

IBN TAYMIYYAH'S CONCEPT OF *FITRAH* AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR ISLAMIC MORAL THOUGHT

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Abstract

Ibn Taymiyyah's moral thought attracts little scholarly attention, and the few studies on his moral view focus on the theological, ontological, and socio-political dimensions. With this, there seems to be little academic focus on his moral epistemology. This study is, therefore, an attempt to articulate Ibn Taymiyyah's view on the nature, sources, and basis of moral knowledge with a focus on the non-inferential epistemic roles that he assigned to the notion of *fitrah* (i.e., innate human disposition) as a key moral resource. This is attempted through a textual analysis of an inductive qualitative method that is library-based. And the study, finally, holds that Ibn Taymiyyah's moral epistemology synthetically combines *fitrah* with other epistemic resources (e.g., revelation, reason, experience, and socio-cultural reality) to construct an integrated moral paradigm that could be employed to holistically understand and explain knowledge of morality in Islam thought.

Keywords: Ibn Taymiyyah, Islamic moral epistemology, moral epistemic resources, moral cognition, conscience, and moral emotions

1.0. Introduction

Many of the available studies on Ibn Taymiyyah's thought focus on his theological perspectives and *fatwa* on jihad. Others, to a very lesser degree, discuss his contributions to Quranic studies, jurisprudence, legal theories, history, and economics, even though he was a polymath and encyclopedic scholar (Lamotte, 1994; El-Tobgui, 2020). And his contributions to Islamic ethics and moral thought are scarcely acknowledged. In fact, a renowned scholar of Islamic studies,

Majid Fakhry (1991, p. 4) in his famous book, *Ethical theories in Islam*, categorically (though erroneously) claimed that Ibn Taymiyyah seemed not to have anything that is worth called moral perspective!

The little academic attention on Ibn Taymiyyah's perspectives on morality deals majorly with the theological, sociopolitical, and ontological aspects (see Vasalou 2016; al-Afifi 1988; Makari 1983). The epistemological aspects seem to be less explored and articulated. A few studies that tend to discuss his moral epistemology mistakenly view it to be ambiguously analytical (Vasalou 2016, p. 6). This is because less attention is paid to the integrated approach that informs Ibn Taymiyyah's perspectives (Hoover, 2019, p. 168).

Against this backdrop, this paper is an attempt to explore Ibn Taymiyyah's theoretical construct of moral knowledge with a focus on the concept of *fitrah* as one of the key elements in his moral epistemological paradigm. It seeks to highlight how the concept is being deployed, by Ibn Taymiyyah, to establish and explain the innateness of man's moral cognitive and psychological ability. It also shows how Ibn Taymiyyah emphasizes the concept as a moral epistemic resource. This is what seems not to have been attempted by the earlier *Mutakallimun* (i.e., theologians) on the nature, sources, and basis of morality in the history of Islamic moral thought before Ibn Taymiyyah.

And without denying some tangential references to the ethical import of the concept of *fitrah* (based on Ibn Taymiyyah's view) by some studies (e.g., Anjum 2012, p. 223; Kazi 2013, p. 265) and its moral-theological significance by al-Afifi (1988, p. 62) and Vasalou (2016), there seems to be no major attempt to discuss its moral epistemological implications. Based on this, the paper aims to highlight, through a textual analysis of an inductive qualitative method, some of the moral epistemological implications of Ibn Taymiyyah's concept of *fitrah*. And the following volumes of Ibn Taymiyyah's writings (particularly, where *fitrah* is discussed) serve

as the primary sources: selected volumes of *Dar' Ta'arud* (1401); selected volumes of *Majmu' al-Fatwa* (n.d.), *al-Radd ala al-Mantiqiyyin* (1404) and *Kitabu al-Nubuwwat* (1991). They are also augmented with other relevant secondary texts.

The paper considers some of the roles that Ibn Taymiyyah assigned to the notion of *fitrah* as a moral epistemic concept. It focuses on how the concept is paradigmatically deployed as an epistemological framework to understand and explain the “sources, nature, and basis” of moral knowledge in Islamic thought. The significance of the study, therefore, lies in its attempt to show that the notion of *fitrah* as a moral epistemic element was a novel development in the history of Islamic moral thought. It shows how the concept was innovatively used by Ibn Taymiyyah to transcend the dichotomized predominant moral views in which moral knowledge was attributed either to the revelation (by the *Ash'arites*) or to the human reason/ intellect (by the *Mu'tazilites*) (Hourani 1985; al-Afifi 1988; al-Attar, 2010, 2017; Vasalou 2016). And in conclusion, the study is of the view that the concept of *fitrah* together with reason, revelation, experience, and non-reprehensible socio-cultural realities could be conceptually deployed as an integrated moral paradigm to approach, understand and explain (the nature, sources, and bases of) moral knowledge, values, realities, etc. from an Islamic standpoint.

To achieve this, the study provides an overview of Ibn Taymiyyah's conception of the *fitrah* as an innate epistemic and cognitive faculty – that is primordially and ontologically impressed into the beingness of man. This is attempted against a backdrop of Ibn Taymiyyah's critiques of selected interpretations of the *fitrah* common during his time. Then, the paper considers and highlights some of the epistemic moral implications of the concept *vis-à-vis* other moral epistemic elements, based on Ibn Taymiyyah's theoretical formulation. And the paper ends with a general remark on the significance of *fitrah* as one of the important epistemic elements of a holistic and integrated paradigm to approach knowledge of morality in Islam.

2.0. An Overview of Ibn Taymiyyah's Concept of *Fitrah*

The term *fitrah* has its root in the primary sources of Islamic thought (Qur'an and *ḥadīth*), and it has been variously interpreted by many Islamic scholars. However, Ibn Taymiyyah's conceptualization of the notion of *fitrah* seems to be unique. This is because he did not only critique many of the previous interpretations before and during his time but also provided some seemingly unprecedented theoretical extrapolations – based on the various Qur'an verses and *ḥadīth* on the notion of *fitrah* (Kazi 2013, p. 232).

Before discussing Ibn Taymiyyah's view on the *fitrah*, it is, therefore, necessary to identify some of the general understanding and interpretations that predated his conceptualization.

To begin with, *fitrah* linguistically as an Arabic word has its root letters to be “fa-ta-ra”, and it generally means ‘to cleave open,’ or ‘to originate,’ “to cause something to open up” or “to cause something to exist for the first time” (Ibn Manzur (n.d.), vol 5, pp. 55-57). And it is in these two senses that the term seems to be more predominantly used in the Qur'an and *ḥadīth*. In its various derivatives, the term recurs more than 15 separate times in the Quran. And it is interesting to know the term appears only once as “*fitrah*” in spelling throughout the Quran (Q30:30) (Muhammad al-Bishi 1417 AH, p. 26).

However, as a technical term in Islamic thought, it has been taken to connote certain understanding regarding the “primordial nature of man.” This is based on exegetical analyses of certain Quranic verses and selected relevant *ḥadīth*. Q30:30 and Q7:172-173 are some of the Qur'an textual references that have been essentially resorted to by many Islamic scholars to discuss the primordial nature of man (Muhammad al-Bishi 1417 AH, p. 38).

In addition to these verses, various prophetic traditions (*aḥadīth*) are referenced to substantiate the notion. For instance, Abu Huraira reported Allah's Messenger (may peace be upon him) to have said: “An infant is born according to his (true) nature. It is his parents who make him a Jew, a Christian, just as a she-camel gives birth to its young ones. Do you find any deficiency in their limbs? You cut their ears (i.e., after birth)” (Sahih Bukhari Book 65, *ḥadīth* 297; see also Sahih Muslim Book 46, *ḥadīth* 40)

Relying on these sources, certain scholars before Ibn Taymiyyah, provided the following understandings of the *fiṭrah*. *Fiṭrah* as Islam (al-Tabari, d. 923 AD); *Fiṭrah* as *Mithaq* – now commonly translated as Adamic covenant (i.e. the discussion that was alluded to in the Quran between Allah and the “progenies” of Prophet Adam) (Ahmad bn Hanbali, d. 855 AD); *Fiṭrah* as predestination (Qadri al-Jaylani, d. 1166 AD); *fiṭrah* as human neutral ability or lack of any innate inclination (Ibn Abdul Barr, d. 1071), and *Fiṭrah* as inner guidance and conviction (Al-Ghazali, d. 1111 AD) (see. Mohamed 1995, pp. 129-154; Kazi 2013, p. 234; Kukkonen, 2015, pp. 5-7).

Due to the limited space and without necessarily going into details of each of these views, the following is a summary of Ibn Taymiyyah’s critiques of these earlier interpretations. Besides the fact that he intellectually discounts the interpretations of *fiṭrah* as “predestination” and “human neutral ability” (Mohamed 1995, pp. 136-137; Ibn Taymiyyah 1401, vol. 8, pp. 387-388), Ibn Taymiyyah builds on some of the viewpoints by the scholars before him. He critiqued, reformulated, and improved upon their interpretation, and articulated his distinct view of the *fiṭrah*. However, unlike many of the earlier interpretations, he provides an extensive theoretical construct of *fiṭrah* in a way that was rarely attempted before.

Without denying that *fiṭrah* could be understood to mean Islam, Ibn Taymiyyah avers that there are basic clarifications that need to be made in this regard. In his view, *fiṭrah* is termed to mean

Islam only in a general sense, not in the actual, practical understanding. Islam is more than *fitrah*, and the two cannot be equated as the same. For him, Islam is a comprehensive and detailed, revealed principles and understanding of creedal issues, rituals, ethics, and fundamental and jurisprudential principles on all aspects of human existence. While *fitrah* could be best understood to mean natural predisposition to Islam – i.e., Islam in its human potentiality (Ibn Taymiyyah (n.d.), vol. 4, pp. 245, 247, 1401, vol. 8, p. 383). *Fitrah* is, therefore, essentially a psycho-spiritual and epistemic faculty that is ontologically part of man's nature, and it is functionally compatible with Islam. As a result, it is part of – but not equivalent – to Islam (Ibn Taymiyyah 1401, vol. 8, p. 383). In other words, *fitrah* is essentially an “Islamic predisposition” that is innate to man, but it is not Islam in the complete and practical sense of the word “Islam,”

This seems to capture or reflects the statement of Prophet Muhammad that “every child is born upon the *fitrah*.” (Sahih Muslim and Sahih Bukhari). And according to Ibn Taymiyyah, the Prophet would not have meant that “everyone is a practicing Muslim, at birth” but rather that everyone has a latent inclination toward Islam and its values. It is a natural, metaphysical constitution of man that is in congruence with the basic ideals of Islam. *Fitrah* – as a latent nature of man which develops and comes to the fore over time – seems to indicate that Allah originally ingrained in our nature, the cognitive and psychological tendencies that internally make us inclinable towards Islamic tenets (Ibn Taymiyyah 1404, p. 429).

As an insight, this could be implicitly understood to imply what is now known in modern psychological sciences as intuition and human instinct. However, according to Ibn Taymiyyah this “instinct or intuition” as human predisposition (i.e., *fitrah*) could not be taken to denote Islam, simpliciter [Ibn Taymiyyah (n.d.) vol. 4, p. 247; 1401, vol. 8, p. 383;]. This is one of the

critiques and distinct views of Ibn Taymiyyah on the concept of the *fitrah*, particularly when interpreted as Islam.

On the interpretation of *fitrah* as “*mithaq*” (i.e., Adamic covenant), Ibn Taymiyyah is of the view that the “Adamic covenant” is not *fitrah* but only presupposes it. For him, it obviously indicates, with a strong basis, the reality of *fitrah* as an innate awareness that is ontological [Ibn Taymiyyah (n.d.), vol. 4, p. 220]. That is, the fact that all the children of Adam could affirmatively respond to Allah’s rhetorical question on His Lordship clearly implies that human beings are primordially imbued with a piece of innate knowledge. According to Ibn Taymiyyah, it is that innate ability to affirm, (not the conversation nor the agreement), that constitutes *fitrah* because it points to a natural understanding that is not based on any inference and learning or experience.

Taking the above as a point of departure, and by drawing from and critically reinterpreting the Qur’an and hadith, Ibn Taymiyyah develops *fitrah* as an epistemic concept that could be employed to understand and approach various issues in Islam

To clearly provide his major extrapolations about the *fitrah*, the following is an overview of the defining characteristics of his conceptualization.

Innateness of *Fitrah* – Ibn Taymiyyah holds that *fitrah* is man’s innate epistemic capacity to know certain realities as self-evident without necessarily having the ability to articulate them. Referencing certain verses (e.g., Q. 14:10) and *hadith*, Ibn Taymiyyah avers that *fitrah* points to the fact that man is instilled with a priori understanding that seems to entail necessary consciousness that may not be readily rendered into words. He sees *fitrah* as an awareness that lies beneath the subconscious mind with strong epistemic values and weight (i.e., self-convincing knowledge) (Ibn Taymiyyah, 1401, vol. 7, p. 300; vol.8, p. 383). For him, *fitrah*

also entails the tendency to be more inclined towards Islamic values and general moral goodness (Ibn Taymiyyah (n.d.), vol. 16, pp. 461;1401, vol. 9, p. 330).

Expanding on some of the earlier interpretations (e.g., *fitrah* as inner conviction), Ibn Taymiyyah sees the *fitrah* as the pure disposition of the heart to be willing to accept the truth. He sees it as a psychic situation where a child would find it difficult to choose other values apart from Islamic ideals when s/he is not influenced by external factors. This is because Islamic tenets, in Ibn Taymiyyah's view, are in tandem with every child's natural disposition [Ibn Taymiyyah (n.d.) Vol. 4 p. 247]

The Susceptibility and Vulnerability of *Fitrah* – The *fitrah* is part and parcel of man's nature, however, it is a dynamic disposition. *Fitrah*, for Ibn Taymiyyah, is susceptible to being influenced and affected as it is not a fixed or unresponsive component of man. According to Ibn Taymiyyah, this view is predicated on the explicit statement in the various *ahādīth* on *fitrah*. Prophet Muhammad (SAW), for example, categorically identified our parents' (sociopsychological influence) and *Shaytan* (i.e., the devil) as factors that could affect the *fitrah* (Sahih of Imam al-Bukhari and Sahih of Imam Muslim as quoted above).

Interpreting these *ahādīth*, Ibn Taymiyyah postulates that *fitrah* is highly prone to be negatively affected by certain socio-psychological, environmental, and demonic factors [Ibn Taymiyyah (n.d.), vol. 8, 362, 379). And this is succinctly captured in the last chapter of the Quran (Q114) where Allah exhorts us to seek protection from all the evils related to the jinn and man with an emphasis on their psychical influences. Besides these factors, Ibn Taymiyyah also discusses the negative influence of forgetfulness, self-delusion, and self-ego on the purity and state of the *fitrah* (Ibn Taymiyyah (n.d.) vol. 8, 528; vol 16, 348).

The Impossibility of Total Alteration of *fitrah* – Despite its susceptibility to being negatively affected and influenced, *fitrah* cannot be essentially replaced. The Quran, in the opinion of Ibn

Taymiyyah, seems to explicitly point out that the pure and real nature of the *fitrah* cannot be totally altered and eroded. He premised his viewpoint on an interpretation of a certain part of the verse on the *fitrah* (i.e., *la tabdila li khaliqi allah*) (Q30.30); he avers that, based on this verse, the nature upon which man is primordially created – i.e., *fitrah* – cannot be replaced (Ibn Taymiyyah 1401, vol.8, p. 425). He strongly holds that the *fitrah* cannot be completely uprooted though he admits that it could be severely corrupted when subjected to serious negative influences (Ibn Taymiyyah 1401, vol.8, 425).

This seems to explain why man enduringly retains some iotas of innate goodness even when he involves in many atrocities. He is still able to maintain a certain level of consciousness about Allah and display some level of remorsefulness and self-guilt due to conscience. And these are alluded to by certain verses of the Qur'an (Q 10:22-23; Q27:14). In these verses, Allah tells us how human beings would always resort sincerely to Allah for assistance in the face of adversity and turbulent situations that are obviously beyond their capacity – even when they have been incorrigible and ingrate.

Fitrah, Revelation, and Intellect – In an attempt to provide more detailed distinguishing characteristics on the nature of the *fitrah*, Ibn Taymiyyah discusses some of the relationships that exist between it and what he seems to identify as the other two basic epistemic resources available to man (i.e., revelation and intellect). And this is very important as many of the problems with sources of knowledge could be traced to the confusion about the nature and roles of these epistemic resources.

According to Ibn Taymiyyah, *fitrah* furnishes man with the basic – though undetailed – general innate knowledge. It entails consciousness about certain metaphysical realities and related issues, such as the existence of God and general truth about the religion of Islam, inbuilt moral inclination, moral senses, etc. In contrast, the revelation provides definite and explicit

knowledge which includes specified principles about many of the realities that are deemed to be intuitively acknowledged by man's *fitrah*. For example, it provides certain details on the nature, names, and attributes of Allah, some information on the future happening on the Day of Resurrection, specified moral dictates and prescriptions, well-spelled out guides on Islamic stipulations on rituals, etc. While the intellect basically cognizes, synthesizes, analyzes, expatiates, (re)interprets, articulates, guides, and contextualizes the various knowledge provided by *fitrah* and revelation. It puts in perspective the received knowledge and principles from the other sources. Intellect discovers and explains, based on revelation, many of the phenomena that *fitrah* could not independently articulate [Ibn Taymiyyah (n.d.) vol. 16, pp. 338, 348;1401, vol. 8, p. 313; vol. 10, p. 135; vol. 1, p. 133; Kazi, 2013].

Revelation is partly meant to affirm and clarify knowledge from the *fitrah*, while *fitrah* confirms and aligns with the revelation. While *fitrah* is a source of non-inferential knowledge, intellect serves as a source for inferentially acquired knowledge. For Ibn Taymiyyah, through *fitrah*, man's reason could be made to be more inclined toward the ultimate truth and righteousness. This is because pure *fitrah* acts in harmony with revelation and functions as a check and balance to the intellect. However, with corrupt *fitrah*, the revelation utterly becomes nonrelevant while the intellect loses its guard (Ibn Taymiyyah 1404, p. 323).

In summary, for Ibn Taymiyyah, each of these sources of knowledge has its distinct characteristics. However, they are functionally connected as they necessarily form the complete epistemic resource for man. They are to be integrated to produce a comprehensive knowledge of reality that is realistic rather than being taken to be conflictual.

Without denying his theoretical drawings from some of the earlier interpretations, the foregoing postulations seem to show how Ibn Taymiyyah uniquely conceptualizes the term *fitrah* as an epistemic element. It summarily indicates how he developed an entire epistemological

paradigm in which the notion of *fitrah* is being emphasized and integrated with other sources of knowledge, particularly from an Islamic standpoint

Certain implications of this intellectual ingenuity on *fitrah* have been attempted by some previous studies with respect to some aspects of Islamic thought; its moral epistemological implications for Islamic moral knowledge are considered in the next part of this paper.

3.0. Moral Epistemological Implications of the concept of *Fitrah*

For Ibn Taymiyyah, the notion of the *fitrah* has expansive implications for Islamic thought. Many of the available studies (e.g., Holtzman, 2015; Kazi, 2013; Hoover, 2007; Ozervarli, 2013, etc.) on the significance of the *fitrah* in Ibn Taymiyyah's thought focus on the theological implications. Very few studies consider some of its other implications, for instance, Anjum (2012) employs it as a political framework; Mohamed (1995, and 1996) discusses its psychological dimensions, and Muhammad al-Bishi (1417) points to its pedagogical relevance. Fewer attempts are made by some studies (e.g., al-Afifi 1988 and Vasalou 2016) to relate Ibn Taymiyyah's conceptualization of *fitrah* to the knowledge of morality particularly as an epistemic resource for moral knowledge.

Apart from its apparent theological significance, *fitrah* is a veritable concept to understand the sources, nature, and basis of morality. And this is even more obvious when it is integratively deployed with other epistemic resources and factors (e.g., intellect, revelation, human experience, and sociocultural realities) [Ibn Taymiyyah (n.d.) vol. 16, 347; vol. 11, pp. 344 – 345; 1404, pp. 323, 383, 429, 430].

Fitrah, as an ontological disposition of man (Q30:30), has not only the innate ability to spur man's consciousness about the existence of Allah, but also serves as an internal epistemic resource for morality. It is one of the grounds of human morality. Through *fitrah*, man

instinctively grasps the morality and immorality of certain actions. He intuitively understands basic moral values and concepts such as altruism, gratitude, truthfulness, honesty, deception, lying, maltreatment injustice, lying, etc. He inherently has contempt for morally wrong actions, and intuitively prefers what is morally right such as fairness, truthfulness, equity, justice, etc. (Ibn Taymiyyah 1404, p. 423).

Moral mindset and ethical disposition, in Ibn Taymiyyah's view, are rooted in *fitrah* (naturalness) which is part of the metaphysical foundation upon which man is primordially created. They constitute man's native ability which is in-born. Certainly, these moral competencies and inclinations would be affected, positively or negatively, by sociocultural factors, their primary existence is not due to these factors (Ibn Taymiyyah (n.d.), vol. 4, 245, 247; vol. 7, 528).

Based on the various perspectives of Ibn Taymiyyah on some of the manifestations of *fitrah* as a moral epistemic capacity of man, the following could be highlighted as parts of the significance of *fitrah* in the total reality of moral knowledge.

Innate Moral Consciousness – this is an instinctive ability to innately perceive and discern basic moral values and concepts. It involves an inherent capacity to know and understand basic moral principles without being learned or based on any inference. It entails a moral acuity naturally possessed by man and has little to do with social and experiential learning as its foundation. Like the innate awareness of Allah's existence, basic moral perception and value judgement knowledge are seemed to be part of human natural disposition. Through an innate moral understanding, everyone could spontaneously and intuitively understand and distinguish various moral concepts such as fairness, justice, equity, unfairness, honesty, dishonesty, and dubious and unjust dealings without necessarily having learned them (Ibn Taymiyyah 1404, pp. 429, 430).

For Ibn Taymiyyah, man's *fitrah* imbued him with the basic moral insight necessary to confront moral reality – i.e., situations of moral decision and evaluation. It is an inherent part of man's moral consciousness. This is one of the moral epistemic manifestations of *fitrah* that was little explored by many of the earlier *Mutakallimun* and Muslim philosophers that preceded Ibn Taymiyyah. It is a moral compass that is native to man, and it is not a function of acculturation and socialization, though these factors would play a key role in its development and effectiveness. According to Ibn Taymiyyah, everyone, irrespective of his/her intellectual ability, has a general moral knowledge, though intellect would play certain impact since there is a nexus between the two (Ibn Taymiyyah, 1404, p. 323).

This does not imply that everyone would necessarily engage in good acts and abstain from bad ones naturally. It, however, means that apart from the fact that we are ingrained with the general and basic capacity to know (and differentiate between) right from wrong, we also possess a higher natural inclination to do good because it seems to be more compelling (Ibn Taymiyyah (n.d.), vol. 7, p. 528). And this is discussed next as another dimension of moral epistemic manifestation of *fitrah* in man.

A Natural Moral Predisposition – This is another integral moral epistemic manifestation of man's *fitrah*. And it implies man's natural tendencies to be good. It is an unconscious inclination to do good, and a willingness to abstain from evil. In Ibn Taymiyyah's opinion, it is generally part of man's innateness to prefer virtuous acts and detest vicious ones (Ibn Taymiyyah (n.d.), vol. 7, p. 528). It is engrossing and more appealing, in the view of Ibn Taymiyyah, for everyone to naturally like a righteous and good person, as there seems to be no right-thinking person that would prefer mean person and malicious acts. Human beings, by their *fitrah* (nature), do not only desire, but also take, pleasure in good things, and moral goodness would not be an exception. (Ibn Taymiyyah, 1404, pp. 420, 429).

It is amazing to know that evil perpetrators generally hate evil as there is no one, for example, that would be expected to tolerate being deceived! In the opinion of Ibn Taymiyyah, preferring evil is a pointer to the corruption of the *fitrah* (Ibn Taymiyyah (n.d.) vol. 7, p. 528). And this could serve as an explanation for the reason evils are covertly perpetrated, in most cases. Even when apprehended, the perpetrators would, mostly, resort to denial or rationalization of the evil act. Without contesting that some people behave to the contrary, the truth is that it is not normal (Bloom, 2013).

This reality of human natural propensity toward morally good acts is understood better through other important dimensions of the moral implication of *fitrah* (i.e., conscience, shame, remorsefulness, etc.). And these are considered next.

Moral Metacognition and Emotions – in different contexts, Ibn Taymiyyah discussed certain metacognitive abilities (i.e., abilities to self-focus on one's thought) and emotions, as key moral epistemic manifestations of *fitrah*. For Ibn Taymiyyah, these emotions are part of the innate moral epistemic resources that are rooted in *fitrah*; with emphasis, he frequently points out the innateness of these emotions and their moral interconnection to man's *fitrah* (Ibn Taymiyyah 1401, vol. 7, pp. 76, 425; (n.d.), vol. 20, p. 121, vol. 31, pp. 106-7; 1404, pp. 420-430). Man exhibits different metacognitive behavior and emotions as moral expression and reactions. And these are known as moral emotions, in the psychology of morality or moral psychology (Roeser 2011; Oakley, 2020).

Practically and experientially, they indicate the moral epistemic significance of *fitrah*. This is because the innate expressions and reactions manifest through moral self-evaluation and moral feeling and consciousness which are parts of human *fitrah*. Some of the few examples are conscience, resoluteness, shame, empathy, disgust, gratitude, etc.

As an illustration, conscience, as a metacognitive attitude is innately exhibited through a remorseful feeling that “disturbs” anyone who refuses to live or behave in accordance with an acclaimed moral value or conviction. Gratitude is an appreciation-related emotion that is naturally expressed toward a benefactor. Empathy is a deep feeling of concern that is spontaneously set off by the plight of others. Shame is a feeling of humiliation that is innately elicited unconsciously by an unacceptable moral behavior (Oakley, 2020).

These attitudes are sometimes expressed outside moral contexts, and sociocultural realities and differences could affect how they are expressed. However, the fact that they seem to be innately displayed or evoked in connection to moral realities, according to Ibn Taymiyyah, indicates their epistemic moral dimensions that are embedded in man’s nature (*fitrah*) (Ibn Taymiyyah 1404, p. 430). They are naturally possessed by every normal individual.

The foregoing is a brief consideration of Ibn Taymiyyah’s ingenious conceptualization of *fitrah* as an epistemic moral element, in some of its various dimensions. And many recent studies and modern philosophy have been pre-empted by Ibn Taymiyyah’s postulations. Many of his views that man possesses basic innate moral character and an intuitive sense of morality that indicate man’s natural goodness are being considered and popularized by these studies.

One of these modern scholarly examples is J.J. Rosseau (1712-1778); he discussed the “natural goodness of man” in some of his works, for example, *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality*, *Confession*, *Emile*, etc. Without denying certain differences in their perspectives, Rosseau, like Taymiyyah, holds that “man is innately good by his nature though he (i.e., man) is also highly vulnerable to the corruptibility of sociocultural reality that would negatively influence his moral innate goodness.

Apart from Rosseau, there are others who focus on the intuitive and non-inferential dimension of human knowledge of morality (which are extensively discussed by Ibn Taymiyyah). For

example, Sidgwick, Henry (d. 1900) in *The Methods of Ethics*; Moore, G.E. (d. 1958) in *Principia Ethica*; Ross, W.D. (d. 1971) in *The Right and the Good*; McShea, R.J. (1990) *Morality and human nature: A new route to ethical theory*; Audi, R (2009) *The Good in the Right: A Theory of Intuition and Intrinsic Value*; Justin Oakley (1992, 2020) *Morality and Emotion*, and Roeser, S. (2011) *Moral emotions and intuition*

Besides philosophical and theoretical views, there are many empirical studies that are now establishing, just like Ibn Taymiyyah espoused, that basic moral consciousnesses are innate parts of man. Many of these studies show that children at a very tender age seem to express some moral behavior (e.g., empathy, compassion, a faint sense of fairness, etc.). *Just Babies: The Origins of Good and Evil* by Paul Bloom (2013) and *Moral Judgment and Action in Preverbal Infants and Toddlers: Evidence for an Innate Moral Core* by J. Kiley Hamlin (2013) are just a few of the many examples.

Despite his various discussions on the importance of *fitrah* to understand moral realities, Ibn Taymiyyah maintains that it (i.e., *fitrah*) is not sufficient to capture the complexity involved in those realities. As a result, he integrates other moral resources (revelation, intellect, human experience, and sociocultural factors) to augment the moral epistemic roles of *fitrah*. A succinct discussion of these other resources as moral epistemic elements and their relationships, particularly with one another, are attempted below. This will also clearly point out an integrative dimension that is minimally identified in Ibn Taymiyyah's approaches or perspectives.

3.1. Intellect and Moral Knowledge

Certain studies (Kalin, 2014, etc.) point to some differences between the two terms: intellect and reason. Without denying these but only to do away with related academic arguments, these two terms will be interchangeably used, and this is also maintained by some other studies (see Tasman, 1930). This is because reason involves the deployment of the intellect, it is like an operational manifestation of the intellect (Chittick, 2011).

Having said that, intellect is another innate and internal epistemic resource available to man, it is latent at birth but develops over time (Bloom, 2013). It generally functions as the ability to understand, interpret, infer, evaluate, etc. (Ali, 2016). With all these, human beings can differentiate between many issues, and thereby acquire and build more knowledge in order to expand their general understanding.

It is these capacities that are deployed to analyze right, wrong, good, bad, and other value-related issues and concepts as far as morality is concerned (al-Afifi 1988). Therefore, intellect plays significant roles in the understanding and articulation of moral knowledge as a guide and basis for moral perspective, moral values, and decisions. According to Ibn Taymiyyah, identifying moral implications of issues is part of the distinguishing nature of man's intellect. For him, a sound intellect has the rational ability to know beneficial and good acts, and equally apprehends evil and vices (Ibn Taymiyyah 1404, pp. 429, 430).

Like the *Mu'tazilites*, Ibn Taymiyyah believes that man has the rational capacity to understand, identify and articulate moral perspectives and issues. However, he differs from them in their claim on the sufficiency of human reasoning with respect to moral issues and sources of knowledge (Vasalou 2016). While the *fitrah*, as an intuitive epistemic faculty provides unlearned, non-inferential moral knowledge, intellect as a rational epistemic faculty provides inferred moral knowledge (al-Afifi 1988). And other moral epistemic values of the intellect entail, but are not limited to, expatiation and interpretation of moral stipulations available in

the revelation; the moral self-evident truth provided by the intuition through the *fitrah*; moral experiences from the sense data (Ibn Taymiyyah 1404, p. 255; al-Afifi 1988). Intellect can perform these functions because it has analytic, synthetic, and ratiocinative capacities to process all moral information received from other epistemic resources.

The foregoing obviously indicates – in a very concise manner – an interconnection that exists not only between reason/intellect and *fitrah* but also between revelation and human experience. More of these relationships, with respect to revelation, are discussed next.

3.2. Revelation and Moral knowledge

Revelation (i.e., Qur'an and *ḥadīth*), in contrast to man's intellect and *fitrah*, represents an external moral resource. It contains moral injunctions and recommendations, and moral perspectives which are not readily available through *fitrah* and intellect (Q2:38; Q20:123). However, the revelation is to be complemented by other moral epistemic sources (Ibn Taymiyyah (n.d.), vol. 20, pp. 105-106).

Unlike the *fitrah* and intellect, Revelation is explicit, relatively specific, and definitive. It is also free from alteration and other corrupting factors (esp. the holy Qur'an). Therefore, it provides man with readily accessible and objective principles/standards in all spheres of life.

According to Ibn Taymiyyah, revelation basically reaffirms and perfects the *fitrah*-based moral values. It is not conflictual with man's natural innate value and disposition. It commands what conforms to sound reason, and that is pure to the heart (Ibn Taymiyyah 1991, pp. 431 -432). It does not arbitrarily proclaim moral values that are in friction with human general nature and existential reality. Its moral principles, stipulations, recommendations, and perspectives are meant to be rationally understood by human intellect, and intuitively attested to by *fitrah* (Ibn Taymiyyah 1404, p. 429). Based on these, revelation complements the other epistemic

resources of moral knowledge. In fact, there are various verses where Allah appeals to our intellect, nature (*fitrah*), and senses or experience (Q8:22; Q47:10 and 21:78). In other words, despite the fact that revelation is the most authentic and definitive sources of moral knowledge, it is to be deployed with human intellect, based on human existential and experiential realities, and others. This view contrasts with the *Ash'arites* that seemed to strongly hold (though erroneously) that revelation is the only source of moral knowledge. To explore other aspects of this reality, an examination of the moral epistemic roles of human experience is considered in the next section.

3.3. Human Experience and Knowledge of Morality

Experience is one of the veritable means through which possible benefits and harms related to moral issues and situations could be generated, corroborated, and confirmed. And these are based on the five senses that man possessed. Through lived experience and reality, certain moral knowledge, like other information, is practically acquired. And with the continuous interactions between intellect and experience, man can assess moral situations, make moral judgements, and take moral decisions (Ibn Taymiyyah 1404, p. 255; al-Afifi 1988; McGrath 2020). The experience thus provides learned and acquired moral knowledge that is easily verifiable because man can always recall past experiences with respect to harm or benefit in a similar or related moral situation.

However, other elements are needed as each has its respective role. Intellect is required to process moral data and to protect against phobia and delusion. Revelation and other epistemic elements of morality are needed to guide the sense data, particularly in new circumstances. The functional interconnectedness of all the moral elements is obvious. In fact, experience, like revelation, *fitrah*, and sociocultural practice (which is discussed next), provides the intellect with the necessary moral data to make correct and accurate rational moral decisions (Ibn

Taymiyyah 1404, p. 255). As a final major point in this paper, the consideration of the moral epistemic role of socio-cultural elements, as external resources for moral knowledge is attempted below.

3.4. Sociocultural element and Moral Knowledge

Socio-cultural factors or elements entails an aggregate of an extended commonly lived reality of a defined set of people within a specific locality over a period. Human behaviours are obviously guided, in certain respects, by social norms and cultures. As a result, they constitute sources of moral knowledge. And without being oblivious of this sociocultural reality, Ibn Taymiyyah, based on certain conditions, granted that certain cultural factors and societal mores could serve as epistemic resources to determine and inform morality with respect to certain categories of issues.

This is based on his perspective on societal benefit, common interest, and the public good. He espoused that is allowed so long the cultural beliefs and values do not contradict any explicit or validly derived principles of Islamic views. This is also permitted on the basis that such acclaimed sociocultural mores obviously provide certain necessary benefits to, or remove certain harms from, the community/society [Ibn Taymiyyah (n.d.) vol. 11, pp. 344 – 345; Opwis 2005; Vasalou, 2016; Mangini, 2018; Hoover, 2019]. This is referred to as conventional morality in modern studies of morality.

And by implication, this epistemic moral element (that is, sociocultural factor) is subject to the regulation of the other elements – which are also modulated by sociocultural factors in certain ways. Therefore, a particular sociocultural basis of a moral value would be necessarily revisited and reformulated in the face of new facts based on either a more correct view of revelation, rationality, or new experience.

4.0. Conclusion

The foregoing provides an overview of Ibn Taymiyyah's extrapolations on the epistemic manifestation of the *fitrah* as an internal resource for moral knowledge. The paper, through an inductive qualitative method of a textual analysis approach, articulated Ibn Taymiyyah's moral perspectives. It focuses on how he ingeniously deploys the concept of *fitrah* as a "kernel of thought" to formulate an epistemological paradigm that has moral implications. The study shows that his view revolves around a position that certain basic moral knowledge is primordially and innately part of man's natural disposition (*fitrah*). It discusses several ways through which the concept could be employed to explain the nature, sources, and basis of moral knowledge.

Beyond this, it is also shown that despite his extensive postulations around the epistemic nature of the *fitrah* as an internal moral resource, Ibn Taymiyyah strongly maintains that *fitrah* is to be deployed integratively with other moral epistemic resources (revelation, reason, human experience, and sociocultural realities). For him, this approach would provide a holistic perspective on the knowledge of morality and serve as an integrated moral epistemological paradigm in Islamic thought. With focus on *fitrah*, the paper, therefore, indicates that Ibn Taymiyyah's approach to moral knowledge is a paradigmatic shift in the history of Muslim moral thought.

Based on the foregoing, it is suggested that a more integrated approach to moral epistemology be attempted to further explore how the five epistemic resources (identified and discussed in this paper) interplay to capture the knowledge of morality in Islamic ethics. Apart from this, Islamic moral psychology based on Ibn Taymiyyah's view is another aspect of his moral thought that could be explored.

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