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Mohammad Attaran

Department of Curriculum and Instructional Technology, University of Malaya, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

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Moral Education, Habituation, and Divine Assistance in View of Ghazali

MOHAMMAD ATTARAN
Department of Curriculum and Instructional Technology, University of Malaya, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

This article describes the concept of moral education and its foundation according to Abu Hamid Ghazali as one of the most influential scholars in the world of Islam. Ghazali equates moral education with habituation. Causality holds a prominent place in philosophical foundations of his theory of moral education. Even though Ghazali recommends educators to employ habituation to cultivate virtues, he eventually maintains that there is no certain causal relation between moral education and habituation, and one must hope for God’s assistance and relay on His Grace.

Abu Hamid Al-Ghazali (1058–1111 AD) is one of the most well known and celebrated Islamic scholars of the 12th century. The depth and breadth of his knowledge and the influence of his thought are incomparable to any other Muslim scholar. Ghazali has been given the titles of Hujjat-ul Islam (Proof of Islam) and Zainuddin (Beauty of the Faith). By any standard, Ghazali is a towering intellectual figure of the Muslim world. Some have exaggerated to the level of saying that if any prophets for Islam existed after Muhammad, the prophet would be no other than Ghazali (Sharif, 1966).

Ghazali has a wide range of works in several branches of religious knowledge including jurisprudence, theology, mysticism, philosophy, and his eventual interest, mysticism. Through religious experience, he attempted to revive religious knowledge in the Islamic world, publishing his tremendously influential work *Ihya Ulum-ud-Din* (Revival of Religious Knowledge). According to Griffel (2009), in the 12th century Ghazali was the most influential writer on religious and philosophical subjects. Every thinker of this period had to address his works, and in most cases that happened quite...
extensively. A prominent portion of Ghazali’s body of works is dedicated to morality. In contrast to non-religious moral education, which is concerned with human’s prosperity in this world, the primary concern of Ghazali’s life and ideas is prosperity in the afterlife (Abul Quasem, 1975). In this article, the concept of moral education and its foundation will be described with regard to Ghazali’s views.

MORAL EDUCATION

Moral education is a dominant part of Ghazali’s writings, intertwined with the development of knowledge and understanding. He believes that fostering children’s moral development is the main goal of education (Attaran, 2001). According to Ghazali, moral education eradicates vice from disciples and replaces them with virtues (Ghazali, 1982). According to Ghazali, moral education is not based just on understanding and knowledge. As Sokolow (2013) mentions, Ghazali considers moral education as a process that is actualized through “habituation” and maintains that nobody could become benevolent, modest, patient etc. without habituation (Ghazali, 1985). Moral education is equated with habituation particularly during childhood, a very important period with regard to the construction of good habits. Ghazali takes as a given that “whatever is important, its seed should be spread during the childhood” (Ghazali, 1985, vol. 2, p. 31).

Ghazali asserts that if childhood is not paid attention to and the good morality that is needed is not fostered throughout child, then the development of bad habits is inevitable (Ghazali, 1985). On this issue, Ghazali, like many other Muslim scholars, has been influenced by Aristotle in likening moral education to habituation. The Greek philosopher considers moral education as a process of creation of virtues. According to Aristotle, virtues are of two kinds: intellectual virtue and ethical virtue—the former is built by teaching, the latter is gained by habituation. In Aristotle’s view, since the aim of moral education is doing, so it is actualized by doing. Thus, one becomes just by doing what is temperate and becomes brave by doing brave deeds (Aristotle, 1984). Habituation in the Aristotelian ethics has three main characteristics: (i) practicing the virtues by doing actions that develop moral excellences; (ii) doing those actions regularly and constantly; (iii) doing so under supervision and authorization of a noble educator (Steutel & Spiecker, 2004).

Ghazali’s statements may appear as mere reiteration of Aristotle’s doctrine of moral education at first sight, and may not suggest any originality. However, a deeper look may help us to detect his creativity and unique turn. Opinions about Ghazali’s ethical system are very different. Some authors such as Watt (1962) think that much of ethical works of Ghazali such as Mizan al-Amal (The Criterion of Action), closely follow an obscure early 11th-century philosopher called Raghib al-Isfahani. While some Ash’arites support this opinion, referring to the presence of some fundamental philosophical notions of
al-Isfahani in Ghazali’s works such as the Golden Mean and division of the
human faculties, as Sharif (1966) mentions, Ghazali in The Treatise on Mystical
Knowledge (al-Risalah al-Laduniyyah) considers ethics as a religious knowl-
edge. Ghazali is not regarded as a philosopher in the Islamic world. He has
been acclaimed as Hujjat al-Islam (Proof of Islam), and Zain-al-Din (Beauty
of the Faith), and Mojaddid (The Revivalist of Religion). Ghazali advocates the
supremacy of religion over human knowledge and reason and gives a
superior status to revelation as a source of knowledge (Halstead, 2004). As
Donaldson (1953) suggests, what Ghazali offers in Ihya is the popular moral
philosophy of Islam with regard to his explanation of the ethics of mysticism.

Ghazali believes that one can only criticize an idea substantially only if
he becomes immersed in it in the same way as an exponent of the idea.
Hence, to show the defects of philosophers, Ghazali initially writes the
Maqasid al Falasifa (Intentions of Philosophers), in which he endeavors to
explain philosophical views just as a philosopher would, and he carries
out this task quite competently. This work may explain why Ghazali is con-
sidered by Thomas Aquinas and Roger Bacon as the true representative of
Arab Aristotelians along with Avicenna and Averroes (Sharif, 1963). Follow-
ing Intentions of Philosophers, Ghazali wrote a heavily influential critique,
“Incoherence of Philosophers.”

Despite acquaintance with Aristotle and his thoughts, Ghazali is disaf-
fected to them and presents a new system, or at least a synthesized theory,
of moral education that is influenced by religion and mysticism. In Ghazali’s
theory of moral education, at least three main different philosophical founda-
tions underpin several new notions in moral education (Abul Quasem, 1975).
These foundations are his views about causality, freedom of will, and the
objectivity of moral obligations. The following article addresses causality
and its implications for moral education. Ghazali’s conceptualization of caus-
ality is one of the most important differences that distinguishes Ghazali’s sys-
tem of moral education from Aristotle’s.

CAUSALITY AND MORAL EDUCATION

The most ancient of philosophical questions is perhaps that of cause and
effect. The concept of cause and effect has appeared in every philosophical
system, particularly the Aristotelian school of philosophy. According to
Aristotle, causality is a type of relation between two entities one which we call
one cause and the other, effect. Cause gives being to the effect: If there is no
cause, there will be no effect. The cause is the essence of the effect. In
Aristotle’s view, everything—except God—is an effect, and every effect needs
a cause. Thus, every phenomenon needs a cause. What is happening must
have arisen through intervention of something, which is called the cause.
There is nothing without a cause. A certain cause produces only certain
effect(s), and a particular effect proceeds from a particular cause. This necessary relation enables one to predict the future. Based on this hypothesis, one expects to remove thirst by drinking. By causality, ones can give order to one’s thoughts and make the universe orderly and knowable. In other words, to obtain knowledge we search for chains of causes and effect (Aristotle, 1984).

However, Ghazali does not agree with Aristotle in all aspects and challenges his conceptualization of causality. This challenge should not be surprising, since for him the criterion to judge, and the established standard, is religion. The Scripture and narrations attributed to the prophet are certain and unquestionable. A short probe in scripture will clarify the rejection of causation by Ghazali.

In the seminal *Incoherence of Philosophers* (1963), Ghazali directs his arguments against philosophers in 20 aspects. He rejects some philosophical notions as infidelity and dismisses them using both Islamic doctrines and philosophical method. He insists with regard to three issues, philosophers are in a complete contradiction with Islamic creeds: eternity of the world, denial of God’s knowledge of the particulars, and denial of bodily resurrection. In his opinion, the rest of philosophical teachings are misleading, confusing and with regard to religion, some of them are heretical or sometimes indifferent. Even though Ghazali intends to put an end to philosophy, as Watt (1962) states, he certainly encouraged Sunnite theologians to become more philosophy-minded. Ghazali refutes the Aristotelian theory of causality in the seventeenth discussion, and rejects a necessary connection of cause and effect.

Some verses in the Koran can be interpreted in a manner that supports Ghazali’s claims about causality. These verses describe a universe in which God—or as Muslims call Him, Allah—is the cause of every happening. According to these verses, the universe, with all its system, is Allah’s act and Allah’s work. The creation is begun and maintained by Him. Just as Allah has no partner in creation, neither has He any partner in agency. All powers and all strength are actually His. He can do everything in the universe and nothing rises or falls without His permission. As read in Koran:

> When He wills a thing He has only to say: be, and it is. (36:82)
> Do they associate those with Him who cannot create anything (7:191)
> Is there one among those you associate with Him who can do the least of these things?
> Too high and exalted is He for what they associate with Him; (30:40)

In these verses, two points are apparent. First, Allah has an absolute power, nothing is more omnipotent than him, and his dominance includes everything. Second, these verses imply that there is no cause except Him. Allah is the real cause of whatever occurs in the universe. Wolfson (1976) holds that
the early Muslims accepted the exclusive power of Allah with respect to these verses and rejected the intervention of other causes in the world.

Ghazali adopts his view of Allah in accordance with these Koranic verses. However, what he offers can be called a maximal version of Godli-ness. His God is the Arbitrator, and there is no intellectual and moral justification for His behavior. He can deceive, break His promise, burn the good people by fire and bring to heaven those who are evil. He can punish whom-ever he wants and reward another for the same deed. Whatever he does is lawful. There is no place to ask him any question because whatever he acts is His sovereign and not that of others.

Ghazali trembles before this God because of fear. He is very disturbed about his dark future, and God’s carelessness hasn’t left any calmness and peace of mind for him. He quotes a narration in *Ihya* (n.d.) that illustrates his attitude. By it, he intends to make clear the kind of fear of learned men before God.

And the understanding of the fear or him respect of his attributes is not possible except by parable. Were it not for the permission of the law, the man of insight would not have dared to mention it. So it has come down in the tradition: surely Allah revealed to David: fear me as you fear the harmful lion, and this is the parable which lets you understand what is the effect of the meaning, even if it does not acquainted with the secret of predestination, and he does not disclose that except to his people. And the concussion to be drawn is that the lion is to be feared not because of the sin which you have previously committed against it. But because of its characteristics, its violence and rapaciousness and arrogance and awfulness and because it does what it will and does not care. For, if it killed you, its heart would be untouched by compunction, and it would feel no pain at killing you. And, if it left you alone, it would not leave you out of pity for you or to preserve your breath. No, you are in its sight too insignificant for it to notice, whether dead or alive. More, the killing of a thousand like you and the killing of a gnat are on one plane with it, since that does not impugn the animal kingdom or the power rapaciousness attributed to it. And the parable has its highest application to Allah. Who-ever knows him, knows with inward sight which is more powerful and trustworthy and transparent that outward sight. He speaks the truth in his saying: these to the garden and I do not care: and these to the fire and I do not care. (Ghazali, n.d., vol. 4, p. 36–35)

Indeed Ghazali’s assertion about causality stems from his inclination to show the absolute power of Allah and it might be supposed to enforce this doctrine. He shows his real intention, which compels him to reject any necessary relation between cause and effect. Ghazali maintains that this relation leads to dispute about the miracles that the Koran ascribes to prophets. Consequently, it is inevitable to interpret them in a philosophical manner,
which Ghazali dismisses, and it is in contrast with what Ghazali wants to outline by the power of Allah. A God who is free to do anything in any way he desires in an absolute meaning and there is no border for his providence and omnipotence.

Philosophers, as Ghazali says, discuss two kinds of miracles. In their opinion some miracles such as conversion of Moses’ staff into a serpent and the raising of the dead are unacceptable and should be treated metaphorically. In another regard, justifiable miracles are divided into three groups: the first type is due to the imaginative faculty of prophets when it is controlled and reinforced. The second is related to the intellectual faculty that enables the prophet to transfer from one idea to other in a fast fashion. The third miracle, in a philosophical view, springs from the prophet’s soul, which enables him to bring about changes in his surroundings, such as raining and blowing winds, for example (Ghazali, 1963).

Contrary to the doctrine of philosophers and its implication, Ghazali (1963) claims that a relation of cause and effect is not a necessary one and the affirmation of neither implies that of the other. For Ghazali, the fusion of the fire and cotton is possible, without any flame, because in his view there is no logically necessary relation between cause and effect. Thus, the relation between quenching of thirst and drinking, satiety and eating, light and sunshine and sunrise is denied in a similar way. What one can observe is the succession of events and nothing more, but that does not indicate logical connection. On the whole, this necessity is a habit of mind whose knowledge is created by Allah (Ghazali, 1963). In other words, Ghazali reiterates the Ash’ari doctrine that causal actions reside exclusively with Allah and all happenings are the creation of Allah, either directly or through the mediation of angels.

Ghazali then presents his argument: Fire has the disposition to burn and it is not a voluntary action, so it cannot lose its nature after connection with something that is receptive to burning. Ghazali considers Allah as the agent of burning and not fire; because fire is inanimate and consequently has no causal agency. He reiterates that there is no proof that certifies the agency of fire, except the observation of burning during the connection of fire and cotton, and this is not sufficient to deprive the existence of any other factor (Ghazali, 1963). To enforce this claim, he gives an example of a blind man who becomes suddenly clear-sighted after waking up. At first he may think his regaining of vision is due to opening his eyes; but that is not true and it is just an association of two happenings (Ghazali, 1963).

In contrast, philosophers argue against Ghazali that his view allows impossible things to be done by Allah; such as giving life to the non-living. Answering this objection, Ghazali concedes that Allah does not act in the reign of impossibilities, and presents a definition of impossibilities. He asserts:

The impossible is the affirmation of a thing while denying it or the affirmation of the more specific while denying one... in the same way
we understand by willing the seeking of something which is known. So if seeking and not knowing is posited, there is no willing, since what we understand by willing has been denude. (Ghazali, 1963)

However, he maintains that the kind of miracle that philosophers believe to be impossible is not of the same type. According to Ghazali:

For Allah to move the hand of corpse and set him up with the appearance of a living person who sits and writes, so that by the motion of his hand an organized book is produced, is not impossible in itself as long as we refer the outcome to the will of a voluntary being. It seems implausible only because the continual of the familiar is against it. (Ghazali, 1963)

Aristotle, Kant, and many western philosophers believed that man achieves morality with his own endeavor, but Ghazali’s ideal man is a person who views everything as possible in this world and instead of relying upon material tools and resorting to reason and emphasizing rational independence, awaits a miraculous event. This is best embodied in his thoughts on tawakkul (confidence and reliance in Allah). For Ghazali, the truth of tawakkul is confidence in Allah (and not the intermediaries). He views three stages for those who practice tawakkul: first, confiding in Allah as between client and advocate; second, confiding in Allah as a kid confides in mother; and third, leaving oneself at the hands of Allah, like a dead body is at the hands of a corpse-washer (Ghazali, 1985).

CONCLUSION

As explicated previously, Allah occupies an important position in moral education according to Ghazali’s viewpoint. Ghazali’s doctrines of causality have profound implications for moral education. Even though every Muslim educator is prescribed to pay attention to foster good habits in childhood, the educator should not forget that everything relies on the will of Allah. Thus, although a Muslim educator should try to educate students, it is not certain that those attempt will produce educational ideals. This failure may not be due to the influence of other factors such as friends, media, family, and school for example. We can provide the best educational settings, yet without the Divine will it could not fulfill the ideal outcome.

Ghazali’s concept of causality underpins his theory of moral education. There is no necessary connection between habitual moral actions and their implications, and one can have no certain hope that people could be trained through habituation; consequently, there should be a sufficient factor to guarantee moral education. This argument is tied with the belief in Allah, who determines the destiny of everything.
When this idea is compared with its Western equivalents, a huge gap one can be observed. For example, Kant whom one may claim that occupies a similar position to that of Ghazali in the western world, holds a contradictory view. Kant as an Enlightenment philosopher tends to reduce religion to morality (Michelson, 1989). His philosophical vision is based on human autonomy and there is no place in his philosophy for a heteronomous grace or divine act to play. In contrast, in Ghazali’s view, everything, including moral education, is dependent on Divine power. Human agency is downsized in moral education, while God’s role is elevated. In the contrary, Kant writes:

We ourselves must do in order to accomplish something, whereas to await a work of grace means exactly the opposite, namely, that the good (the morally good) is not our deed but the deed of another being, and that we therefore can achieve it only by doing nothing, which contradicts itself. (Kant, 2009)

In Ghazali’s view, Allah and religion are the tenets of morality, and moral virtue is equated with loyalty and love for the Divine will. According to Kant, however, one does not need to view religion as the source of moral laws or a motive to adhere to it (Kant, 1959). Self-autonomy stems from nothing but human reason. If morality is defined in the framework of concordance with the Divine will, even if God is seen as the one who rewards or punishes beyond the law of morality, the rule of morality has turned into a rule of prudence and will then foster motives for acting in accordance with morality only for the hope of reward or fear of punishment (Kant, 1959). Thus, in practicing moral obligations, according to Kant, one should primarily regard it as an obligation, not a divine order (Kant, 1959).

The key ethical teaching of moral education in view of Ghazali can be worded as such:

Satan misleads a man without guidance. In searching a true guide, man should appeal to his savior like a blind man drowning in the sea. Following the guide must be so complete that neither internally nor externally, he makes no objection to the guide’s act of guidance and asks not for a cause, even if it appears irrational. The wisdom of all teachings of the savior becomes clear when we reach his status. (Ghazal, n.d., vol. 5, p. 321)

In sum, according to Ghazali the pillars of moral education are: habituation, causality, and divine assistance. Without the last pillar, moral education is impossible.

REFERENCES


**Mohammad Attaran** received his doctorate in curriculum studies from University of Tarbiat Modarres, Tehran, Iran in 2000. Since 2011, he has been serving as a visiting lecturer at the University of Malaya, Malaysia. His research interests are curriculum studies, research methodology in education, and narrative inquiry.