

# Human Behavior from an Islamic Perspective: Interaction of Nature, Nurture, and the Spiritual Dimension

by

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## Abstract

Western psychology tends to be divisive in dealing with human personality and has been responsible for the nature-versus-nurture controversy. On the one hand, it contends that certain corrupt behavior is predetermined by psychological or biological factors from conception—while on the other, it explains behavior as a simplistic series of reinforcements from contingencies and conditioned responses to environmental stimuli. This secular humanistic outlook has produced an ethical relativism that is the current trend in today's world. This stance is not condemned only by Islam, but also by most religions of the world. This shows that the human nature (*fitrah*) is still vibrant and dynamic. This article attempts to highlight the importance of the Islamic belief system—which is an integrated and comprehensive way in dealing with human behavior—especially by means of the interaction of nature, nurture, and the spiritual factor in the formation of human behavior.

## Introduction

The foundations of Western psychology are based on secular thought that challenges traditional and religious values, while granting human beings

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the absolute authority to decide their own moral codes. The Western moral outcome is generated through predetermined psychological or biological causes including unconscious motivation, genes, and environmental factors. This system of thinking in Western psychology has produced the understanding that a person has no choice in the way he or she behaves. The role of heredity in the Western context is highly overstressed—to the extent of attributing many qualities that are clearly influenced by environmental learning and early upbringing rather than due to genes and biological etiology.

The controversy of nature versus nurture has been and is still one of the most recent issues of debate in modern psychology. It has generated valuable research in comparing the behavior of humans and animals and in confirming whether certain attributes are hereditary or environmental in nature. Research on identical and fraternal twins reared together and apart—as well as the use of photography and computers in studying the behavior of newly born babies and children—have stimulated the nature-versus-nurture controversy. While these studies have contributed to informed learning, these studies have also promoted the misuse of this controversy because it is based on preconceived and sometimes prejudicial positions.<sup>1</sup>

In contrast to early Islamic sciences that were guided by faith, spirituality, and employing reason guided by revelation, modern debates spring from the materialistic philosophical platform of secular humanism and at times from the declared or undeclared point of view of the supremacy of the white race. Some schools of psychology, such as behaviorism, under the influence of its founder J. B. Watson, have overly exaggerated the role of the environment. In this perspective, human beings are fully at the mercy of their environments—as though they were dry leaves, by which the “winds of the environment” shape their lives and behaviors in any way they blow. The following famous statement by Watson clearly illustrates this extreme position:

Give me a dozen healthy infants, well-formed, and my own specified world to bring them up in and I'll guarantee to take one at random and train him to become any type of specialist I might select . . . doctor, lawyer, artist, merchant-chief and, yes, even beggar-man and thief, regardless of his talents, penchants, tendencies, abilities, vocations, and race of his ancestors.<sup>2</sup>

From the philosophical background of secular humanism, such an extreme stand would thwart the existence of religious or moral values or any perma-

nent qualities in human nature. Since humans' behaviors and values are the construction of their environment—and since every part of the world has its unique culture—then values and morals must be relative, and there is no place for any religious directives or global ethical consciousness. Moral decisions would therefore be the sole responsibility of the people in this world, and not that of a wise God who rewards and punishes in the Hereafter. Malik Badri, a contemporary Muslim psychologist, contends that: “In applying this philosophy (secular humanism) in the field of reproductive biology, man would be free to kill an unborn child by abortion, clone himself, rent a uterus or kill or assist in killing any person whose life is depressed by an inherited or acquired untreatable disease. He/she only needs to be permitted by the government of the people for the people and by the people.”<sup>3</sup>

The other excess in the nature-versus-nurture controversy is the extreme focus on biological subjects in fields such as evolutionary psychology, sociobiology, and etiology. As early as the biophilosophical ramifications of Darwinism up to the present, the human being, viewed from the hereditarian point of view, has always been viewed as an animal mainly propelled by his biology in order to adapt himself to new situations. Natural selection, survival of the fittest or, for that matter, survival of the fittest genes continues to beat the drums of nature against nurture. This approach in genetics and molecular biology has found great support in the significant discoveries in the etiology of some inherited disorders; for example the association of an extra chromosome 21 with Down's syndrome and metabolic disorder with phenylketonuria (PKU).<sup>4</sup>

Two of the most important methods used to achieve this biologicistic approach are reductionism and biological determinism. The insinuation of reductionism is that the nature of humans and their actions can only be understood in terms of the biochemical properties of their cells, namely the genes, and that even thoughts and feelings may theoretically be reduced to such microscopic units. As is said by extreme biologically-oriented psychiatrists, “Behind any twisted idea there is a twisted molecule in the brain.” Accordingly, the behavior of humans is determined by the properties of their genes. The way these units interact to produce behavior is already well programmed, and thus there is no place for free choice. Therefore, the biologicistic stance serves the same philosophical and political views of secular humanism, in which genetics can possibly be manipulated to release people from their moral responsibilities.<sup>5</sup>

## Influence of Heredity

The Qur'an mentions the role of heredity (nature) in the light of the prohibition of Muslims from marrying their close kin; this acknowledges the influence of genetics on the physical and psychological features of the offspring. Difference places in the Qur'an state that all things are created in pairs. A pair is comprised of both the male and female—that is, both chromosomes are needed for the development of an offspring<sup>6</sup>:

We read: And everything We have created pairs: that ye may receive instruction (51:49).

That He did created in pairs, male and female. From a seed when lodged (in its place) (53:45–46)

And of him He made two sexes, male and female (75:39).

According to some Muslim scholars, character or inner disposition can be inherited through genetic transmission and can even influence the psychological personality traits.<sup>7</sup> Though modern psychologists will dispute such a hereditary view, there are evidences that intelligence, extroversion, and psychotic behavior, such as schizophrenia, are influenced by genetic transmission.<sup>8</sup>

Bearing this in mind, it should be of interest to refer to some of the Hadith that have alluded to such hereditary influences. Al-Ghazali for instance, cited a hadith that portrayed the relationship between the two (genetic transmission and the psychological personality traits). One report stated that the Prophet (ṢAAS) said: “Choose the place for your sperm since inheritance can have its influence in a disguised manner.” It is obvious, that in our modern terminology, the hadith referred to recessive genes. In another hadith, the Prophet said: “Beware of the green vestiges (*khadra al-diman*).” Someone asked: “Who are the green vestiges?” He said: “Beautiful women of bad origin.”<sup>9</sup> This crucial factor of lineage in choosing a spouse was substantiated by a sound hadith; the Prophet is reported to have said: “A woman is married for four reasons: her wealth, her lineage, her beauty, and her religion. . . .” (*Sahih Bukhari*, vol. 7, book 62, no. 27) These hadith illustrate the nobility of lineage as one of the crucial elements for the selection of spouses, since a refined character and educated mother will transmit good upbringing and education to her children.

In a hadith (authenticated by Abu Dawud, Bukhari, and Muslim), the Prophet explained how heredity can even influence the psychological per-

sonality traits that scholars may often attribute solely to environmental influences<sup>10</sup>:

While the Prophet (pbuh) was sitting with a group of his companions in the city of *Madina*, a group of travelers arrived in the compound. With the exception of a companion by the name of al-Munzir al-Ashaj they all hurriedly tied their camels and walked to give *salam* to the Prophet and kiss his hands. Al-Munzir on the other hand was unhurried. He slowly took out new clean clothes from his rack and put them on instead of the dirty sweaty ones he was using during his long journey, then he slowly and gracefully walked up to the Prophet who must have watched what he had done with smiling amusement. After greeting the Prophet with respectful *salam* (Islamic greeting), he took his place among his companions. The Prophet looked at him with admiration and said, “You have two characters that Allah and his Prophet like.” “What are these characters O Messenger of Allah?” The first was *al-hilm*. This is an Arabic word that has no one single translation in English. It stands for adjectives like clemency, forgiveness, forbearance, intelligence and patience. The second was *al-anah*. For a person to be described by this term he would have good qualities such as being unhurried, deliberate and easy going. Al-Munzir then asked a question that modern psychologists are still debating. He said, “O messenger of Allah! Are these two characteristics the result of my own endeavour or are they already imbedded in my natural disposition?” In modern terminology, this 7th century Arab was literally asking the Prophet whether these two characteristics or traits had been environmentally developed in him by his own effort or were they genetically predetermined. The Prophet answered that they were imbedded by Allah in his natural predisposition, i.e., they were inborn or hereditary. To this al-Munzir enthusiastically exclaimed, “All thanks are due to Allah who created in me character traits that He and his Prophet like.” (Narrated by *Sahih Muslim*, hadith no. 1045 and also by *Sahih Bukhari*, hadith No. 14 )<sup>11</sup>

Some may argue that based on a holistic approach to the Hadith literature the interpretation of the above-mentioned hadith denotes human freedom and responsibility. Accordingly, it does not strongly support the notion that heredity can influence the psychological personality traits. My humble view is that if the qualities of patience, intelligence, and forgiveness (*al-hilm* and *al-anah*) as mentioned in this hadith are not personality traits, then what are personality traits? For a person to inherit some personality traits does not interfere with his or her freedom of choice and responsibility. Just as people have inherited different physical traits and still have freedom of choice and responsibility, they can also inherit or be predisposed to

different inherited personality traits and still have the freedom of choice as a part of what Allah has given them.

Several hadith portrayed the competing influence of the hereditary contributions of the man and the woman to the developing baby; however, from the interpretations of these hadith, it appears that there is no solid connection between heredity and character or personality development. The first hadith mentioned that in an answer to a question about how the growing newborn at times looks like the mother and other times like the father, the Prophet replied that if the part of the droplet of fluid of the father is stronger, the baby will be “pulled” to his features, and if the droplet of fluid of the mother is “higher” or “above” or more dominant, the child will look more like her.<sup>12</sup> For the Arabs of that time, the Arabic word *nutfah* was the nearest possible description to our modern conception of the male or female gamete.<sup>13</sup>

In another hadith, it was narrated that a man was disturbed and suspicious by the fact that his wife had given birth to a black child though both he and his wife were fair in color. He consulted the Prophet about his dilemma. Instead of giving an immediate answer the Prophet asked the man whether he owned and bred camel, and the man said he did. “What is their color?” the Prophet asked. “They are yellowish in color,” was the man’s reply. “Don’t they, in rare occasions, give birth to a dark camel?” The man answered in the affirmative. “How did you explain this though both parents were yellowish in color?” the Prophet asked. “It must have inherited from a dark ancestor” the man replied. “Indeed,” the Prophet said “And your son had also inherited his color from a distant ancestor” (*Sahih Bukhari*, no. 4893). No wiser and simplified approach could have convinced this Bedouin about the fidelity of his wife and the existence of dominant and recessive genes in the working of heredity. That is why some Muslim scholars attribute a saying to the Prophet advising his companions when choosing a wife to be careful from the “concealed” hereditary influences.<sup>14</sup>

## **Influence of Environment**

I have mentioned only examples of the blessed sayings of Prophet Muhammad that speak clearly about the influence of heredity on the formation of the personality of a human. However, the Prophet also gave us an example about how a strong influencing environment in addition to a hereditary predisposition—that is, how the home environment can distort the children’s worldviews in a way that will shape their attitudes, their faith, and the way they perceive their very existence.

In his sayings, the Prophet asserts that the environment too can take on a major role in influencing human behavior and beliefs. For example, in a famous hadith, authenticated by Bukhari, (hadith no. 1296), he states that every child is born with an inherited predisposition to believe in the One God (*fitrah*) but that it is his parents who indoctrinate him to develop other deviant beliefs. The Prophet speaks in this hadith about an inherited predisposition in the hearts of humans to believe in the existence of God, but it is their environment that diverts them from their inborn disposition.

It is of interest to note that some modern scientists are referring to a similar inherited predisposition wired in our systems. Chief among them is Dr. Herbert Benson, the well-known Harvard professor of medicine. In his book, *Beyond the Relaxation Response*, he wrote:

Perhaps this tendency of humans to worship and believe was rooted in our physiology, written in our genes, and encoded in our very makeup. Perhaps it is what distinguishes us from other life forms, this innate desire to believe and to practice our beliefs. Perhaps instinctively, human beings had always known that worshipping a higher power was good for them. . . . The notion that humans might be wired for God seemed to me to be so beyond the realm of traditional scientific study that, as exhilarated as I was about the possibility of its being true, I was also immediately fearful.<sup>15</sup>

Islam accepts that both nature and nurture play major roles in shaping and molding one's character traits because they are the creation of God to whom everything belongs and to whom everything will return. According to Mustafa Achoi, a contemporary Muslim psychologist, there is a general agreement in contemporary texts that maintains that "the thrust of Islamic concern is with learning and environment rather than heredity."<sup>16</sup> Muslim scholars such as, al-Ghazali (d. 1111 ) and Miskawayh (d.1030) suggested that environmental and educational factors are vital in the process of the formation of character traits.<sup>17</sup> In addition to heredity, Islam places great emphasis on the role of the parents in the formation of the personality of their children. In this manner, in their approach in ethics, both Miskawayh and al-Ghazali stressed the importance of the concept of virtues through the studying of human beings, through character and disposition.<sup>18</sup> Al-Ghazali for instance, started his explication of ethics by stressing that human character is not destined. If animal behavior can be changed through training and conditioning, then it is reasonable to consider that the behavior of a rational human being can be changed. For, if character could not be

changed, then the whole message of the teaching of Islam and of preaching and giving advice would be futile.<sup>19</sup>

Similarly, this notion is advocated in the modern conception of human character, which asserts that emotional temperaments are partly innate and partly inherited from early life. They are not fixed attributes. Many of those who work with emotional literacy are able to change their temperament. Temperaments vary: some accept changes rapidly, while others do not. However, they are simply learned habits that can directly be unlearned and treated by conditioning. People can get rid of their emotional disorders by simply concentrating on changing their inner thinking and wrong beliefs.<sup>20</sup> Some simple steps can help even the most chronic worrier control this habit.<sup>21</sup> These principles of learning and unlearning by association and conditioning may wrongly be seen as discoveries of modern psychology. However, they have already been discussed and therapeutically applied by early Muslim physicians and scholars, such as Abu Zayd al-Balkhi (d. 934) and Ibn Sina (d. 1037).<sup>22</sup> Thus, in supporting my point of view by accepting psychological literature, I am not contradicting my stand of criticizing the philosophical aspect of modern psychology. In fact, certain areas in modern psychology—such as the approach of positive psychology and the results of positively studying human emotions—if properly understood can be of help in Islamic ethical training.

### *The Interaction between Nature, Nurture, and Spiritual Factors.*

What is the real nature of the human being, and what are the distinctive in-born traits and attributes which God has engraved in the very essence of the human being, which facilitate divine knowledge and submission in those who seek them—traits that allow an instinctive return to Him as though they are carrier pigeons or salmon coming back to their abode. The Qur'an has clear dictum about the dual nature of humans: they are comprised of both body and soul; they are simultaneously physical being and spirit.<sup>23</sup> To know God and consequently to submit to Him, humans as physical beings need to be provided with the animal properties which make life on this earth possible for them, as well as all the cognitive abilities such as intellect, perception, and imagination; however, they must also possess a spiritual faculty, which provides them with the ability to acquire knowledge of the spiritual realm.<sup>24</sup> This is indeed a sign of God's wisdom since it is impossible for humans to believe in the existence of spiritual realities such



as God Himself, or of angels, if they have not been bestowed with the spiritual potentiality to do so.

According to al-Ghazali, this spiritual endowment is the true seat of knowledge in humans and is the substance of their real essence. Without it, humans would not be different from other animals. Though it is a single spiritual substance, al-Ghazali indicates, it is given different names, operating somewhat like attributes of that spiritual substance, and acting according to the function each performs and the resulting state of its activity. Thus the terms *'aql*, *nafs*, *qalb*, and *rūh* as mentioned directly and indirectly in the Holy Qur'an—meaning respectively intellect, soul, heart, and spirit—all refer to this single spiritual substance in the human.<sup>25</sup>

But if human beings are created with this dual nature of an animal seeking to satisfy its bestial instincts and a spiritual being hoping to fulfill its angelic aspirations, conflict between these two aspects cannot be avoided. This is indeed the test and the weighty burden of trust, which is placed upon each human's shoulders. Al-Ghazali, as cited by al-Attas, rightly perceives the conflict between the antagonistic powers of the soul as that of devoted armies engaged in perpetual battles. Some powers fight to pull human beings down to the depths of their bestial natures, while opposite powers fight to raise them to a transcendent angelic level.<sup>26</sup>

This dynamic inner struggle results in one of three conditions or an idiosyncratic vacillation between these psychospiritual states. The Muslim can struggle hard to subdue his animal powers and put them under the control of his rational soul, thus devoting his cognitive potential to acquire spiritual knowledge. The reward of this true submission is divine peace, spiritual fulfillment, and happiness in this world and the Hereafter. These blessed psychospiritual gifts can only be attained through true submission in which Muslims continue to use the intellectual powers of their rational soul to domesticate and dominate their animalistic powers until they attain the elevated status of the tranquil soul (*al-nafs al-muṭma'innah*) Qur'an (89:27–30).<sup>27</sup>

Islam teaches that the body also possesses an importance and a beneficial role in relation to the spirit. Muslims must strive to attain the exalted status of the tranquil soul (*al-nafs al-muṭma'innah*), and when they do, the worldly pleasures that people used to sinfully devour like greedy wild animals, without heeding any ethical or moral obligations or aspiring to moral excellence, are to them no longer objects of obsession. Instead of incurring sins and divine anger, sanctioned physical pleasures now become a source of Godly rewards and divine pleasure.<sup>28</sup> So, there is a real difference be-

tween the two states of the soul; whether people fully submit to their bestial instincts and totally ignore their rational and spiritual aspects to be finally, “severed from the nature common to humanity and appears as a human only in shape and construction,”<sup>29</sup> or whether they strive for moral excellence aided by good works until they transcend their animalistic attributes and attain an angelic nature, looking like an animal only in their physical appearances. This is the status of *ihsān* (of true submission, of worshipping God as though one sees Him).<sup>30</sup>

These then are the two extremes of the states of the soul. However, it is very rare indeed for a Muslim to quickly transcend from the foothills of the dominance of the bestial nature to the apex of the spiritually tranquil soul. From early childhood, humans’ souls are commanded by their physical and psychological desires and instincts, while their rational souls remain in dormant captivity. It needs a proper grounding in various branches of Islamic religious sciences, a very strong and unwavering determination, as well as painstaking spiritual struggle for the defeated to be the victor and the ridden to be the rider.<sup>31</sup>

As “spiritual warriors” take over new territories in their ways up the heights of intellectual powers and eternal truths, their well-established animalistic habits pull them down to the foothills of physical lusts and greed. This causes the soul striving for betterment to strongly blame itself; this phenomenon is referred to in the Holy Qur’an (75:2) as the censuring or reproaching soul (*al-nafs al-lawwāmah*). This painful disapproval often motivates the soul to continue the battle with greater determination. This may indeed reveal to it more blessed knowledge and brighter divine lights only to find itself succumbing again to worldly pleasures. This blessed vacillation may end up in one of three states of the soul: it either gives up the struggle and accepts the domination of its bestial nature; it wins the battle of full submission to God and is rewarded with tranquility and bliss; or it continues in a state of vacillation.

Al-Ghazali described personality as the integration of spiritual and bodily forces. According to him, man possesses a dual nature, physical and spiritual. However, the body is the home of the soul and the soul is greater than the body. Although the soul and the body are separate entities, they influence each other. Every act produces an effect on the soul, if it is done deliberately and repeatedly. This soul-body relationship known as traditional interaction theory is referred to as the concept of balance (*wasat*) of the faculties of the soul or theory of means.<sup>32</sup>

In their conception of human nature and behavior, Muslim scholars emphasized the importance of soul and its faculties to explain the causes of psychospiritual well-being and the adaptation of behavior. When the soul is united with the body, the spiritual subtlety assumes different names according to its activities in the body—namely, the heart (*qalb*), the spirit (*ruh*), the intellect (*‘aql*) and the soul (*nafs*).<sup>33</sup> Citing al-Ghazali, al-Attas considered the heart to be the mode of spiritual subtlety on the basis of which all perception, emotion, motivation, and consequently external behavior depend on. Accordingly, behavior of people depends on their qualitative efforts at the spiritual level. Thus, their spiritual level can be one of three possible levels—namely, the commanding soul (*al-nafs al-ammarah*), the blameworthy soul (*al-nafs al-lawwamah*) or the pacified soul (*al-nafs mutma‘inah*)<sup>34</sup>

According to Al-Ghazali “there is a constant interaction between the three levels of consciousness each imposing itself for supremacy, but mediated by the heart or rational self in the ‘awake’ state and by the spirit (*ruh*) in the ‘sleeping’ state.” Thus, all the mental processes as well as behavior depends on the spiritual state of the person. Al-Ghazali has presented spiritual entity in most of his writings with the term *qalb* (the spiritual heart) because it is the most important part of a human being. This is clearly illustrated through the saying “for the earth is that which knows God, which approaches unto Him, works for Him, and strives after Him.”<sup>35</sup>

According to Islamic tradition, the heart occupies the supreme autonomous status in the scheme of human personality: it controls and rules over all the regions of the brain and the whole nervous system. The heart is deemed to be the master and the key entity that regulates all sorts of behavioral functions and drives the entire course of personality development, both in its positive and negative directions.<sup>36</sup> In this regard, the Prophet said: “within man there is a fleshly fragment and when it is corrupted the body is corrupt, and when it is sound the body is sound (*Sahih Bukhari*, vol. 1, hadith no. 47). On the basis of this hadith, the Muslims scholars observe that if the heart becomes sick and corrupt, the growth of all human potentials is stopped and the personality turns toward a regressive course of ruination and self-destruction. When “dissociation occurs between the soul (*nafs*) and the heart (*qalb*) it results in destructive behavior with all its barbaric and inhuman practices, i.e. man leads the life of an animal, without a moral basis.”<sup>37</sup> Thus, the degree of relationship between the soul and the heart depends on religious enlightenment. This is the reason that al-Ghazali devoted most of his writings to explaining the good character

of the Muslim. According to an Islamic theory at the level of the *nafs al-lawwamah* and *nafs al-muṭma'innah* the person has a direct relationship with the Creator. Moreover, the heart is meditating between these three levels, and the status of the human being depends on the cultivation of the heart. The reason being that when there is dissociation between the soul and heart, the human being is on the lowest level, the stage equal to an animal.<sup>38</sup>

Moreover, according to al-Muhasibi (d. 243 H), the heart is the means to salvation or perdition; from the heart, therefore, comes both sins and righteousness, and according to its purity and impurity, so will an individual attain to salvation or perdition.<sup>39</sup> The most profound treatment is through the “mediation of remembrance of Allah” (*dhikr*), glorifying Allah (*tasbīh*) and the prayer (*ṣalat*) for mental stability and for curing the mentally ill.<sup>40</sup> Ibn al-Qayyim (d.1350) identified ways of cleansing the heart from impurities of which are a course of psychological pathology. In this book, *Al-Fawaid*, Ibn al-Qayyim said :

There is no doubt that the heart becomes covered with rust, just as metal dishes—silver, and their like—become rusty. So the rust of the heart is polished with remembrance of Allah (*dhikr*), for *dhikr* polishes the heart until it becomes like a shiny mirror. However, when remembrance of Allah is abandoned, the rust returns: and when it commences the heart again begins to be cleansed. Thus the heart becoming rusty is due to two matters: sins and neglecting remembrance of Allah. Likewise, it is cleansed and polished by two things: seeking Allah’s forgiveness (*istighafar*) and remembrance of Allah (*dhikr*).<sup>41</sup>

Moreover, al-Ghazali states:

functional diseases are caused due to ignorance and lead from deviation from God. When the darkness of ignorance afflicts the heart of a person, it will be alienated from divine guidance and his or her development toward perfection is thwarted, so much so that he/she can become as blind. Ignorance as a disease is the opposite of knowledge, the enemy of reason, and is ultimately fatal. Once it has corrupted thinking, it becomes incurable.<sup>42</sup>

Al-Ghazali, therefore, stresses that caring for the soul should take priority over one’s body. Just as it is important to eat healthy and exercise to maintain a healthy body, the soul should be cared for much more extensively. While other philosophers refer to the concept of working to actualize the potential of the soul, al-Ghazali refers to this as purifying or discipline

of the heart, or soul. After purifying and disciplining the soul, and then through profound soul searching can one truly reach the ultimate goal: happiness by means of the knowledge of God. Again, the soul only potentially has the ability to be actualized. Al-Ghazali explicated that there are four qualities of the soul: predatory, animal, satanic, and divine. The predatory quality refers to that of fury or rage; the animal refers to the desire for food and sex; the satanic refers to the ability to commit evil; and the divine refers to the utmost quality that requires the greatest investigation and insight to attain.<sup>43</sup>

Al-Ghazali also mentioned that four good virtues make up good character. These are the virtues of wisdom, courage, temperance, and justice. Al-Ghazali, outlined three ways in which people change their character for the better. The first way mentioned is not actually a method to change, as it is given by Allah. Some people are naturally born with good qualities, while some are not. Prophets, for example, are such people who are born with good qualities. The second method is by self-training (*riyādah*), which means exerting effort to perform those actions that reflect good qualities until they become habitual and pleasant. The third method mentioned is by observation and association with people of good character. It was mentioned that when individuals associate with people of good character for a sufficient amount of time, they will unconsciously incorporate their good values and also consciously learn from them.<sup>44</sup>

Al-Ghazali, also mentioned that the first step in correcting an evil character consists of awareness of that quality itself. One may also seek the help of a spiritual guide to observe and notify him or her of any defective personal traits. A defective character is a disease of the soul, and the cure consists of the total removal of the cause of the disease. One of the methods for the removal is the therapy by the opposites, which is a cognitive remedy. It involves identifying the undesired trait and identifying its opposite trait—then persevering to perform that opposite trait repeatedly until a desirable virtue is established. Al-Ghazali gave an example of the trait of miserliness. To eradicate this trait, the person should perform an opposite action, such as the act of giving away repeatedly until the opposite quality, generosity, is established.<sup>45</sup>

People will acquire a variety of virtues if their intellects (*'aql*) gain supremacy over their souls. If humans are unable to control their appetites and anger (biological and emotional urges), their souls will take over their intellects, and this will lead to immoral and wicked behaviors. In order to strengthen themselves from evil forces (*shaytan*), they need right knowl-

edge and action. Right knowledge involves faith in Allah and in the last day, and knowledge of man's essential nature. Right actions or conduct is obedience to the religious and ethical commandments of Allah. Individuals will achieve the highest level of psychospiritual development if their intellects have the complete control over their souls. People will be able to do this only when their intellects are guided by knowledge based on the divine revelation.<sup>46</sup>

Psychospiritual health processes happen when the heart is gradually awakened and illumined by the awareness of the knowledge of Allah. Only when the self recognizes the Ultimate Transcendent Reality as divine unity encompassing and sustaining the whole universe within absolute sovereignty and omnipotence—namely, *tawhid*—can the human personality overcome and free itself from all kinds of influences alien to the real human self, and return to its original nature (*fitrah*). A person's belief in Allah generates deep emotions of love and fear—or God's conscious (*taqwa*). This increasingly captures the domain of emotions that facilitate the process of growth of inner personality endowments and protects them from being corrupted by lower drives and passion. Love of Allah increases the positive value of all those virtues and deeds that are approved and appreciated by Allah, and the fear of Allah increases the negative values of all traits and behavior that are Allah dislikes and condemnes. The combination of these two emotions (love and fear of Allah) takes psychospiritual growth to a higher level.<sup>47</sup>

### *Fitrah*

When one talks about religious experience, one may get the impression that it is the result of environmental and learned experiences. Though learning and experience play a major role in the development of noble behavior, spiritually have its deep roots in the very nature of being human. That is because according to the Qur'an and the sayings of the Prophet, God has already made a covenant with the human in the primordial world of souls: "Am I not your Lord?" God asked the congregated souls of all human beings and they all chorused: "Yes indeed, You are our Lord" Qur'an (7:172). God then warned them not to be influenced by evil environments, which may cause them to forget this oath and succumb to ingratitude and disbelief:

Has thou ever considered (the kind of man) who makes his own desires a diety? Could thou be a disposer of affairs for him? (25:43)

But if they hearken not to thee, know that they only follow their own lusts: and this is more astray than one who follows his own lusts, devoid of guidance from God? for, God guides not people given to wrong-doing (28:50).

Many Muslim scholars and commentators of the Qur'an take this verse of the Qur'an (7:172) as an evidence for *fiṭrah* (the human-inherited predisposition to know God and to worship Him). Due to environmental factors, family upbringing, or any other causes, if individuals choose disbelief and ingratitude to God, they will enslave themselves or falsely submit to some other gods. Thus, people who do not submit to God will find themselves being slaves to other material or abstract things such as their race or nation, their political party, their lover, their wealth or gods of false religions and any other beings or ideologies.<sup>48</sup>

*Tawhīd* is an integral part of human *fiṭrah*, for *fiṭrah* of God is engraved upon the human soul. This is attested in a hadith of the Prophet:

Every newborn child is born in a state of *fiṭrah*. His parents then make him a Jew, a Christian or a Magian, just as an animal is born intact. (*Sahih Muslim*)

*Fiṭrah* can be described as a God-given innate state or inclination to believe in God and to worship Him. It is the natural constitution with which a child is created in his or her mother's womb in a state of happiness or misery; but it could also mean the truth of the *shahadah*, which expresses *tawhīd*, the oneness of God and the messengership of Muhammad. Thus, *fiṭrah* also expresses the truth about religion.<sup>49</sup> Furthermore, Ibn Taymiyyah (d. 1328) also asserts that every child is born in the state of *fiṭrah*; it is the social environment that corrupts the original state of *fiṭrah*. He further maintains that *fiṭrah* is not only a latent potential, which should be awakened from without, but also rather the source of the awakening itself within the individual. In the same way, Ibn Taymiyyah explains the nature of the *hanīf*.<sup>50</sup>

The *fiṭrah* accords very well with the direct sense experiences of life, as well as with freedom and divine justice. It is related to the idea of God and to moral behavior in the sense that human's spiritual or mental nature is structured in a way that makes it necessary for its well-being that the human believes in God and lives a moral life. In fact, one of the meanings of *fiṭrah* as *din* refers to the realization of the covenant by man. Submission in this sense will accordingly lead to the freedom of the human, since freedom means to act as his true

nature demands. People who submit to God in this way are living out the *din*. It is normal for humans to fulfill the purpose for their creation and existence, for humans' obligation to serve God comes as a natural inclination of humans. When this noble trust (*amanah*) is carried out, it raises human beings to the dignity of vicegerents of God (*Khalifat Allah*).<sup>51</sup> On the other hand, failure to exercise the *fitrah*, reduces the human being to the lowest of the low.<sup>52</sup> This divergence from the *din al-fitrah* is the natural result of human beings as individuals due to a state of forgetfulness in which they do not realize their freedom in the real sense.<sup>53</sup>

According to Islamic belief, the Merciful Transcendent God does not leave the human alone; rather He provides the Shar'iah as a reminder as well as guiding light to the essential faith in Him. The message which God sends to humans through His prophets provides them with guidance by building on the potentialities of their good nature.<sup>54</sup> It is possible for individuals to cut themselves away from this original nature because by means of the intellect and freedom of choice, they can decide and choose to conduct themselves in a wrongful or unlawful manner. Although human beings are not born evil because they are endowed with innate *fitrah*, they are vulnerable to evil stimuli and external sources of misguidance.<sup>55</sup>

In Islam, persons who are able to control themselves from their lust will obtain the higher level of spiritual achievement (*al-nafs al-mutma'innah*). On the other hand, those who fail to control their lust will follow the lower psychospiritual level, which is called *al-nafs al-ammarah*, a state full of vices and selfish drives. Those with a low level of spirituality will govern their life by passion and anger, and they also will exhibit negative characteristics and become self-centered. This is the act of disbeliever, and this has been emphasized in the Qur'an (2:90):

Evil is that for which they sell their souls: that they should disbelieve in that which Allah hath revealed, grudging that Allah should reveal of His bounty unto whom He will of His bondmen. They have incurred anger upon anger. For disbelievers is a shameful doom.

The attributes of passion and anger contain both positive and negative outcomes. For example, with anger, it can be manifested as a self-preservation to resist from falsehood. However, if the drive is used wrongly, it can become a blameworthy quality, which is harmful to the soul and body. Al-Ghazali, emphasized on two elements, anger and appetite, which can transform the lower soul into a higher level of psychospiritual development if it is assisted with the intellect. As opposed to it, evil forces (*shaytaniyah*)



is an opposing influence to the intellect that can lead to destructive behavior. If humans follow this force, the satanic influences are strengthened and humans become the slaves of anger, passion, and lust. Hence, it has the tendency to reach its maximum and become the active principle to govern a person's behavior by following the principle of the commanding soul (*al-nafs al-ammarah*).<sup>56</sup>

This phenomenon was explained by al-Ghazali by the nature of the heart (*qalb*)—the word *qalb* comes from the word *qalaba*, which means to turn something around or change its rotary movement. Thus, the *qalb* (heart) is so named because of the ease of its continuous changeability.<sup>57</sup> A hadith states that the heart of the believer (*mu'min*) is held between two fingers of God, *Al-Rahman*; He turns it around as He wishes—or according to another version: if He wills to establish it, He causes it to stand, and if He wills to cause it to go astray, He does so.<sup>58</sup>

## Conclusion

Islam perceives that there is a balanced interaction between nature and nurture in shaping human behavior because the concept of nature (*fitrah*) is not only the biological aspects of behavior but also the spiritual dimension. Faith and education are crucial elements for bringing about change in human behavior and molding a balanced personality. Moral excellence is a characteristic of human nature. The recognition and pursuit of virtue is an innate quality in humans, born out of their natural state of *fitrah*. Virtue may be considered both inborn and acquired. It is an inborn quality of the soul. Humans also have been awarded with the capabilities (physically and spiritually) to explore, examine, compare, and think in order for them to have virtue. Human beings need divine guidance in order to live in harmony with their nature. Their nature requires that they believe in Allah and that they be grateful to Him and love Him. Revelation guides human beings to the path of gratitude. Besides that, healthy social circumstances are required in order to awaken people's virtue. Human beings are considered as spiritually and psychologically healthy if they demonstrate good conduct while in the harmony of their inner nature.

## Endnotes

1. Malik Badri, "The Neglected Contributions of Islamic Civilization to Genetics and Reproductive Biology." (paper presented at International Conference on Islamic Medical Association, Cairo, Egypt, 2006).

2. J. B. Watson, *Behaviorism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1924), 104.
3. Malik Badri, "The Neglected Contributions of Islamic Civilization to Genetics and Reproductive Biology."
4. Ibid.
5. Malik Badri, *The AIDS Crisis: An Islamic Socio-Cultural Perspective* (Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia: ISTAC Publications, 1997) 56.
6. M. Noor Noraini, ed. *Psychology from Islamic Perspective: A Guide To Teaching and Learning* (Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia: IIUM Press), 86.
7. Mustafa Achoi, "Human Nature from a Comparative Psychological Perspective." *The American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences*, 15, no. 4 (1998). See also Noraini, *Psychology from Islamic Perspective*.
8. Robert C. Carson and John Neal Butcher, *Abnormal Psychology and Modern Life*, 9th ed. (New York, Harper Collins Publishers, 1992); see "Perspective on Abnormal Behavior," 200–213. See also H. J. Eysenk and M. W. Eysenk, *Personality and Individual Differences: A Natural Science Approach* (New York: Plenum Press, 1985).
9. Abu Hamid al Ghazali, *Mizan al-'Amal* (Beirut, Lebanon: Dar al-Afaq al Jadidah, 1986), 100.
10. Badri, "The Neglected Contributions of Islamic Civilization to Genetics and Reproductive Biology."
11. Ibid.
12. This hadith was authenticated by Ahmad ibn Hanbal, as cited by Ibn Kathir in his *tafsir* of *Surat Al-Mu'minun*. Ibn Kathir, *Tafsir al'Azim* (Beirut, Lebanon: Dar al-Ma'rifah li al-Tiba' wa al-Nashr, 1969), vol. 3, 241.
13. Badri, "The Neglected Contributions of Islamic Civilization to Genetics and Reproductive Biology."
14. Ibid.
15. Herbert Benson, *Beyond the Relaxation Response: How to Harness the Healing Power of Your Personal Belief* (New York: Berkley Books, 1985), 196.
16. Mustafa Achoi, "Human Nature from a Comparative Psychological Perspective."
17. Muhammad Abul Quasem. *The Ethics of al-Ghazali* (New York: Caravan Books, 1978), 79–80.
18. Ahmad ibn Muhammad Miskawayh, *Tahdib al-Akhlaq* [The Refinement of Character], ed. and trans. C. K. Zurayk (Beirut, Lebanon: American University of Beirut, 1968), 85.
19. Ibid., 80.
20. Malik Badri, "Abu Zayd al-Balkhi: A Genius Whose Psychiatric Contributions Needed More Than Ten Centuries To Be Appreciated,". *Malaysian Journal of Psychiatry* 6, no. 2 (1998).
21. Daniel Goleman *Emotional Intelligence* (New York: Bantam Books, 1995), 215.

22. Abu Zayd al-Balkhi, "Treatment of Depression, Negative and Management of Anger," in *Masalih al-Abdan wa al-Anfus*, ed. Fuat Sezgin. (Stuttgart, Germany: Ernst Printers, 1984), 80. Similarly, Ibn Sina was well-known with his book *Al-Shifa*.
23. See also Al-Ghazali *Al-Ma'arifi al-Quds fi Madarij Ma'arifat Al-Nafs* (Beirut, Lebanon: Dar al-Afaq al-Jadidah, 1978), 14.
24. *Ibid.*, 2. In this sense, the Qur'an itself guides human beings in the spiritual realm. This is explicitly stated in Qur'an (96:4-5); see Alparslan Acikgenc, *Islamic Science: Towards a Definition* (Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia: International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilization [ISTAC], 1996), 56.
25. Al-Ghazali, *Al-Ma'arifi*, 15.
26. Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas, *The Nature of Man and the Psychology of The Human Soul* (Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia: ISTAC, 1990), 6.
27. *Ibid.*, 7
28. Al-Ghazali, *al-Ma'arifi*, 15.
29. Al-Attas, *Nature of Man*, 147.
30. Ahmad b. Muhammad, ibn Hanbal, *Musnad* (Egypt: Matba'at al-Maymaniyyah, 1895), vol. 4, 114. See also, Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas in his *Islam and Secularism* (Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia: Muslim Youth Movement of Malaysia [ABIM], 1978), 115, contends that: ". . . so is *tasawwuf* the inner dimension of Islam; its sincere and correct practice is none other than the intensification of the *shariah* upon one's self; it is the expression of *ihsan* in the 'abd; it is *'ibadah* fortified and enlightened by intellectual discernment leading to spiritual apprehension of realities; it is the practice of *shariah* at the station of *ihsan*."
31. Al-Ghazali, *al-Ma'arifi*, 15.
32. See, Yasien, *Fitra: The Islamic Concept of Human Nature* (London: Ta-Ha Publishers Ltd., 1996), 108.
33. Al-Ghazali, *al-Ma'arifi*, 15.
34. Al-Attas, *The Nature of Man and the Psychology of The Human Soul*, 38-39.
35. *Ibid.*, 39.
36. Amber Haque and Mohamed Yasien, ed. *Psychology of Personality: Islamic Perspective* (Cengage Learning Asia Pte Ltd: Singapore, 2009), 257.
37. Yasien, *Fitra*, 97-98.
38. *Ibid.*, 98.
39. See his *Al-Wasaya* (Beirut, Lebanon: Dār al-Kutub, al-ŪImiyyah, 1986), 123.
40. Cited by Malik Badri, *Contemplation An Islamic Psycho-spiritual Study* (London: International Institute of Islamic Thought, 2000), 116-17.
41. Ibn al-Qayyim al-Jawziyah, *Al-Fawa'id* (Beirut, Lebanon: Dar Fikri, 1983), 98.
42. Abu Hamid al-Ghazali, *Ihya ulum al-Dīn*, (New Delhi, India: Kitab Bhavan, 1993), vol. 4, 56.

43. See Mohamed Yasien, *Fitra*, 90.
44. See Abul Quasem *The Ethics of al-Ghazali*, 117–18.
45. *Ibid.*, 118.
46. Amber Haque and Mohamed Yasien, *Psychology of Personality*, 172.
47. *Ibid.*, 173.
48. Ibn Taymiyyah, *Dar‘u Ta‘arud al-‘Aql wa al-Naql*, ed. Muhammad Rashad Sa‘im (Riyadh, Saudi Arabia: Jami‘at al-Imam Muhammad ibn Sa‘ud al-Islamiyyah, 1981), 385. Interestingly, that some Western psychologists like the Harvard physician, Benson, claims that faith and belief in God is firmly embedded in human genes, that “humans are literally programmed with a need for faith.” Herbert Benson, MD, *Timeless Healing: The Power and Biology of Belief* (London: Simon & Schuster Ltd, 1996), 198.
49. Taymiyyah, *Dar‘u Ta‘arud*, 386. See also al-Hakim al-Tirmidhi (d. 255 A.H), who viewed *fitrah* as *nur ma‘rifat Allah*. He provides evidence for his view from Qur’an (31:25). which means: “If thou ask them, who created the heavens and the earth. They will certainly say, ‘Allah’ Say: ‘Praise be to Allah!’ Similarly Sahl al-Tustari (d. 896) like many others—for instance al-Nawawi (d. 1277) and Isfahani (d. 1108)—perceive the natural predisposition to acknowledge *tawhid* of God as innate.
50. Taymiyyah, *Dar‘u Ta‘arud*, 387.
51. Qur’an (2:30).
52. Qur’an (7:179).
53. Al-Attas, *Islam and Secularism*, 80.
54. G. H. Asi, *Din* (Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia: Islamic Book Trust, 2007), 72.
55. Al-Ghazzali, *Ihya* (Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia: Islamic Book Trust, 2007), see chapter on *fitrah*.
56. Al-Ghazali, *Wonders of the Heart*, tr. Walter James Skellie (Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia: Islamic Book Trust, 2007), 152–53.
57. *Ibid.*, 153.
58. *Ibid.*