

Virtues and Character Development in Islamic Ethics and Positive Psychology

Fatimah Abdullah

Department of Usuluddin and Comparative Religion
Kulliyyah of Islamic Revealed Knowledge and Human Sciences
International Islamic University Malaysia
Malaysia

Abstract

The development of good character in Islam is mostly a process of dealing with one's emotions. It helps to build and support positive or good emotions or virtues and to fight and suppress negative emotions. Character building would therefore, have much to do with patience and perseverance in controlling emotions leading to negative aspects and reinforcement of emotions leading to positive ethics. Manipulation of emotions lead to good ethics would also guide one to have a spiritually and psychologically healthy life. This research aims at investigating the relationship between new approach in psychology namely, positive psychology which emphasised the positive aspects of emotions and the age old values of virtue ethics. This conceptual study concludes that the integration of virtue ethics and some aspects of modern Psychology which are in harmony with the worldview, ethical principles, ethical values and norms of Islam not only can be sources of action guides and but also serve as effective methods of management of emotions that steer to self-development and interpersonal relationship skills.

Key Words: positive ethics, positive psychology, virtue ethics, self-development and interpersonal relationship skills

Introduction

Character building is one of the fundamental missions of the Prophet (pbuh) and should be incorporated in a holistic concept of progress and sustainable development of community within the worldview of Islam which unifies and balances the material with the spiritual dimension producing well being in this life and well being in after life.

Islam emphasizes on the centrality of the role of morality in Islam, in both interpersonal and intra-personal relationship. To carry out moral and religious duties it requires the purification of the human soul through the application of the ethic of tawhid and the Prophetic teachings and learning. Self-purification or refinement of the human soul is not possible without proper observation and treatment and changing of human character or behavior. So much so to positively studying human emotions can be of help in Islamic ethical training; this is of value because the development of good character in Islam is mostly a process of dealing with one's emotions. Even, the West is beginning to appreciate the role of spirituality or virtues in achieving mental and physical health and happiness (Gary W. Hart, 2006). Psychology as a discipline that studies behavior and cognitive processes is most related to character building. After more than a century of pure non-godly secularism, psychology is now beginning to appreciate the role of spirituality and good character in the light of human development and progress (www.interscience.wiley.com.).

This is most apparent in the new areas of emotional intelligence, positive psychology and mindfulness as practiced in cognitive behavior therapy. Though they do not give such studies ethical terms, they are actually talking the same language of religious ethics. They are talking about virtues which are embedded in the value system such as mercy, empathy, patience, delaying of gratification, forgiveness, and acceptance and similar issues that Islamic or virtue ethics is propounding.

Positive Psychology

Modern psychology that has for long limited itself to the negative and pathological aspects of man is very recently rediscovering the importance of being positive in approach. Badri in his book, *The dilemma of Muslim psychologists* (1978) criticizes the materialistic, soulless and selfish amoral image of man advocated by Freud and supported by Watson's scientism and its animalistic conception of man has wasted a century of building a psychology that does not deny the spiritual dimension in man and that helps in developing good ethical behaviour and avoiding evil characteristics.

My research in this field finds that the pioneer of psycho-spirituality in the West is the famous psychiatrist Scott Peck. He was the first to speak out for spiritual growth. His first book was *The road less travelled: a new psychology of love, traditional values and spiritual growth* made history in this respect (1990). After this astounding success, Peck followed the road less travelled with two other best sellers, *People of the lie: the hope for healing human evil* and *The Denial of the soul*. In *People of the lie*, (1997) Scott Peck bitterly criticizes Western psychology and psychiatry for trying to mimic exact sciences by professing a neutral stand towards human evil and in *denial of the soul* he openly attacks psychiatry and medicine for repressing any mention of the human soul and spirituality in their work. As a the pioneer of the recent movement of positive psychology he courageously spoke about the epidemic of anxiety and depression in our modern world as a result of failure to build moral aspects of personality and to avoid responsibility and refuse to delay gratification (Badri, 1978). Scott Peck (1990) further explains the nature of these character disorders and at the same time provides a solution to it, saying that:

We cannot solve life's problem except by solving them. This statement may seem idiotically tautological or self-evident, yet it is seemingly beyond the comprehension of much of the human race. This is because we accept responsibility for a problem before we can solve it. We cannot solve a problem by saying 'It's not my problem. We cannot solve a problem by hoping that someone else will solve it for us. I can solve a problem only when I say 'This is *my* problem and it's up to me to solve it'. But many, so many, seek to avoid the pain of their problems by saying to themselves: 'This problem was caused me by other people, or by social circumstances beyond my control, and therefore it is up to other people or society to solve this problem for me. It is not really my personal problem'.

As one reads through his books, one cannot avoid seeing the resemblance of his work to that of our early *Sufi* scholars. In fact he admits to quoting from Islamic and other religious sources but, as a master of eloquence, he puts his words in a style that is acceptable to the modern mind of our young generations. It is here that the author feels that such literature can help to support character building and give our Islamic or virtue ethics a modern dynamic approach.

The success of Peck in his criticism of Western psychology motivated other scholars to follow his approach. A few years after that Daniel Coleman came up with his great book, *Emotional intelligence* (1995). In many ways, this book is related the positive values promoted for many years by the Muslim scholars of spiritual or virtue ethics. The accumulation of similar literature culminated in the new approach of what is known as "positive psychology".

Rooted in Maslow's and Rogers' Humanistic Psychology in the 1950's and 60's, the positive psychology has significantly developed over the past decade, emphasizing optimal human functioning.

A major turning point was in 1998, when the head of the American Psychological Association at the time, Dr. Martin Seligman, announced the establishment of the new field of research in psychology, which he called Positive Psychology (see, (Seligman, M. E. P., Steen, T. A., Park, N., & Peterson, C., July-August, 2005: 410).

Positive psychology then emerges as the scientific study of the strengths and virtues that enable individuals and communities to thrive. The Positive Psychology Centre promotes research, training, education, and the dissemination of Positive Psychology. This field is founded on the belief that people want to lead meaningful and fulfilling lives, to cultivate what is best within themselves, and to enhance their experiences of love, work, and play. Positive psychology is about health versus sickness, or human strengths versus weaknesses. They also indicated that several features of fundamental ideology of Positive psychology can be derived from its research and theory. The ideology to a certain extent is close to the surface. Such an example, virtues are meaningful and valuable due to the fact that they make the virtuous people feel good, put them into flow, and provide meaning in life. It gives the illusion of achieving the higher things, when in reality it is some aspect of contemporary culture of self fulfilment (see, Seligman, M. E. P., and Csikszentmihalyi, Mihaly, 2000:5 and Woolfolk, R.L., & Wasserman, R.H., 2005: 25, 1).

Positive Psychology and Positive Emotions

Positive emotions, positive individual traits, and positive institutions are the domains of concern of Positive Psychology. Understanding positive emotions entails the study of contentment with the past, happiness in the present, and hope for the future. Understanding positive individual traits consists of the study of the strengths and virtues which rooted in the value system, such as the capacity for love and work, courage, compassion, resilience, creativity, curiosity, integrity, self-knowledge, moderation, self-control, and wisdom. Understanding positive institutions entails the study of the strengths that foster better communities, such as justice, responsibility, civility, parenting, nurturance, work ethic, leadership, teamwork, purpose, and tolerance (Seligman, M. E. P., Steen, T. A., Park, N., & Peterson, C., 2005: 60, 410–421).

The broaden-and-build theory is a new theoretical perspective on positive emotions and situates this new perspective within the emerging field of positive psychology. The broaden-and-build theory posits that experiences of positive emotions broaden people's momentary thought-action repertoires, which in turn serves to build their enduring personal resources, ranging from physical and intellectual resources to social and psychological resources. Preliminary empirical evidence supporting the broaden-and-build theory is reviewed, and open empirical questions that remain to be tested are identified. The theory and findings suggest that the capacity to experience positive emotions may be a fundamental human strength central to the study of human flourishing (Barbara L. Fredrickson, 2004:1368-1374).

The broaden-and-build theory underlines the ways in which positive emotions as essential elements of optimal functioning, and therefore positive emotions are important to the science of well-being. Both the theory and the research analysis, suggests that positive emotions: (i) broaden people's attention and thinking; (ii) undo lingering negative emotional arousal; (iii) fuel psychological resilience; (iv) build consequential personal resources; (v) trigger upward spirals towards greater well-being in the future; and (vi) seed human flourishing. The theory also carries an important prescriptive message. People should cultivate positive emotions in their own lives and in the lives of those around them, not just because doing so makes them feel good in the moment, but also because doing so transforms people for the better and sets them on paths toward flourishing and healthy longevity. When positive emotions are in short supply, people get stuck. They lose their degrees of behavioural freedom and become painfully predictable. But when positive emotions are in ample supply, people take off. They become generative, creative, resilient, ripe with possibility and beautifully complex.

The broaden-and-build theory conveys how positive emotions move people forward and lift them to the higher ground of optimal well-being (Barbara L. Fredrickson, 2004:1375).

Virtue Ethics and Character Development

The term *khuluq* appears in several places in the Qur’anic, such as in the verse “And You (Muhammad) are on an exalted standard of character” (the Qur’an 68:4 and 26:137). Muslim scholars such as Miskawayh (d. 1030 al-Ghazali (d.1111), Fakhruddin al-Razi (d. 1209), al-Tusi (d. 1274), al-Dawwani (d. 1502), and others defined *Khuluq* (*akhlaq*) or character as the state of the soul that determines human actions. It is neither the soul nor the action. Such character could be acquired through training and practice while the soul is part of human’s nature. In addition, to differentiate between the words, character and action, character is the internal and hidden state of the soul, while action is its outward manifestation. Character or *akhlaq* is the inward cause while action is its outward consequences (see, Miskawayh, 1958).

Citing from Miskawayh (1958), Muhamad Nasir Omar (2003) defines Ethics or *ilm al-akhlaq* as the science of the human soul which defines the characteristics and qualities of the soul as well as the methods of how to control and moderate them. Islamic ethics on the whole deals with the study of the human’s soul or man’s inward dimension, man’s outward dimension, his characters, actions and responsibilities, promoting virtues, protecting from vices, and purification of man’s soul, and the concept of happiness and misery.

Zaroug, Ahmad Hasan, in his article “Ethics from an Islamic perspective: basic issues”, *The American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences*, discusses that there are two approaches to ethics in dealing with human character namely, virtue ethics and action ethics. In virtue or spiritual ethics, consideration is given to the moral agent, his character and dispositions instead of his actions (Zaroug, 1998:53). Virtue ethics include ethics as a way of life. In fact virtue ethics deal with purifying the soul to develop and improve human character. This self-introspective approach is the core of virtue ethics. It is known as the discipline of the soul for it deals with self-knowledge and the inner dimension of human being by moulding human character (Omar, 2003).

There is vast literature on *Tasawwuf* with emphasis on the applicatory aspects of moral training based on the understanding of early Muslim scholars on the psychology of the human soul. This literature would be a useful source of reference to the study of Islamic ethics and its applications. It is interesting to note that this literature discussed a number of areas in psychology, such as the management of emotions, character building, and psycho-spiritual well-being. It can thus be inferred that the proper teaching of Islamic ethics from a modern perspective would require the combination of Islamic ethics from its Classical and Sufi sources with the accepted contributions of modern Psychology. In fact, scholars such as al-Muhasibi (d. 342 H), al- Balkhi (d. 322 H), Miskawayh (d. 1030 A.D.) al-Ghazali (d. 1111 A.D.), Ibn al-Qayyim (d.1350 A.D.) al-Razi (d. 1209 A.D.) and others were Islamic psychologists who did their best to spiritually invigorate their disciples and present the proper methods of refining character. Not only that, but their contributions transcend the benefit to the individual and to the well being of the whole society. Their contributions in this respect, if properly understood, can be a resourceful guide to developing solutions to contemporary moral problems.

Virtue Ethics and Positive Psychology in Positive Emotions

Virtue ethics deal with the concept of human character (*khuluq* plural *akhlaq*), which refers to the state of the human soul. Character is the mental and moral qualities distinctive in an individual and if a person behaves appropriately, it shows that he possesses good character and vice-versa. Refinement of character relies on the ability to control self. Achieving self-control requires spiritual maturity and discipline (*tazkiyat* and *riyadhah*) which teaches the faithful to delay gratification. A spiritually and psychologically mature person can control himself in order to delay immediate gratification.

This is done as a postponement, so that the person may ascend to a higher level of spiritual, intellectual or even physical gratification (the Qur'an, 94:5-6). Attaining this level requires knowledge of the self, this knowledge is bestowed by Allah and realization of the self ultimately directs one to the realization of Allah. Miskawayh, al-Ghazali and many others perceived the necessary relationship between knowledge of the self and formation of noble character. The Prophet said: "whoever knows his own self, knows Allah". To put our emotion under control requires a kind of knowledge of how to control the rival power of the inner-self (Omar, 2003)

The control of the rival power of the inner-self generates personal strength. It is a set of noble character traits. Personal strength generates solid and clear principles of life toward facing our very challenging environment. A person with personal strength is able to choose the responses or the reactions that best suit the principles of their life. On the other hand the concept of self control and personal strength promoted by positive psychology is devoid from any religious principle (Augustine, 2009).

Positive psychology speaks about the power of self control that produces ability to manage emotions thus handling feelings in a proper way. It also refers to mood management, which is comprised of methods in managing feelings so that they are relevant to the current situation. In this manner, a person's anger is under control, adapting oneself to change, and taking responsibility for personal actions. Similarly, al-Ghazali stressed that control of self or emotions is the basis of character building. Al-Ghazali has explained how to redirect negative emotions such as, aggression and lust and passion into positive emotions. If lust (*shahwah*) is properly controlled and expressed in moderation, qualities such as chastity, contentment, tranquillity, fearful obedience (of Allah) cheerfulness and modesty emerge. If aggression (*ghadab*) is controlled, qualities, such as, courage, generosity, fortitude, endurance and forgiveness appear. If both lust and aggression are subordinated to the angelic nature, qualities such as, knowledge, wisdom, faith, and certainty develop (see Umaruddin, 1982, Yasien, 1996 and Abul Quasem, 1983).

Stressing on the body-soul relationship, al-Balkhi in his book *Masalih al-Abdan wa al-Anfus*, (1984) warned that the human soul could be healthy or unhealthy in the same way that one's body can be healthy or unhealthy. When the soul is healthy, all its faculties will be tranquil without any psychological symptoms such as anger, panic, depression and other similar forms of sickness. Without the control of the rival power of the inner self, al-Balkhi stressed that negative thought or faulty thinking would lead to emotional pathological habits of anxiety, anger and sadness and is the main reason behind the psychic disorders of the soul. He suggested that those psychological symptoms are simply learned habits that can directly be unlearned and treated by conditioning (see Badri, 2002)

This is further supported by a research in positive psychology was conducted to explore Positive Automatic Thought functioning as stress buffers and mood enhancers. The research was done to test whether Positive Automatic Thought and the Positive Automatic Thought with Negative Events interaction predicted unique variance in future depression and happiness. The study administered to 152 undergraduates volunteers twice, with six weeks between testing. The result showed that Positive Automatic Thought predict future happiness. Thus, it has an impact on immediate well-being and future well-being as well. However, the overall Positive Automatic Thought with Stressful Events interaction did not predict either depression or happiness (Jr. Owen Richard Lightsey, 1994:331).

There is evident that positive schemata may be linked to psychological health and to absence of depression. Beck's early writings suggested that positive schemata or attitudes "form the basis for a healthy personality adjustment". When the self-enhancing attitudes such as "I am capable" are activated, the person regards himself more favourably (Oaron T. Beck, 1980). Activated negative schemata are theorized to exacerbate the effects of stress and thereby to foster depression. Likewise, activated positive or self-enhancing schemata may be theorized to buffer the effects of stress and thus, to confer resistance to depression (see, Jr. Owen Richard Lightsey, 1994: 325).

There were studies conducted whether a grateful person is also a happier person. They manipulated the expression of gratitude among psychology undergraduates. They found that the groups that expressed gratitude showed increased well-being on several outcome measures, the most robust effect being on mood. More specifically, those individuals who recorded daily list of things to be grateful for were more likely to have helped someone with a personal problem or offered someone with emotional support than those people who recorded daily list of personal hassles (Emmons, R.A. & Mc Cullough M. E., 2003: 377).

Besides, there was a spiritual connection as people who attended religious services on a regular basis, engaged in religious activities, were more likely to be grateful. These experimental results supported by several researches that the counting of blessing is positively related to similar measures of subjective well-being, pro-social behavior, and spirituality (Emmons, R.A. & Mc Cullough M. E., 2003: 377).

Several studies have in Positive Psychology remarked that forgiveness only comes into effect when the unforgiveable has happened. Thus, there is also a sense which hope only comes into its own when all grounds for optimism have vanished. The normal basis for making optimistic predictions about the future is that the past has gone well, and there is no reason that it would not continue to do so. There are many situations where there is no ground for optimism such as suffering from painful terminal illness. However, it might be possible to maintain an attitude of hope (Watt. F., Dutton. K., & Gulliford. L., 2006: 277).

Similarly, Ibn al-Qayyim discussed extensively on the role of inner thought in relation to human action and observable behaviour. He argued that the role of the inner faculty is not to agree with the destructive thoughts of the negative emotion but always work for the transformation of it into a positive state (Badri, 2000). This is self-awareness which is the cornerstone of Emotional and spiritual Intelligence. It involves observing oneself and recognizing feelings as they arise; seeing the links between thought, feelings and reactions; seeing the consequences of alternative choices; recognizing one's strength and weaknesses; and seeing oneself in a positive but realistic light (Goleman,1995). In addition they also gain the ability to remain cognizant of feelings as they occur. Those who with greater certainty about their feelings are better pilots of their lives and can cope with others (Goleman,1998).

Positive psychology stresses on positive attitude and hope for better future. It reveals that those who have experience continuous positive moods and feelings generate higher levels of satisfaction and well being in comparison to individuals who experience moods and such feelings as disappointment, depression and anger. Thus, people with emotional stability and clarified personality have the ability to adapt with the situation and develop a more enduring coping style. James Averill in his work on 'Rules of Hope' suggested four rules: first, distinction between hope and optimism, where one can hope for things that one does not expect. Second, hope is influenced by moral values where one can only hope for what is morally good. Third, people only hope for things that are only important for them. Fourth, hoping for something drives people to working on it to bring it about (Averill, J. R, et. al., 1990)

There is also kind of hope that occurs in religious contexts. It is supported by faith and how it can best be formulated in psychological terms. Hope reflects the belief that one can find pathways to desired goals and become motivated to use those pathways. Hope is the product of cognitive processes namely pathway thinking and agency thinking. Hence, hopeful people have goals to which they aspire, and believe in their ability to generate pathways towards them, follow them through successfully (Watt. F., Dutton. K., & Gulliford. L., 2006: 277).

In the same manner virtue ethics suggest that people should use their emotions intelligently to guide their thinking and behaviour. With this ability people are more likely to deal with shortcomings (*musibah*) in the best possible way. Therefore, it actually brings calm, courage, confidence and optimism in one's self (the Qur'an, 2; 153).

Similarly, those with emotional and spiritual wisdom are sure that they are not being burdened with more than they can bear (the Qur'an, 94:1-2). This helps them develop a sense of optimism and hope and not to lose balance and give into despair.

Virtue ethics contend that balanced personality resulting from self-purification enables the person to motivate oneself to channel emotions in the service of a goal, delaying gratification, and stifling impulses. It includes achievement drive, initiative, commitment and perseverance (*al-Shams* 91; 9-10).

In the same manner Positive psychology discusses about positive virtues that enable anyone to excel and achieve an outstanding performance in any field or area he may be involved in. Modern research in Psychology reveals that people who acquire such skills tend to be more highly productive and effective in whatever field they undertake. However, in western secular humanism which is the foundation of modern psychology the correlation between the concept of self-purification and the concept of after-life is not known.

Virtue ethics stress that the qualities of emotional balance as a source of developing intra-personal and interpersonal skills for building good character and for developing excellent human relations at the societal level. Human relation requires attributes of mercy, empathy and compassion which enable Muslims to strengthen the brotherhood and solidarity among them. Modern studies show that when our hearts are filled with mercy we are able to manage with the emotions in others and thus improve our social competencies. This domain is very significant for the development of an effective leadership and interpersonal relationships (Goleman,1995).

Virtue ethics emphasize the attributes of love and mercy as backbone of interpersonal relationship. In marital relationship for instance, mercy reinforces *mawaddah* which signifies love (*al-Rum* 30:72). It is not referred to as physical love but to as an active, emotive love by involving affectionate care and attention to the others. It grows from our love of other people in the life with the involvement of personal faithfulness, emotional support, good counsel and a general regard for the interests of others. When love is mixed with mercy, the product is one of the noblest psycho-spiritual emotions. It generates warm feelings of sympathy and empathy. Mercy is tied to compassion and closely linked with the act of forgiveness and pardon. Islamic tradition defines mercy as the intent to bring good to others and caused them benefit.

Similarly, Positive psychology perceives forgiveness as not merely pardoning, excusing or condoning while forgetting is an essential and sufficient condition for forgiveness. There are two psychological works in forgiveness which are; Attribution Theory and empathy. According to Attribution Theory, causality of an event gives clear explanation of motives. At some cases, it might involve the attribution change from internal to external factors. It provides a dual foundation to build forgiveness to be more impersonal and appraisal of the offending behaviour. Meanwhile, empathy which is the basis of the second major therapeutic approach has five stages in relation to forgiveness; 1) recall the hurt, 2) empathize with the one who hurt you, 3) altruistic gift, 4) commitment to forgive, 5) holding onto forgiveness (Worthington, E. L., 1998).

Like positive psychology, virtue ethics suggest that sustaining a relationship requires the awareness of our own emotions and emotions of others, for, with this kind of awareness, people are able to be flexible and communicate effectively with each other (*Al-Imran*, 3; 133-134, 159). In modern psychology this is known as 'empathy', which is essentially being sensitive to other's emotions and concerns besides, respecting the differences in how people feel about things. It also refers to and encompasses understanding others, and assisting others in their personal development. This domain is connected with altruistic behaviour, like trying to understand others and helping solve their problems. It includes being a good listener, being assertive rather than angry or passive, managing conflict constructively, and learning the art of co-operation.

These characteristics are the core of a relationship and help people communicate comprehensively. Studies show us that those who excel in these skills tend to perform well at anything that relies on interacting smoothly with others because they are the social star or role model (Goleman, 1995).

The significant impact of positive emotions on human behavior and well-being is explicitly illustrated in the Hadith. This information or data of knowledge can provide us the explanation for further comprehension of the meaning and value of the Hadith of the Prophet (p.b.u.h) which he is reported to have 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. (Hadith narrated by Bukhari, Vol. 1, Hadith No. 47).

The heart as stated in this Hadith is deemed to be 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. 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 lumped and the personality turns towards a regressive course of ruination and self-destruction (Amber Haque, and Yasien. M. Ed. 2009).

The *Sirah* of the Prophet (p.b.u.h) and his companions has documented the details of all walks of life of the Prophet (p.b.u.h) which are full of aspects of virtue ethics serves as the corner-stone of Islamic morality. Guided by the Qur'an and the *Sunnah*, virtue ethics as a discipline primarily discusses the development of good character which is mostly a process of dealing with one's emotions and emotions of others. This paves the way to psycho-spiritual management which concentrates on character building, self-purification, self-control, discipline (*tazkiyat* and *riyadhah*), spiritual maturity and spiritual commitment.

Conclusion

Though, Spiritual ethics and Modern psychology belong to two different belief systems and worldviews, but, there are universal values and positive aspects in the latter which provide useful concept and have implications for character building. The integration of spiritual ethics and some aspects of modern Psychology which are in harmony with the worldview, ethical principles, ethical values and norms of Islam not only can be sources of action guides and but also serve as effective methods management of emotions that steer to self-development and interpersonal relationship skills in the scheme of personality or character building. Virtue ethics perceive human moral and ethical values that are universally accepted and those morals and values that have been initiated by Islam by harnessing them to service of right cause and higher purpose, i.e., for the sake of Allah Most Gracious. Whereas positive psychology has promoted the classification of character strengths and virtues and its objective was to attain meaning of life and authentic happiness in the framework of human development and progress. But what are the basis, nature and scope of them are not clearly spelled out.

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