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## Relativism and Intolerance, Two Sides of a Coin: Qur’anic Exposition

Che Amnah Bahari\*

### Abstract

Numerous catastrophic consequences have been attributed to ethical relativism, ranging from increased crime rates due to intolerance to the decline of social values as the result of not understanding tolerance. Although doubting some reports on the about such empirical claims, this paper contends that relativism has dissident explanatory outcome. Concentrating on the library research and finding ,the focus of the outcome is its disloyalty to ethical understanding which in turn undermines (i) reason and (ii) the idea of moral progress. In clarifying point (i), an analysis on Qur’Ēnic view of the term *birr* will be referred to the effect that Islamic ethics or *akhlāq* can nurture character of tolerant people who live in harmonious spirit parallel to the needs of society and the environment. In discussing the outcome of point (ii), anti-relativism is differentiated by the concept of western chauvinism and Islam. The paper concludes with the suggestion that ethical relativism’s outcome leads to perdition but deliberation on Islamic principles of ethics hold water.

**Keywords:** Ethical relativism, chauvinism, *akhlāq*, tolerance.

### Introduction

“Different strokes for different folks” are street slang<sup>1</sup> that brings the meaning of every people has their own outlook of life or in other terms – so many countries so many terms which is equivalent to Malay proverb “*lain padang lain belalang*” (different field, different type of locust). Perhaps this is a simple account on relativism. In the milieu of ethics or

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<sup>1</sup> *The Phrase Finder* attributes “different strokes for different folks” to Muhammad Ali (d.1438AH/ 2016CE) the famous Muslim professional boxer, stating that Ali used to repeat the existing street slang and there is no surviving record of the expression in print prior to his use of it. Given Ali’s celebrated and inventive use of language it is likely that he coined the expression himself.

<https://www.phrases.org.uk/meanings/different-strokes-for-different-folks.html>.

Retrieved, 8<sup>th</sup> July 2019.

moral, relativism brings the meaning that what is good or bad, right or wrong, or true or false, can be diversely different for different people.<sup>1</sup> Relativism can be further applied under the category of cultural relativism that specifies cultural activities may be right for some but wrong for others. Truth relativism, another concept, means truth is relative which may be opposed by one religion but acceptable to others. While epistemic relativism reflects that *how you know things* may be different in contexts or cultures.

Today, the deliberation over ethical relativism is not an abstract discussion of interest only to philosophers and to public. The debate has implications for the social sciences, politics, and international relations. What is the impact of ethical relativism will be analyzed in the following discussion upon presenting a brief note on history of ethical relativism, its theory and critic related to tolerance. It is then followed by the Qur'anic proposition on ethics.

Though Islam has a very distinct outlook on ethics or *akhlāq*, in which the reason of Islam is to uphold the sanctity of *akhlāq*,<sup>2</sup> but its universality of ethics and values are meant for all, Muslims and non-Muslims alike. Hence the statement: *la kum dīnukum wa li yadīn*,<sup>3</sup> (to you be your way, and to me mine) might have a little resemblance by face value, with ethical relativism but in terms of philosophy, objective and stance, the Qur'anic message contrast altogether from relativism. Since Islam is a *dīn al-qayyim*<sup>4</sup> (the standard religion) that brings *rahmah lil 'ālamīn*<sup>5</sup> (mercy to all mankind) it is incumbent for one to elucidate it, as in the following.

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<sup>1</sup> Refer to Luke, Steven, *Moral Relativism*, (London: Picador, 2008); K.A. Smith, *Who is afraid of Relativism; Community, Contingency and Creaturehood*, (Michigan: Baker Book, 2014); James Kellenberger, *Moral Relativism, Moral Diversity, and Human Relationships*, (Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania States University Press, 2003)

<sup>2</sup> Refer to *Sūrat al-Baqarah*, 2:151; *Sūrat al-Jumu'ah*, 62:2; Al-Bukhārī, *Al-Adab al-Mufrad*, (London: UK Academic, 2006), Book 14, Ḥadīth 273.

<sup>3</sup> *Sūrat al-Kāfirūn*, 109:6. This verse defines the right attitude to those who reject faith. In matter of religion and truth, Muslims can make no compromise, but it is unnecessary to persecute anyone for his choice of faith or belief.

<sup>4</sup> *Sūrat al-Rūm*, 30:30. The religion includes the whole life of man that includes thoughts and desire of man. It is different from other numerous human systems which not only in conflict with each other but also identifying themselves as distinct "religion" or "sect" (refer to verse 32 of *Sūrat al-Rūm*).

<sup>5</sup> *Sūrat al-Anbiyā'*, 21:107. Here the message of *tawhīd* and its related ethical applications brought forth by Prophet Muḥammad is for the mercy for all mankind, for all race and nation; the principles of ethics in life are universally applied.

### **Ethical Relativism – A Brief Note**

Ethical relativism focusses primarily on non-ultimate standard of ethics. This idea brings the meaning that there is no ultimate standard ethics be it good or bad. Every decision made whether it is right or wrong depends on a person's likings, culture and situation.<sup>1</sup> With this view in mind, it also refers to nonappearance of standard or specific rules of ethics, and certainly no opinion or statement can be believed as absolutely "right or wrong" and "best or worst". In a simple sentence ethical relativism speaks on the belief that ethical verdicts are only true or false from a specific view. If a person were to be at different time and circumstances the similar viewpoint may not be applicable at all.

From historical view, ethical relativism is said to draw from the ancient Chinese Daoist philosopher Zhuangzi (d.286 BC) who forwarded a non-objective view of life that characterized a kind of relativism.<sup>2</sup> Among the ancient Greek philosophers, ethical relativism is derived from the idea of Protagoras (d. 411BC) as represented in Plato's *Theaetetus* mentioning that "man is the measure of all thing" and any idea "... is to me such as it appears to me, and is to you such as it appears to you"<sup>3</sup> However, this view was quite uncommon and moral relativism hardly flourished, as Plato (d. 347 BC) and Aristotle (d. 322 BC) both defended forms of moral absolutism or universalism. It holds that morals are inherent in the laws of the universe, the nature of humanity, the will of God or some other fundamental source.<sup>4</sup>

Then in the early modern era, Baruch Spinoza (d. 1677 CE) revived the ethical relativism claiming that good or evil were not an essential values; nothing positive in things, nor anything in thinking or notion "...because we compared things to one another."<sup>5</sup> The ethical relativism gained momentum with John Hobbes (d. 1679 CE) who argued that ethical principles should be looked upon their cogent purposes in

<sup>1</sup> Velleman, David, *Foundation For Moral Relativism*, (Cambridge: Open Book, 2013) p. 45.

<sup>2</sup> Ziporyn, Brook, *Zhuangzi: The Essential Writings with Selections from Traditional Commentaries* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 2009), p. vii; Chan, Wing-Tsit, *A Source Book In Chinese Philosophy*. (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1963)

<sup>3</sup> Plato, *Theaetetus*, trans. F.M. Cornford, in E. Hamilton and H. Cairns (eds.): *The Collected Dialogues of Plato*. (New York: Bollinger Series, Pantheon Books, 1961), pp. 845–919.

<sup>4</sup> Russel, Bertrand, *History of Western Philosophy*, (New York: Stratford Press, 1945), Book One, Part 2, pp 73-195, cited as Russel, *History*.

<sup>5</sup> Refer to Matthew J. Kisner & Andrew Youpa (eds.), *Essays on Spinoza's Ethical Theory*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

obtaining mutual advantages in social life, rather than being right or wrong.<sup>1</sup> Ethical relativism became sturdy with Friedrich Nietzsche's (d.1900 CE) thought who assessed ethical values based on one's goals and self. He braced himself to claim that "God is dead" or "*Gott ist tot*" in German, which pronounced vividly that there is no longer credible to believe in an objective validation for ethical rights.<sup>2</sup>

Today, the twentieth century's popularity of relativism is said to be indebted to Einstein's (d. 1955) *Theory of Relativity*<sup>3</sup> which are used both as model and as well as a vindication for various relativistic claims.<sup>4</sup> According to Gilbert Harman, in Einstein's *Theory of Relativity* an object's mass is relative to a choice of spatio-temporal framework and "... I am going to argue that moral right and wrong.... are always relative to a choice of moral framework."<sup>5</sup> However, reading Einstein's *Theory of Relativity* reveals that he does not adhere to relativism in ethics or epistemology because, although in his model simultaneity and sameness of place are relative to reference frames, the physical laws expressing such relativity are constant and universal<sup>6</sup> and hence in no sense relative. The question arises, what is the basis for ethical relativism that caught people's interest since the time of Daoist philosopher Zhuangzi, or even earlier in the history of mankind beginning with our great ancestors, Prophet Ādam and Hawā'.

### **Ethical Relativism: (i) Reason Delineated**

Relativism is the philosophy that denies the truth; there is no right or wrong, no moral absolutes. In general, there are four types of relativism, namely metaphysical, epistemological, ethical, and religious. The metaphysical relativism people claims that nothing is absolute in reality while in epistemological, they belief that there are no absolutes in knowledge. As for ethical dimension, this group denies the moral

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<sup>1</sup> Tom Sorrel, "Hobbes without doubts", *History of Philosophy Quarterly*, Vol. 10, No. 2 (Apr 1993), pp.121-135.

<sup>2</sup> Emrys Westacott, "What Does Nietzsche Mean When He Says That God Is Dead?" 2010, Retrieved 9<sup>th</sup> July 2019 <https://www.thoughtco.com/nietzsche-god-is-dead-2670670>

<sup>3</sup> Einstein A. *Relativity: The Special and General Theory*, (New York: H. Holt and Company, 1916).

<sup>4</sup> Chris Gowan, "Moral Relativism", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 2015, Retrieved, 9<sup>th</sup> July 2019. <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/moral-relativism/>.

<sup>5</sup> Harman, G. & J.J. Thomson, *Moral Relativism and Moral Objectivity*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), p. 3.

<sup>6</sup> See Melbourne, J Evan, "The Relativity of Simultaneity: A critical Analysis", *Dialectica*, vol. 16, No. 1 (15. 3. 1962), pp. 61-82.



absolutes and in religious view, the relativists say there is no true religion. In short, the idea of ethical relativism is captured in three points.<sup>1</sup>

What you believe is true for you but not for me; what I believe is true for me but not for you – changeable

Truth is subjective – subjective

Truth is in the eye of the beholder – individual

Point (a) speaks on the emotional aspect of ethical relativism.

The relativists believe that there are no downright truths when it relates to ethical judgments. In fact, the reality of ethical judgments is undeniably relative to the condition of the individual or group. An individual or group may find an action to be ethically right and true and this thinking may not be agreeable with another person or group. In addition, there is no standard rule of ethics to compare. Indeed, point (a) is self-contradictory because it asserts an absolute— what is true for you is not for me. Equally, is it absolutely true that what is not true for you is true for me? Here, it declares things to be absolute, creating the whole things to be in contradiction.

Logically, without a standard frame for reference it is difficult to gage the rightfulness or wrongness of a decision and action in a relative condition. So why choose relativism? Generally, people are desire for happiness. To achieve happiness there are several ethical values and responsibilities to be fulfilled. Since fear of not be able to fulfill the tasks to achieve happiness, it is probably the fear that inability to fulfill would make people unhappy and thus feel guilty.

Looking from another perspective, good ethical values like smile or helping others has good effects on people's feeling.<sup>2</sup> So, also bad behavior has bad effects.<sup>3</sup> Feelings of guilt and unhappiness effect people's mental health so also happiness contributes to high level of self-esteem in people.<sup>4</sup> Strict rulings of ethics bring about guilt and unhappiness and ethical relativism leads to good feelings, self-esteem and happiness, though for a short while. It is interesting to note that feeling of guilt appears due to wrong-doing inflicted on others and often

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<sup>1</sup> See Peter Kreeft, Peter, *A Refutation of Moral Relativism*, (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1999), p. 64, cited as Peter Kreeft; "Relativism", Retrieved 10<sup>th</sup>. July 2019 <https://reasonandmeaning.com/ethical-relativism-in-detail/>

<sup>2</sup> See Daniel Nettle, *Happiness: The Science behind Your Smile*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

<sup>3</sup> Claudia Card, *The Atrocity Paradigm: A Theory of Evil*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

<sup>4</sup> Anthony Robbins *Awaken the giant within*, (New York: Free Press, 1992).

the guilty party will make amend to compensate the damage done. Hence, guilt is important for people to foster harmonious interpersonal relationship, bring about happiness and boost self-esteem. The life example on ethical relativism:

**What does dumping plastic equal?**

Statement a – dumping plastic waste in Malaysia is wrong.

Statement b – dumping plastic waste in Malaysia is right.

Reality – statement a (dumping plastic waste in Malaysia is wrong) is true and statement b (dumping plastic waste in Malaysia is right) is false; both statements cannot be true at the same time.

Ethical relativism – statement a (dumping plastic waste in Malaysia is wrong) is true and statement b (dumping plastic waste in Malaysia is right) is true, whatever you want to believe is true for you.

The above example is a self-contradictory idea and illogical. Likewise, point (b) says that ethic is subjective in terms of thinking and feeling that there is nothing good or bad and nothing makes it so. What is considered ethical in one society may be unethical in another. So, there is no standard ethical ruling. People's action can only be refereed by the society they live in. If they have been brought up in a Malay culture, certainly the Malay cultures will be inherent in them. Often, opinion on Malay is associated with laziness.<sup>1</sup> However, this is untrue for there are many successful Malays in business, education, politics and others.<sup>2</sup> To over generalize a statement from one person to all Malays is indeed unjustified. This means that the person who claimed that Malays are lazy is entrapped in his own thinking, supported by the unscrupulous people around him which limit his ability to see things beyond his own biases. The same applies to ethical relativists,

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<sup>1</sup> Munshi Abdullah (d 1270AH/1854CE) has quoted that Malays are lazy people. See Noriah Taslim, "From Ethnocentrism to Eurocentrism: the position of Abdullah's discourse on the Malays", *Malay Literature*, vol. 20, (No 1, 2007, Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka), pp. 20-33. Retrieved 8<sup>th</sup>. July 2019, Azhar Harun, "The "lazy" Malays – exploring the Malay psyche" <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/lazy-malays-exploring-malay-psyche-azhar-harun/> Retrieved 8<sup>th</sup>. July 2019, Huzir Sulaiman, "Orang Melayu Tak Malas", 12<sup>th</sup>. January 2019. <https://www.harakahdaily.net/index.php/berita/15-tanah-air/9378-orang-melayu-tak-malas>

<sup>2</sup> Retrieved 8<sup>th</sup>. July 2019, Tang Ruxyn, "9 Successful And Wealthy Malaysians Who Came From Humble Beginnings", 16<sup>th</sup>. August 2017, <https://says.com/my/lifestyle/successful-malaysians-and-their-humble-beginnings>

being imprisoned in their own culture, failed to see beyond the limit of their own biases thus concluded truth is relative to culture and no objective ethical standard exist. Perhaps another example could reinforce the problems in ethical relativism.

In her book,<sup>1</sup> Lillian Quigley recaps the encounter of six blind men, who expressed their opinions once they touched the animal.

The first blind man put out his hand and touched the side of the elephant. "How smooth! An elephant is like a wall." The second blind man put out his hand and touched the trunk of the elephant. "How round! An elephant is like a snake." The third blind man put out his hand and touched the tusk of the elephant. "How sharp! An elephant is like a spear." The fourth blind man put out his hand and touched the leg of the elephant. "How tall! An elephant is like a tree." The fifth blind man reached out his hand and touched the ear of the elephant. "How wide! An elephant is like a fan." The sixth blind man put out his hand and touched the tail of the elephant. "How thin! An elephant is like a rope."<sup>2</sup>

From the fable, the ethical relativist will say that different people have different perceptions of truth. However, the issue here is that the blind men were conditioned by the values of blindness, hence once they touched different parts, the result varied. In context of ethics, the relativists said that ethics is decided by communities, and that when all six of these blind men gather together and discuss, their conclusions reflect not the truth of the elephant, rather, tree, wall or rope. In reality though, this analogy actually proves that the relativists are confused with value opinions by the six blind men and that of the real value of existence. It argues, not for relativism, but for actual standard of ethics.

In point (c) which highlights the individual prerogative; truth is in the eye of the beholder seems to describe that there is an intelligent disagreement around aesthetics. This phrase refers to an opinion as to what deemed to be beautiful; different people see things from different perspectives. It means that beauty is subjective. On the other hand, this statement is a way to silent up people particularly when there is a grave disagreement about what is bad or good or ugly or good in something.

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<sup>1</sup> Lillian Quigley, *The Blind Men and the Elephant*, (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1959).

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

In another context the phrase is used to protect people against snobbishness. For example, if only the phrase “beauty lay in the eye of beholders” is true, then it would apparently be rational to affirm that a rubbish junkyard was an attractive place to go. Generally, nobody would say that and in real life, people do not believe that beauty does lie wholly in the eye of beholder.

Further readings indicate that this attitude of “beauty lay in the eye of beholders” could be categorized under the banner of ethical subjectivism.<sup>1</sup> Ethical Subjectivism is the idea that our moral opinions are based solely on feelings and no objective of right or wrong.<sup>2</sup> If a person says that lesbianism is beautiful, the person is not stating a fact about lesbianism. Instead the person is merely saying the beauty aspect of lesbianism.<sup>3</sup>

The danger of this ethical subjectivism is that it has impact on life. It is not merely an idea about the assessment of lesbianism or homosexuality. It applies to all moral matters. One can search for a different example, it is a fact that the Netanyahu exterminated millions of innocent Palestinians; but according to ethical subjectivism, it is not a fact that what he did was evil. When people call his actions “evil,” they are only saying that people have negative feelings toward him. The same applies to any moral judgment whatever.<sup>4</sup>

In brief, ethical relativism as depicted above shows many illogical explanations to the adherents of this thought. The reason is to denounce the logic of standard ethical rulings in life. To clarify further, Islam says that ethical rulings exist not to curtail but to heighten man’s happiness by providing action guide to be emulated. The term *birr* (righteousness) as mentioned in verse 177 of *Sūrat al-Baqarah* outlined the responsibilities to be fulfilled in order to attain happiness;

*Righteousness is not that you turn your faces toward the east or the west, but [true] righteousness is [in] one who believes in Allah, the Last Day, the angels, the Book, and the prophets and gives wealth, in spite of love for it, to relatives, orphans, the needy, the traveler, those who ask [for help], and for freeing slaves; [and who] establishes prayer and gives zakāh; [those who] fulfill their promise when they promise; and*

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<sup>1</sup> James Rachels, *The Elements of Moral Philosophy*, (New York: McGraw Hill, 2010), p. 32, cited as Rachels, *The Elements of Moral Philosophy*.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, p.33

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

*[those who] are patient in poverty and hardship and during battle. Those are the ones who have been true, and it is those who are the righteous.*

The responsibilities highlighted here are of two folds. First, responsibility to God and the second is to society. The first responsibility, having faith in God, the angels, book and prophets make up the spiritual foundation which has the effects of man's happiness. And man's happiness is further reinforced by performing *salāt* and giving *zakāh*. This happiness is reflected in the form of giving some portion of one's wealth to recipients like the relatives, the orphan, travelers, the needy and others. Fulfilling promises<sup>1</sup> became the greatest duty and it is one of the forms of *sadd al-zarā'ī* (means blocking the permissible acts which lead to an evil) that preventing from guilt. In context of ethical relativism, removing the ethical standard of rulings in life would remove the sense of guilt for a short while. Indeed, guilty feeling is a kind of warning for self-improvement for it is likely to steer man in a corrective direction when it is done in proper manner.<sup>2</sup>

For a Muslim, in context of point (a) - what you believe is true for you but not for me; what I believe is true for me but not for you, he must consider two points. First, what is the issue in discussion; it is principle of religion or it is universal values? If it is a principle of religion, he must hold to religion. But if it is related to daily transaction or mundane affairs like eating, drinking and sleeping, he must adhere to the concept of "eat of what is on earth, lawful and good" (*Sūrat al-Baqarah*, 2:168). This verse implies that humanity is expected to eat, use and act in accordance with what is not only permissible but also good, pure or wholesome. The verse expresses the Almighty commandment using two important words, namely "*ḥalāl* " (lawful) and "*ṭayyib*" (good).

The second point is that a Muslim must take note of the accountability aspect of the deeds done. One of the fundamental

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<sup>1</sup> Fulfilling promises is a means of attaining security (free from guilt) in this world and preventing bloodshed, and of protecting the rights of people, both Muslims and non-Muslims, as Allah says in *Sūrat al-Anfāl*, 8:72 – "but if they seek your help in religion, it is your duty to help them except against a people with whom you have a treaty of mutual alliance, and Allah is the All-Seer of what you do."

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VZp167Ob5no;>  
<https://www.chatelaine.com/health/wellness/guilt-complex-emotion-explained/>  
 Retrieved 14<sup>th</sup>. July 2019.

teachings of Islam is about the Day of Retribution. All men are responsible and answerable on that day for their beliefs and willful actions. The Almighty God says;

*On the Day when every soul will be confronted with all the good it has done and all the evil it has done, it will wish there were a great distance between it and its evil. But Allah cautions you (to remember) Himself. And Allah is full of kindness to those that serve Him (Sūrat Āli 'Imrān, 3:30)*

The above verse shows that Almighty God will hold us accountable for all our doings, and only He can be the true judge of our deeds. For the sake of discussion in the light of ethical relativism, the example is as in the following.

**Life Example:**

Statement a - "Eating pork is *ḥarām* for Muslim"<sup>1</sup>

Statement b - "Daily consumption of pork is acceptable for Muslim"

In reality - statement a - "Eating pork is *ḥarām* for Muslim" is true and

Statement b - "Daily consumption of pork is acceptable for Muslim" is false;

both statements cannot be true at the same time.

However,

In contingency period or being forced – "eating pork is allowable" for life protection (*Hifz al-nafs*) not without willful disobedience, not transgressing due limits, then he is guiltless – is true for Muslim

Since Islam is *rahmah li al-Ālamīn* (the religion of mercy) for the whole mankind, it provides spiritual and physical guidelines for sustainability in life. In specific, Islam outlines the need to preserve religion, life, mind, dignity and wealth.<sup>2</sup> The wisdom behind all this preservation is to sustain people's interest known as *maṣālīḥ al-an'ām*.<sup>3</sup> With this ruling in mind we see that Islam is giving a flexibility for people's interest particularly, in difficult condition where Almighty God says; "...but if one is forced by necessity, not without willful disobedience, not

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<sup>1</sup> *Sūrat al-Baqarah*, 2:173

<sup>2</sup> Al-Ghazzālī, Abū Ḥamīd, *Al-Mustasfā min 'Ilm al-Uṣūl*, (Riyāḍ: Risālah al-Ālamīyyah, 1926), Vol. 1, p.172.

<sup>3</sup> Al-Izz Ibn 'Abd al-Salām, *Qawā'id al-Aḥkām fī Maṣālīḥ al-Anam*, (Bayrūt: Dār al-Nashr, nd), vol.2, p. 221.

transgressing due limits, then he is guiltless....”<sup>1</sup> So it means that sanction of prohibition is lifted due to contingency, provided that other *ḥalāl* sources are exhaustively search for. This is ascertained by Ibn Qayyīm (d. 748 AH/1347 CE) saying;

“The Islamic law is all about wisdom and achieving people’s welfare in this life and the afterlife. It is all about justice, mercy, wisdom, and good. Thus, any ruling that replaces justice with injustice, mercy with its opposite, common good with mischief, or wisdom with nonsense, is a ruling that does not belong to the Islamic law, even if it is claimed to be so according to some interpretation.”<sup>2</sup>

From the statement of Ibn Qayyīm we see the clarity of Islamic law where subjectivity has no place as propounded by ethical relativism cited in point (b) above. Islamic law is not man’s opinion or manmade value but a set of rulings from the Almighty God for the benefit of the whole mankind.

To further explicate point (b) (on the issue that truth is subjective, Muslims do not share this concept. The reason is that knowledge is the foundation of Islam and the worldview projected by it is always paving ways to certainty (*yaqīn*) and not skepticism (*shakk*) nor subjectivity (*dhātīyyah*).<sup>3</sup> Muslims throughout the history will ensure the certainty of things by referring to the original sources; the Qur’ān and the Prophetic Sunnah.<sup>4</sup> With the sources of Islam remain intact and with the reputable methods of approaching the authentic sources, Muslims are able to differentiate between the truth and the false. The truth be substantiated and fortified, and falsehood uncovered, rebutted and condemned. Unlike the Western counterpart, the Muslims in regard to religion will never allow their religion to be besmirched because they are fully responsible to preserve it for all until the day of resurrection.<sup>5</sup> The issue of subjectivity of truth will not arise for the principles of Islam remain intact and Muslims will enliven those principles in their daily life. In context of the elephant and the blind men, mentioned above, Islam looks at the case differently. A blind man who tread alone or follows another blind one without a proper and guided knowledge, in both cases, will face destruction. Hence, to use logic and reason to understand the reality

<sup>1</sup> *Sūrat al-Baqarah*, 2:173

<sup>2</sup> Shams al-Dīn, Ibn al-Qayyīm, *I’lām al-Muwaqī’in*, (Bayrut: Dār Al-Jīl, 1973) vol.1, p. 333.

<sup>3</sup> Ḍiyā’ al-Dīn ‘Abd al-Malik, al-Juwaynī, *Al-Waraqāt fī Uṣūl al-Fiqh*, (Riyāḍ: Dār al-Muslim, 1994), p.12.

<sup>4</sup> Refer to *Sūrat al-Hijr*, 15:9.

<sup>5</sup> *Sūrat Āli ‘Imrān*, 3:110.

of things is insufficient. The divine revelation is necessary.<sup>1</sup> In the fable, all those who touched the elephant were rational human beings like us but what missing was the light of revelation. Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī (d. 672 AH /1273 CE) says the same thing;

“Strive to be weaned through the nutriments of the hearts  
Eats the words of wisdom, for veiled light  
Is not accepted in preference to unveiled light  
When you have accepted the light, O beloved  
When you behold what is veiled without a veil  
Like a star you walk upon the heavens....”<sup>2</sup>

If only all of them have a lamp in their hands, they would all be safe from differing in life. Likewise, if we refute and reject the light of our religion, it can lead people passing their own wrong belief on to their own children and communities. Then we have a whole new set of generation that fail to differentiate between what culture is and what religion is.

As for the point (c) that says truth is in the eye of the beholder, which means that people may have different aesthetic views on things, and it is subjective; for one person might love it but ugly to another. Islam looks at beauty in different manner. In fact, the Almighty God is beautiful (*jamīl*) and He loves beauty (*jamāl*).<sup>3</sup> The term *jamāl* according to Ibn ‘Arabī, (d. 637AH/1240 CE) signifies Divine beauty which refers to the extrinsic attributes of *Raḥmah* (Compassion) and *Raḥīm* (Merciful) that arises from the Divine Presence by virtue of His Name *al-Jamīl*, the Beautiful”<sup>4</sup> While the term *jalāl*, indicates Divine Majesty, the extrinsic attributes of *al-Qahr* (Power) arises from the Divine Presence by virtue of His *al-Wujūd* of which transpires existence. The interpretation given by Ibn ‘Arabī reflects that by His virtues of *al-Jamāl* and *al-Wujūd* ,Almighty God has created all cosmos with all its objects and events to be beautiful. This also means that man is created beautiful as affirmed in *Sūrat al-Tīn*, verse 4; “We have indeed created

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<sup>1</sup> Refer to *Sūrat al-Baqarah*, 2:1-5.

<sup>2</sup> Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī, *Masnavi i Ma’navi*, tr. Edward Henry Whinfield, *The Spiritual Couplets of Maulana Jalal al-Din Muhammad Rumi*, (Iowa: Omphaloskepsis, 2001) pp. 181-182.

<sup>3</sup> Yaḥyā Ibn Sharaf al-Nawāwī, *Riyāḍ al-Ṣāliḥīn*, (Bayrūt: Dār Ibn Kathīr, 2007), Book 1, Ḥadīth 612.

<sup>4</sup> Ibn ‘Arabī, *Al-Futuḥāt al-Makkiyyah*, (Al-Qāhirah: Maṭba‘at al-Manār, 1990), vol. XIII, pp. 221-235.



man in the best of the moulds (*aḥsan taqwīm*).”<sup>1</sup> At the same time man, being beautiful in terms of form, nature, constitution has to preserve the pattern of which God has made him (*fiṭrah allatī faṭar al-nās ‘alayhā*)<sup>2</sup> by submitting to Him and not forsaking His guidance. Once man falls to the temptation of Satan, and starts mishandling and maltreating things, thus wrongs himself he falls lower than the beast.<sup>3</sup>

Further reading reveals beauty in Islam can be seen from two aspects, its inner and outer dimensions. Al-Ghazzālī has beautifully captured the concept of beauty;

“Know, O dear readers, that every which is beautiful is dear to one of the senses. Allah is beautiful and loves beauty. Material beauty can be perceived by the eye. The beauty of divine glory can only be appreciated by the mind. The word beauty is used to describe the attributes of individuals. It is therefore said that man has a beautiful character. The word applies to his qualities, and not to his physical appearance. He is loved for his beautiful attributes as one is loved for his beautiful appearance. If this love is deep, it is called *ishq*. Even more wonderful is when a dead man is loved, not for his appearance, but for the innate qualities he possessed. All worldly beauty is a spark of that permanent beauty of Allah and a spark of His light. So, how can he not love Him who is ever beautiful and the prime source of beauty? He who realizes this, loves Him the most. Nothing can be compared to the beauty of the sun and the moon. Allah is creator of these beautiful things. So how should He be loved?

Love for a created thing is defective. To love a creation is a sign of ignorance. But one who knows Him with knowledge of certainty knows of no beauty except the Creator of beauty. He who knows workmanship as the attribute of a workman does not get to anybody except to him. Everything in the world is the workmanship of Allah and the sign of His creation. So, he realizes Him through His creations and realizes His attributes and His workmanship, just as one realizes the qualities of a writer through his written book. A man of little intellect understands love as physical union or satisfaction of sexual lust.”<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Sūrat al-Tīn*, 95:4.

<sup>2</sup> *Sūrat al-Rūm*, 30:30.

<sup>3</sup> *Sūrat al-Tīn*, 95:5

<sup>4</sup> R. H. Princess Wijdan Ali, *Al-Ghazali and Aesthetics*, October 2001, Retrieved 11<sup>th</sup>. July 2019. [http://naungan\\_nur\\_wahyu.tripod.com/id17.html](http://naungan_nur_wahyu.tripod.com/id17.html)

In short, beauty from Islamic perspectives brings readers to a very high level of intellectual observation of “Allah loves beauty” that gives rise to the beauty of His creations; man bestowed with all the beauty in life, knowledge, power of hearing, seeing, understanding so that he may show his gratefulness by fulfilling all the needful as His vicegerent. Differ from that of ethical relativism on beauty that stresses on shallow sentiment of like and dislike, Islamic beauty focusses of Almighty God Himself as the Source of beauty that permeates in all His creations.

### **Ethical Relativism – The Idea of Moral Progress**

The ethical relativists believe that moral absolutes do not exist, and that morality is culturally sanctioned, meaning the rightness or wrongness of an action is dependent upon the society it is practiced in. They also do not accept the existence of moral progress, thus ignore the instinctive ability of people to critic for the better society. Accepting moral progress would mean ethical relativism null and void. Or for the sake of argument the relativists may say“ ;I do not like milk as a child but today I like it.”

This change is a matter of changing opinion that is from hate to love. Another question asked to the relativist; “Slavery in the year 1800 was normal but today it is a heinous crime”, it indicates moral progress from bad to good. On this question, the relativist has no specific answer; “there are limits to what we have a duty to tolerate. We have a duty to tolerate those with a different religion, but not a duty to tolerate slavery, murder, child molestation, or other activities in which one person is violating the rights of others”.<sup>1</sup>

The critic of ethical relativism will say that a community that accepts the notion of no ultimate right or wrong loses the skill of making any judgement or decision in life and tolerate things as deem fit. This would mean that tolerance has transformed to be an unconditional support and agreement for all type of opinion, be it good or bad.<sup>2</sup> In brief, Greg Koukl has listed 7 things that an ethical relativist could not do;

Relativists Can't Accuse Others of Wrong-Doing  
 Relativists Can't Complain About the Problem of Evil  
 Relativists Can't Place Blame or Accept Praise  
 Relativists Can't Claim Anything Is Unfair or Unjust  
 Relativists Can't Improve Their Morality  
 Relativists Can't Hold Meaningful Moral Discussions

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<sup>1</sup> Peter Kreeft, p. 5

<sup>2</sup> Peter Kreeft, p. 5.

## Relativists Can't Promote the Obligation of Tolerance<sup>1</sup>

The above seven points indicate that ethical relativism faces many internal conceptual difficulties that lead people to think that the position held is erroneous or muddled. Ultimately distorted understanding on tolerance became intolerance; two side of a coin of ethical relativism, specified ;in the following discussion.

### **Ethical Relativism and Tolerance – A Critic**

Many proponents of ethical relativism are in tandem with the idea that once people leave ethics to “the eye of beholder” then this idea pave for diverse ideas, flexibility in life and tolerance for others’ differences. According to Rosenfeld, ethical relativism is dangerous for:

Tolerance becomes the equivalent of intolerance, freedom of coercion, and equality of subordination. And this is particularly dangerous and unattractive for our own times as it might lead to the conclusion that [the] ... global terrorist... so long as the terrorist can appeal to a normative justification within a particular collectively shared interpretation of [killing others]”<sup>2</sup>

Karl Popper is of the opinion:

“Unlimited tolerance must lead to the disappearance of tolerance. If we extend unlimited tolerance even to those who are intolerant, if we are not prepared to defend a tolerant society against the onslaught of the intolerant, then the tolerant will be destroyed....”<sup>3</sup>

In addition to above, Rosenfeld in context of Hegel (d. 1831CE) “dialectic of master and bondsman”<sup>4</sup> emphasized; “...selfhood only makes sense in relation to, and as set against, the others.”<sup>5</sup>

Ethical relativism is now a way of thinking that it has unfortunately being erroneously misunderstood by some quarters<sup>6</sup> paving for the

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<sup>1</sup> Greg Koukl, *Relativism: Feet Firmly Planted in Midair*, (Michigan: Baker Book, 1998)

<sup>2</sup> Rosenfeld, Michael, *Law, Justice, Democracy, and the Clash of Cultures, A Pluralist Account*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), p. 13, cited as Rosenfeld, *Law, Justice*.

<sup>3</sup> Popper, Karl, *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, (London: Routledge, 1966), vol. 1, 265.

<sup>4</sup> See Hegel, Georg. *Phenomenology of Spirit. The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, by Vincent B. Leitch et al., (W.W. Norton & Company, 2018).

<sup>5</sup> Rosenfeld, *Law, Justice*, p.43.

<sup>6</sup> It is said that prior, during and after the Christchurch tragedy “*12 Rules For Life: An Antidote For Chaos*” was freely accessed by public. See Andrew Russel, “Jordan

recent tragedy of Christchurch mosque shooting.<sup>1</sup> So much tolerance for ethical relativism! So also, the issue of “bad blood”; Elizabeth Holmes, with her unblinking eyes, her capacity to charm, her secretive style, and the ways she fulfilled, and in some ways, belied stereotypes about Silicon Valley entrepreneurs. A dropout Holmes would soon after drop out of Stanford to do just that: She founded the blood testing company Theranos and raised over \$900 million by claiming to have invented a revolutionary new blood testing technology that could perform hundreds of life-saving tests on a small, slick device, using just a pinprick of blood. The only problem was that no such invention existed.”<sup>2</sup> Fraud is right and wrong for ethical relativism!

Back on home soil, Malaysians see red over the toxic chemical contamination incident at Sungai Kim Kim, and the sheer severity of its effects has certainly opened the eyes of the public to the importance of taking care of the environment and enforcement against illegal dumping activities.<sup>3</sup> The recent finding on the unwanted plastic waste also raised uproar among Malaysians when various social media have leaked the news. Malaysian government has a huge task ahead to send back the unwanted waste to 14 origin countries, including the United States, Japan, France, Canada, Australia and Britain.<sup>4</sup> It is reported that “these containers were illegally brought into the country under false declaration and other offences which clearly violates our environmental law. To make the matter worsen, there are several culprits and thugs who

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Peterson's '12 Rules for Life' pulled by New Zealand bookseller over Christchurch mosque attacks” 2019. Retrieved; 9<sup>th</sup> July 2019.

<https://globalnews.ca/news/5085105/jordan-petersons-12-rules-for-life-pulled-by-new-zealand-bookseller-over-christchurch-mosque-attacks/>

<sup>1</sup> See Thomas Mahan, “‘Alarming’ increases in extreme-right genocide theory came before Christchurch terror attack – report”, 2019. Retrieved; 9<sup>th</sup> July 2019.

<https://www.stuff.co.nz/national/christchurch-shooting/114066106/alarming-increase-in-extremem-right-genocide-theory-came-before-christchurch>

<sup>2</sup> Avi Asha Shafiro, “What the Theranos Documentary Misses”, 29<sup>th</sup>. March 2019. Retrieved; 9<sup>th</sup> July 2019 <https://newrepublic.com/article/153419/theranos-documentary-misses>

<sup>3</sup> See Nur Baizura Basri, “Sungai Kim Kim incident opens public’s eyes to importance of environmental cleanliness” 2019. Retrieved; 9<sup>th</sup> July 2019.

<http://www.bernama.com/en/news.php?id=1707459>

<sup>4</sup> Rozana Latif, “Malaysia to send 3,000 tons of plastic waste back to countries of origin” 28<sup>th</sup>. May 2019. Retrieved; 9<sup>th</sup> July 2019.

<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-malaysia-waste/malaysia-to-send-3000-tonnes-of-plastic-waste-back-to-countries-of-origin-idUSKCN1SY0M7>

illegally set up recycling factories, without operating licenses, and communities have complained of environmental problems.”<sup>1</sup>

“Malaysia won’t continue to be a dumping ground for the developed nations and those responsible for destroying our ecosystem with these illegal activities are traitors. We view the perpetrators of this act as traitors to the country’s sustainability and therefore they should be stopped and brought to justice.”<sup>2</sup>

How successful can it be remained to be seen? This toxic incident clearly marks the damaging side of ethical relativism in finance and environment. If ethical truth only depends on a culture or on an individual, then “anything goes”, and finance in this sense is an amoral.

In other words, it is non-moral due to “money intolerance” of others; subject which has as its purpose of excessive profit maximization, unmindful of others’ pain and suffering. Similarly, the haze episodes that have a strong connection with the presence of hotspots absorbed from the images of Sumatra Island, Indonesia has proven the existence of intolerance, an outcome of ethical relativism on society at large.<sup>3</sup> Having clarified that ethical relativism and its intolerance attitude that is damaging to life, society and environment, what can be done to save the situation?

### **Action Guides in Tackling Issues of Environment out of Intolerance**

Further readings reveal that United Nations has came up with its global planning that focused on seventeen goals in its attempt to tackle the issue of environment. Though it is not ideally related to ethical relativism per se, readers can put things together; the attitudes of intolerant among the ethical relativists contribute to issues at hand. Likewise, there are hundreds of books that talk about sustainability growth development and how to go

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<sup>1</sup> Katherine Martinko, “Malaysia vows to send plastic waste back”, 29<sup>th</sup>. May 2019. Retrieved; 9<sup>th</sup> July 2019, <https://www.treehugger.com/plastic/malaysia-furious-about-plastic-waste-imports>

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Retrieved; 9<sup>th</sup> July 2019. <https://kabar24.bisnis.com/read/20180928/15/843369/titik-panas-di-pulau-sumatera-capai-193-terbanyak-di-sumsel>; Nur Syahirah Mohd Zambri, “Open Burning in Indonesia Gives Impacts to The Environmental Changes in Kuala Lumpur and Selangor, Malaysia”, 2018. Retrieved; 9<sup>th</sup> July 2019. [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/329872233\\_Open\\_Burning\\_in\\_Indonesia\\_Gives\\_Impacts\\_to\\_The\\_Environmental](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/329872233_Open_Burning_in_Indonesia_Gives_Impacts_to_The_Environmental)

about it.<sup>1</sup> There are also numerous websites that encourage people to contribute to sustainability growth development that could be an eye-opener to culprit of intolerance of the relativists.<sup>2</sup> All these information are relevant for overcoming the said issue at hand from various levels. International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM) for that matter has successfully informed students, in particular on the awareness of the impact of unrecycled plastic waste through several but catchy electronic mails.<sup>3</sup> Several lecturers have put up the topics related to sustainability growth development and how to go about it; as one forms of their teaching assessment. Several training programs were organized for IIUM community exposing the concept of sustainability growth development and how to go about it. In addition to that arrays of buntings on sustainability growth development were erected in front of the Muhammad Abdul-Rauf Building to remind of IIUM community of the significance of it in life, a focal point for IIUM motto - *Leading the way*.<sup>4</sup>

Indeed, it is inadequate to explain the issue at hand, intolerance; two side of a coin for ethical relativism if the fundamental of *Islamic akhlāq* is not instilled among people in general and in particular, the IIUM community.

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<sup>1</sup> To name a few, refer to; Yacine Aek Kaci, *The sustainable development goals*, (New York: UN, 2018); Jeffrey D Sachs, *The age of Sustainability Development* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015); Miranda Paul, *One Plastic Bag*, (Minneapolis: Lerner Publishing Group, 2015); Fernando M Reimers, *Empowering Students to Improve the World in Sixty Lessons*, (California: CreateSpace Independent Publishing, 2017); Felix Dodd, *Negotiating the Sustainable Development Goals : A transformational agenda for an insecure world*, (London: Routledge, 2016); Susan Verde, *I Am Human: A Book of Empathy*, (New York: Abrams, 2018).

<sup>2</sup> C.J. Pearson, "Liberal Intolerance Is Wrecking My Family", 5<sup>th</sup>. June 2019, Retrieved; 9<sup>th</sup> July 2019 <https://humanevents.com/2019/06/05/liberal-intolerance-is-ruining-my-family/>; John F Catherwood, "An argument for intolerance", *Medical Ethics*, December 2000 - Volume 26 – 6 Retrieved 9<sup>th</sup>. July 2019. <https://jme.bmj.com/content/26/6/427>

<sup>3</sup> The dates of the emails are; (1) 6<sup>th</sup>. May 2109 - # Sustainability@DC: Bring your Own Cup/Mug/Tumbler Campaign; (2) 7<sup>th</sup>. May 2019 - Ramadhan Kareem from Plastic Waste Management Committee, (3) IIUM Go-Green; (4) 7th. May 2019 - TD HAPPENINGS No.04/2019 - April 2019 – 7 single-use-swap and the trash you can save in one year; (5) 13<sup>th</sup>. May 2019 - IIUM ITD GO GREEN TIPS 05/2019 - Green *iftar*; (6) 14<sup>th</sup>. June 2019 - #Sustainability@DC: Bring your Own Cup/Mug/Tumbler Campaign; (7) Eco-Campus competition in conjunction with the Rector's vision in implementing the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) on IIUM campus.

<sup>4</sup> Dzulkifli Abdul Razak, *Leading the way*, (Gombak: IIUM Press, 2019); Retrieved; 11<sup>th</sup> July 2019, <http://online.anyflip.com/mwck/mgtk/mobile/index.html>, cited as *Leading the way*.

### **Fundamental of Islamic Akhlāq**

This part will highlight some of the values in the treatise on *The Words of Risale-i Nur*<sup>1</sup>, written by Said Nursi Bediuzzaman (d.1379AH /1960CE). It consists thirty parts which are relevant in addressing the issue of ethical relativism and are vastly appropriate in fostering good character. The book; *Leading the way*<sup>2</sup> will be occasionally referred to for providing action guide in practicing good character. In brief, there are six key points of which Said Nursi specified, namely;

- Submission to Almighty God and having the decisive aim in Him
- Positivity and self-reconciliation
- Qanā'ah* (satisfaction) and continuous *shukr* (gratitude)
- Patience and perseverance
- Pro-active and the worth of prayers
- Humility and modesty<sup>3</sup>

Under the heading (1) Said Nursi said that human character is highly related to the faith one holds onto. Man is born pure with the natural tendency (*fiṭrah*) of submitting himself to God, to believe in Him and to worship Him.<sup>4</sup> Having faith in God would lead humans to act according to the guidance of the Prophet and the Divine Book. On the other hand, good deeds and actions would likewise induce the growth of *īmān* and vice versa.<sup>5</sup> Likewise, Said Nursi asserted that to believe in the Absolute Oneness of God (*tawḥīd*) is the most potent way to understand God's Lordship (*rubūbiyyah*) through the marvels of God's creations in the whole universe and in man himself, known also as contemplation (*tafakkur*) and remembrance (*dhikr*).<sup>6</sup> Both *dhikr* and *tafakkur* generate awareness of the infinite Magnificence of God and understanding of His wisdom in this worldly existence subsequently steering man to understand the concept of submission and vicegerency.<sup>7</sup> While contemporary viewpoints on this earthly existence, grounded by

<sup>1</sup> Said Nursi, *The Words of Risale-i Nur*, translated by Sukran Vahide, (Izmir: Kaynak Koll.Sti., 1997).

<sup>2</sup> Dzulkifli Abdul Razak, *Leading the way*, (Gombak: IIUM Press, 2016), cited as *Leading the way*.

<sup>3</sup> Amnah, Faris, *Character building: A Reflection from Risale-i-Nur* a paper presented at Seminar Falsafah dan Tamadun Islam 2018, (SEFATA), USM, Penang, 6<sup>th</sup>. Ogos, 2018, cited as *Character building*.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, p. 4.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> *Character Building*, p. 5.

<sup>7</sup> *Sūrat al-Baqarah*, 2:30.

materialistic and unrealistic notions and brought about by the secular world order and the secular humanistic civilization, in particular ethical relativism, that led humanity to a hedonistic way of life or subjectivity in life; Islam holds the best answer and guidance to the truthful and authentic meaning of life through its principles and worldview. Muslims, therefore, must be truthful to themselves, to God and to community by having pride in work or studies, sacrifice when needed and *berbudi berbahasa* (to reciprocate the assistance received from others)<sup>1</sup>

The heading (2) speaks on positivity. Said Nursi says that an individual with a healthy soul is capable of practicing *ḥusn al-ẓan* (positive thought) and having *ḥusn al-ẓan* in ourselves, in others, and in the environment, we are living in means to liberate our mind from negative thoughts and to perceive the best in every circumstance we are going through while concurrently appreciating our worth.<sup>2</sup> Through his illustrative allegory, Nursi tried to expound the dangers that torture the pessimist soul, where his imagination has been damaged by his ill thinking and preoccupied by only the ugliness and suffering in this worldly life. Other than that, pessimism and depression are highly interconnected.

This is because a pessimist tends to let go of all the good things in his life as he erroneously regards them in the opposite way, causing innumerable losses and disappointments.<sup>3</sup> The panacea to negative thought is to contemplate (*tafakkur*) that keeps our emotions in check as it helps to stabilize our unbalanced, or in our case, negatively driven, sentiments. Thus, for centuries, Islam has promoted daily prayers (*Ṣalāt*) a medium for contemplation that links a believer to his God. By praying, Said Nursi asserted that a servant is placing his utter trust in his God in full submission. It is an absolute realization that everything that is taking place inside and outside of him is grounded by God's will and taking refuge in Him is the only solution that would lead him to true and authentic happiness in both the transient and eternal lives.<sup>4</sup>

Another consequence of pessimistic behavior is that it hinders positivity in our mind and instigates excessive self-criticism and imperfections as a human being. This attitude, if not controlled, leads to a low level of self-confidence. The fact that humans are created to have constant inadequacy does not necessarily indicate our level of achievement in our life. The goal is not to be perfect, yet to give our best

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<sup>1</sup> *Leading the way*, p. 27.

<sup>2</sup> *Character Building*, p. 6.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> *Character Building*, p. 7



in everything that we do. Rather than continuously denigrating the nature of our weakness, we should give ourselves more encouragement or more positive criticism to allow us to see the brighter side of our own existence. By being grateful for what we have in our lives and acknowledging even the simplest blessings is a prominent strategy that should be emphasized in our journey in becoming a positive individual.<sup>1</sup> To be positive one has to be aware of his responsibilities; students and staffs alike, by giving attention to details in works assigned and observe punctuality when invited to present their thoughts.<sup>2</sup>

The third heading deals with *qanā'ah* and gratitude. Our endless longing and desire towards senseless needs have always left us in a constant state of pointless unease and anxiety, deceiving us in the way we perceive our purpose in this worldly existence. To make things worse, we often associate happiness with acceptance from people around us instead of our own self-acceptance. Consumerism, which is central to capitalism, damages not only humans but also the universe we are living in. For instance, as the modern technology industry coaxes consumers to replace their devices with those newly released gadgets, the electronic waste problem has resulted in upsetting devastation to the environment. While recycling electronic wastage is often not viable by the industrial recycling company, a cheaper method adopted by these capitalists is exporting this wastage to the Third World countries, associating consumerism with inequality.<sup>3</sup>

To overcome this Islam promotes the idea of *qanā'ah* or self-satisfaction that comes together with our gratitude to the Almighty God. The attribute of *qanā'ah* balances both our asceticism and materialistic needs, keeping us from being a slave to our animalistic soul and bourgeois desire.<sup>4</sup> Said Nursi has likewise advised us to always have our sole trust in the All-Generous Provider, as He has never neglected any of His servants who have submitted his whole life only to Him. Our greed is grounded by our ingratitude is the consequence of our doubt, if not disbelief, towards the Almighty God. Provision and sustenance are one of the secrets that are kept within His knowledge, thus supplicating to Him is a crucial step that must be given our very attention.<sup>5</sup> To endure with the spirit of gratefulness and to tame blatant uncontrol

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid, p. 8.

<sup>2</sup> *Leading the way*, p. 28.

<sup>3</sup> *Character building*, p. 10.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, p. 11.

<sup>5</sup> *Character building*, p. 11.

consumerism, collaboration through sharing with members on *tazkiyyah al-naafs* will benefit all not only developing the spirit of teamwork but enhance and sustain the spirit of inclusiveness.<sup>1</sup>

Patience and perseverance in heading (4) became the most important characters in Said Nursi's *Word*. Only through patience and perseverance, with a strong and steady faith in God, can a servant advance in his journey to reach his final goal, the Hereafter, while at the same time, his soul is "freed of very burdensome debts and fears."<sup>2</sup> In the matter of patience, as mentioned by Topbas<sup>3</sup> the Prophets and saints are the best example of the exhibited uppermost essence of patience and perseverance and were given divine help. The reward and bounty for patience can only be Paradise, as it includes all aspects of good character, with sole reliance onto the Almighty mercy and help.

In this era of modernization and advanced technology, where almost everything that we need is made available at a single tap of our devices, patience for most people is difficult to come by. However, the values of being patient and perseverant remain relevant. Patience is a crucial prerequisite in securing our goal, as some things simply could not and should not be rushed. In achieving our goal, full attention should be given, thus making patience essential throughout the process. Success has a strong interrelation between patience and perseverance. Working for our success means we are allocating our time and effort in a long-term process that typically comes with hiccups and obstacles, indicating why patience is absolutely necessary in our daily journey. Hence to reinstate patience one must have courage and sincerity in fulfilling job or assignment tasked upon him, so much so come what may, one can easily confronted the challenge.<sup>4</sup>

Heading (5) discusses the spirit of pro-active and the worth of prayers. Said in *The Words*, expounded the needs to be proactive by using the worth of the prescribed prayers as one of his instances. He allegorized the twenty-four (24) hours that we have as twenty-four coins that should be used in purchasing the ticket, i.e., prayers to travel to the farm, the Paradise. He dictated:

"People cover that long journey at different times according to their deeds and conduct...the ticket is the prescribed prayer. An hour is enough for the prayers in a day. If you spend twenty-

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<sup>1</sup> *Leading the way*, p. 27.

<sup>2</sup> *Character Building*, p. 13.

<sup>3</sup> Topbas, Osman Nuri, *Civilisation of Virtues*, (Istanbul: Erkam Publications, 2009), vol. 2. p.25.

<sup>4</sup> *Character Building*, p. 14; *Leading the way*, p. 27.

three hours of each day of your short life in this world on the affairs of this world and don't reserve the remaining hour for the important prayers necessary for the other world, it shows your foolishness and stands you in a condition of grave loss.”<sup>1</sup>

From the citation, Said Nursi said that a proactive person tends to plan his journey for success by taking every initiative and source that he has today as a preparatory measure for any potential hiccups that await him in the future. The idea is, when present things are (relatively) tranquil without any crisis, the perfect time to give our hardest effort is now. For the Muslim community, in particular, proactivity is no longer a choice; it is necessary for every single Muslim. With Islamophobia going around the globe and the act of terrorism typically (yet mistakenly) linked to our religion, being proactive is one of the ways in tackling these issues.<sup>2</sup>

In another instances, Said Nursi asserted:

“Moreover, in prayer, there is comfort for the soul and mind. Nor is it difficult for the body. Furthermore, with the right intention, all the deeds and conduct of one who prays become like worship. In this way, his little lifetime is spent for the sake of the eternal life in the other world. And his transient life gains a kind of permanence.”<sup>3</sup>

Several key points can be extracted from the previous paragraph. Firstly, prayers bring comfort to the soul and mind, contentment that every single soul yearns for. Living as a being that is constantly being tested with life tribulations, the only wish that we can ask for after all the hardship that we are going through is to obtain tranquility in our soul, which can be gained through prayers. Secondly, prayers should not be a burden to a believer, who has his faith in the Almighty God. Lastly, the final aim of prayers is to gain everlasting happiness in the eternal existence, the Hereafter. As such, prayers, as well as other obligations, should not be taken recklessly, as it is beyond imperative in building good character in the present world and easing our permanent life in the Hereafter.<sup>4</sup>

The last point that is heading (6) as highlighted by Said Nursi is the attitude of humility and honesty. Humility is defined as a quality of having a low or modest view of one's importance. Modesty, on the other hand, holds the quality or state of being unassuming in the estimation of one's

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid, p. 15.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, p. 16.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, p. 17.

<sup>4</sup> *Character Building*, p. 17

abilities. Likewise, the latter refers to behavior, manner, or appearance intended to avoid impropriety or indecency.<sup>1</sup> As such, humility expounds our quality of having a moderate outlook on ourselves and the practice of being humble. On the other hand, modesty refers to the quality of being modest, concerning others' opinions on our abilities, which occur externally. As a human, humility and modesty are needed to remind us of the nature of our weak existence. Said Nursi emphasized that man is created to be in constant weakness and poverty, unlike the Supreme God, who is rich without measure where He is "in no way needy of the universe or the entities within it." Thus, submitting ourselves through worships is our recognition of our nature as a "servant of God, being aware of our defects, weakness and poverty in the Divine presence." He added that our realization of God's perfection and our weakness and helplessness requires us to bow to him in deep humility, seeking refuge in Him, while at the same time placing our trust in Him.

In today's social media culture, however, being humble and modest seems to have been forgotten day by day. Our eagerness in sharing our daily activities, posting photos of ourselves wearing fashionable clothing and dining at luxurious restaurants have turned out to be a competition between ourselves as social media users. We strive to gain fame and popularity by tagging the brand of clothes and gadgets that we wear and use. Not only that, we tend to evaluate ourselves and others through the likes and shares on Facebook or Instagram, knowing that most of those posted on social media are not even genuine. Social media has since made us ignorant of the nature of our existence as human beings who interact via real conversations in the real world. Therefore, we must realize that only through modesty and humility can we regain our humanity. Far from the ethical relativism that pave way for uncertainty, relativity and beauty in the eye of beholder; those ideas could not solve the problem of today, not to mention humility and modesty.

### **Conclusion**

Ethical relativism incites intolerance to its beholders. The reason being this idea stems on denial the truth, there is no right or wrong, no moral absolutes. Like Karl Popper puts it - "Unlimited tolerance must lead to the disappearance of tolerance. If we extend unlimited tolerance even to those who are intolerant, if we are not prepared to defend a tolerant society against the onslaught of the intolerant, then the tolerant will be destroyed".

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid, p. 18. *Leading the way*, p. 27

Hence, we can see issues cropped up like Christchurch shootings, unwanted plastic waste dumped at other peoples' shore, fraud etc. and there goes the cliché – ethical relativism and intolerance; two side of a coin. To overcome this intolerance fundamental of Islamic *akhlāq* must be imbued in our generation, without which, we are answerable to Almighty God that we have failed to uphold Islamic *akhlāq* in life and we have failed to impart to our generations the beneficent of Islamic worldview that balanced up life in this world and life to come.

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