunni groups that fall under this category are the Māturīdīs. The Māturīdīs focus on "prescribed punishment" and "divine warning." According to Ibn Abī al-ʿIzz, a major sin is one for which the perpetrator is assigned a worldly punishment or faces a divine warning in the Hereafter. A ḥadd is a legal penalty prescribed in Islamic jurisprudence for certain sinners, while waʿīd refers to the promise of punishment or exposure to divine wrath and curse. He states: "*A minor sin is that which has no prescribed punishment in this world nor a warning in the Hereafter*" (Ibid.: 371). This view has also been adopted by other Sunni scholars, such as Māwardī. According to this group, this perspective reconciles various opinions (Ibn Ḥajar Haythamī, 1999, vol. 1: 10).

Among rationalist Shīʿah theologians, scholars such as ʿAllāmah Ṭabāṭabāʾī believe that the criterion for distinguishing major and minor sins lies in "the manner of prohibition." If the prohibition is stated plainly, it is a minor sin, but if it is accompanied by reprimand, threat, or divine warning, then the prohibited act is a major sin. The Quranic expression "the major sins which you are forbidden from" alludes to this meaning—that is, it refers to the most severe prohibitions among forbidden acts.

The gravity of a sin is determined by the intensity of its prohibition when compared to prohibitions related to other sins. The verse "what you are forbidden from" does not lack an indication or implication of this. The evidence for the severity of the prohibition lies in the emphasis of the discourse, whether through insistence or threats of punishment by fire and the like (Ṭabāṭabāʾī, 1997, vol. 4: 323).

From his perspective, the reason a sin is considered major is the intensity of its prohibition, and the way to recognize this intensity is through accompanying linguistic cues such as emphatic particles, threats of punishment, and similar indicators. Whether these clues appear in the Quran or ḥadīth does not make a difference—what matters is that the prohibition is accompanied by linguistic evidence indicating its seriousness (Ibid.: 332).

Relying on this evidence-based approach—which identifies major sins through linguistic indicators such as emphasis, hyperbole, threats of punishment,

and the like—ʿAllāmah interprets ḥadīths that define major sins through "divine warnings" and similar concepts. In his view, divine warnings are merely one way to distinguish major from minor sins. There are other methods, such as emphasis and hyperbole, through which one can discern the seriousness of the prohibition. These elements do not need to be explicitly mentioned in religious texts—an implicit indication is sufficient (Ibid.: 334).

This perspective is highly commendable in that it does not rely solely on rational speculation to determine the criterion for major sins but instead directly engages with language and linguistic evidence. Referring to language to discern the speaker's intent is a strategic method that is more or less common across all cultures. However, the issue lies in the fact that Arabic's mode of expression differs somewhat from other languages. While emphatic devices exist to some degree in every language, the sheer frequency of their use in Arabic—both in terms of scope and the variety of emphatic techniques—is unparalleled. It appears that emphatic constructions in Arabic do not always signify the importance of the subject matter; at times, they serve a decorative function. This is why modern English and In Persian translations of the Quran often fail to fully reflect the emphatic nuances of the verses. Contemporary professional translators, for instance, render phrases like inna Zaydan qāʾimun simply as "Zayd is standing," disregarding their emphatic undertones (Makārim Shīrāzī, 1992: 415). If Arabic's emphatic devices were always taken literally, the meaning could sometimes become distorted.

Textualist Perspectives

By text-oriented views, we mean perspectives that rely solely on the apparent meanings of religious texts rather than employing speculative reasoning, refusing to go beyond these texts—even if these apparent meanings sometimes contradict one another. Groups from both Shīʿah and Sunni traditions have inclined toward this view. According to them, we cannot independently establish a criterion for distinguishing major sins (kabāʾir) from minor sins (ṣaghāʾir). Any sin explicitly designated in religious law as a major sin is considered as such, while any sin not explicitly labeled as major is deemed minor. The narrations on this topic vary, leading to the formation of different viewpoints.

1. The View That All Sins Are Major

Among Sunni theologians, groups such as the Ashʿarites—including figures like Bāqillānī and Juwaynī—hold that all sins are major and that there is no such thing as a minor sin (Ibn Ḥajar Haythamī, 1999, vol. 1: 7). According to this group, disobedience (of God) of any kind or degree falls under the category of major sins, and no minor sins exist. The reason some sins are called minor is that they are compared to others, and in doing so, it becomes apparent that some sins are smaller relative to larger ones—but in reality, any sin, regardless of its nature, is major. Ibn Ḥajar also quotes Ibn Fūrak as saying: "*All acts of disobedience toward God are major sins, and the reason some are called minor is in comparison to those that are greater*" (Ibid.: 7).

The reason this view is classified under text-oriented perspectives is that it reflects

the content of narrations attributed to Ibn ʿAbbās, which state: "Every prohibited thing is a major sin" (Ibid.). In another narration from him: "Anything by which God is disobeyed is a major sin" (Ibid.).

This view also appears to be quite popular among Shīʿah scholars. Prominent figures such as Shaykh Ṭūsī have explicitly stated that all sins are major (kabāʾir) and that minor sins (ṣaghāʾir) do not truly exist. The reason some sins are called "minor" is only in comparison to greater sins. In other words, when sins are compared to one another, the concept of a "minor sin" emerges, but in relation to the majesty and grandeur of God, all sins are major, and there is no justification for considering some sins against Him as insignificant (Ṭūsī, 1986: 232).

In his *Majmaʿ al-Bayān*, Ṭabarsī first narrates a *ḥadīth* from Ibn ʿAbbās stating that all sins are major, then notes that Shīʿah scholars have adopted this very view. According to him, from the Shīʿah perspective, sins are without exception major, and labeling a sin as "minor" is merely a result of comparing sins among themselves (Ṭabarsī, 1993, vol. 3: 61).

Mullā Ṣāliḥ Māzandarānī, a commentator on Uṣūl al-Kāfī, elaborates on Ṭabarsī's view, noting that since Ṭabarsī was meticulous in his attributions and never carelessly ascribed opinions to others, it is clear that this stance—that all sins are major—is undeniably held by Shīʿah scholars and represents their consensus (Māzandarānī, 1968, vol. 9: 246). The main basis for this position is the famous narration from Ibn ʿAbbās: "*Every act by which God is disobeyed is a major sin*" (Ṭabarī, 1985, vol. 5: 41) or "*Everything prohibited by God is a major sin*" (Majlisī, 1983, vol. 76: 10).

Additionally, some scholars have provided further justifications, including that God has bestowed countless blessings upon His servants—beyond enumeration—or that God possesses incomparable majesty and grandeur. Thus, disobeying Him—even in the slightest measure—is significant and must be avoided (Fakhr Rāzī, 2000, vol. 10: 60).

While this perspective is commendable for seeking to derive religious concepts directly from scriptural texts rather than relying on speculative reasoning, it ultimately proves untenable due to its incompatibility with the apparent meanings of numerous Quranic verses and *ḥadīths*. Consequently, scholars from both Sunni and Shīʿah traditions have explicitly rejected it. Fakhr Rāzī presents several arguments against this position:

First, if all sins were major, the Quran would not distinguish between "major sins" (kabāʾir) and "minor sins" (ṣaghāʾir) that are forgiven by avoiding the graver ones (Quran 53:32). Yet, the Quran explicitly differentiates between them. Second, verses such as Quran 54:53 and 18:49 categorize sins into major and minor, which would be meaningless if all sins were inherently major. Third, Prophet Muḥammad (PBUH) specifically identified certain sins as major (e.g., al-kabāʾir in ḥadīth literature). If all sins were major, such distinctions would be redundant. Fourth, in Quran 49:7, the term ʿiṣyān (disobedience) is followed by fusūq (transgression), which on a linguistic basis indicates that there must be a distinction between the two terms. Thus, fusūq refers to major sins, while ʿiṣyān denotes minor sins—proving

that not all sins are equal in gravity (Fakhr Rāzī, 2000, vol. 10: 60–61).

Allāmah Ṭabāṭabāʾī also does not accept this view and, in rejecting it, points out that this position is essentially based on a fallacy. The actual discussion concerns comparing some sins with others, not comparing human status with divine majesty. What this view assumes is precisely comparing the status of the sinful human with the sublime station of divinity (Ṭabāṭabāʾī, 1997, vol. 4: 326). However, even if one argues there is no fallacy involved, the reasoning still remains unacceptable. For if God is indeed the Most Exalted of all beings—as He truly is—He is simultaneously the Most Merciful of the merciful and the Most Generous of the generous (Fakhr Rāzī, 2000, vol. 10: 60). Therefore, there is no justification for us to categorically label all sins as major.

2. The View that Only Textually-Specified Sins Are Major

The view that considers only explicitly mentioned sins as major represents another text-oriented approach among scholars of both Islamic schools. Those adhering to this perspective maintain that major sins are strictly those specifically designated as such in Quranic verses or authentic *ḥadīths*. Given the variations in narrations regarding the number and types of major sins, naturally differing opinions have emerged on this matter.

Based on one narration found in tradition sources from both Islamic schools, major sins are confined to seven categories. Based on such reports, some scholars have argued that major sins are confined to these seven, excluding other transgressions (Ibn Ḥajar Haythamī, 1999, vol. 1: 14).

Instead of focusing solely on the seven sins, Taftāzānī presents alternative views emphasizing different numbers (Taftāzānī, 1989, vol. 5: 161), indicating the existence of other textual sources that have given rise to variant text-oriented positions.

Given this, similar perspectives have emerged among Shīʿah scholars, with some groups maintaining: "They are the sins specifically identified by the Prophet Muḥammad (PBUH) by name" (Kabīr Madanī, 1989, vol. 2: 232). The approach of scholars like Martyr Dastghayb, who enumerates approximately forty major sins in his work based on explicit ḥadīth references (Dastghayb, 2012), appears to stem from this same textual orientation.

While this view deserves respect for its strict adherence to scriptural references, its limitations become apparent upon closer examination. The textual evidence itself varies considerably—the aforementioned narration from Ibn ʿAbbās specifies seven sins, yet other reports from him mention seventy (Abd al-Razzāq, 1983, vol. 10: 460) or even seven hundred (Ibn Baṭṭāl, 2003, vol. 9: 198). Furthermore, the specification of certain numbers and sins in ḥadīths does not necessarily imply restriction to those cases, but rather indicates their particular importance. This explains why other narrations in this context mention different numbers like four, fourteen, or fifteen (Ibn Ḥajar Haythamī, 1999, vol. 1: 14).

The Hierarchical-Integrative Theory

Regarding the issue of identifying major and minor sins, as noted earlier, Muslim theologians and scholars have proposed a

variety of views. Examination of these views, however, shows that most of them can be organized under two general approaches: the textualist approach and the ijtihād-based approach. The textualist approach rests on the assumption that religion, in its transmitted sources, has provided either criteria or at least examples of major sins; therefore, the way to identify them is by referring to the religious texts, namely the Quran and ḥadīth.

In contrast, the ijtihād-based approach proceeds from the assumption that although religious sources refer to the division of sins into major and minor, they do not offer a clear criterion for distinguishing between the two; consequently, determining them is left to scholarly reasoning and analytical judgment. Each of these two approaches has its strengths and weaknesses. The textualist approach enjoys direct support from the religious texts, yet in many cases it encounters the limitation of the texts themselves. For instance, one narration states the number of major sins to be seven, while another sets it at twenty. The ijtihād-based approach, on the other hand, allows for broader analysis but is exposed to disagreement and diversity of opinions.

In light of this reality, a combined approach may be proposed as a more plausible theory. According to this approach, whenever there exists in the religious sources a reliable and unopposed text declaring a certain sin to be major, that text should undoubtedly serve as the criterion; for in such cases the Lawgiver has directly stated the ruling, leaving no need for independent reasoning. For example, in a narration it is reported that the major sins include: associating partners with God, killing a human being unjustly, harming and disobeying one's parents, usury, consuming the property of an orphan, fleeing from the battlefield, and so forth (Kulaynī, 1986, vol. 2: 278). If this narration is reliable in its chain of transmission, sound in its indication, and not opposed by conflicting evidence, it can provide a solid basis for identifying some of the major sins, since such sources explicitly enumerate them.

Nevertheless, the fact remains that the religious texts have not set out all the instances or detailed criteria of major sins. In such cases one must inevitably resort to ijtihād. Yet ijtihād in this matter has also produced various views. While some scholars regard the criterion of a major sin as the predominance of the punishment for the committed sin over the good deeds of the agent, others have suggested referring to linguistic indicators within the texts. Among these views, however, the one proposed by Mullā Ṣadrā—and earlier by Ghazālī—appears to be more robust. Based on a profound religious worldview, this perspective considers the criterion of a major sin to be the degree to which it disrupts the essential necessities of religious and human life. According to this analysis, a major sin is one that causes serious harm to one of three fundamental domains: knowledge and divine unity, the preservation and dignity of human life, and the protection of property and social order.

It is evident that this interpretation also accords with the spirit of religious teachings, for many legal rulings and prescribed punishments have in fact been instituted to safeguard these fundamental principles. Knowledge of God constitutes

the foundation of religious identity and the starting point of all virtues. The Quran states that the purpose of creation is worship (Quran 51:56), which in narrations has been interpreted as "knowledge" (Māzandarānī, 1968, vol. 4: 278). Without knowledge of his Lord, a human being wanders in the darkness of ignorance and misguidance, and guidance toward "light" is achieved only through knowledge of God (Quran 2:257). Such knowledge is not merely propositional information but an existential transformation that leads to faith, love, and the reform of one's actions (Kulaynī, 1986, vol. 1: 44).

The preservation of life is likewise among the essential objectives of both the *Sharīʿah* and reason. The Quran describes the killing of a soul with severe warning and counts it among the gravest sins, even equating the destruction of a single life with the destruction of all humanity (Quran 4:93; 5:32). Human life is a divine trust, and its protection is the prerequisite for all religious and moral responsibilities; without the preservation and security of life, neither worship, intellectual growth, nor the fulfillment of moral responsibilities can take place.

The protection of property also belongs to this framework as one of the pillars of human and social life. The Quran explicitly forbids consuming the wealth of others unjustly (Quran 4:29) and describes devouring the property of orphans as "consuming fire" (Quran 4:10). According to the narrations, wealth is "the property of God" entrusted to human beings (Ṭūsī, 1986: 729). Economic integrity and the avoidance of extravagance, wastefulness, usury, and betrayal are prerequisites for the formation of a just society and a context for spiritual growth, since a society lacking sound economic foundations easily falls into various moral and social corruptions.

Therefore, the combined approach—according to which a reliable and unopposed text takes precedence when it exists, and in its absence recourse is made to rational ijtihād and analysis of the objectives of the Sharīʿah—offers a balanced and defensible way to address this issue. Within this framework, the theory based on the disruption of the essential necessities of religion—articulated by thinkers such as Mullā Ṣadrā and Ghazālī—possesses greater explanatory power. It allows, while remaining faithful to the religious texts, a more coherent and rational understanding of the distinction between major and minor sins.

Conclusion

The present study seeks to resolve the theoretical confusion surrounding the distinction between major and minor sins by examining the views of Muslim scholars and classifying them into two overarching approaches: the "textualist" approach and the "ijtihād-based" approach. The ijtihād-based approaches include the theories of balancing, the centrality of linguistic indicators, and the centrality of the essentials of religion, all of which emphasize rational analysis and human understanding. In contrast, textualist approaches maintain either that all sins are inherently major, or that only those sins explicitly mentioned in the religious texts are to be regarded as major.

Given the limitations and shortcomings of each of these two paradigms, this study proposes an innovative "combined model" as

a final solution. According to this preferred model, the first step is to refer to reliable scriptural texts; whenever an explicit statement exists, it should be accepted as the decisive criterion. However, in the absence or insufficiency of such textual evidence, the process of identification shifts to rational ijtihād and the analysis of the objectives of the Sharīʿah.

Within the domain of ijtihād, the teleological perspective advanced by thinkers such as Mullā Ṣadrā and Abū Ḥāmid Ghazālī is adopted. This approach seeks the criterion of a major sin in the degree to which it harms or disrupts three fundamental pillars: knowledge and divine unity, the preservation of human life and dignity, and the protection of property and social order. Compared with other approaches, this perspective offers significantly greater comprehensiveness, practical effectiveness, and depth of religious insight.

The main contribution of this study is its systematic categorization of existing perspectives and its proposal of a balanced, integrated model that respects both scriptural authority and rational reasoning. Future research may further explore the application of this combined approach to specific cases and its implications for Islamic jurisprudence and ethics.

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Conflict of Interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this manuscript.

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AUTHOR BIOSKETCHES

Syed Abdurrauf Afzali. *Department of Philosophy and Mysticism, Faculty of Philosoophy and Religious Studies, al-Mustafa Internationa University, Qom, Iran.*
Email: *althakhaer@gmail.com*
ORCID: *https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8889-4779*

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