

THE CAPABILITIES EMBEDDED INTO THE HUMAN NATURE/*FITRA*

Prof. Dr. Şaban Ali Düzgün

www.sabanaliduzgun.com

duzgun@ankara.edu.tr

1. *Fitra*: Linguistic and Semantic Definitions

Fitra is the nominal form of the Arabic verb *fa-ta-ra* which connotes ‘dividing into two parts’, ‘create’, and ‘invent.’ And its nominal form means ‘creature’, ‘having some tendencies and capabilities.’ Many terms have been used to replace *fitra*: ‘*dunamis*’ (Aristotle's term), ‘ability’, ‘potency’, ‘capability’, ‘tendency’, ‘potentiality’, ‘proclivity’, ‘capacity’, and so forth. In a very general sense, they mean disposition, or otherwise something close by. To avoid confusion, however, we will stick to the term *fitra* to mean ‘disposition’ and ‘human nature’. *Fitra* is a particular type of character which makes someone likely to behave or react in a certain way. Temperament and inclination are also used to replace it.

Fitra is defined as to sign the basic features and neutral state of all creatures they have inborn or by nature which have not yet been affected by physical environment.¹ Construing *fitra* as the positive tendencies inscribed into the human disposition, Ibn ‘Abdilbar gives soundness, steadfastness and purposefulness as the equivalent of it. The reason for this equivalence is the correspondence between the terms *fitra* and *hanîf*.² Because *hanîf* means to protect one’s natural disposition (*salâma*) and lead a life in accordance with this natural state (*istiqâma*).

Râgib al-Isfahânî defines *fitra* as an epistemic capability encoded to human nature, the first and foremost ability of which is to know God. In order to support this contention he refers to the Qur’an, Surah Zuhruf, verse 87:

“And if you ask who created them, they would say: Allah.”³

¹ Ibn ‘Abdilbar, *et-Temhîd*, Titvân, 1987, XVIII, 57.

² Ibn ‘Abdilbar, *op.cit.*, pp. 70-71.

³ Râgib al-Isfahânî, *Mufredât*, “fitrat” article.

In his opinion this verse justifies that humans have the idea of ‘God’ before they are imparted anything else.

Qurtubî defines *fitra* as a tendency towards truth and the feeling of adopting the truth necessarily or immediately.⁴ Consistent with this definition *fitra* does not imply any determining factor in human life such as belief (*îmân*) or denial (*kufur*); true path (*hidâya*) or perversion (*dalâla*), it is just an inclination and proclivity.

Abû Hanîfa associates *fitra* with the Qur’anic term *mîsâq*⁵ (God’s perennial covenant with human kind) and interprets as follows:

*“He brought forth the offspring of Adam, from his loins in the as particles, and gave them intelligence. Then He addressed them and commanded them to believe and forbade them from disbelief. Then they submitted to His Godhood, which affirms their belief in Him. Hence, they are born (on the fitra) in this state (in which they were initially exposed to the environment of belief) therefore they are conditioned to believe. Whosoever disbelieves thereafter is therefore changing and altering their original prior state –of belief-, and whosoever believes and affirms has conformed and remained steadfast.”*⁶

Taqiyyuddîn as-Subqî defines *fitra* as common sense that enables man to surrender himself to true religion and Subqî informs that mostly Muslim scholars have the same opinion.⁷

Some Muslim philosophers’ definition of *nafs* (soul) also evokes *fitra*, as we follow from Ottoman scholar Hâdimî: “*Nafs* (soul) is free from knowledge at the outset of creation, but has the capability of perceiving the (sensible)...”⁸

⁴ Qurtubî, *el-Câmi’ li ahkâm al-Qur’ân*, (edition: Abû İshâq İbrâhîm) Cairo, 1966-67, XIV, 29.

⁵ The *mîsâq* verse which has quite extensive reference framework from all Islamic scholarships such as Philosophy, Kalam and Mysticism reads as follows: ““And when your Lord took from the children of Adam –from their loins- their descendants and made them testify of themselves, (saying to them), “Am I not your Lord?” They said, “Yes, we have testified.” (This is so –lest you should say on the day of Resurrection, “Indeed, we were of this unaware.” (7/A7râf, 172)

⁶ Abu Hanîfa, *Al-Fiqh al-Akbar*, (edition: Mustafa Öz, within *İmam Azam’ın Beş Eseri*), 4. Publ., İstanbul: MÜİFV Publications., 2008, 72.

⁷ Taqiyyuddîn as-Subqî, *Kullu mawlûdin yûledu ‘ala’l-fitratî*, (edition, M.S.Ebu Ammihi) Tanta, 1990, 16.

⁸ Hâdimî, *Berika*, (Trans.: B. Çetiner, H. Ege, S. Oğuz) Karaman Publ., İstanbul, 1989, vol.:1, 71.

Muslim scholars generally refer to the Qur'an, Chapter Rum (Romans), verse 30 in order to set up their conception of *fitra*. The verse reads:

*“So set thy face to the service of religion as one devoted to God. And follow the nature made by Allah — the nature in which He has created mankind. There is no altering the creation of Allah. That is the right religion. But most men know not.”*⁹

Fa-ta-ra in this verse is mostly taken as the equivalent to Arabic *ja-ba-la* (to set a character). To create is to encode a character so as to build the nature of a thing, be it human or something else. Following from this synonymousness Mâturîdî interprets *fitra* as the ability of knowing God, *ma'rifatAllah*. To him *fa-ta-ra* as a verb means an epistemic encoding. Including the knowledge of God, everything human kind needs in his/her life is contained there:

*“FitratAllah is the state of consciousness and ma'rifatAllah (knowing God), through which the child knows the lordship and uniqueness of God. The analogy of this consciousness is a baby's instinct to suckle her mother's chest. The prophet's hadith about fitra is totally assigned to this instinction. Another analogy to understand the fitra is that skies and earth praise God (tasbîh).”*¹⁰

According to this analysis, Human experience does not create *fitra*; on the contrary a life compatible with the *fitra* gives life its very characteristics. The fact that Maturidi and Ghazali defined *fitra* as encoded character means that the codes are given but what creates norms for life is learnt through human experience. Ghazali gives a clear definition of *fitra* in his *al-Munqiz min ad-dalâl* as follows:

*“Know that human quintessence is free in terms of fitra; there is no any knowledge included there regarding the outer world.”*¹¹

⁹ 30/Rûm, 30: فَأَقِمْ وَجْهَكَ لِلدِّينِ حَنِيفًا فِطْرَةَ اللَّهِ الَّتِي فَطَرَ النَّاسَ عَلَيْهَا لَا تَبْدِيلَ لِخَلْقِ اللَّهِ ذَلِكَ الدِّينُ الْقَدِيمُ وَلَكِنَّ أَكْثَرَ النَّاسِ لَا يَعْلَمُونَ

¹⁰ Mâturîdî, *Te'vilât al-Qur'ân*, XI, s. 185-186.

¹¹ *Munqiz*, 41.3-4. For a comparison between al-Ghazali's conception of *fitra* and those of Ibn Sinâ and Fârâbî see Frank Griffel, “Al-Ghazali's Use of “Original Human Disposition” (*Fitra*) and Its Background in the Teachings of al-Fârâbî and Ibn Sina”, *The Muslim World*, 102, 2012. And also see bkz. Farid Jabre, *Essai sur le lexique de Ghazali* (Beirut: Librairie Orientale, 1985), 222–224; Hermann Landolt, “Ghazali and ‘Religionswissenschaft’ Some Notes on the Mishkât al-Anwâr,” *Asiatische Studien. Zeitschrift der Schweizer Gesellschaft für Asienkunde* (Bern) 45, 1991.

Reasoning, heart and similar epistemic capabilities are also the product of *fitra*. As if everything is encoded or engraved there and then a cause forces it to come into being. Ghazalî continues:

“*It seems that all theoretical knowledge is inscribed in our fitra we have inborn. But a reason is needed to cause it to happen.*”¹²

This interpretation of al-Ghazali reminds us the Qur’anic verse which says when human kind was born as *he knows nothing* about *experimental* world (şay’). The verse reads:

“*And Allah brought you forth from your mothers’ wombs, whilst you did not know anything. And He gave you ears and eyes and hearts, for you to be grateful.*”¹³

The Prophet Muhammad’s saying that “Every child is born with a *fitra* (and keeps it) until he enters into a cultural setting”¹⁴ or “Every child is born with a *fitra* until his parent make him Jew, Christian or Zoroastrian”¹⁵ attributes an affirmative status to *fitra*. So when left as it is the *fitra* can find its true way by nature. Only a misleading does diverge it from its normal direction.¹⁶ Only in this case does the *fitra* loses its en route, its core hanîf characteristic. As we remember the theological novels by Ibn Toufail’s *Hayy b. Yaqaza* and Ibn Nafis’ *ar-Risâla al-Kâmilîyya* have the presupposition that if a baby grows up in an isolated island he would discover by his inborn nature/*fitra* what is necessary for life including religious and ethical truths.

2. The Dichotomous Structure of Man and His Authority over His Nature

Qur’an depicts the inconsistent nature of human *fitra* and cautions against its deviating power:

¹² Op.cit.

¹³ 16/Nahl, 78. وَاللَّهُ أَخْرَجَكُمْ مِنْ بُطُونِ أُمَّهَاتِكُمْ لَا تَعْلَمُونَ شَيْئًا وَجَعَلَ لَكُمُ السَّمْعَ وَالْأَبْصَارَ وَالْأَفْئِدَةَ لَعَلَّكُمْ تَشْكُرُونَ

¹⁴ “كل مولود يولد على الفطرة حتى يعرب عنه لسانه” Ahmad b. Hanbal, *Müsned*, (Edition, Shuayb al-Arnaut), vol: 23, 113.

¹⁵ Ebû Dâvud, *Sunna*, 4716.

¹⁶ For a good analysis on the relation between *fitra* and predetermination (*qadar*) see the article studying the issue in Ibn Taymiyya and Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya: Livnat Holtzman, “Human Choice, Divine Guidance and *Fitra* Tradition: The Use of Hadith in Theological Treatises by Ibn Taymiyya and Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya.”

“And by the soul and He who perfected it. Then inspired it the capability of knowing the wrong and right. Indeed he succeeds who purifies it, and fails who corrupts it.”¹⁷

After proclaiming that that human has naturally two tendencies which make him neutral God through revelation just reminds him his eternal nature and invites him to the right direction, while other factors, like instincts or environmental ones, invite him to the other way. As it is put forward by the following verse human nature can be shaped by in one or other way:

“Verily man was created very impatient. Fretful when evil touches him. And niggardly when good reaches him. Not so those devoted to prayer those who remain steadfast to their prayer (who submitted themselves to God), and those in whose wealth is a recognized right for the needy and those who hold to the truth of the Day of Judgment, and those who fear the displeasure of their Lord ...”¹⁸

5

To pray, to pay for the needy, to believe in the hereafter, keeping the promise, not breaching the trust and similar traits are depicted in the Qur’an as the ones blockading impatience, stinginess, greed that trigger man into a negative way. That Adam was given a power to name the things or give them their names in the Holy Scriptures induce us to deduce that human can exercise his authority even over his own existence not just the physical world. As he is the vicegerent on earth, his own nature also under this vicegerency, and he should do his best for his nature’s betterment also.

3. Teleological Structure of *Fitra*: Human *Fitra* And Its Natural Telos

Despite the neutrality of the *fitra*, the Qur’an warns man against his nature by articulating that it is keen to going down (the earthly character) rather than going up (a heavenly character). If he goes down and increases the gap between the divine and human, than he hardly hears the voice coming from the sky. Qur’an speaks about these people as if they are called from a long distance and they hardly hear the voice.¹⁹ And the basic reason for

¹⁷ 94/Shams, 7-10.

¹⁸ 70/Maârij, 19-26.

¹⁹ 41/Fussilat, 44.

not hearing this orienting voice is that they forget their innate nature/*fitra* and God made them forgot their own nature. The verse reads:

*“And be not like those who forgot Allah, so He made them forget themselves. Those are the defiantly disobedient.”*²⁰

A wise life can be gained only by leading a conscious life, remembering core values, sometimes referred in the Qur’an as *umm/ummî*.

When there is a huge gap between the telos/goal encoded into human *fitra* and the life he leads, it is seen an alienation to the very nature of man. And to make an awareness to this cause Qur’an uses the metaphor of abyss:

*“... Inclining towards God (hanîf), and turning away from all that is false, without ascribing divine qualities to aught besides Him: for he who ascribes to divinity to aught but God is like one who is hurtling down from the sky-whereupon the birds carry him off, or the wind blows him away onto a far-off place.”*²¹

6

When the true human nature is degenerated, man lives by three pessimistic situation: He falls from the sky, the birds tear him down and wind blows him where nobody cares him and mentions him again. This is a total abyss into which man is dragged as he is not standing a stable place that is his very nature.

4. **The Ontic and Epistemic Structure of *Fitra* (*Halq* and *Hidâya/Lumière naturelle*)**

God created man with a given nature/*fitra* which includes an epistemic guide also. This is given in the following verse:

*“Our Lord gave everything its ontic (halq) and epistemic (hudâ/hidâyah) structure.”*²²

Fitra as an ontic term represents bodily appropriateness, spiritual tendency and mental capabilities. This tripartite structure of *fitra* has the capacity of orienting its senses, mental and spiritual tendencies.

²⁰ 59/Hashr, 19.

²¹ 22/Hajj, 30.

²² 20/Tâ-Hâ, 50: قَالَ رَبُّنَا الَّذِي أَعْطَى كُلَّ شَيْءٍ خَلْقَهُ ثُمَّ هَدَى

The term *hidâya* (guidance) is byproduct of *fitra* in this regard. In the following verse the term *hidâya* means the internal developmental laws of beings:

*“And God has disposed (qaddara) everything and then guided.”*²³

*The guidance in this verse marks the internal developmental laws of every species.*²⁴

The disposition (*taqdîr*) of human nature is immediately followed by *hidâya* (guidance; *Lumière naturelle*) which makes him different from other creatures that live by only with their disposition. Through this *lumière naturelle* only human has the will and mental processes which instantaneously create language and culture. And through his will and mental processes/reasoning only man can control his instincts.

Another characteristic to be mentioned with regard to the ontic structure of *fitra* is its aesthetic dimension. The following verse signifies it:

*“He who whatever He created He made it best/perfect ...”*²⁵

Besides aesthetic the term *ihsân* in the Qur’anic terminology means intentionality and purposefulness compatible with the aim it was created for.

7

5. The Covenant Structure of *Fitra* and *Hilqa* (Creation) as the Basis of Ascertaining the Truth

The following Qur’anic verse gives some clues about the additional character of *fitra*, which shows that man with his *fitra* is made part of a pact or a covenant with God.

*“And did I not take a covenant (‘ahd or mîsâq) that you should not obey devil and become my servants to me.”*²⁶

Mâturîdî cites three kinds of covenants (*‘ahd*): The first is the covenant of creation, which means that man is created with a *fitra* so as to know and confess God’s existence. The second is the covenant taken through the prophets, which means man will give ear to the prophetic norms. The final one is the covenant of being thankful to God’s bounties, which

²³ 87/A’1a, 3.

²⁴ Allahbukhsh Brohi, “The Qur’an and Its Impact on Human History”, *Islam: Its Meaning and Message*, (ed.) K.Ahmad & S.Azzam, Londra 1975, 84.

²⁵ 32/Secde, 7: *الَّذِي أَحْسَنَ كُلَّ شَيْءٍ خَلَقَهُ*

²⁶ 36/Yâ-Sîn, 16.

means throughout his life man can observe everything as not but the bounty of God that requires being thankful to the Lord.²⁷

The two terms used to denote the compatibility between inborn nature and divine will in Islamic tradition are *al-qasd al-halkî* (creative aim) and *al-qasd al-taklîfî* (propositional aim). The former stands for the nature of man and its oriented goal and the latter stands for the divine propositions and Islamic tradition seek a reconciliation between the two. This was best echoed in Andalusian scholar Shatibî's wordings:

*“The reason why people have been sent a divine guidance (Holy Book) is to save them from following their desires and ambitions and to make them willfully submit to divine propositions as they by their very nature submit to God Himself.”*²⁸

Two other terms are employed in this context. *Al-vahy at-takwîni* (the creative revelation) and the latter is *al-wahy at-taklîfî* (propositional revelation). *Al-wahy* does not contain proposition alone, the creation is also considered a kind of *al-wahy*. And this correlative system is called *dîn* (religion). The term *dîn* has the same root with *dayn* (debt), which means by creating an encoded fitra God entrusted and gave him something valuable. By giving him this valuable thing He made them indebted to Him. Everything that is not present is *ad-din* (*dayn*). And from the same root comes *Madîna*, a place where all debts should be paid.²⁹ As a whole this can be called a covenant between God and man as the verse reads:

6. Value Structure of *Fitra* [*Fitra* Encoded to Value-ception]

All our experiences are value-oriented. Everything we perceive, every voice we hear, according to the affect it creates upon us are valued. So the tree we perceive is not big and long, but magnificent and splendid as well.

The objects of perception are value-loaded. Historical objects carry cultural values; religious ones carry sacred values. Many times the value is not intrinsic to the object but embedded by humans. The value of Black Stone (*al-Hajar al-Aswad*) is not but an

²⁷ *Ta'vîlât*, 12/99.

²⁸ Shatibî, *Al-Muvâfakât*, II, 168.

²⁹ For a subtle analysis of this correlation see; Fethi Benslama, *Psychoanalysis and the Challenge of Islam*, trans. Robert Bononno, University of Minnesota Press, 2009, p. 35.

entrenched value. An ordinary road becomes holy and memorable (Golgotha) when the Jesus Christ took it on his way to the crucifixion.

Some other objects have intrinsic values, which are called sign (*âya*) and the Qur'an mentions them as active objects that activate human mind and heart together. These are named as caller or inviter (*munâdî*). What makes them so active is the intention embedded into them. They are so arranged that it is hardly probable for an eye to turn away from them.

This value-ception or recognizing the value intrinsic to the objects is first and foremost feature of human *fitra*. It is an act of creation and it is not just the outcome of mental processes but emotional as well. A value naturally we attribute to any object deepens our feelings as to the indispensability of the object for us.

7. Metaphysical Structure of *Fitra* [*Fitra* as the Basis of Metaphysical 'Self']

In a Qur'anic verse, the self (*nafs*) is made equivalent to *fitra* and its capacities. In this verse the Qur'an warns those who forget God that God will make them forget themselves:

“And be not like those who are oblivious of God, and whom He therefore causes to be oblivious of themselves ...”³⁰

The verse signifies the *fitra* and its *hanîf* character of human kind. Forgetting the *fitra*'s capabilities such as reasoning, willing, which are the mental processes (logos) of man, and the spiritual ones (nomos) is actually forgetting the *fitra* as a whole. This unawareness or unconsciousness is mentioned in terms of God, which signifies metaphysical dimension of *fitra*. This forgetfulness makes man just the dependent of his senses and instincts. This underestimation of rational and spiritual capabilities of man is a total loss of 'self' and causes him to forget its human nature and fell down to the lowest of the low (*asfal as-sâfilîn*), the animal character.³¹

The loss of *hanîf* character in the Qur'an is likened to the total loss of value and meaning. The verse reads:

³⁰ 59/Hashr, 19.

³¹ 95/Tîn, 5.

“Being true faithful to Allah (hanîf) and never assigning partners to Him: if anyone assigns partners to Allah he is as if he had fallen from heaven and been snatched up by birds or the wind had swooped (like a bird on its prey) and thrown him into a far-distant place.”³²

This parable likens man who loses his connection with the divine is like a man who falls from sky and being picked up in the air by birds of prey. These birds would be the false objects of worship or addictions which cannot hold the man permanently in their grip. A fierce blast of wind comes and snatches him away and throws him into a place far-off from any existential constituent. If he loses his faithful to God, his meaningful existence stop progressing, and nobody mentions him or care for him, which is a total marginalization and forgottenness. Place (*mekân* in the verse) signifying a place where all becomings take place (*kâne—kun, kawn and mēkân*), and meant to show that one who goes astray at the same time loses his sense of space.

8. Free or Emancipatory Structure of *Fitra* [*Fitra* as the Basis of Free Self]

As the meaning of *fa-ta-ra* is to create by cleaving, the human *fitra* always tend to set itself free from the bounds and go back its original/natural state. This intrinsic tendency is a protective shield to keep *fitra*'s *hanîf* position and its unique authenticity against the web invading him from the social-authoritative setting, the basic characteristics of which is to paint all its members with the same brush. Individual seeks to keep its authentic (*hanîf*) form against all compulsory series of authorities. Every free individual through its innate free *fitra* does its best to protect this freedom. Although this instinctive protection of individual seems an egoism, indeed by protecting the individuals it creates a libertarian and free society. Only in a society in which mutual relations are constructed on the basis of conscious mutual assistance can egoism protect both individual and society from annihilation. Thus individualism by reinstating its authentic position (*hanîf*) blockades the society's evolving into an annihilating authority against human personality.

³² 22/Hajj, 31.

Conclusion

The term *fitra* in the Qur'an is a resistance point in human kind against every sort of internal and external enticement. It is first an existential and then an epistemic code according to which one can inspect whether his life settings are deteriorated. In the Qur'an *fitra* is affiliated with God so as to provide it with a permanent protective shield.

God's invitation to become *hanîf*³³ is an invitation to resist all deviations and deadweights inflicted on human *fitra*. In this context *fitra* is maximally great—so perfect and splendid that nothing greater is conceivable than it. It is the criterion according to which other criteria of life should be evaluated and checked. The sum and the substance of the matter is that Qur'an's emphasis on the *fitra* is not but a call to create humane norms that help us to understand and interpret all other sources that create norms for human life.

³³ 30/Rûm, 30.