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Human Value in Islamic Thought

Müfit Selim Saruhan¹

Abstract: This paper analyses the value of a human being from an Islamic viewpoint. From the perspective of Islamic thought, a human being is characterised as an intelligent being or creature. As a natural result of this characterisation, a human being has the capability of transforming the subject of his knowledge into action. In this respect, the will to know and the tendency to do is the most basic need and, therefore, the right of all human beings. The worldly life is a field of values through which Man will win his afterlife. In this field of values, we encounter the freedom of choice, which is one of the basic requirements of human freedom and a moral existence. The world is also an area of gains in a way. This article attempts to determine the criteria of human worth and value in Islamic thought. Accordingly, it explains the awareness of differences that lead to the realisation of God's existence.

Keywords: Islam and morality, Responsibility, Value, Islamic Thought, Human Being, *Taqwa*, Diversity, Peace, Social Justice.

Introduction

The main purpose of this article is to approach and analyse human value from the perspective of Islamic understanding and thought. The Qur'an prioritises and emphasises on what makes human beings valuable, and there are powerful theological and philosophical interpretations of this issue in the Islamic world. Today, the world needs peace more than ever. Human beings and the value attributed to them should always be

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prioritised in any field of life. We, as modern people, have been in the middle of violence and gender discrimination besides many ongoing religious, economic, and political problems. Although this world should be the ultimate source of comfort and peace. Human beings have constantly been stumbling in an atmosphere of marginalisation, polarisation, and discrimination that leads to depression, anxiety, and fear. At this point, we witness that there is a deep need for an understanding of peace based on justice, as mentioned in Qur'an. In this article, we will touch on the guiding function of Qur'anic verses and the principles of human value. According to the Qur'an, justice, peace, and love should be the primary values in human life as they not only bring comfort but also value to human life.

Human beings are characterised as intelligent creatures that can understand and seek meaning in life. Human beings inherently have the will to "know". As a natural result of this, Man has the capability of transforming his knowledge and putting it into action. In this respect, the will to know and the tendency to do are the most basic needs and, therefore, they are the rights of all human beings. Life in this world is based on values through which Man will reach heaven in the hereafter. In this field of values, we encounter the freedom of choice, which is one of the basic requirements of human life and moral existence.

Accordingly, I will try to explain the following matters in this article. The principles, which I intend to discuss, are based on the sense of "awareness", specifically awareness of the fact that each living being is unique and significant, and is aware that this uniqueness is an order of Allah, the Criterion who makes human life valuable and is the balance of good deeds in this world and the hereafter. According to the Qur'an, those who meet and socialise are valuable; socialisation is significant as it makes human life meaningful. The measure of superiority in the sight of Allah is *taqwa*. The concept of *taqwa* is one of the principles of Islamic thought that ensures the real value of a human being in this world and the hereafter. Seeing the mistakes of our ancestors and having the courage to be authentic are two significant elements that should be embraced to protect the value of human beings. In this article, I will try to explain the essentials and priorities of the value of Man in the Qur'an, which states that being aware of differences among human beings and showing respect ensures the realisation of Allah's existence.

Man's Natural Desire for Knowledge and Good Deeds

In Islamic Philosophy, the soul, as a single genus, may be divided into three species. Firstly, there is the vegetable, which is the first entelechy (perfection or actuality) of a natural body possessing organs in so far as it reproduces and grows, and is nourished. Secondly, there is the animal, which is the first entelechy of a natural body possessing organs in so far as it perceives individual things and moves by volition. Thirdly, there is the human being, which is the first entelechy of a natural body possessing organs in so far as it commits acts of rational choice, deduction through opinion, and perception of universal matters (Afnan, 1958, p. 136; Kabadayı, 2006, p. 22).

Nutrition, growth, shelter, and understanding are the basic endeavours that all human beings share. While we share partnerships with other living things in our efforts to feed, reproduce, and seek shelter, the effort to understand is unique to humans. A life in which there is no effort to understand is wasted at the vegetative and animal level. The road to understanding is through knowledge, and the road to action and behaviour is through contemplation. Searching for the meaning of humanity is similar to having inner peace because it is a way of finding freedom (Ibn Miskawayh, 1398, p. 118; Ibn Sina, 1328, p. 5; Deniz, 2018, p.45).

The first area where an individual's personality appears is "the integrity of the body". The "life" and "continuity of health" of the individual is the law constituting the basic elements of the individual. The integrity of the body also calls upon the phenomenon known as "right to life" in case of an inseparable necessity, and puts it at the head of the constitutional arrangement. Life is central as the most fundamental right and the most fundamental freedom in an individual. It also cannot be dissolved from the human attribute. Therefore, the right to life cannot be restricted by any means (al-Attas, 1984, p. 45; Deniz, 2017, p. 15).

The Qur'an teaches us the essence of being human and describes four aspects of Man - physical creation, spirit, natural disposition (*fitrah*), and light - all of which have an unmediated origin in Allah. These features are combined to make Man a distinctive and special creation. Additionally, the Qur'an sets a frame about Man, including his aspects as a physical creature, a spiritual creature, a creature that is

naturally disposed to worship, and an enlightened creature. Our body, our spirit, our predisposition to worship Allah, and our light are gifts sent directly from Him to serve as a critical means of attaining human perfection. The perfection described in the Qur'an lies in cultivating these aspects of the spirit in order to transcend the animating qualities, actualise our disposition to worship, and refine our light (Shakir, 2018, p. 3).

When we examine the expressions about "life" in the Qur'an, we see that life in this world is a step that leads us to another existence. This worldly life consists of certain features that are temporary and deceptive. Permanent life will begin after this worldly life.

The two verses below lead us to think, contemplate, and research. Neither religion nor philosophy could exist in a world where there is no death. The Qur'an refers to the temporariness of this world, but the main purpose is not to give Man the idea that there is nothing to do here. Instead, the Qur'an emphasises that Man should prioritise the basic, most significant, and permanent values such as justice, peace, and love.

O my people, this worldly life is only [temporary] enjoyment, and indeed, the Hereafter - that is the home of [permanent] settlement (al-Ghafir: 39).

And the worldly life is not but amusement and diversion, but the home of the Hereafter is best for those who fear Allah, so will you not reason? (al-An'am: 32).

The Arabic word for world, *dunya* (d/n/y), is derived from its root word which means low. *Dunyā* means the temporary world - including its earthly concerns and possessions - as opposed to the eternal spiritual realm, or the hereafter. *Dunyā* also means closer or lower. In the Qur'an, here and hereafter represent oppositions in the temporal, spatial, and moral dimensions, similar to now and later, below and above, and evil and good respectively (Isfahani, 1986, p. 375; Draz, 2009, p. 45).

Allah created life (al-Mulk: 2), which makes it divine. Observing the worldly life and looking at its subtleties bring people together with the existence of Allah. He has entrusted this world to Man as His caliph, the reasons for which we cannot completely comprehend. There

are statements made by angels, who were concerned that Man, as the caliph on earth, will “shed blood” and “cause corruption”. However, the Almighty Allah emphasises, “Indeed, I know that which you do not know” (al-Baqarah: 30).

This emphasis seems to indicate that the real duty of Man is not to defeat and shed blood, but to improve and sustain life. What makes this world meaningful is the actions of human beings. The Qur’an reminds us of the temporariness of this world and emphasises that the joy of living is based on the competition among human beings in terms of goodness (al-Zumera: 10; an-Nisa: 97).

There is an ethical value of the worldly life in Islam; it is a field of values through which Man will win his afterlife. In this field of values, we encounter the freedom of choice, which is one of the basic requirements of human freedom and morality. The world, in a sense, is also an area of achievement. In the Qur’an, Allah mentions night as the time to rest and day as the time to work (an-Naba: 10-11). In Surah al-Jumu’ah, the Almighty Allah invites believers to worship with enthusiasm and, at the end of the Jum’ah prayer, invites them to earn and share the endless gifts that He has given: “And when the prayer has been concluded, disperse within the land and seek from the bounty of Allah, and remember Allah often that you may succeed” (al-Jumu’ah: 9).

In this respect, the Qur’an emphasises that life in this world is a game and distraction (al-Hadid: 21) and the possibilities offered by this world are temporary. The statement, “I love not those that set,” (al-An’am: 76) in the Qur’an is presented through Prophet Ibrahim (PBUH). This significant statement means that we will not have knowledge about what is right, what is wrong, and how much we will be valued in this worldly life without going through a divine (*Rabbani*) education process. The verse “...so let not the worldly life delude you and be not deceived about Allah by the Deceiver” (Fatir: 5) clearly shows that a human being is susceptible to deceit unless he looks at life as a means of reaching wisdom.

In terms of the Qur’an, the Almighty Allah provides answers to those who wish it: “Whoever desires the life of this world and its adornments – We fully repay them for their deeds therein, and they therein will not be deprived” (Hud: 15, 26). Accordingly, every human

being has the fundamental right to acquire, produce, and share property. Islam often draws attention to the inherent sense of possession and advises that this feeling should not erode one's moral qualities (Deniz, 2018, p. 25).

The Divine Will sets human beings a goal in this world: to win both this world and the hereafter. The believer shall not forget his worldly share.

But seek, through that which Allah has given you, the home of the Hereafter; and [yet], do not forget your share of the world. And do good as Allah has done well to you. And desire not corruption in the land. Indeed, Allah does not like corrupters (Al-Qasas: 77).

We are meant to be in the service of humanity, in return for the gifts and good deeds Allah has endlessly served us.

Human Nature: Man as a Living Being Who Understands and Acts

Man is the most distinguished creature on earth. In terms of the history of philosophy, Man has always tried to know and define the whole universe in the best way. However, the search for knowledge about the very nature of humanity has long been ignored. The individual who sets out to research all the subjects of science and philosophy to the finest of details may neglect himself the most in this process. The question of whether Man and his nature has been understood brings extensive explanations and interpretations with it.

According to the philosophy of Islamic thought, human beings are intelligent creatures that understand and then act accordingly. This intelligence has two basic components, namely the will to know and the tendency to act; these are also the two most basic human needs. In this respect, it can be said that these two components are the most basic rights of human beings.

Man attains peace and freedom when he discovers the inner workings of nature. The mind performs its activities within the limits of life and time. Receiving knowledge and acting accordingly occurs in a flow of life and time. What creates human values is a type of information regardless of its source; value does not occur without

knowledge since the latter is its basis. Human beings create values and apply them as long as they know. The knowing individual is aware of what is good, right, and virtuous, and follows them in everyday life. The purpose of a knowing individual's existence is to be virtuous and righteous in every step of life.

Based on the abovementioned information, it can be said that the actions of human beings have been subjected to various basic classifications. The general actions of human beings can be defined as:

1. Activities that are carried out by an individual towards a goal, such as the realisation of technical projects and decisions.
2. Activities that are related to the actions of daily life; in short, our natural needs such as nutrition, shelter, and struggle for survival.
3. Systematic and mechanised movements, such as a job in a factory or the act of using a technical tool.

Reflecting upon our values in real life by combining them with knowledge leads us to happiness. Additionally, such wise actions give us inner and external peace. Every single thing around us becomes meaningful when we start to really "understand"; perceiving the first reason and final goal of everything is necessary for a consistent and steady life. Knowledge ultimately exists to shed light on the way of Man.

The Qur'an says, "...and We have certainly honoured the children of Adam and carried them on the land and sea and provided for them of the good things and preferred them over much of what We have created, with [definite] preference..." (al-Isra, 70). As human beings, Man possesses the power to know and act at the same time. In this respect, he has the right to be valuable and honourable.

Upon closely studying the Qur'an, we can conclude the following essential teachings:

1. It describes the origin and creation of human beings, and provides information about human life after death.
2. It draws attention to the positive and negative psychological characteristics of human nature.

3. It describes the duties and responsibilities of human beings. These tasks essentially include the duties of Man to himself, his environment, and his lord; his other duties include sociological, moral, and religious acts.

An individual who expresses and defines himself, who understands and desires good, and applies it in his every action will be happy. Similarly, an individual who contemplates the universe and is aware of the natural forces and functioning of the universe will know his strengths and limitations. One of the most common and accepted definitions of religion in Islamic thought underlines this fact. Accordingly, religion is the name given for the whole of the rules that ensure the happiness of human beings in this world and the hereafter.

The main goal of Islam is to liberate Man. The principles in the Qur'an allow him to choose between freely believing and not believing while respecting the beliefs of others. He must listen to the opinions of others, and let others define and explain themselves. Religion introduces principles that regulate the visible world of Man with the promise of happiness, and also binds the invisible world and the condition of peace after death in order for him to obey these principles. If we look at the teachings of the Qur'an, religion is a concept that expresses the relationship of Man with God, with other human beings, and finally with the whole living and non-living universe. In this respect, the prophets struggled to draw human beings to an honourable line, to keep them free from external ties that surround and limit them, and to give them their fundamental rights. The history of the prophets should be read as the history of human rights struggle (Nasr, 2000, p. 46; Garaudy, 2015, p. 18; Rahman, 2009, p. 36).

According to al-Ghazali and many other scholars, the condition of creating a society that human beings need to live in is to ensure that there is mutual solidarity based on a specific, fair, and collective basis for survival; the significant elements are called nation and Shariah (Mahmud, 1968, p. 134; Goodman, 2003, p. 46).

For example, al-Shahrastānī in his *Kitab al-Milal wa al-Nihal* states that human beings need to live together to continue their lives and prepare for the hereafter, and this social structure should be formed in a way that will enable them to help and protect each other. This formation of togetherness is called the nation (1947, p. 38).

Awareness of Differences Leads to Perceiving Allah's Wisdom

Allah states the following reason behind our diversity:

O mankind, indeed We have created you from male and female and made you peoples and tribes that you may know one another. Indeed, the noblest of you in the sight of Allah is the most righteous of you. Indeed, Allah is Knowing and Acquainted. (al-Hujurat: 13)

This verse expresses that the awareness of our being in different colours, races and languages in this world is a kind of process that leads us to the existence of Allah. When Man examines the formation and differences of races and languages in terms of physiological, psychological, and sociological aspects, he realises the power behind these differences. Diversity obliges us to accept a systematic design made of different elements. The verse also emphasises that those who will determine the wisdom of these differences are human beings with knowledge.

Differences as a Form of Awareness: The Value of Socialisation

When approaching this issue from the Qur'anic perspective, our starting point is that our differences are natural and the result of the Divine Will.

To each of you, We prescribed a law and a method. Had Allah willed, He would have made you one nation [united in religion], but [He intended] to test you in what He has given you; so race to [all that is] good. To Allah is your return all-together, and He will [then] inform you concerning that over which you used to differ. (al-Maidah: 48)

In the frame of this verse, we can state that the ethnic, cultural, and geographical differences of human beings are a result of the Divine Will. Allah, the Supreme Creator, has intended for Man to attain unity in the diversity of differences. The fact that this is a divine law means that it is also natural law. Finding unity within the multiple is one of the most important conditions for the existence of societies in sociological terms. The nature and continuity of things are based on the existence of differences.

Societies would not be able to meet their needs without differences. We find the best examples of this in the statements of al-Farabi and Ibn Sina. According to al-Farabi, every human being needs many things in order to live and achieve superior perfection, but cannot provide all of them alone. Since each individual can only do his part to meet these needs, human beings need to come together, unite in their duties, help each other and complete different tasks to be able to survive. Al-Farabi emphasises that a world created with the help of all human beings will be a happy world. He also believes that the resource of socialisation based on happiness is a necessity. In other words, human beings need each other and societies can be successful as long as this chain of need is carefully constructed. In al-Farabi's philosophy, justice and love are the root of civilisation. His view of love is composed of three sources that determine the structuring of social organisations: love (arising from necessity), benefit, and pleasure. When viewed from the perspective of politics and state philosophy throughout history, it is perceived that these three sources have determined and shaped humanity.

According to al-Farabi, pleasure occurs when virtue and interest are combined. In this respect, the maintenance of the state, which is established by love, is based on the virtue of justice. The bonds that bring entities in the universe together are like the love that binds people together. Parts of a city and the different elements in it are connected and linked by a bond of love and, as such, they should be fairly protected. For this reason, justice is the foundation and principle of a virtuous city. While al-Farabi classifies virtuous societies as large, medium, and small. He emphasises on the coexistence of all nations in all habitable (*ma'mur*) regions of the globe with the large society; the coming together of the middle society and a single nation; with a small community it means the gathering of the people of a single city in a region where any nation is settled. The highest form of good and perfection is achieved firstly in the city. Happiness cannot be achieved in a community smaller than the city. Bad deeds occur, just as good deeds occur by choice and will. Therefore, happiness is not obtained in every city. A city that provides real happiness to its people and aims to help them on the way to happiness is a virtuous and perfect city. A society in which its people help each other to achieve happiness is a virtuous and perfect society. Cities that help each other will become a virtuous and perfect nation. Likewise, the virtuous and perfect

universal state only emerges when all the nations within it help each other to attain happiness (Al-Farabi, 1985 pp. 79, 117-118).

Ibn Sina (Avicenna) further develops the theory of need; for him, human beings cannot live alone. Social life is essential for the survival and continuation of human beings. When they start to live in a society, they enter into relations with each other. Law and fair administration are needed in order to regulate relations and ensure that they work fairly. They require a lawmaker and a fair administrator for their share. For the continuation of the human species and the full realisation of human existence, there should be a person who will oblige fair management and people who will comply with the laws of this management. The existence of Divine Grace is obvious, so it is inconceivable that it does not assign some people to fulfil this need. These people are prophets, and just governance and laws are the revelations they brought from God. Prophecy is mandatory for justice and law (Ibn Sina, 2004, p. 50).

According to the statements presented above, differences are natural and they ensure richness in human life. There are differences in human ability and level of understanding. For this reason, the Divine Will points out that the epistemic differences among human beings in terms of perceiving the truth and their inclinations may differ due to these differences. Competing in good deeds and following righteous deeds should be the fundamental aim of humanity.

The verses presented below have inspired theologians and philosophers in the Islamic world. These verses call upon humanity to work in consciousness of unity by being aware of differences and not breaking away from the movement towards good.

Indeed, those who have believed and done righteous deeds - indeed, we will not allow being lost the reward of any who did well in deeds. (al-Kahf: 30)

And that there is not for man except that [good] for which he strives. (al-Najm: 39)

According to the Qur'an, the prerequisite that makes Man valuable in terms of his work in this world is his actions. A human being is valued based on his work and production, not skin colour or environment. No one has the chance to choose the environment in which he is born

or the exact conditions in which he lives. The communities formed by men and women have different characteristics, which generates the discovery of individualities within sociality. *Taaruf*, which means “to get acquainted”, is a concept expressing mutual acquaintance and cognition. It is another divine emphasis of differences as a means of unity and beauty (Izutsu, 2002, pp. 45-65).

The Measure of Value in the Sight of Allah: *Al-Taqwa*

“Indeed, the noblest of you in the sight of Allah is the most righteous of you.” (al-Hujurat: 13)

Verse 13 of the Surah al-Hujurat above emphasises on the significance of knowing, meeting, and sharing. However, there is another significant criterion of *al-taqwa* after these elements. The following are some questions that should be asked, understood, and contemplated upon in the light of this verse:

- What is *taqwa*?
- What is Superiority (*Akram*) (أكرم)?
- What is the wisdom and reason behind using the word *Akram* in the verse, while emphasising superiority in the word *Afdal* (افضل)?
- What is the semantic difference between *Akram* and *Afdal*?
- Do we perceive the existence of a human being with our eyes or our heart? We can perceive the superiority of property and authority with our five senses. Therefore, the perception of *taqwa* is not a sensory awareness, but a mental comprehension.
- Is there any difference between superiority in the sight of Allah and human beings? The emphasis in the abovementioned verse is about being “in the presence of Allah” (*Indallah*) (عندالله). When we categorise nations in the world, we are doing it with the same criteria: developed, developing, and underdeveloped countries. Here, the Almighty Allah leads us from the pride of intermediary values to the acceptance of noble and enduring values. While this world has standards of superiority, in Allah’s sight, the criterion of superiority is *taqwa*.

Man is a creature that knows and acts. All human behaviours have various factors and reasons. A human being spends his life describing and evaluating what he sees. He feels the peace of existence as long as he gives meaning to what he sees and feels. He understands as he knows, and as he understands, he finds the opportunity and strength to move freely.

The value system that Islam bestows upon Man comprises high and noble values. Moral and religious values give Man an understanding of the harmonious integrity of the universe. A human being who is indifferent to moral and religious values will experience personality fragmentation, no matter how mature his personality is. Moral and religious values are elements that strengthen personality by combining joy and harmony with the environment and the meaningfulness of life (Dar, 1963, p. 175; Donaldson, 1953, p. 75).

Conclusion

According to Islam and the Qur'an, the value of a human being increases when his behaviour is shaped based on peace and love. The principles that make us valuable are also the basic duties of human beings living together on earth.

The Qur'an prioritises discovering and understanding this world and the differences in it, rather than rejecting or criticising different perspectives. However, when one's religious perceptions are not properly settled, he moves away from following good deeds and becomes lost in life. The system of the modern world causes new generations to become less happy because the centre of their life is no longer about "peace and unity". The religion sent by Allah gives us the duty to, firstly, have a solid personal construction and, secondly, to protect, resurrect, and sustain what is different. Improving life on earth is the duty of all intellectual human beings.

Al-Taqwa, which is the highest consciousness of duty and responsibility, is above all these principles. The level of justice is the closest to *al-taqwa* because it requires a deep sense of responsibility for the duties of Allah. Human beings who are not fooled by the deception of time will adhere to permanent values instead of pursuing temporary values. The first principle of salvation is to be the owner, not the

prisoner, of time. Man will have knowledge and faith reflected in his actions, and then recommend the right deeds and patience. Socialisation is possible only with a consciousness of worship. The abovementioned verse about *al-taqwa* emphasises clearly on the qualities of those who attain salvation in plural mode, as well as on the development of the law of friendship and goodwill. Man should fulfil Allah's orders with love and show compassion to all creatures. The fundamentals of faith cleanse the human soul and turns Man into a being who constantly feels God right beside him.

The Qur'an states that one of the most fundamental problems of human beings is not being able to see the mistakes of the previous generations and ancestors. Defending the wrongs of our ancestors, with whom we have the same lineage and blood relation, and not being able to display an original stance distracts us from the line of justice stipulated by conscience and the Qur'an, and imprisons us in the darkness of cruelty.

In sum, Islam's emphasis on the protection of generation can be understood from two perspectives. First of all, Islam seeks to ensure that generations of all living creatures should be preserved in terms of environmental and biological considerations. Secondly, Islam intends not only to guarantee the biological continuation of the human species, but also to offer guarantees to the moral, religious, and legal character of their future generations. It is one of our major responsibilities to afford full protection to human beings.

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