

THE ELEMENTAL ROOT OF CREATIVE AND INNOVATIVE THINKING BASED ON ISLAMIC MORALITY

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Received: 01 Nov. 2021

Accepted: 10 Nov. 2021

Published: 30 Dec. 2021

Abstract: Religious ethics have been viewed as a top-down system of moral severity that provides rigid restrictions rather than assistance for practical living. This paper aims to explore the elemental root of creative thought with respect to Islamic morality by exploring characteristic morals that support innovative reasoning. It is discovered that the moral framework of the Qur'an entertains a wide spectrum of choices that affect human actions and development with regard to desirable and undesirable outcomes. An endless flux between a static status quo and dynamic change pushes us beyond levels of excellence for a more congruently cognizant life experience. The concept of morality expressed in the Qur'an is herein elevated to a conjoined creative realm with a generic connotation of 'goodness' with respect to 'rights' as a divinely targeted goal. This narrative therefore establishes that divine doctrines—commonly seen as straightforward, strict and static - can be divested of puritan fancies and then released to function well in realms that nurture divergent thought and enhance innovation.

Keywords: Creative thinking, innovative thinking, Islamic Morality, Religious ethics

Cite this article: Amilah Awang Abdul Rahman, Rahimah Embong & Huda Afiqah Hashim. (2021). Akhlaq as the Root of Creative Thinking and an Innovative Mind: a Conceptual Framework for Moral Education. Global Journal of Educational Research and Management (GERMANE), 1(4), 193-209.

INTRODUCTION

Religious ethics are a primary tool of moral development. Presently marginalized under waves of modern and post-modern quests for autonomy and progress, they are generally perceived as self-imposed rigid constructs of nonsense that comprise a typical top-down rule-bound non-malleable monolithic edifice that withstands and prevents change with time. As such, secular ethics are now deemed to hold solutions for a new breed of humans. Many such theories emerged with Kant, Bentham, Nietzsche, Hare, GE Moore, Heidegger and Levinas. Lately, atheist-leaning ethics have also gained ground under the charge of Paul Kurtz, Peter Singer, Sam Harris and others who radically reject anything religious.

Our contemporaries submit that creative thought from innovative minds is an important tool for civilizational progress. Educational goals have been tailored to provide skills that support the imaginations of current jargon such as 'Industrial Revolution 4.0', 'Society 5.0', 'Sustainable Goals' and others. These efforts intensify initiatives like artificial

intelligence, robotic manufacture, advanced information technology and other inventions that underscore the indispensable role of divergent creative thought as the main engine of an innovative mind.

Islam has comfortably accommodated creativity in science, medicine, mathematics and technology from its onset. Ibn Sina, Ibn Firnas, al-Khawarizmi, al-Jazari and others made significant contributions in these disciplines. Taha Abd al-Rahman believes that Islam's moral system paved these creative roads and that Islam still holds solutions for current problems confronting civilization as a whole (Taha, 2000). However, little work has been done to explore the roots of creative thinking in Islam.

This paper argues that the root of creative thought is laid bare in the moral system described by the Qur'an. The author contends that important characteristics of this moral system more than adequately spur innovation and creativity.

Creative Thinking and Morality

Creative thinking is a vital yet complex concept with a wide scope of implemented outcomes. Scholars nevertheless agree that there is no generally accepted definition of creativity. (Jamal Badi, 2007; Ripple, 1999). Its general meaning pertains to the "*skill of bringing something into existence*"; or "*to make or produce something that no one has made before by using skill or imagination*" (Oxford U Press, 2004). This description is sufficient for mass consumption. Some writers add *novel* (original, unexpected) and *appropriate* (useful, adaptive concerning task constraints) (Sternberg & Lubart, 1991,1995, 1996).

Before the Enlightenment, creativity was considered a near miraculous gift. Creative people often evaded close scrutiny, almost to the point of avoidance. However, creativity's importance has since been acknowledged and is presently nurtured in support of scientific discoveries so that much innovation rapidly occurs in a wide variety of disciplines. Creativity is further appreciated in sync with Postmodern philosophy, which expects radical and unexpected changes in human circumstances. Moral philosophers like Nietzsche, Heidegger and Wittgenstein especially stressed the importance of creative individuals and eschewed any permanent structuring of organized human life.

Currently, creativity reaches beyond the individual to societal levels with a wide range of tasked domains, (Sternberg, 1999) both tangible and intangible. It is even viewed as an inherent capacity so that new ideas and ways of dealing with just about everything are close at hand and can touch even mundane everyday matters and facilities. Indeed, the innovative mind now spurs excellence in all fields and has become the key to success in a highly competitive world

Nonetheless, the relationship between our creative effort and human ethics remains to be explored. Ethics are related to critical thought as a means of structuring thought and action in line with principles concerning both good and bad, beneficial versus harmful. However, the well-known Western philosopher, Alasdair MacIntyre, posits that moral thinking is not a matter of deciding or choosing between what is good or bad but rather of choosing according to the worldview or living philosophy and tradition in which a decision maker dwells both mentally and physically. Ethics are, therefore, far more about complex thought patterns than what has been hastily observed by many thinkers. As long as a moral system is understood to

prescribe rules that govern good and bad actions, people find it extremely difficult to see how moral guidance translates to a fountain of creativity.

Morality and the Qur'an

Qur'an is the model of *akhlaq*. We know this from Aisha who, when questioned about the *akhlaq* of the Prophet responded: "His "*khuluq*" (morality) is the Qur'an". This means the Prophet's conduct was as perfect as the Qur'an. Another inference that the Qur'an is, in the main, a book of morality that contains the principles guiding the Prophet's conduct is a very famous hadith relating that the Prophet was sent to sanctify good conduct: "I was sent to sanctify the noble characteristic."

Although the word *khuluq* is only mentioned twice in the Qur'an, "This is no other than *khuluq* (customary device) of the ancients" [As-Shua'ara:137]; and "And you (Muhammad) have a sublime character" [Al-Qalam:4] morality is nevertheless acknowledged as one of its major components. Morality or '*amal salih*' (good action) is paired with 'good faith' in more than 45 verses. Izutsu considers this pairing "the strongest tie of semantic relationship into an almost inseparable unit." (Izutsu, 2002).

The general spirit of the Qur'an is to demonstrate the good as compared to the bad, including taking good path (to believe) and leaving the wrong path (do not believe), and therefore is part of ethical role. To submit one's self to Islam, 'ahd...implies the total submission to the God's commands which thus, the ethical aspect of the Qur'an is indeed very broad.

'Good' in the Qur'an is also represented by various terms such as *salih, birr, ma'ruf, khayr, tayyib, husn, halal*; 'bad' by *fasad, munkar, sharr, khabith, haram* and *dhunub* (Izutsu, 2002). Numerous human traits are associated with conduct, including *kafir* or *kufir* (unbeliever) as symbols for ingratitude and injustice; *alladhin amanu* (those who believe) represents high commitment to assigned duties. Moreover, the major reason for the rejection of truth is related to morality; this is *istikbara*, which means arrogant. [See al-Zumar: 59; Sad: 75; al-Baqarah: 87; al-Jathiah: 31]. Good characteristics, as mentioned in the Qur'an, are also associated with believers. Such terms include *muhsinun, muttaqun, muslimun, muflihin*; versus negative terms like *Zulm, mujrim*, and others.

Faith is the Qur'an's primary concern. Ethical principles are foundational and inherent in all verses that relate to faith directly or indirectly. For example, all human deeds are to be presented on the Day of Judgment and weighed for reward or punishment. Good is rewarded with good. Many verses mention that the reward for those who do good is Heaven, and they will be permanently there with all sorts of pleasure and sources of happiness. Among others, al-Baqarah: 25; 82; al-Nisa': 57; 122; 173; Hud: 23 and many others. and given even better. There are several verses mentioning that Allah will reward the best of what the servant do. For example al-Kahfi: 30 and al-Ahqaf: 16. Bad deeds are punished with more than their equivalent measure. (Fussilat: 27) The Qur'an's concept of God is that He is the best Judge because He is all-knowing and all-hearing, and because He sees beyond all boundaries, to include what is hidden in the human heart. Furthermore, all narratives of the Prophets of Allah and their communities therein are clearly intended as moral lessons. The chief inference being

that motivating mankind's acquisition of good conduct and personal characteristics is the Qur'an's primary purpose.

On the content of the Qur'an, Ahmed Badi wrote the following:

The Qur'an does not simply aim at convincing people of truth. Theoretically, it also stimulates them to act according to truth. A thoughtful action is very important in Islam.

The Qur'an consists of not only theory, but it is a comprehensive philosophical system based on abstract ideas as well as good society in real life. [p. 64]

The Qur'an contains principles of action framed in moral premises. Draz further highlights the miraculous aspect of the Qur'an from an exceptional moral perspective, and claims that it prodigiously affects the positioning of human actions between being fixed and flexible—that it's message uniquely presents a threefold system of perfection: softness within firmness, progress within stability, and nuance within unity. (Draz, 2008)

Nevertheless, the actual systematic study of morality presented in the Qur'an is relatively new. The most thorough overview was given by Abdullah Draz seventy years ago. Other writers are Toshihiko Izutsu and Taha 'Abd al-Rahman. Prior to these writers, moral discourse in Islam was approached by either listing good conduct(s) or with the theory of soul. Most author focus was given to the Prophet's morality (pbh). The theory of Malek ben Nabi (Badrane, 2013) might therefore be true, in that ethical thought arises as the last stage of human historical development, and may well explain its late emergence in Islam. This aligns with Ripple who posits that creativity combines abilities, skills, motivations, and attitudes, (Ripple RE, 1999) which infers a robust relationship with ethics, especially those of *akhlaq*, which is the Islamic moral system.

CHARACTERISTICS OF THE QUR'ANIC MORAL SYSTEM THAT SPUR CREATIVITY AND INNOVATION

1. *Akhlaq*: A Human-Centred System of Morality

a. *Individual achievement is the main aim*

Individual grooming is made evident within the moral system of Islam. This moral or ethical dimension of Islam, is rooted in *khuluq*, which literally means “*innate peculiarity, natural disposition, character, temper, nature.*” (Hans Wehr, 1994) This is an Islamic realm that clearly spells ‘the moral development of human character’ so that ethical human activity abounds. The importance of individual commitment to *Akhlaq* is far more robust when compared to other words that describe moral dimensions in other languages. For example *ethicos* means ‘good life’; *moralis* means ‘principles in society’. Muhammad Asad expounded the unique overtones that embrace Islamic morality as being purely individual by saying: “*Everyone must strive towards the spiritual goal as an individual and everyone must begin and end with himself.*” (Muhammad Asad, 1999) Indeed. The most effective moral inculcation is empowered from within one's self, because, aside from God Almighty, it is only the self who knows his/her desires of the heart.

By clearly stressing individual achievement(s), the Qur'an's indisputable message is that life's goal is to discover who is best at being a moral human being. [Al: Mulk: 2; al-Kahfi: Hud:] Promised retributions are repeatedly declared as being based on unacceptable ‘bad’ or immoral deeds. The Qur'an further stresses that no one can be of help to another in

an explicit finality that follows life on earth, whether father, son, mother or daughter. [*“Every soul draws the meed of its acts on none but itself: no bearer of burdens can bear the burden of another.”* al-An’am: 164; *“No mother shall be treated unfairly on account of her child. Nor father on account of his child, an heir shall be chargeable in the same way.”* Al-Baqarah: 233.] The goal of moral life is, therefore, to compile good deeds and avoid bad deeds in preparation for the afterlife. Full stop. Obviously, this end is endlessly supported by the concept of death’s unknown moment of truth, which again highlights everyone’s individual performance. [*“... He causes you to grow further so that you may reach old age, while some of you He recalls earlier. All this is in order that you may reach an appointed term and that you may understand (the Truth). He it is Who gives life and causes death. Whenever He decrees a thing, He only commands to it “Be”, and it is.”* Ghafir: 67-68]

Nonetheless, the Qur’an does not expect the same degree of performance from everyone. It describes different levels of achievement, ranging from the best (*ahsan* or *khayr*) to the worst (*azlam*: meaning ‘the most cruel’); or from the highest quality (*muhsinun* or *muttaqun*) to the lowest, which can manifest as a sub-human ‘worse than an animal’ condition. [Al-A’raaf:179] The Qur’an motivates moral achievement for all in accord with individual capabilities (Al-An’am 132). Hence, Islam’s moral domain admits individual strengths and weaknesses so that various qualities, temperaments and psychological inclinations find the path of positive development in sync with respective predispositions, capabilities and effort. The Qur’an further considers a person’s circumstances regarding limited behavioural expectations. Acceptance of the true religion, for example, is conditionally dependent on the ‘sending down of a prophet’. *‘We never punish until We have sent a Messenger’* [Al-Israa’: 15] with signs (*ayat*) and explanations (*bayyinat*).

The Qur’an explodes with multiple interpretations that accommodate so many different human circumstances and talents there is more ample enough room to discover values and responsibilities rather than foolishly construct any dry code of conduct. It pushes people to strive hard to overcome various challenges, but when needed, the Qur’an proffers generous leniency for the weak. [An-Nisa’: 95]. Groups who require munificent attention include the poor, orphans, children, old folks and women. The Qur’an often, clearly and repeatedly mentions that their rights are on par with all others. [On women: alBaqarah; on orphans] In this sense, the Qur’an allows for individual applications adjusted for real circumstances. Clear rulings involving food, drink and ritual are subject to change when dealing with dangerous or difficult situations. [Food in *mudarraah*, *tayammum* and shortening the prayers, fasting for long journey.] There is also advice for persons with various temperaments and social status.

Allah also makes it clear that He monitors (watches) humans, especially those who strive: *“Or think ye that ye shall be abandoned, as though Allah did not know those among you who strive with might and main.”* [at-Taubah: 16] The Qur’an’s expectations for each and every one of us is made very clear. Draz said:

The recourse of individual effort to ensure one’s duty conforms with objective reality is a universal obligation incumbent upon the most ignorant of men, as well as the most competent ... so each of us is obliged to judge for ourselves whether the action we intend to carry out satisfies requirements of the rule. (Draz, 2008, p. 63).

As for the idea that God's absolute power and will does not deny human choice — a classical matter of contention — Draz concludes the following: "... *predestinationists have not gone as far as to deny moral law or impute any injustice to the One who instituted it,*" — and further: "... *anxious to safeguard divine justice, liberalists did not want to raise man to the level of God, but had to admit to an exception in the creative act.*" (Draz, 2008, p 103). The antinomy of either pole is perceived only at extreme perspectives.

While expecting everyone to practice decision-making and problem-solving, Qur'anic morality welcomes each one to fulfil criteria that nurture innovative approaches, indicating that, as a book of guidance, people actually need to be told they can be creative. [Denton: The same opinion is raised by Chan Kim and Mauborgne in their Blue Ocean Strategy that confidence helps create unbelievable new ideas] As its spirit of morality leans towards nurturing decision-making skills to achieve life goals rather than the passive acceptance of 'good versus bad' arenas, the Qur'an actually offers diverse ideas and new ways of dealing with adaptive processes when life's numerous circumstances spur the spirit of creativity onward, upward and forward. In fact, it is proven that creativity best emerges when dealing challenging conditions of constraint. Many studies show that people do not have to be of superstar quality to be innovative, which is what generally occurs in genuine Islamic moral praxis. Most creative work is done by ordinary people. Hence, the moral system offered by the Qur'an is an open field for everybody.

b. Cognition is a major aspect of Morality in the Qur'an

Moral commitment begins with contemplation (*taffakur*), which is compulsory for Muslims because it strengthens faith. The Qur'an's allows this by uniquely opening its entire content to comprehension by all. Many verses repeatedly highlight this 'clear guidance' (*bayyinah*): "*We have sent down clear signs to you and no one will reject them except the wicked* [Al-Baqarah: 99. Al-Imran: 97; Yunus: 15; Al-Isra': 101; Al-Haj: 16; 72; Al-Nur: 1; Al-Qasas: 36; Saba': 43; Al-Jathiah: 17; 25; Al-Ahqaf: 7; Al-Hadid: 9; Al-Mujadalah: 5.] – *In this way God makes clear unto you His messages.*" [Al-Baqarah: 187; 219; 242; 266; Al-Imran: 103; Al-Ma'idah: 89; Al-Nur: 58; 59; 61.] [Al-Baqarah: 221; Al-Nur: 18] His fury always follows any rejection of clear explanations and warnings, "*As for him who sets himself against the Messenger and follows a path other than that of the believers even after true guidance had become clear to him, We will let him go to the way he has turned to, and We will cast him into Hell - an evil destination.*" [Al-Nisa':115. Also in Al-Baqarah:109; Muhammad:32] as delivered by the prophets. [Al-Baqarah:253; Al-Imran: 86;183;184; Al-Ma'idah:32; Al-A'raf:101; Al-Taubah:70; Yunus:13; 74; Ibrahim: 9; Al-Isra':101; Al-Ankabut:39; Al-Rum:9; Fatir:25; Ghafir:22; Saba':50; 66; 83] Al'Qur'an associates words like *ayat* (sign) and clear (*bayyinah*) with His warnings, missives and judgments.

The Qur'an launches a direct dialog between God and humans. The mind is triggered each time the book is opened or recited. These reflections instil deeper understanding, especially on matters of faith that cannot otherwise be seen without the Qur'an's 'clear evidence', often stating *afala ta'qilun* ("do you not think or comprehend?") or "*la'allakum ta'qilun*" ("so that you can comprehend"). ["*don't you think*", and "*so that you will comprehend*" appear in more than 20 verses, such as al-Baqarah: 44; 73;76 and 242; Al

‘Imran: 62 and 118.] Thus, the Qur’an constantly motivates us to make good moral choices, including that of sound faith. The Qur’anic way is to address all matters logically and lucidly. The narrations of the past people who did not accept the teachings of the Prophets such as the people of Nuh, Lut, Salih, Musa and others and suffered finally are also as lessons.] Each component of every verse enlightens and fosters correct thought and action. The classical approach to morality or theory of soul has established that cognition plays a primary role in moral development. Al-Ghazali considered cognition a core faculty of human selfhood:

Akhlaq (character) means established states (of the soul) from which actions proceed easily, without any need for reflection and deliberation. If this state is such that good actions—i.e. those which are praised by reason and Shari‘ah—proceed from it, it is called good character. If the actions proceed from the evil state, it is called bad character (*akhlaq*). (Muhammad Abul Quasem,1978)

Both roles, faculty and function, stand alongside shariah-bound efforts to control anger and desire (Muhammad Abul Quasem,1978). Draz relates that our autonomy involves the ability to reason and then choose to act:

Between the undetermined and the determined there lies a whole gamut of options, not only for the free choice of psychological conscience but also for the intelligent evaluation of the moral conscience ... It therefore requires individual effort and a special tact to appreciate their proper value and choose those which are most essential. (Draz, 2008, p 63)

He also asserts that room for choice remains even for specific rules:

A rule is never made in order to shackle our freedom, but somehow to increase it. ... It also provides a framework for activity that increases power and effectiveness. Our freedom can be lost by extension but it gains depth in our search for the best way to performing a duty.

Taha ‘Abd al-Rahman affirmed that human reasoning was paid insufficient attention by previous philosophers. He argues that reason is vital to fulfil our responsibility as moral creatures (*al-makhlūq al-akhlaqi*) and that reason’s moral usage is unlimited. Man must think to produce action; hence, moral reasoning demands higher levels of reckoning compared to decisions concerning abstract situations. Al-Rahman characterized two types of thought processes that govern human action: *al-‘aql al-musaddad* and *al-‘aql al-mu’ayyad*. (AbdurRahman,2013). *‘Aql al-mu’ayyad* is related to divergent process in which a person freely considers ways to optimize his/her achievement of life goals compared to *al-‘aql al-musaddad*. [Acts through which an agent aims to bring benefit or avoid a harm by means of performing works dictated by the Moral Law (*Shar‘*) See Wa’el b. Hallaq.] This is very much related to creative thought.

Badi discussed four active stages of the intellect. Processes related to moral decisions are *Tawassum* (cognitive application) and *tabassur* (perceptual application); both lead to *I’tibar*, which is the practical application of knowledge, the rationale for which leads to *yaqin*, the highest level of certainty concerning truth and *ilm*. (Jamal Badi, 2007) Badi’s concepts (*tawassum*, *tabassur* *I’tibar*, *yaqin*) are deeply related to processes that involve divergent thinking.

c. A dynamic system of good and bad

Stability and flexibility are important characteristics of a good moral system. Stability ensures continuous respect for cited principles. If everything remains open to change, original

objectives cannot be preserved or respected. Such a fragile status denies its features as a theory or philosophy worthy of praxis.

Akhlaq is a system that combines confirmed stable principles (*qiyam*) with more elastic attitudes (*taqyim*) with a view to suit different people and situations. For instance: donating money and administering justice are standard values, but how much money or the specific manner of administering justice are not always prescribed. Both remain open to innovation in accord with conditional circumstances and need. It is also interesting that such confirmed stable principles comprise: "... a hierarchy of values, both positive and negative, cleverly arranged and richly detailed. The first group of acts is elementary and definitive duties"—or specific rules with—"detailed regulations guiding choice and behaviour in particular circumstances." (Draz, 2008) The second group is that of creative constructive virtue, a field of activity that is so vast it holds endless degrees, all of which are possible and practicable. Ansari defines values as "general standards of desirability, more or less independent of specific situations". Izutsu described primary and secondary values, as well as virtues, vices, rights and responsibilities.

This realm of 'creative constructive virtue' is often mentioned in the Qur'an, which offers several general terms, mostly for virtues related to one's belief. Other terms (*muqarrabun*, *muhsinun*, *muttaqun*) stand in opposition to followers of desire represented by *zulm*, *mujrim*, etc. Al' Qur'an's categorizing of human actions is also done in a general sense, to include *khayr*, *sharr*, *ma'ruf*. Yet the open and general concept of what is 'good' in the Qur'an does not infer laxity. Rather, it better relates to maintaining individual dynamism so that each person has his/her own way of doing the needful but without detailed specifications. This demonstrates that *akhlaq* stands apart from law (*shari'ah*), which needs to specify all expectations. Thus, both approaches to achieving the good work hand-in-hand.

However, open injunctions do not obtain personal laxity or freedom. Instead, the Quran pushes us towards greater participation by encouraging everyone to rise above the mundane to higher degrees of merit. Any concession that relaxes mores so that passion and caprice triumph negates ethics. The key, therefore, is to always follow the way of God in opposition to one's own desire. The Qur'an describes human desire as humankind's enemy since it leads us astray [Al-Qasas:50;Saad:25], and always deviates from the truth [An-Nisa:135].

The best example discussed here is that of justice. Justice does not concern fair distribution but rather the putting of something in its proper place with regard to conduct while assuring everyone's needs are met, especially between man and woman. The arrogation of human rights is decided by religion. However, creativity occurs when broader guidelines are used for problem solving as opposed to detailed standard operating procedures. According to John Geanakoplos and Larry Gray, 'Rules of thumb' are better than comprehensive analysis when playing chess. The caveat being that although flexibility is allowed to facilitate creative thought, nothing too chaotic or unpredictable is advised.

People have different capacities for achieving success yet these differences do not hinder individual effort, which is the most valuable aspect of human activity from a Qur'anic perspective. Indeed, the Qur'an opens the entire realm of 'moral behaviour' to creatively constructive efforts so that different responses accommodate all levels of ability and sincerity.

Thus, Islamic ethical expectations guide Muslim responses according to each person's sensitivity, aptitude and means.

This combination of 'static and solid' with 'flexible and not straightforward' shows that *akhlaq*, as an ethical system of personal development, supports creativity. Consciously combining specific abstract concepts having good and bad attributions systematically supports creative thought in light of two universal forces: order and chaos. (Denton, 1999) Thus, innovation derives from chaos theory, the science of complexity in which order and chaos appear to clash but can be creatively and congruently re-ordered. (Denton, 1999) Murray-Gell Mann supports this notion of creativity: "*Something must have sufficient regularity (order) for it to be able to exploit learning or adapting, but not so much regularity that nothing happens.*" (Mann, 2007). With this in mind, creativity dwells in engineering companies and human management divisions. Nonetheless, economic creativity, for example, does not necessarily negate established formulas. Producing actions via *akhlaq* involves a complete set of adaptive processes that transform concrete moral norms and modalities of behaviour into the most appropriate of actions in accord with one's life goals as supported by the Islamic worldview. Thus, *akhlaq* encompasses innovative moral discipline, which implies that the element of free conscientious choice, a matter of import that Islam requires because it entails intelligent evaluation by a morally imbued conscience, is followed by qualitative decisions applied to types and levels of response and performance.

2. Ideal System

Fulfilling the demands of *akhlaq* are difficult because ideal expectations are exceptionally high and likely not achievable. Its exacting suppositional realm is not entirely sympathetic to mundane experience. Even so, Muslims should strive to meet these standards daily despite falling short. Open room for *iktisab* (effort) and *mujahadah* (serious effort) connotes a serious struggle to attain specific aims with a view to expand and improve how we affect and experience of life.

Draz writes that Islamic morals reach beyond what exists into what is "*expected to be*". He expands this idealism by differentiating between judgement of value and judgement of reality; thus indicating the task is to work for something beyond what we confront from the very beginning of our struggle to become morally ideal. *Akhlaq* not only concerns what *should be done* at a particular time and place but also goals and how they are best achieved. As such, it is about planning and optimizing the path to moral maturity. Such understanding motivates the innovative process as we navigate the real trials and errors of human experience.

In explaining ideal ethical goals, McIntyre differentiates between aim and achievement. A person must first aim for the highest point then strive to achieve the nearest mark. Most fall short (MacIntyre, 1988) but understanding the difference between aim and reach is crucial. If a goal is forever limited to what is confidently achievable, we place a limit on our capabilities. Hence, "*pushing beyond the limit*" became a slogan.

The Qur'an instructs us that the highest human hope is to attain the love of God. Thus, loving and being loved by God, when appropriately acknowledged, motivate Islam's adherents to move beyond both perceived or imagined limits. Since we do not know what or

where our best is, we continue to strive and achieve greater blessings by performing greater deeds. This allows the Islamic struggle its unique departure from boundaries while still working within the confines of moral restraint. In fact, placing any mundane goal as a moral end limits our achievement(s). Thus, what follows is an even stronger relationship with God, one that triggers us from within as the most genuine of motivators.

This great expectation is expressed in the Qur'an as an ethic that is entirely different from what might be called 'normative'. Western normative ethics place social expectations as the ultimate ethical goal. Success is therefore measured by meeting immediate social needs. This aim does not motivate an individual to exceed expected limitations. Satisfaction is derived by meeting mundane goals.

Islamic commits its subscribers to a spirit of gratitude and indebtedness to God. On its own, such a spirit of gratitude pushes each believer to excel at whatever they do in response. Islam's system of reward and retribution is based on weighing good actions more than bad actions, which should ideally stimulate goodness. Furthermore, a good Muslim is not limited to goodness that is merely acceptable but always seek out the very best. At the same time, he or she tries as hard as possible to move away from doing what is bad and from any harmful influences. To achieve this, one cannot remain passive but must push onward towards perfection, which can only lead to a spirit of innovation.

To "*push beyond the limit*" therefore denotes exceeding the expected maximum. In Islam, this requires the removal of hindrances and influences that prevent moral achievement. Although perfection is not achievable, its moral sense psychologically holds a relatively individual connotation. It does not imply having all imaginable good qualities nor any progressive acquisition of new qualities from without, but rather the development of what is already existing within. Such positive qualities are thus aroused from what lies dormant and owe to what are inherently varied characteristics, talents and abilities. (Muhammad Asad, 1999).

The ideal moral aim is supported by failures and challenges that try us. (Ayat nablawa) Here, the effort is what really counts in the end. Believing in *Qadha* and *Qadr* (God's predestination) further endorse this concept by stressing an understanding that not all goals are achievable. Instead of producing weak human capital, belief in predestination nurtures resilience and motivates greater effort, because effort determines success or failure in the hereafter. Indeed, the unseen aspect of human belief pushes one onwards towards infinity.

Although achieving our very best is not a common concern certain institutions define expected goals and push their staff to achieve higher marks to ensure targeted objectives. Some venues even demand perfection and do not excuse negligence, forgetfulness and ignorance. Many of these often align with the ideals of religious ethics. Islamic *akhlaq*, for example, demands as many good deeds as possible as life's goal. Expectations are high and often unachievable. Nevertheless, the Muslim striving for excellence looks beyond apparent limitations and abilities to the impossible and relentlessly seeks what is best to please God as the ultimate goal. Thus *akhlaq* is the catalyst that yields superior results. This is also where *akhlaq* aligns with the Greek word, *arête*, which has been inaccurately translated as 'virtue' in modern ethics. *Akhlaq* real meaning is 'excellent personality', an achievement that begins within and is far more than virtue. (Izutsu, 2002; Macintyre, 1985)

The Quran guides all of humanity to achieve better outcomes by opening avenues of ever greater participation in an endlessly unlimited enterprise that rises to higher levels of merit. For example, its concept of ‘donation’ is quite detailed. First, the Qur’an consistently prompts us to help others, especially close relatives and those in difficulty. Secondly, the Qur’an mentions no limit on the amount or type of help, which allows ample flexibility. *Infaq* during times of difficulty holds even higher value:

Not equal are those of you who spent and fought [in God’s cause] before the Victory [and those who did not do so]: they are of a higher rank than those who would spend and fight [only] after it — although God has promised the ultimate good to all [who strive in His cause], and God is aware of all that you do. [Al-Hadid: 10]

The Qur’an details manners for donation:

- If you disclose your charity, that is well, but if you hide it and give to the poor, that is better. The latter atones for some misdeeds and Allah is well aware of what you do (2:271)

Moreover, a charitable act or donation can be voided if it is not followed by other good actions. [See al-Baqarah: 245 and al-hadid: 10]

- Kind words and the covering of faults are better (*khayr*) than charity followed by injury. Allah is free of all wants, and He is Most-Forbearing (Al-Baqarah 163).

Hence, that the Qur’an expects and appreciates our best is made extremely clear. The Qur’an not only expect good from us but also our very best, which is more important. A word that reflects the expectation of excellence is *ihsan*, which is normally discussed under the shade of the *Hadith of Jibril*, in which Prophet Muhammad, when answering Jibril, stated, "[*Ihsan* is] to worship God as though you see Him, and if you cannot see Him, then [know] indeed [that] He sees you" (AlBukhari & AlMuslim). The connotation carries two meanings: as a verb *ihsan* means ‘doing good’; in its noun form it means ‘the best’. Interestingly, this word, *ahsan*, appears many more times in the Qur’an than the word *husn* or ‘good’. Verses that contain *ahsan* (noun form) include:

- He it is Who created the heavens and the earth in six Days — and His Throne was over the waters — that He might try you, which of you is best in conduct. [Hud: 7]
- He Who created Death and Life, that He may try which of you is best in deed: and He is the Exalted in Might, Oft-Forgiving [al-Mulk: 2]
- That which is on earth we have made but as a glittering show for the earth, in order that We may test them — as to which of them is best in conduct. [al-Kahfi: 7]

Thus, Allah underscores that the reason for human life is to know who achieves the best of good deeds. A number of verses say that God’s rewards are based on best actions. For example:

- What is with you must vanish: what is with Allah will endure. And We will certainly bestow, on those who patiently persevere, their reward according to the best of their actions. [Al-Nahl 16:96]

This demonstrates that the spirit of Islamic élan is to target the very best of what is good. Moreover, in its normal usage, *ihsan* is a level higher than ‘*adl*, which indicates doing more than what is commonly expected. An example is the lender whom a borrower fails to repay. Instead of forcing repayment, the lender gives yet another extension for settlement or may even donate/forgive the debt. This is *ihsan*, since he has full right to enforce payment.

The terminology used in Al’Qur’an carries meanings for both ‘good’ and ‘best’. The word *khayr* is normally translated as ‘good’ but actually means more. Izutsu considered *khayr*

the nearest Arabic equivalent to the English word 'good'. He wrote that *khayr* has a wider application (Izutsu, 2002, p. 253-254) which means 'better' and even 'the best'. Verses containing *khayr* include: al-Baqarah 197: *the best provision during journey to pilgrimage is right conduct*; Al Imran 54: *Allah is the best planner*; Al Imran 110: *the Muslim community is the best community for enjoining what is right, forbidding what is wrong, and believing in Allah*. These imply not only doing good but doing *better* and *best*.

Hence, we surmise that the aim of *akhlaq* as presented in Al'Qur'an is to strive for the best, for excellence in all spheres of life. *Akhlaq* applies to all of life and not just professional pursuits. It means being a good (the best) husband or wife, mother or father; especially since *akhlaq* means to be the best, which requires sacrifice and pro-active thought and deed. One must therefore anticipate being the best rather passively waiting to perform a good deed. Thus, being the best means being prepared to efficiently and effectively provide what is good, which is surely demanding but fits current challenges to all of humanity.

The Qur'an also describes self-sufficiency for both good and bad characteristics. A good man continually strives to improve himself. Such a self-contained idealist even strives to overtake the Prophet's example as the ideal model. The Prophet perfectly combined what is best as a political and religious leader with humility. He was the best husband, friend and servant of God. He consummated sincerely and holism in a balanced manner. An issue that attracts attention is his practice of polygamy as the 'way of the Prophet'. However, we forget polygamy's challenges and how it was that the Prophet managed it. He was the best advisor to his wives; even counselling their relationships with each other. Unfortunately, many remain unconcerned about fundamental husbandly responsibilities and excuse themselves from family maintenance yet entertain polygamous delights by claiming it is the sunnah. The most important aspect of the mature man is to measure himself then match that measure with a reasonable set of suitable behaviours that obtain success as a Muslim.

At times, our responsibilities are not so straightforward yet life demands that we do our best in the most reasonable manner possible. It is impossible to do everything expected and we are often incapable of fulfilling responsibilities even when aiming for the best outcomes. Yet this aspiration pushes us to achieve idealistic goals.

3. Goal Orientation Breeds Creative Effort

Akhlaq is oft perceived as being limited to the discernment of good from bad or to specific formulaic religious activities and so forth. However, it is a goal-oriented value system that assists the achievement of our success. Discerning between good and bad simply greases the process. Words used for success are *falah* and *fawz* and are mentioned many times with reference to success in the hereafter. This goal is frequently related to time in a manner that makes several other concepts vital, especially the 'end of life' (death) and the hereafter. The Qur'an's goal for all of us is *al-nafs al-mutma'innah* or "the good ending". Achievement begins with good actions that nurture the internalization of qualities for a 'good self' that attains "the good ending" before entering the next life.

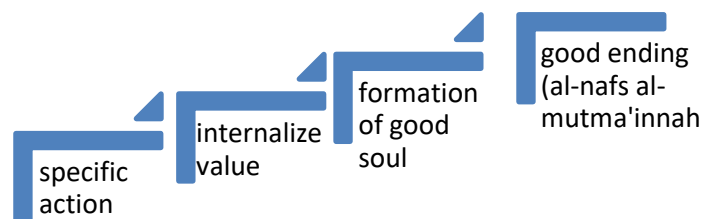


Figure 2: Action Orientation- Motivation causing us to strive for the goal.

Akhlaq and '*Amal Salih*': The Qur'an contains hundreds of verses on '*amal salih*' (good deeds). More than fifty references also stress faith. This inspires a life of good deeds that not only avoids what is bad but is also a life that proactively strives for good with much verve. Such is the predisposition of Allah's servants. The aim is to carry out our responsibilities while fully knowing we are answerable to Allah if we do not maintain a good life on earth. Muslims are taught that their role as *khalifah* is to responsibly shoulder the heavy burden of trust.

And if Allah has so wished, He could have made you a single nation, but He wishes to test you in carrying out what He has given you. Vie with one another in good works [Al-Maidah:48]

This spirit of competition is intended for the mutual emulation of striving for what is good:

For every community has a goal towards which they turn. So, emulate one another in good works; for wherever you are, Allah will definitely bring you all before Him. Indeed, Allah has power over all things. [Al-Baqarah:148]

And hasten (in doing good deeds so as) to earn the forgiveness of your Lord and a Garden as wide as Heaven and earth, prepared for those who are God conscious. [Ali'Imran:133]

This imagination of 'weighing the good' encourages us to do better by being proactive and creative. The measure of good deeds is found in the weighing of good actions against bad actions and assures that good deeds receive the foremost attention and reward. To achieve this aim, man's role is far from passive. The spirit of Islam thus surpasses mere obedience to laws and specific restrictions with proactive innovation. Thus, the major role of *akhlaq* is to align human praxis with good character. People lacking good character as well as leanings towards religious teaching ignore prescribed rules and purposely avoid pious instructions despite sound directives and clarity of prohibition.

4. Motivation in the Qur'an

As the divinely revealed word of God, the Qur'an is a living dialogue between God and human beings that describes God and the most fundamental issues of human life which remedies are sources of human motivation. Indeed, a moral life weighs heavily upon man who therefore needs motivation to sustain a life of good deeds.

a. Caring and Motivating God

Islam's concept of God commonly presents Him as a 'strict enforcer'. However, the Qur'an further reveals a caring and motivating God. On close reading, one soon becomes aware that

God pays close attention to our performance. The attribution of *al-'alim* (all knowing) is the most numerous, being noted in more than 150 places. The phrase “*Allah sees (basir) well all that they or you do*” shows His awareness of any effort we make even when others do not know—this includes good intentions and plans, etc. It appears in 17 verses; e.g., “*And He is with you wheresoever ye may be. And Allah sees well all that ye do.*” (al-Hadid: 4). The phrase “*And Allah is well acquainted (khabir) with what ye do*” appears in more than 20 verses, example: “*To Allah belongs the heritage of the heavens and the earth; and Allah is well-acquainted with all that ye do.*” (Al-Imran: 180)

The next name *al-Sami* (the all hearing) appears in more than 40 verses, coupled with *al-'Alim* (all-knowing) and *al-Basir* (all-seeing). This constitutes a significant set of motivators for us to do what is good. Normally, we are encouraged to do good and achieve excellence when acknowledged by others. Interestingly, God’s attention is both extrinsic and intrinsic.

The phrase, *al-Ghafur al-Rahim* (the most forgiving and merciful) is mentioned in more than 90 verses. The Qur’an specifically rebukes humans for thinking Allah does not heed their deeds: “*Think not that Allah doth not heed the deeds of those who do wrong. He but giveth them respite against a Day when the eyes will fixedly stare in horror*” [Ibrahim:42]. The Qur’an repeatedly mentions that God is fully aware of our actions, including those we conceal. Allah said: “*Know they not that Allah knoweth what they conceal and what they reveal?*” [Al-Baqarah:77] This same phrase appears in five verses. [Al-Nahl:19; al-Mumtahanah: 1; Al-Taghabun: 4; Hud: 5; Al-Nahl: 23; Yasin: 76] Also: “*Whether you speak in secrecy or aloud, (it is all the same to Allah). He even knows the secrets that lie hidden in the breasts of people.*” [Al-Mulk: 13]

Another set of names shows that God is caring. The Qur’an consistently mentions that God is *basir* (all seeing) and *sami* (hearing): “*Then shall anyone who has done an atom's weight of good, see it! And anyone who has done an atom's weight of evil, shall see it.*” [Al-Zalzalah: 7-8] Numerous verses show that Allah is particularly keen about what people do; that God is fully aware of any deed, even as small as an atom; that He promises to never be unjust, and that He will multiply any good and never reduce any reward:

Allah is never unjust in the least degree: If there is any good (done), He doubleth it, and giveth from His own presence a great reward. (An-Nisa: 40); Allah suffereth not the reward of the Faithful to be lost (in the least) (Al Imran: 171); And their Lord hath accepted of them, and answered them: "Never will I suffer to be lost the work of any of you, be he male or female: Ye are members, one of another." [Al-Imran: 195. Similar meaning also appears in Yusuf: 56 and Al-Kahfi: 30]

The Qur’an therefore presents a supportive and understanding God rather than a harsh punisher. Allah is described as *al-Rahman* (most gracious) and *al-Rahim* (most merciful). The word *al-Rahman* is always coupled with *al-Rahim* and appears in more than fifty verses. It appears twice in surah *al-Fatihah*. *Al-Rahim* is coupled with *al-rahman* and *ghafur* (Most forgiving) in more than a hundred verses.

b. Worldview that motivates serious living

Out of love for Allah, early Muslims explored far and wide to see the richness of God’s creatures. Such expeditions are highly encouraged in the Qur’an. There are seven verses that

speak about traveling the earth. [Al Imran: 137; Al-An'am 11; Al-Nahl 36; Al-Naml 69; Al-Ankabut 20; Ar Rum 42; Saba': 18] For example: "*Many were the Ways of Life that have passed away before you: travel through the earth, and see what was the end of those who rejected Truth*" [Al-'Imran: 137].

The first thing a Muslim comes to know is that this life on earth is a once only event. He must face death at the end of his struggles and then realize reward or punishment for his earthly deeds in the Hereafter. The Qur'an says: "*Every soul shall have a taste of death: And only on the Day of Judgment shall you be paid your full recompense.*" [Al Imran: 185]. The Qur'an makes it very clear that no one knows his or her time of death, which means he or she must constantly prepare for the next life: "*To every people is a term appointed: when their term is reached, not an hour can they cause delay, nor (an hour) can they advance (it in anticipation).*" (Al-A'raf: 34. The same meaning also in the verses Yunus: 49; An-Nahlu: 61.)

The Qur'an describes life in this world as a test. God truly appreciates those who strive:

Or think ye that ye shall be abandoned, as though Allah did not know those who strive with might and main, and take none for friends and protectors except Allah, His Messenger, and the (community of) Believers? But Allah is well-acquainted with (all) that ye do [Al-Tawbah: 16].

Be sure we shall test you with something of fear and hunger, some loss in goods or lives or the fruits (of your toil), but give glad tidings to those who patiently persevere [Al-Baqarah:155]

Islam boosts our confidence by positioning every individual as a *khalifah* (vicegerent) of Allah. It is this spirit of responsibility that motivated the miraculous development of Islam by the earliest Muslims. They realized that life is their most precious opportunity. Their confidence thus became a vital force when facing unexpected demands for innovation and change.

c. Reward and punishment based on real justice

The Qur'an comprehensively defines divine retribution and continuously reminds us that deeds, whether good or bad, great or small, will be accounted for. Retribution is based on giving more weight to good deeds than bad deeds so that men are motivated to do good. However, the pass/fail line remains unclear, although many may think the qualification for entry into Paradise is merely to believe. Nonetheless: "*We shall set up scales of justice for the Day of Judgment, so that not a soul will be dealt with unjustly in the least, and if there be (no more than) the weight of a mustard seed, We will bring it (to account): and enough are We to take account* (al-Anbiya': 47).

Thus, the Qur'an motivates us to do as much as good as possible and to perform our best for every action as a continual goal for all believers. The 'best of conditions' is mentioned most frequently and rewards are based on the 'best of actions':

What is with you must vanish: what is with Allah will endure. And We will certainly bestow on those who patiently persevere their reward according to the best (*ahsan*) of their actions. (Al-Nahl 16:96) ... Nor could they spend anything (for the cause) – small or great – nor cut across a valley, but the deed is inscribed to their credit: that Allah may requite their deed with the best (possible reward). [al-Tawbah: 121]

Being committed to the best is not so easy because Islam expects Muslims to meet these expectations in all spheres of life. Islam provides clear guidelines and a comprehensive set of expectations for all areas of life. Hence, it is therefore unacceptable to be excellent at work but horrible when dealing with family. A person might not be accepted in paradise due to actions many consider of no event, such as showing disrespect to their mother.



Figure 3: Action Orientation- Motivation causing us to strive for the goal.

Akhlaq's general sense motivates our us to perform the most beneficial actions possible to the best of our ability. To achieve this success requires a continual striving that balances prescribed expectations with creative efforts. Prescribed rules are like ingredients in a recipe that requires creative effort to present the best dish; a combination vital to innovation. Thus, *akhlaq* promotes divergent thought processes that encourage our progress as *khalifah*.

CONCLUSION

The Qur'an's human-centred moral system motivates and guides the development of creative thinking and innovation. It promotes contemplative divergent thought processes and encourages a purely individual approach to the application of its dynamic set of moral values. The Qur'an does not provide simple prescriptions for what is good or bad but rather expounds an ideal goal-oriented set of values supported by fundamental doctrines that endorse creativity and innovation.

The inventive Muslim is therefore self-aware and envisions alternative options that embrace rights and responsibilities. He or she uses justificatory reasoning and contemplation that reflect sensitivity for all ethical dimensions while acknowledging consequences with empathy. *Akhlaq* helps the Muslim develop principles that guide critical thought and creative problem-solving for relevant decision-making. Such personal skills are invaluable for the success or failure of civilization, which depends on constituent attitudes.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

This article is an output of Fundamental Research Grant Scheme—(FRGS/1/2019/SSI09/UNISZA/02/3) entitled “Modelling Holistic Thoughtful Classroom Based on Islamic Integrated Curriculum for Promoting Higher Order Thinking Skills in Malaysian Schools”. We appreciate support from Malaysian Ministry of Education and

Center for Research Excellence & Incubation Management (CREIM) and Faculty of Islamic Contemporary Studies, Universiti Sultan Zainal Abidin.

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