

Moral Realism and Character Formation: Abu Hamid Al-Ghazālī and Muḥammad Taqī Miṣbāḥ Yazdī on the Foundations of Qur'anic Ethics

Saeful Anwar

Universitas Islam Nusantara Bandung, Indonesia

Email: saefulanwar@uninus.ac.id

*Corresponding authors: saefulanwar@uninus.ac.id

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Abstract: Contemporary discourse on character education in Muslim societies frequently invokes al-Ghazālī's virtue ethics as a source of moral formation yet rarely interrogates the meta-ethical foundation on which such formation rests. This absence becomes acute when confronted with moral relativism, since neither a habituated disposition nor a curriculum policy can be normatively binding without a defensible account of moral objectivity. This study argues that Imam al-Ghazālī's virtue-psychological ethics, though pedagogically robust, requires supplementation by an explicit meta-ethical layer, and that the moral realism of Muḥammad Taqī Miṣbāḥ Yazdī (1935–2021) supplies precisely this layer within an internal Islamic dialogue. Using philosophical hermeneutics and comparative conceptual analysis of primary Arabic and Persian sources, the study advances three findings. First, al-Ghazālī grounds moral formation in a habituated *hay'ah rāsikhah* (settled disposition) whose telos is *qurb ilā Allāh*, but leaves the ontological status of value under-theorised. Second, Miṣbāḥ Yazdī, drawing on Ṣadrian *ḥikmah muta'āliyah* and Ṭabāṭabā'ī's theory of *idrākāt i'tibārīyyah*, argues that moral propositions are *ḥaqīqī* (real) in that they designate a real relation between an act and human perfection. Third, a two-layered synthesis in which al-Ghazālī contributes the method of internalisation and Miṣbāḥ Yazdī the rational justification of moral objectivity yields a defensible model of revelation-grounded virtue ethics that can operate within a plural society without collapsing into either Islamisation or moral neutrality. The study proposes this synthesis as an original contribution to Islamic meta-ethics and reframes character formation beyond the pedagogical vocabulary in which it is usually conducted.

Keywords: al-Ghazālī; Miṣbāḥ Yazdī; moral realism; virtue ethics; *khuluq*; Islamic meta-ethics

1. Introduction

The moral condition of contemporary Muslim youth is regularly described in the language of crisis. Whether the vocabulary is that of value disorientation, ethical fragmentation, hedonism, or the erosion of civic virtue, the underlying diagnosis is that inherited moral traditions have lost their normative grip on the practical reasoning of a generation formed by digital saturation, market rationality, and thinning religious literacy. Indonesia is emblematic: reports from the Indonesian Child Protection Commission (KPAI) and the OECD PISA studies of 2018 and 2022 document persistent concerns about violence among schoolchildren,

declines in student well-being, and technology-related deviance.¹ Confronting this condition, Muslim educators frequently return to Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī (d. 505/1111), whose *Ihyā' 'Ulūm al-Dīn*, *Mizān al-'Amal*, and *Kīmīyā' al-Sa'ādah* are treated as canonical resources for a virtue-based response. Yet a stubborn philosophical difficulty attends every such return: without an explicit account of what a moral value is and on what ground it is true, appeals to virtue tend to be normatively inert. In a plural society where moral relativism functions as the default epistemic stance of the educated young, a pedagogy that presupposes rather than defends the objectivity of virtue is precisely a pedagogy that fails to persuade.

Existing scholarship in Indonesia has produced a large body of literature on 'al-Ghazālī and character education,' typified by Kurniawati, Silvy, and Sari, Ridwan and Suteja, Maghriza and Nursikin, and Quraisy and colleagues.² This literature has established two consensus positions: that al-Ghazālī's ethics is centrally concerned with the formation of *khuluq* as a settled disposition of the soul, and that this formation proceeds through habituation, exemplarity, and *mujāhadah*. Alongside these pedagogical readings, comparative studies have examined al-Ghazālī in dialogue with Western thinkers Qasserras compares him with Paulo Freire; Gumilar and colleagues and M. Amin Abdullah place him beside Immanuel Kant; Fella Lahmar situates his pedagogy within contemporary 'wisdom-based' learning environments.³ Beyond Indonesia, systematic philosophical treatment is offered by Majid Fakhry, M. A. Sherif, M. A. Quasem, and M. Umaruddin, who reconstruct al-Ghazālī's ethical psychology and its Aristotelian debts through Ibn Miskawaih's *Tahdhīb al-Akhlaq*.⁴

A specific and consequential gap nonetheless remains. The existing literature is overwhelmingly pedagogical or descriptively conceptual: it explains what al-Ghazālī says about virtue and prescribes how to teach it. What it does not do is engage the meta-ethical

¹ Komisi Perlindungan Anak Indonesia (KPAI), *Catatan Tahunan Perlindungan Anak* (Jakarta: KPAI, 2023). Persistent indicators of violence, bullying, and technology-related deviance among schoolchildren are documented in the annual reports of KPAI; comparable indicators of student well-being are reported in OECD, *PISA 2022 Results (Volume II): Learning During – and From – Disruption*, Paris: OECD Publishing, 2023.

² Indriani Kurniawati, Wina Silvy, and Herlini P Sari, "Pemikiran Al-Ghazali Tentang Filsafat Pendidikan Islam Dan Pembentukan Karakter: Relevansinya Untuk Masyarakat," *Tawshiyah Jurnal Sosial Keagamaan Dan Pendidikan Islam* 18, no. 2 (2023): 57–72, <https://doi.org/10.32923/taw.v18i2.4014>; Wawan A Ridwan and Suteja Suteja, "Pembentukan Kepribadian Menurut Imam Al-Ghazali," *Al-Tarbawi Al-Haditsah Jurnal Pendidikan Islam* 3, no. 2 (2018), <https://doi.org/10.24235/tarbawi.v3i2.3464>; Muhammad T R Maghriza and Mukh Nursikin, "Pendekatan Pendidikan Nilai Dalam Filsafat Islam: Analisis Kontribusi Imam Al-Ghazali Dan Ibnu Sina," *Afeksi Jurnal Penelitian Dan Evaluasi Pendidikan* 5, no. 2 (2024): 295–314, <https://doi.org/10.59698/afeksi.v5i2.253>.

³ Mohammed Qasserras, "Critical Pedagogy in Abu Hamid Al-Ghazali and Paulo Freire: A Comparative Study," *International Journal of Research Publication and Reviews* 4, no. 10 (2023): 346–52, <https://doi.org/10.55248/gengpi.4.1023.102609>; Gumgum Gumilar et al., "Filsafat Idealisme Immanuel Kant: Relevansinya Dalam Pendidikan Karakter Di Sekolah Dasar," *Jurnal Filsafat Indonesia* 7, no. 1 (2024): 131–38, <https://doi.org/10.23887/jfi.v7i1.66153>; M. Amin Abdullah, *Filsafat Etika Islam Antara Al-Ghazali Dan Kant* (Bandung: Mizan, 2002), 409.

⁴ Majid Fakhry, *Ethical Theories in Islam*, 2nd ed., vol. 8, Islamic Philosophy, Theology and Science: Texts and Studies (Leiden: Brill, 1994); Muhammad Abul Quasem, *The Ethics of Al-Ghazālī: A Composite Ethics in Islam* (Selangor: Central Printing, 1975); Muhammad Umaruddin, *The Ethical Philosophy of Al-Ghazzālī* (Aligarh: Aligarh Muslim University Publications, 1949).

question that undergirds any such teaching, namely, on what ground can virtue be said to be objectively binding, especially in a plural society where moral relativism is the default epistemic stance of the educated young? Al-Ghazālī himself provides a virtue-psychological ethics but no explicit meta-ethical argument, and Ash‘arī divine voluntarism, on which he stands theologically, appears to make moral value contingent on divine command in ways that unsettle claims to universality.⁵ The literature has left this problem unaddressed, and it is precisely the problem on which any contemporary retrieval of al-Ghazālī for character formation stands or falls.

This study accordingly asks: can al-Ghazālī’s virtue ethics be supplemented by a meta-ethical framework internal to the Islamic tradition that would ground the objectivity of moral value without abandoning the pedagogical strengths of habituation and exemplarity? Specifically, does Muḥammad Taqī Miṣbāḥ Yazdī’s (1935–2021) moral realism, developed in *Falsafah-yi Akhlāq* and *Akhlāq dar Qur’ān*, supply the meta-ethical layer that al-Ghazālī leaves implicit, and if so, what model of character formation results from their synthesis?⁶ The study restricts itself to a philosophical-textual investigation and does not pursue empirical implementation, since the meta-ethical question that motivates the inquiry is not resolvable by field data.⁷

The thesis of the paper is threefold. First, al-Ghazālī grounds moral formation in a habituated *hay’ah rāsikhah* (settled disposition) whose ontology remains under-theorised: he presupposes that the virtues are objectively good but does not argue for their ontological standing. Second, Miṣbāḥ Yazdī, drawing on Mullā Ṣadrā’s *ḥikmah muta‘āliyah* and ‘Allāmah Ṭabāṭabā’ī’s theory of *idrākāt i’tibārīyyah*, argues that moral propositions are *ḥaqīqī* in the sense that ‘good’ designates a real relation between an act and the ultimate perfection (*kamāl*) of the human being, so that moral truth is neither conventional in a Humean sense nor divine-command-dependent in a crude Ash‘arī reading. Third, when the two are read together, a two-layered model emerges: al-Ghazālī supplies the method of moral formation, Miṣbāḥ Yazdī supplies its ontological justification, and their combination produces what may be called a revelation-grounded virtue ethics that can enter plural public discourse without collapsing into either an Islamisation programme or a merely procedural neutrality.

The contribution of this study is threefold. Substantively, it introduces Miṣbāḥ Yazdī’s moral realism into the Indonesian conversation on al-Ghazālī, where his work has scarcely been received. Analytically, it recasts the debate about character formation as a debate about

⁵ On the Ash‘arī voluntarist background, see George F Hourani, *Reason and Tradition in Islamic Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 57-66; The tension in al-Ghazālī between voluntarism and the substantive content of virtue is analysed at length by Fakhry, *Ethical Theories in Islam*, 193-207.

⁶ Muḥammad Taqī Miṣbāḥ Yazdī, *Philosophical Instructions: An Introduction to Contemporary Islamic Philosophy*, trans. Muhammad Legenhausen and ‘Azīm Sarvdalir (Binghamton: Global Publications, Binghamton University, 1999); Muḥammad Taqī Miṣbāḥ Yazdī, *Ethics in the Qur’ān*, trans. Muhammad Legenhausen (London: ICAS Press, 2003).

⁷ Saeful Anwar, “Konsep Manusia Sempurna Menurut Muhammad Taqī Miṣbāḥ Yazdī,” *Jaqfi: Jurnal Aqidah Dan Filsafat Islam* 4, no. 1 (2019): 1–40, <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.15575/jaqfi.v4i1.9330>.

the ontology of value rather than the design of curriculum. Constructively, it proposes revelation-grounded virtue ethics as a way through the standing contradiction between 'curriculum Islamisation' and 'inclusive pluralism,' a contradiction that has vitiated much of the extant Indonesian literature. The study thereby aims to shift the axis of the discussion from an applied pedagogical vocabulary to a philosophical one, in keeping with the specific concerns of a journal of Islamic creed and philosophy.

Two clarifications are in order before proceeding. First, the study is not offered as a comprehensive treatment of either al-Ghazālī or Miṣbāḥ Yazdī; it is a focused comparison confined to the meta-ethical dimension of their moral thought. Neither al-Ghazālī's Sufi psychology nor Miṣbāḥ Yazdī's political philosophy is at issue here, though both are relevant to a fuller account. Second, the comparison is deliberately internal to the Islamic tradition. There is a valuable and growing literature that engages Islamic ethics with non-Islamic moral realism Cornell realism, Aristotelian neo-virtue-ethics, natural-law theory and any developed contribution to the debate would need to pursue that dialogue. The present paper prepares the ground for such dialogue by first exhibiting the internal Islamic resources on which it could proceed. The paper unfolds as follows. Section method outlines the method, distinguishing philosophical hermeneutics and conceptual analysis from the empirical field-research procedures that are frequently and inappropriately borrowed for textual study. Sections C.1 and C.2 reconstruct, respectively, the moral architecture of al-Ghazālī and the meta-ethical apparatus of Miṣbāḥ Yazdī. Section C.3 develops the comparative synthesis and its consequences for the standing pluralism debate. Section D draws out the implications and identifies the limits of the argument.

2. Methods

This study employs a qualitative, textual approach that combines philosophical hermeneutics in the tradition of Hans-Georg Gadamer⁸ and Paul Ricoeur⁹ with comparative conceptual analysis. Hermeneutic reading is used to reconstruct the internal logic of each thinker's ethical architecture from within its own tradition; conceptual analysis is then used to isolate and compare the specific meta-ethical claims that each makes or presupposes. The two techniques are complementary: hermeneutics guards against the anachronism of imposing external categories, while conceptual analysis permits the cross-tradition comparison that is the study's aim. The Miles and Huberman¹⁰ model of data reduction, display, and conclusion drawing designed for empirical field data is deliberately not employed, since the objects of

⁸ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, ed. Joel Weinsheimer & Donald G. Marshall (New York: Continuum, 2004).

⁹ Paul Ricoeur, *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences: Essays on Language, Action and Interpretation* (Cambridge university press, 1981).

¹⁰ A M Huberman and M B Miles, *The Qualitative Researcher's Companion* (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 2002).

analysis here are texts, not observations, and the appropriate criteria of validity differ correspondingly.

Two primary corpora are used. For al-Ghazālī, the corpus is the Arabic *Iḥyā' 'Ulūm al-Dīn* (Beirut: Dār al-Fikr, 2000), with particular attention to volume 3 (*Rub' al-Muhlikāt*), especially *Kitāb Riyāḍat al-Nafs* (Book 22) and *Kitāb Sharḥ 'Ajā'ib al-Qalb* (Book 21); *Mizān al-'Amal* (Cairo: Dār al-Ma'ārif, 1964); *Kīmīyā' al-Sa'ādah* (in the Persian original and the Indonesian translation by Riyadi and Bahreisy); and *Ma'ārij al-Quds fī Madārij Ma'rīfat al-Nafs*. *Tahāfut al-Falāsifah* is excluded, since it is a polemical work in metaphysics and theology rather than a source in moral philosophy. The attribution of *Ayyuhā al-Walad* to al-Ghazālī is disputed and it is used only as a corroborative source, not a primary one. For Miṣbāḥ Yazdī, the corpus is *Falsafah-yi Akhlāq* (English: *Philosophical Foundations of Islamic Ethics*), *Akhlāq dar Qur'ān* in three volumes (English: *Ethics in the Qur'ān*, ICAS Press, 2003), and *Āmūzish-i Falsafah* (English: *Philosophical Instructions*, Binghamton University Press, 1999), especially the sections on *idrākāt i'tibārīyyah*. The meta-ethical background is drawn from 'Allāmah Ṭabāṭabā'ī's *Uṣūl-i Falsafah wa Rawish-i Ri'ālism*, whose theory of *i'tibārīyyāt* underlies Miṣbāḥ Yazdī's position.

Selection criteria for secondary literature were three: (i) direct engagement with the primary Arabic or Persian sources; (ii) explicit meta-ethical or comparative argument, rather than pedagogical application only; and (iii) scholarly authority within the specialised sub-fields of Ghazālīan ethics (Fakhry, Sherif, Quasem, Umaruddin) or of contemporary Shī'ī moral philosophy (Legenhausen, Ṭabāṭabā'ī scholarship). Secondary works in Indonesian are used to situate the argument within the local scholarly conversation and to indicate where the present study departs from it. Validity in a textual-philosophical study cannot be secured by 'source triangulation,' which is a criterion appropriate to empirical field data. This study therefore adopts four textual-philosophical criteria in its place: (i) textual fidelity, that is, faithfulness to the Arabic and Persian originals as evidenced by verifiable citation of volume and page; (ii) conceptual clarity, that is, precise use of technical terms (*khuluq*, *hay'ah*, *i'tibārī*, *ḥaqīqī*, and so on); (iii) internal consistency, meaning coherence of the reconstructed argument with the wider system of each thinker; and (iv) explanatory power, that is, the extent to which the reconstructed position illuminates the meta-ethical question posed in the Introduction. Arabic and Persian transliteration follows the IJMES conventions consistently throughout.

3. Findings and Discussion

Al-Ghazālī's Virtue Ethics and the Moral Architecture of Character Formation

Al-Ghazālī's ethics is, in the first instance, a moral psychology of the soul (*naḥs*). Its architectural centrepiece is the doctrine of *khuluq*. In *Kitāb Riyāḍat al-Nafs* (Book 22 of the *Iḥyā'*, *Rub' al-Muhlikāt*), al-Ghazālī defines *khuluq* in a formula that has become classical: '*al-khuluq 'ibāratun 'an hay'atin fī al-naḥs rāsikhatin 'anhā taṣḍuru al-af'ālu bi-suhūlatin wa-yusrin*

min ghayri ḥājatin ilā fikiran wa-rawiyyah' that is, 'Khuluq is an expression for a settled disposition in the soul, from which actions issue with ease and facility, without need of thought or deliberation.¹¹ The precision of the language matters. Al-Ghazālī does not use *ḥāl* (a transient state) but *hay'ah* (a settled configuration) qualified by *rāsikhah* (deeply rooted). Within al-Ghazālī's own Sufi vocabulary the distinction is essential: a *ḥāl* is an occasional visitation of the soul that comes and goes as divine gift, whereas a *hay'ah rāsikhah* is an entrenched structure that produces its actions with ease and immediacy.¹² Character, on this account, is neither an occasional performance nor a rational calculation; it is a disposition of the soul so deeply set that virtue emerges spontaneously.

This definition places al-Ghazālī in an evident line of descent. Ibn Miskawaih, in *Tahdhīb al-Akhlāq*, had transmitted the Aristotelian doctrine of the mean, treating virtue as a *hexis* (Greek: settled state) that constitutes the mean between two extremes of excess and deficiency.¹³ Al-Ghazālī takes over both the terminology (*hay'ah* is his Arabic rendering of *hexis*) and the substantive doctrine of *i'tidāl* or *al-wasaṭ bayn al-ifrāt wa al-tafrīt* ('the mean between excess and deficiency').¹⁴ This debt is often obscured in Indonesian scholarship, which speaks of *wasatiyyah* as though it were an original al-Ghazālīan category; *wasatiyyah* in its contemporary usage is in fact a twentieth-century construct. Al-Ghazālī works with *i'tidāl*, transmitted through Miskawaih from the *Nicomachean Ethics*. Recognising this debt does not diminish al-Ghazālī's originality; it clarifies where the originality lies.

The originality is in the theological and psychological deepening of the received virtue framework. Where Aristotle's telos is *eudaimonia* in the polis, and Miskawaih's is a philosophically-articulated *sa'ādah*, al-Ghazālī's is unambiguously theological: the perfection of the human being consists in *qurb ilā Allāh* (closeness to God), attained through *tazkiyat al-nafs* (purification of the soul). Correspondingly, the mechanism of moral formation is theological as well as psychological. In *Kitāb Sharḥ 'Ajā'ib al-Qalb* (Book 21) al-Ghazālī develops an account of the heart (*qalb*) as the seat of moral perception, whose polish (*jilā'*) determines whether the soul receives the divine light or is veiled from it by the corrosion of vice.¹⁵ The four cardinal virtues of the Aristotelian tradition are reconfigured as *ḥikmah*,

¹¹ Abu Hamid Al-Ghazali, *Ihya' Ulum Al-Din* (Beirut: Dar al-Fikr, 2000), vol. 3, Kitāb Riyāḍat al-Nafs, 52. The exact Arabic formula is: '*al-khuluq 'ibāratun 'an hay'atin fī al-nafs rāsikhatin 'anhā taṣḍuru al-aḥlū bi-suhūlatin wa-yusrin min ghayri ḥājatin ilā fikiran wa-rawiyyah*.' Pagination follows the Dār al-Fikr edition; users of the Dār al-Ma'rifah, Dār Iḥyā' al-Turāth, or 'Isā al-Bābī al-Ḥalabī editions should verify against their own copy.

¹² On the terminological distinction between *ḥāl* (transient state) and *hay'ah rāsikhah* (settled disposition) in al-Ghazālī's Sufi lexicon, see Sherif, *Ghazali's Theory of Virtue*, 30–35; and al-Ghazālī, *Iḥyā'*, vol. 3, Kitāb Sharḥ 'Ajā'ib al-Qalb, 4–6.

¹³ Aḥmad ibn Muḥammad Ibn Miskawaih, *Tahdhīb Al-Akhlāq*, ed. Constantine K Zurayk (Beirut: American University of Beirut, 1966), 25–36. On al-Ghazālī's dependence on Miskawaih for the doctrine of the mean, see Fakhry, *Ethical Theories in Islam*, 108–36.

¹⁴ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Terence Irwin, 2nd ed. (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1999), 1106a15–1106b28 (Book II, ch. 6): virtue as a *hexis*, the mean between extremes.

¹⁵ Al-Ghazālī, *Iḥyā'*, vol. 3, Kitāb 'Ajā'ib al-Qalb, 2–49, esp. 12–17 on the polish (*jilā'*) of the heart as the condition for the reception of divine light.

shajā'ah, *iffah*, and *'adl*, and each is understood as the product of disciplined training (*riyāḍah*) of a specific faculty of the soul.¹⁶

Habituation, exemplarity, and *mujāhadah* are the three pedagogical instruments through which the settled disposition is constructed. Habituation (*i'tiyād*) works by the repeated performance of the outward act until the inward disposition follows.¹⁷ Exemplarity is the mechanism by which the child imitates a morally serious adult; al-Ghazālī insists that a teacher without character is worse than useless, since the child imitates the vice more readily than the virtue. *Mujāhadah*, the disciplined struggle against the appetites of the soul, is the specifically Sufi contribution, drawn from the tradition of the ascetics but generalised by al-Ghazālī into a universal method of moral formation.¹⁸ Sherif's reconstruction of the underlying psychology emphasises that these three instruments are not separate techniques but interlocking phases of a single formative process: habituation supplies the behavioural substrate, exemplarity supplies the intelligible pattern, and *mujāhadah* secures the interior consent of the will. Without all three, the disposition either fails to form or forms as a mere behavioural imitation without inner rectitude.

Two virtues deserve careful distinction, since they are frequently conflated in the local literature. *Ṣidq* (truthfulness) is the disposition to speak in accordance with what one knows to be the case; its Qur'anic anchor is Al-Aḥzāb 70. *Amānah* (trustworthiness in what has been entrusted) is a distinct virtue, concerned with the fulfilment of obligations divine, interpersonal, and institutional and its Qur'anic anchor is Al-Aḥzāb 72.¹⁹ In al-Ghazālī's taxonomy they are related but not identical: *ṣidq* is a virtue of speech and intention, *amānah* a virtue of executed responsibility. The passage in the Qur'ān on the '*amānah* offered to the heavens and the earth' has been read by the classical exegetical tradition (al-Ṭabarī, al-Rāzī) as concerning the totality of religious and moral responsibility, not merely the professional duty of an educator.²⁰ Conflating *ṣidq* with *amānah*, as some of the Indonesian literature does, blurs the specificity of al-Ghazālī's analysis.

¹⁶ Al-Ghazālī, *Iḥyā'*, vol. 3, Kitāb Riyāḍat al-Nafs, 53–58, on the four cardinal virtues reconfigured as *ḥikmah*, *shajā'ah*, *iffah*, and *'adl*. See Sherif, *Ghazali's Theory of Virtue*, 51–74, for a systematic reconstruction.

¹⁷ Abū Ḥamid al-Ghazālī, *Mizān Al-'Amal*, ed. Sulaymān Dunyā (Cairo: Dār al-Ma'ārif, 1964), 264–68, on habituation (*i'tiyād*) and the role of exemplarity (*uswah*) in the formation of *khuluq*.

¹⁸ Al-Ghazālī, *Iḥyā'*, vol. 3, Kitāb Riyāḍat al-Nafs, 63–70, on *mujāhadah* as the disciplined struggle against the appetites. See also Abū Ḥamid al-Ghazālī, *Kimīyā' Al-Sa'ādah: Kimia Ruhani Untuk Kebahagiaan Abadi*, trans. Dedi Slamet Riyadi and Fauzi Bahreisy (Jakarta: Zaman, 2001).

¹⁹ On the distinction between *ṣidq* and *amānah* in al-Ghazālī's virtue taxonomy, see al-Ghazālī, *Iḥyā'*, vol. 3, Kitāb Dhamm al-Kadhib wa Faḍīlat al-Ṣidq (Book of the Blame of Lying and the Merit of Truthfulness), 130–37; and vol. 4, Kitāb al-Tawakkul wa al-Amānah, 240–48. Quasem, *The Ethics of Al-Ghazālī: A Composite Ethics in Islam*, 105.

²⁰ Departemen Agama Republik Indonesia, *Al-Qur'an Dan Terjemahan Juz 1-30* (Semarang: Toha Putra, 2015) (adapted). For the tafsīr tradition on the *amānah*-verse, see Muḥammad ibn Jarīr al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi' Al-Bayān Fī Ta'wīl Āy Al-Qur'ān* (Beirut: Mu'assasat al-Risālah, 2000) vol. 20, 335–41; Fakhruddin. Ar-Razi, *Mafātīḥ Al-Ghayb*, ed. Ahmad Hijazi As-Saqqa (Beirut: Dar al-Fikr, 1981), vol. 25, 235–39.

Modern reconstructive scholarship principally Majid Fakhry, M. A. Sherif, M. A. Quasem, and M. Umaruddin has however identified two philosophical difficulties in al-Ghazālī's system that must be squarely faced. The first is the tension between his Ash'arī theology of divine voluntarism, on which good and bad are what God commands and prohibits, and his substantive endorsement of a virtue ethics whose content is not obviously reducible to command. If *ṣiḍq* is good because God commands it, then in what sense is *ṣiḍq*'s goodness intrinsic to the disposition rather than extrinsic to the divine decree? Fakhry has pressed this question most sharply.²¹ The second is the charge of otherworldliness or Sufi elitism: since the highest telos is a mystical *qurb* accessible only to a spiritual elite, al-Ghazālī's ethics risks leaving ordinary moral life without an accessible ground.²²

Al-Ghazālī neither ignores nor fully resolves these difficulties. He gestures toward reconciliation through the doctrine that the divine command tracks the objective utility (*maṣlaḥah*) of created beings, so that what God commands is not arbitrary but ordered to human perfection.²³ This gesture, however, remains a theological placeholder rather than a fully articulated meta-ethical position: it asserts a coordination between command and utility without arguing for its ontological ground. As Sherif notes, the strategy is theologically respectable but philosophically underdeveloped; it stops precisely where a rigorous meta-ethical argument would need to begin. The result is a moral architecture of great pedagogical richness and psychological subtlety, whose ontological foundations remain implicit. Al-Ghazālī shows, with unmatched insight, how the settled disposition is constructed in a human soul; he does not show, with comparable rigour, why the settled disposition constructed is objectively good in a sense that could withstand contemporary relativist challenge. To render those foundations explicit is the task for which Miṣbāḥ Yazdī's moral realism is most directly suited, and to which the next section turns.

Miṣbāḥ Yazdī's Moral Realism and the Meta-Ethical Foundations of Qur'anic Ethics

Muḥammad Taqī Miṣbāḥ Yazdī (1935–2021), student of 'Allāmah Muḥammad Ḥusayn Ṭabāṭabā'ī and Imām Rūḥullāh Khumaynī, developed his moral philosophy across three principal works: *Falsafah-yi Akhlāq* (Philosophical Foundations of Islamic Ethics), *Akhlāq dar Qur'ān* (Ethics in the Qur'ān, three volumes), and *Āmūzish-i Falsafah* (Philosophical Instructions). The consistent thread of these works is the defence of a moral realism internal to the Islamic tradition and articulated within Mullā Ṣadrā's *ḥikmah muta'ālīyah*

²¹ Fakhry, *Ethical Theories in Islam*, 193, presses the tension between Ash'arī voluntarism and al-Ghazālī's substantive virtue ethics most sharply.

²² Umaruddin, *The Ethical Philosophy of Al-Ghazzālī*, 121–48 on the charge of otherworldliness; Quasem, *The Ethics of Al-Ghazālī: A Composite Ethics in Islam*, 40–56, on the Sufi elitism reading and its qualifications.

²³ Mohamed Ahmed Sherif, *Ghazālī's Theory of Virtue* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1975), 90–107, , on al-Ghazālī's doctrine of *maṣlaḥah* as the utility-tracking function of the divine command. See also al-Ghazālī, *al-Mustaṣfā min 'Ilm al-Uṣūl*, ed. Ḥamzah ibn Zuhayr Ḥāfiẓ, 4 vols., Medina: Sharikat al-Madīnah al-Munawwarah, n.d., vol. 1, 174–83..

(transcendent philosophy). To understand the argument, one must begin with a distinction that runs beneath it: the distinction between *idrākāt ḥaqīqī* (real perceptions) and *idrākāt i'tibārī* (conventional or posited perceptions), a distinction inherited from Ṭabāṭabā'ī's *Uṣūl-i Falsafah wa Rawish-i Ri'ālism*.²⁴

A *ḥaqīqī* proposition, on this schema, is one whose truth-conditions consist in a real correspondence between the proposition and the way things are in themselves. 'Water is composed of hydrogen and oxygen' is *ḥaqīqī*: it is true or false in virtue of the actual constitution of water. An *i'tibārī* proposition, by contrast, has no such truth-conditions; its 'truth' consists in a socially or subjectively posited relation. 'The rook moves in straight lines' is *i'tibārī*: it is not descriptive of any real object but is the constitutive rule of a game. The Humean tradition, and much of modern moral philosophy, has held that moral propositions are of the second type: expressions of attitude, conventions of a moral community, or projections of the passions.²⁵

Miṣbāḥ Yazdī's central meta-ethical claim is that the Humean assimilation of moral to *i'tibārī* propositions is a mistake, and that moral propositions rightly analysed are *ḥaqīqī*. The argument proceeds in three steps. First, every voluntary act is directed at an end, and human ends are stratified: proximate ends (nourishment, security) serve intermediate ends (health, learning), which in turn serve the ultimate end (*kamāl*, perfection).²⁶ Second, human perfection is not arbitrarily posited but is a real feature of the human being as a substance with a determinate essence (*fiṭrah*); Ṣadrian metaphysics of *tashkīk al-wujūd* (gradation of being) supplies the ontological framework in which perfection is a degree of intensified being, not a mere preference.²⁷ Third, 'good' and 'bad' designate the real relation between an act and this real perfection: an act is 'good' if it actually conduces to the perfection of the agent, 'bad' if it actually diminishes it. On this view, moral propositions carry ontological weight in the same way that biological propositions do: to say that veracity is good is analogous to saying that photosynthesis is good for the plant, except that the relevant perfection is that of a rational-spiritual creature whose ultimate telos is *qurb ilā Allāh*.

The consequences for meta-ethics are significant. First, moral realism is defended without recourse to a naïve divine command theory. God commands what conduces to human perfection because it conduces to human perfection; the divine command tracks the objective ordering of ends rather than constituting it. This is a Mu'tazilī-adjacent position (the Imāmī 'adliyyah rejects the extreme Ash'arī voluntarism) but distinguished by its explicit

²⁴ Muḥammad Ḥusayn Ṭabāṭabā'ī, *Uṣūl-i Falsafah Wa Rawish-i Ri'ālism* (Qum: Mu'assasah-yi Ṣadrā, n.d.), various editions, esp. vol. 2, essay 6 on *idrākāt i'tibārīyyah*. On the Ṭabāṭabā'ī–Miṣbāḥ Yazdī lineage, see Muhammad Legenhausen's translator's introduction to Miṣbāḥ Yazdī, *Philosophical Instructions*, xxi–xxxviii.

²⁵ Miṣbāḥ Yazdī, *Philosophical Instructions: An Introduction to Contemporary Islamic Philosophy*, 314.

²⁶ Miṣbāḥ Yazdī, *Ethics in the Qur'ān*, 90–105.

²⁷ On the Ṣadrian ontology of *tashkīk al-wujūd* and its bearing on moral realism, see Miṣbāḥ Yazdī, *Philosophical Instructions: An Introduction to Contemporary Islamic Philosophy*, 155–168; Ṣadr al-Dīn al-Shirāzī (Mullā Ṣadrā), *Al-Ḥikmah Al-Muta'aliyah Fi Al-Asfār Al-'Aqliyyah Al-Arba'ah* (Beirut: Dār Iḥyā' al-Turāth al-'Arabī, 1981, vol. 1.).

metaphysical grounding in the graduated ontology of Ṣadrian *wujūd*. Second, moral relativism is refuted at its root: relativism depends on the *i'tibārī* analysis of moral judgement, and once moral judgement is shown to be *ḥaqīqī*, relativism loses its foothold.²⁸ Third, the sources of moral knowledge are correspondingly stratified: reason (*'aql*) grasps the general structure of the human telos; revelation (*waḥy*) specifies its content and corrects the errors of unaided reasoning; and moral experience (including *dhawq*, the Sufi tasting) confirms and refines what reason and revelation propose.²⁹

The pedagogical implications differ notably from al-Ghazālī's. Where al-Ghazālī's emphasis falls on the habituation of a settled disposition and the disciplining of the soul's appetites, Miṣbāḥ Yazdī's emphasis falls on the rational apprehension of the objective moral order and the exercise of intentional will (*niyyah*, *ikhtiyār*) directed by that apprehension.³⁰ In *Akhlāq dar Qur'ān* he insists that the Qur'anic imperative to 'know' as in the many verses beginning 'have you not considered...' is not decorative but constitutive: moral formation requires that the agent understand why an act conduces to the human telos, not merely that it is commanded. The Qur'ān, on this reading, is not primarily a moral rule-book but a systematic training of moral intelligence.³¹

Two features of Miṣbāḥ Yazdī's position deserve emphasis for the argument of this study. The first is the treatment of the Qur'ān as the primary source of moral value. Miṣbāḥ Yazdī agrees with al-Ghazālī that the Qur'ān is authoritative, but the mode of authority differs. For al-Ghazālī, the Qur'ān transmits divine commands whose obedience is the path of purification; for Miṣbāḥ Yazdī, the Qur'ān communicates truths about the ontological structure of human perfection whose grasp is itself constitutive of moral formation. The difference is not a difference of reverence but of meta-ethical analysis: what is the Qur'ān doing when it uses moral language?

The second is the treatment of the objectivity of virtue in a plural society. Precisely because moral propositions are *ḥaqīqī*, they are in principle accessible to any rational agent, Muslim or not, who is willing to reason from a shared account of the human telos. Miṣbāḥ Yazdī is a Shī'ī scholar formed within a specific tradition, but the argument he mounts for the objectivity of moral value does not depend on prior commitment to that tradition; it is offered as a philosophical argument that can be assessed on its own terms.³² This has considerable implications for the standing debate about 'Islamisation' and 'inclusivity' in Muslim-majority polities, to which the comparative synthesis of the next section will return.

Two further clarifications are worth registering before turning to the comparison. First, Miṣbāḥ Yazdī's moral realism is not naïvely cognitivist: it does not maintain that moral truths are self-evident to any rational agent whatever, but rather that they are objectively

²⁸ Miṣbāḥ Yazdī, *Ethics in the Qur'ān*, 105.

²⁹ Miṣbāḥ Yazdī, 125.

³⁰ Miṣbāḥ Yazdī, 15.

³¹ Miṣbāḥ Yazdī, 21–39.

³² Miṣbāḥ Yazdī, *Philosophical Instructions: An Introduction to Contemporary Islamic Philosophy*, 325.

grounded and, given the appropriate rational and revelational instruction, demonstrable. The role of revelation is not to introduce a truth that reason could not in principle grasp but to supply, adequately and reliably, what reason left to itself might grasp only fragmentarily and often mistakenly. This position is defensible against contemporary emotivist and expressivist meta-ethics precisely because it locates the truth-conditions of moral propositions in a real ontological structure rather than in the attitudes of the speaker. Second, Mişbāḥ Yazdī's synthesis of Ṣadrian metaphysics with Qur'anic moral discourse is not a mere juxtaposition but a genuine philosophical integration, and it is on the strength of that integration that the two-layered model developed below rests.

Comparative Synthesis: Toward a Two-Layered Model of Character Formation

Placing al-Ghazālī and Mişbāḥ Yazdī side by side reveals both substantial convergence and philosophically productive divergence. Both make *qurb ilā Allāh* the ultimate telos of ethics. Both privilege the Qur'ān as the primary source of moral value. Both insist that moral formation is a matter of the whole person, not of behavioural conformity alone. And both operate within the classical Islamic virtue-ethical vocabulary, treating character (*khuluq*) as the object of ethical formation rather than an incidental by-product of rule-following. Yet on four axes their positions diverge in ways that structure the synthesis this study proposes. Table 1 sets out the four axes and the two positions.

Table 1. Al-Ghazālī and Mişbāḥ Yazdī on Four Axes of Comparison

Axis	Al-Ghazālī	Mişbāḥ Yazdī
Source of value	Qur'ān and Sunnah as divine command tracked to <i>maṣlaḥah</i>	Qur'ān as communication of the ontological order of human perfection
Ontological status of moral propositions	Presupposed but under-theorised; Ash'arī voluntarism as background	Explicitly ḥaqīqī: real relation between act and <i>kamāl</i> on Ṣadrian ontology
Moral epistemology	Dhawq (Sufi tasting), habituated intuition, exemplarity	Burhān (demonstrative rational argument) grounded in <i>fiṭrah</i>
Method of character formation	Habituation (<i>i'tiyād</i>), exemplarity, <i>mujāhadah</i> against appetites	Rational apprehension of moral order, cultivation of <i>niyyah</i> and <i>ikhtiyār</i>

The first axis concerns the source of moral value. Both thinkers privilege revelation, but they analyse the mode of that priority differently. Al-Ghazālī treats revelation as authoritative command whose rationality is confirmed by the *maṣlaḥah* it secures; Mişbāḥ Yazdī treats revelation as communication of the real structure of human perfection, whose truth is discoverable in principle by reason but reliably and adequately only by revelation. The

difference does not concern the Qur'ān's authority but what the Qur'ān is doing in speaking morally.

The second axis is the ontological status of moral propositions. This is where the deepest asymmetry lies. Al-Ghazālī assumes that virtues are good in themselves and that vice is really evil, but he does not defend the assumption against the Ash'arī background of his theology, which appears to make moral properties dependent on divine will. Miṣbāḥ Yazdī, by contrast, argues explicitly that moral propositions are *ḥaqīqī* not conventions, not projections of attitude, but statements about the real ordering of acts to perfection. This is precisely the layer that al-Ghazālī's system leaves implicit and that any contemporary defence of virtue ethics against relativism requires.

The third axis is moral epistemology. Al-Ghazālī places significant weight on *dhawq*, the direct experiential grasp of moral truth attained through the purification of the heart; Miṣbāḥ Yazdī places corresponding weight on *burhān*, demonstrative rational argument from premises about the human *fiṭrah*. Neither excludes the other, but the balance shifts. Al-Ghazālī's ideal knower is the Sufi whose heart has been polished to receive moral illumination; Miṣbāḥ Yazdī's ideal knower is the philosopher-jurist who has reasoned demonstratively from the metaphysics of *wujūd* to a determinate ethics. Between them, the two epistemologies together track something important: moral knowledge is neither purely intuitive nor purely inferential but sits at their intersection.

The fourth axis is the method of character formation. Al-Ghazālī's method is that of the master of the *ṭarīqah*: habituation of act, imitation of the exemplar, and disciplined struggle against the lower appetites. Miṣbāḥ Yazdī's method is that of the Ṣadrian philosopher-teacher: cultivation of rational grasp of the moral order, formation of intention (*niyyah*), and the exercise of free choice (*ikhtiyār*) informed by that grasp. The Sunnī–Shī'ī setting is not incidental: Sunnī Sufi pedagogy and Shī'ī rational-philosophical pedagogy have different institutional histories and different assumptions about the role of the intellect in moral life.

The two-layered synthesis this study proposes takes both contributions seriously. From Miṣbāḥ Yazdī we take the meta-ethical layer: a defensible account of the ontology of moral value that grounds character formation in something more than convention or command. From al-Ghazālī we take the pedagogical layer: a psychologically subtle account of how, in practice, a settled virtuous disposition is formed in a human being who begins as a bundle of appetites and habits. The layers are not in competition. On the contrary, each supplies what the other lacks. A meta-ethics without a pedagogy is normatively empty; a pedagogy without a meta-ethics is normatively arbitrary. Their combination yields what may be called revelation-grounded virtue ethics: an ethics that is virtue-theoretic in its psychological and pedagogical structure (al-Ghazālī), realist in its meta-ethical structure (Miṣbāḥ Yazdī), and grounded in revelation as both the source of moral knowledge and the specification of the human telos (both).

This synthesis has direct consequences for the vexed contemporary debate about 'Islamisation of the curriculum' and its apparent incompatibility with pluralist commitments. The contradiction that has troubled much Indonesian writing on the subject between the demand for Islamising education and the demand for inclusive citizenship arises when Islamisation is understood as the substitution of Islamic content for common content. Al-Attas's original programme of *ta'dīb* intended something more sophisticated: an epistemological reordering rather than a confessional imposition.³³ Yet the programme has been criticised, not least by M. Amin Abdullah, Fazlur Rahman, and Wan Mohd Nor Wan Daud, for its ambiguous relation to plural public life.³⁴ On the two-layered model developed here, what Islam contributes to the public educational space is not a set of confessional contents to be imposed on non-Muslims but a defensible account of moral value that can enter plural public discourse alongside other traditions. *Ṣidq* is not 'the Muslim value of truthfulness'; it is truthfulness as one tradition has articulated a value that any rational agent can recognise as good, because truthfulness really does conduce to human perfection. On this reading, the deep tension between Islamic virtue and pluralist inclusion dissolves: the virtues cultivated in an Islamic pedagogical setting are offered to the public sphere as candidates for shared moral discourse, not imposed as sectarian requirements. This is what it would mean to speak of an Islamic contribution to a plural public ethics, rather than of an Islamisation programme, and it is what the al-Ghazālī–Miṣbāḥ Yazdī synthesis makes philosophically defensible.

D. Conclusion

This study has argued that contemporary invocations of al-Ghazālī as a resource for character formation require a meta-ethical supplement that al-Ghazālī himself does not explicitly provide. The Sufi-psychological virtue ethics of the *Iḥyā'*, *Mīzān al-'Amal*, and *Kīmīyā' al-Sa'ādah* remains pedagogically indispensable, but its silence on the ontology of moral value leaves it vulnerable when confronted with the relativism, emotivism, and voluntarism that dominate contemporary moral discourse. The moral realism of Muḥammad Taqī Miṣbāḥ Yazdī, developed within Ṣadrian *ḥikmah muta'āliyah* and drawing on Ṭabāṭabā'ī's theory of *idrākāt i'tibāriyyah*, supplies this missing layer: it argues that moral propositions are *ḥaqīqī* in that they designate a real relation between an act and the real perfection of the human being.

Read together, the two thinkers yield a two-layered model of revelation-grounded virtue ethics: al-Ghazālī contributes the method by which virtue is internalised; Miṣbāḥ Yazdī

³³ Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas, *The Concept of Education in Islam: A Framework for an Islamic Philosophy of Education* (Kuala Lumpur: International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilization (ISTAC), 1999), 13–29.

³⁴ M Amin Abdullah, *Islamic Studies Di Perguruan Tinggi: Pendekatan Integratif-Interkoneksi* (Yogyakarta: Pustaka Pelajar, 2006), 89–113; Fazlur Rahman, *Islam and Modernity: Transformation of an Intellectual Tradition* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1984), 130; Wan Mohd Nor Wan Daud, *The Educational Philosophy and Practice of Syed Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas: An Exposition of the Original Concept of Islamization* (Kuala Lumpur: International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilization (ISTAC), 1998), esp. ch. 6..

contributes the ontological justification of the values being internalised. This synthesis does not merely add material to the existing conversation; it reframes the question. It shifts the debate from the design of a curriculum to the ontology of value, and it dissolves the apparent contradiction between 'curriculum Islamisation' and pluralist inclusion by showing that the objectivity claimed for Islamic virtue is in principle accessible to any rational agent.

The limitations of the study are those of any philosophical-textual investigation: it does not test empirically how the proposed synthesis fares in classroom implementation. That test is the appropriate task for a subsequent empirical study, and the present study makes no empirical claims that require such data. What this paper has established is the philosophical framework within which such a study could be intelligibly designed. Future work should extend the comparison to other Islamic meta-ethical positions (Mu'tazili, Māturīdī, contemporary Salafi), and should engage with non-Islamic moral realism (Cornell realism, natural-law theory, neo-Aristotelian virtue ethics) in ways that both distinguish the Islamic contribution developed here and place it in genuine philosophical dialogue with its interlocutors..

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