

Lesson 3: Natural Disposition (Fiṭrah) and Knowing God

One of the ways of knowing God being always given attention by thinkers and scholars and also given importance by the prophets through whom they have guided the people to the true religion and the worship of God is the human being's natural disposition (*fiṭrah*).

Definition of Fiṭrah

Fiṭrah is defined in the Qur'an and traditions as "new and unprecedented creation." The originality of the creation of the universe has two dimensions. One is that God Himself has created the primary components of the universe and brought the universe into existence through their composition, and the other is that God Himself has also conceived of the design of creation without copying it from anything or anybody.

Fiṭrah is a type of intrinsic guidance for the human being in the realm of knowledge and sensory perception. It is identical with instinct (*gharṣah*) in the sense that each of them is a sort of "intrinsic guidance" (*hidṡyat-e takwīnī*). But their difference lies in the fact that *fiṭrah* pertains to rational types of guidance while instinct pertains to non-rational types of guidance. Hence, *fiṭrah* is regarded as one of the salient features of the human being while instinct is one of the characteristics of [lower] animal life.

The Distinctive Features of Fiṭrah

Human *fiṭrah* can be identified with the following salient features:

1. Since it is an integral part of human creation, it is not outside the framework of cause and effect, although external factors have contributed in its growth and development;
2. Man has intuitive knowledge of it but it can also be known through acquisitive knowledge;

3. It is inseparable with rational perception and knowledge; that is, it is crystallized in the realm of rational human life and it is regarded as the criterion for man's humanity;
4. It is the touchstone and standard of human exaltation because it has a sense of sanctity (*taqaddus*);
5. It is general and universal; and
6. It is permanent and inalterable.

Some of the abovementioned features can also be found in instinct, such as the first, second, fifth, and sixth features while two features – the third and the fourth – are exclusive to *fiṭrah*.

Given these salient features, one can also distinguish *fiṭrah* from habit (*ʿadat*), for habit is not innate but rather a product and outcome of external factors. Moreover, it is not universal and permanent. ¹

It must be noted that these salient features can be inferred by analyzing *fiṭrah*, and thus, they are essential and definite. That is, in view of the definition given to *fiṭrah*, negation of the said features is tantamount to contradiction. For example, notwithstanding the assumption that an object is square, the identical size of its sides is denied. Notwithstanding the assumption that a substance is water, its being liquid is denied. In the words of the Muslim philosophers, such predicates (*maʿmūlāt*) ² are called “predicates about the core” (*maʿmūlāt ʿan ʿamamah*) and Emmanuel Kant ³ has called such predicates “analytic propositions.”

Therefore, there is no need to cite proofs and evidence to establish the abovementioned features.

Fiṭrah in the Domain of Knowledge and Sensory Perception

As we have stated, *fiṭrah* is one of the characteristics of rational human life, and human life has two domains of manifestations, viz. knowledge and feeling. In other words, they are perception (*idrāk*) and inclination (*girāyesh*). That is to say that on account of *fiṭrah*, man perceives the truths and tends to incline to them.

Intrinsic (fiṭrī) Knowledge

Intrinsic (*fiṭrī*) knowledge refers to the things which the human reason (*ʿaql*) axiomatically knows and accepts, without need for any learning (*taʿlīm*) and inculcation (*talqīn*) and they are known in logic as “rational axioms” (*badʿhiyyāt-e ʿaqlī*), which, in turn, are divided into two, viz. theoretical rational axioms (*badʿhiyyāt-e ʿaqlī-ye naʿarī*) and practical rational axioms (*badʿhiyyāt-e ʿaqlī ʿamalī*):

1. Theoretical rational axioms, such as the law of non-contradiction, circular argument, the rule that qualities of the same weight are equal, the rule that a whole is bigger than its part, and so forth, and
2. The rule on the goodness of justice and honesty, and the evil of injustice and telling a lie, and the like.

Ibn Sina has defined intrinsic perceptions (*idrākīyat-e fiṭriyya*) with two characteristics. First is that they emanate from human nature and not a product of teaching (*taʿlīm*) and inculcation (*talqīn*), and the other is that they are definite and undeniable:

“*Fiṭrah* means that granted that man is suddenly created mature and intelligent and has so far not heard of any belief or view from anyone and has not been able to interact with anyone, he would entertain an idea in his mind and doubt about it. So, if he was able to doubt it, *fiṭrah* does not testify to it and if he was not able to doubt it, it is the dictate of his *fiṭrah*.”⁴

Instinctive Inclinations

As we have stated earlier, intrinsic inclinations are rational and have a sense of sanctity or sacredness (*qidāsah*). This type of inclinations is called “sublime inclinations” in psychology, in contradistinction to “personal inclinations” such as love of oneself, and “social inclinations” such as tribalism and patriotism.

According to psychologists, “sublime inclinations” have four types:

1. *Search for the truth*. It is also called sense of curiosity and honesty; that is, man intrinsically accepts, searches for the truth and inclines to it.

2. *Love of beauty (aesthetics)*. Man is naturally inclined to goodness and beauty, and his emotions are stimulated in perceiving whatever is beautiful, and thus bringing particular pleasure to himself. Archeological evidence testifies that aesthetic values have been in existence since pre-historic times.

3. *Love of good or moral inclination*. It is one of man’s intrinsic and sublime inclinations; one of the most important points of his distinction to the animals

4. *Religious feeling*. It is an intrinsic inclination to a metaphysical and sublime truth; according to psychologists, it is one of the primary and permanent elements of the human soul; it is as fundamental as the sense of beauty, good and right.⁵

Fiṭrah and Search for God

As stated earlier, the sense of curiosity and truthfulness is one of the intrinsic inclinations of the human being, and because of this intrinsic guidance, he wants to know the secrets and causes of phenomena. Just as this intrinsic inclination prompts him to search for the cause of each of the phenomena, it also stimulates him to search for the cause of the totality of phenomena in the universe regarded as a single unit.⁶

Fiṭrah and Inclination to God

The human being's intrinsic inclination to God can be proved in two ways. One is to study one's psyche and the behavioral and verbal reactions of others and thereby to identify such inclination and the other is to refer to the views and opinions of scholars, particularly the psychologists. We shall first deal with the first way and explain it in two presentations, viz. love for absolute perfection and hope for a superior power in moments of danger.

a. Love for Absolute Perfection

The human being will find out in himself that he loves perfection; nay, he wants perfection in the absolute sense. By referring to the actions and sayings of others, he will also discover the same feeling in others. (It must be noted that we do not talk here about attainment of absolute perfection but rather about love for absolute perfection.)

We hereby state that the existence of such a feeling in the human being is a proof of the reality of absolute perfection, and what is meant by "God" is nothing but Absolute Perfection and Beauty, and Infinity.

The conclusion of these two preliminary points is that man innately loves God, although there might be mistakes in practice by loving what is not really absolutely perfect. For example, an infant's sense of hunger inspires her that there is food or something to eat in the world, but in many instances, she commits a mistake in identifying what can really be eaten but proceeds to putting an insect into her mouth, for example.

The question is, what is the proof that love for the absolute perfection necessitates its being real? Is it not possible that this feeling is incorrect and baseless?

Reply: The reality of love for absolute perfection can be proved in two ways:

The first way is that instinctive and intrinsic inclinations, without any reality in the outside world, are incompatible with the order governing the universe because a study on the existing human and animal instincts (*gharṭiyiz*) shows that they pay attention and are attached to real things, and if ever there is any mistake, it is in identifying the manifestations, and not in the essence of the thing.

The second way is that the realization of matters whose reality pertains to nothing is impossible without the realization of the *muṭṭafun 'ilayh* (noun in the genitive case) and their adjunct (*muta'alliq*).⁷ For example, knowledge (*'ilm*) or awareness necessitates object of knowledge (*ma'lūm*) and to suppose knowledge without its adjunct is something impossible. The will (*irṭdah*), therefore, needs a purpose (*murṭd*) [for itself to function]. Love (*ḥubb*) necessitates an object of love (*maḥbūb*). Affection demands an object of affection, and so on and so forth.

If these stated things potentially (*bi'l-quwwah*) exist, then their adjuncts (*muta'alliqat*) must also exist potentially, and if the stated things actually (*bi'l-fi'l*) exist, then their adjuncts (*muta'alliqat*) must also exist actually. Since our assumption is that inclination to the absolute perfection actually exists, it follows that the Absolute Perfection also actually exists.

b. Hope for a Superior Power in Moments of Danger

In moments of danger and crisis in life when the human being loses hope in all natural means and causes, deep inside him he feels that there is a Power over all physical powers and if It wills, It can rescue him. As such, the hope to live gets stronger in him and he strives harder in order to survive. And this in itself is a testimony to the instinctiveness of theism deep within the human being. Yet, the amusements of material life make him heedless of the existence of that Superior Power under common conditions. In reality, the amusements of life are like dust to the mirror of *fi'rah* and because of which the human being cannot see the face of truth in it. The many crises in life remove all those dust, thereby making clear the mirror of *fi'rah*.

In this regard, 'Adr al-Mu'allih said:

“The existence of God, as stated, is something innate as testified by the fact that when the human being is situated in horrible conditions, he would intrinsically repose his trust in God and turn toward the Cause of causes (*musabbab al-asbab*) and the One who turns difficulties into ease, although he gives no attention to this intrinsic inclination of his.”⁸

'Allamah 'Ab'ab' has also said in this regard:

“No one – believer or unbeliever – has any doubt that in moments of danger when there is no hope for any means and way of rescue, the human being turns his attention toward, and seeks the assistance of, a Superior Power which is above all means and is immune from any defect, negligence, oblivion, and the like. Meanwhile, hope and expectation, just like love, hatred, will, aversion, attraction, and the like are qualities that depend on others and they will not be materialized without the existence of their dependents (*muta'alliq*) in the outside world.

Therefore, the actual hope in one's self for a Powerful Being is a testimony to the actual existence of It. The human *fi'rah* can clearly discern the existence of such a Power although in many cases, because of the amusements [in life] he is so overly heedless of Its outward elements and manifestations. Yet, with the emergence of perils and difficulties in life, this veil of heedlessness will be removed and *fi'rah* will play its role of guidance.”⁹

In numerous verses, the Holy Qur'an has also stated the fact that in times of danger and crisis, the human being seeks refuge in One God. One can point to the following verse:

﴿ فَإِذَا رَكِبُوا فِي الْفُلِّ دَعَوْا اللَّهَ مُخْلِصِينَ لَهُ الدِّينَ فَلَمَّا نَجَّاهُمْ إِلَى الْبَرِّ إِذَا هُمْ يُشْرِكُونَ ﴾

“When they board the ship, they invoke Allah putting exclusive faith in Him, but when He delivers them to land, behold, they ascribe partners [to Him], being ungrateful for what We have given them!”¹⁰

Reply to Two Objections

First Objection:

Hope for a superior power in moments of danger and lose of hope for natural means do not provide a logical proof for the existence of that superior power because it is possible that the cause of this hope is man's love for life and subsistence. Although he knows for a fact that there is no rescuing power, his love for life generates this imagination in him. Someone who is drowning knows that there is no one who can rescue him, yet he still shouts and calls for help.

Reply:

Like love, affection, will, hatred, and the like, sense of hope is a reality adjunct to something else (“added essence”). If it is realized actually, its adjunct must also exist actually. In the case of the drowning person, even granted that there is no human rescuer out there, this call for help shows that there is really a Rescuer. His shout reflects his inner feelings on the existence of a Power that can rescue him if It wills so.

Objection 2:

If search for God and belief in Him are intrinsic human inclinations, how comes not all people believe in, and worship God, and not all those who worship God express interest on issues pertaining to the task of knowing God?

Reply:

The innateness (*fiṣriyyah*) of a human inclination does not necessarily mean that it is uniformly active in all people and in all conditions, yielding the same result. The role of *fiṣrah* is in terms of the order of succession of its practical effect within the appropriate limit, and not in being the total cause. For this reason, external conditions and factors have their contribution in its emergence. This point is not limited to the human being's inclination to God. For instance, love of knowledge is one of the intrinsic inclinations of the human being, but it is actually expressed in different ways under different conditions. Sometimes, it is so extreme that it prevails over all physical instincts and inclinations and there are also times when it is very low. Yet, in any case, knowledge is something lovable and desirable, and the human being accepts it deep inside him.

What Scholars Say

That faith in God stems from man's inner being is acceptable to many scholars and some of them have even regarded the heart as the best locus for knowing God. We have stated earlier that religious feeling is one of the primordial dimensions of the human soul. Here, we shall quote the statements of some scholars:

1. Blaise Pascal (1623–1662), a renowned French [physicist, religious philosopher and] mathematician, has said, “The heart, and not the intellect, bears witness to the existence of God, and faith is attained through this way. The heart has proofs which are inaccessible to the intellect.”^{[11](#)}

2. Nicolas Malebranche (1638–1715), a French philosopher, says:

“Although the human soul is connected to the body, its real and original link is to God. But since the human being becomes sinful, his attention is drawn to the body and his link to the Origin becomes weaker. He must strive hard to strengthen that link...

“The human soul cannot perceive anything except that which is connected and linked to it and since it has no real connection to the body and its link is to God, it can only perceive the existence of God...

“Given this, it becomes clear that the Essence of God needs no proof. His existence is axiomatic and the human knowledge of His Being is essential, and the human soul can directly perceive God without any intermediary.”^{[12](#)}

3. William James (1842–1910), the famous American psychologist, has made an extensive study of religion and faith in God through psychology and written a book entitled *The Varieties of Religious Experience* in this regard. Some parts of the said book have been translated into Persian under the title *Dān wa Rawān (Religion and Psyche)*.^{[13](#)} He says:

“The primordial source of religious concepts emanates from the beliefs of the heart, and then philosophy and intellectual arguments put those concepts in a system or formula. Disposition and the heart come forward and the intellect follows suit, guiding it.”^{[14](#)}

He also says:

“We feel that we have a defect and flaw in our being which is the source of our restlessness, and we also feel that whenever we establish connection with a power superior to us, we can rescue ourselves from this restlessness and inquietude. This is already enough for the human being to resort to a higher truth. He will thus realize that within him there is something beyond these restlessness and inquietude and that he is linked to a higher truth which is not separated from him and which can help him. And when his being of descent and lower position is in a whirlpool and deep waters, it (higher truth) will become his refuge and ark of salvation.”^{[15](#)}

4. Christoph Meiners (1747–1810), a German researcher who has written valuable works of criticism on the general history of religions, is one of the pioneering modern scholars who confirmed that there is no community or nation without religion and that religion has emanated from the human being's innermost self. [16](#)

5. Although Sigmund Freud [17](#) regards religion as a product of human imagination, he has a somehow moderate stance on intrinsic knowledge. For example, he has then said:

“It cannot be denied that some persons feel something from within which cannot be explained well. This subjective assumption is a perpetual feeling which is reflected in the great mystics as well as in Indian religious thinking. It is possible that it constitutes the source or essence of religious feelings which are the manifestations of various religions.”

He has doubt on this subject and acknowledges that by his psychoanalysis, he has not been able to find any trace of such feelings in himself, but he adds that this fact does not allow him to deny the existence of the said feeling in others. [18](#)

6. Max Muller [19](#) says, “Feelings of infinity give rise to the birth of belief and religion.”

7. Jean–Jacques Rousseau [20](#) said, “Common sense is the best way to prove the existence of God.”

8. Albert Einstein [21](#) said, “My religion consists of inadequate and insignificant veneration of a Superior Spirit.” He also said, “The most beautiful experience is to experience secrets and mysteries – the same experience that has brought religion (religiosity) into existence... the same feeling which is the quintessence of real religiosity.” [22](#)

Fiṣrah and Religion from the Perspective of Revelation

The innateness of religion has been categorically put forth in the Qur'an and traditions. The most explicit verse in this regard is verse 30 of *Sṣrat al-Rḥm* which has become known as the Verse of Human Nature (*ḥyat al- fiṣrah*):

فَأَقِمْ وَجْهَكَ لِلدِّينِ حَنِيفًا فِطْرَةَ اللَّهِ الَّتِي فَطَرَ النَّاسَ عَلَيْهَا لَا تَبْدِيلَ لِخَلْقِ اللَّهِ * ذَلِكَ الدِّينُ الْقَیِّمُ وَلَكِنَّ أَكْثَرَ النَّاسِ لَا يَعْلَمُونَ ﴿٣٠﴾

“So set your heart on the religion as a people of pure faith, the origination of Allah according to which He originated mankind. There is no altering Allah’s creation; that is the upright religion, but most people do not know.” [23](#)

The Holy Prophet (ﷺ) is reported to have said:

كُلُّ مَوْلُودٍ يُولَدُ عَلَى الْفِطْرَةِ.

“Everyone begotten is born in the state of *fiṭrah*.”

According to Imām al-Ḥadiq (‘a), this means that the gnosis (*ma‘rifah*) that God is the Creator of man and the universe is ingrained in every human being.²⁴

Imām ‘Alī (‘a) has regarded “the renewal of the intrinsic covenant between God and mankind” as one of the goals of the prophets’ *bi‘thah* (mission):

لَيْسَتْ أَدْوَهُمْ مِيثَاقَ فِطْرَتِهِ XC

The Imām (‘a) has also said that *al-tawḥīd* which is called “the word of purity” (*kalimat al-ikhhlāṣ*) is rooted in man’s being.²⁵ And there are many traditions (*ahādith*) regarding the intrinsic nature of religion and to quote them is beyond the scope of the discussion.

It is appropriate for us to end this discourse with some couplets from Naṣrī Nayshābūrī:

غیر من در پس این پرده سخنسازی هست

راز در دل نتوان داشت که غمّازی هست

بلبلان! گل ز گلستان به شبستان آرید

که در این کنج قفس زمزمه پردازی هست

تو مپندار که این قصّه به خود میگویم

گوش نزدیک لبم آر که آوازی هست

Review Questions

State the definition of *fiṭrah*.

Write down the salient features of human *fiṭrah*.

Explain the theoretical rational axioms and practical rational axioms.

State what Ibn Sīnā said about the salient features of *fiṭrah*.

Write down the types of sublime inclinations according to the psychologists.

Explain briefly the first way of the human being's inclination to God.

Write down Ḥadr al-Muta'allih's proof of the intrinsic nature of inclination to God.

State 'Allamah al-Ḥabīb's proof on the intrinsic nature of inclination to God.

Write down the objection to the intrinsic nature of theism and the reply to it.

Explain the intrinsic nature of religion in the Qur'an and traditions (*ad-dīn*).

1. See Murtaḥḥ Muḥahhar, *Fiṭrah*, pp. 32–34, 69–73.

2. Maḥmūd: the logical predicate, i.e. the term (or terms) in a proposition which predicates something about the subject (mawḍūʿ), e.g. the term “mortal” in the proposition: “Man is mortal.” [Trans.]

3. Immanuel Kant (1724–1804): the German philosopher regarded by many as the most influential thinker of modern times. Describing in the *Metaphysics of Ethics* (1797) his ethical system which is anchored in a notion that reason is the final authority for morality, actions of any sort, Kant believed, must be undertaken from a sense of duty dictated by reason, and no action performed for expediency or solely in obedience to law or custom can be regarded as moral. [Trans.]

4. Ibn Sīnā, *Al-Najāt*, p. 62.

5. Ḥiss-e Madhhabī Yā Bu'd-e Chahṛum-e Rabb-e Insānī (Religious Feeling or the Fourth Dimension of the Human Soul), pp. 16–32.

6. In this regard, refer to the first lesson.

7. The assumption is that it is an “added essence” (*dhāt al-iḥṭāfah*). That is, its being pertaining to nothing is embedded in its essence. In this case, the assumption of its being real without the existence of its adjunct (*muta'alliq*) is tantamount to contradiction.

Adjunct (*muta'alliq*): an adverb or a phrase that adds meaning to the verb in a sentence or part of a sentence. [Trans.]

8. Ḥadr al-Mu'allih, *Al-Mabda' wa 'l-Ma'ād*, p. 16.

9. Sayyid Muḥammad Ḥusayn al-Ḥabībī, *Al-Maḥẓan fī Tafsīr al-Qur'ān*, vol. 12, p. 272, exegesis of *Sūrat al-Naḥl*, verse 53.

10. *Sūrat al-'Ankabūt* 29:65.

11. Sayr-e Fikmat dar Urp (The Trend of Wisdom in Europe), vol. 2, p. 18; *Falsafeh wa Imān-e Mas'ūm* (Philosophy and Christian Faith), p. 54.

12. Sayr-e Fikmat dar Furūp, vol. 2, pp. 22–23.

13. Six out of 20 chapters of the book have been translated into Persian. See William James, *Dīn wa Raw'īn* (Religion and Psyche), trans. Mahdī Qā'inī (Tehran: Intishārāt wa Ḥamāzesh-e Inqilābī Islāmī, 1372 AHS). [Trans.]

14. *Dīn wa Raw'īn*, trans. Mahdī Qā'inī, p. 57.

15. *Ibid.*, p. 122.

16. *Dīn-pazhīshī* (Religious Studies), vol. 1, trans. Bah' al-Dīn Khurramshāhī, p. 122.

17. Sigmund Freud (1856–1940): the founder of psychoanalysis who founded the International Psychoanalytical Association in 1910 and whose view on psychoanalysis was reached through his study of the effect of hypnosis on hysteria. Among his numerous and well-known works are *The Interpretations of Dreams*, *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life*, *Introductory*

Lectures in Psychoanalysis, Humor and Its Relation to the Unconscious, The Ego and the Id, The Problem of Anxiety, and The Future of an Illusion. [Trans.]

[18.](#) Kāḍak az Naḥār-e Wirāṭhāt wa Tabiyat (The Child in Terms of Nature and Nurture), vol. 1, p. 308, quoting Andāsheh-e Freud (Freudian Thoughts), p. 89.

[19.](#) Friedrich Max Müller (1823–1900), more regularly known as Max Müller: a German philologist and Orientalist, and one of the founders of the western academic field of Indian studies and the discipline of comparative religion. [Trans.]

[20.](#) Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–78): Swiss-born French writer, philosopher, and political theorist. Greatly influenced by Denis Diderot, Rousseau first gained fame from his essay Discourse on the Sciences and the Arts (1750), an attack on the arts as a source for the increased wealth of the rich and an instrument of propaganda. In his Discourse on Inequality (1755), he professed the equality and goodness of ‘natural man’ and asserted that the golden age of humanity occurred before the formation of society, which bred competition and the corrupting influences of property, commerce, science, and agriculture. The Social Contract (1762), influential during the French Revolution, claimed that when human beings formed a social contract to live in society, they delegated authority to a government; however, they retained sovereignty and the power to withdraw that authority when necessary. [Trans.]

[21.](#) Albert Einstein (1879–1955): German, Swiss and American mathematician and atomic physicist who stimulated a revolution in physics by discovering the theory of general relativity and for which he received the Nobel Prize in physics in 1921 and is often regarded as the father of modern physics. [Trans.]

[22.](#) Kāḍak az Naḥār-e Wirāṭhāt wa Tabiyat, vol. 1, p. 69, quoting Irṭibāt-e Insān wa Jahān (The Relationship of Man and the World), vol. 3, p. 175.

[23.](#) Sūrat al-Rūm 30:30. [Trans.]

[24.](#) Tafsīr Burhān, vol. 3, p. 261.

[25.](#) Nahj al-Balāghah, Sermon 110.

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