

The Guiding Force for Moral Behaviour and the Role of Religion to Sustain it: A Comparative Study Through a Psychological Lens

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Abstract: Since time immemorial, the world has been shaped by various rules and codes of conduct. These rules, though varying with the demands of time, have been incorporated into human life to ensure harmony and prosperity. Of particular significance are the moral or ethical rules that have guided humanity along the path of goodness. Moral codes of conduct have always been tied to the idea of right and wrong, of goodness and evil, and are almost always introduced with religious or cultural undertones. While this may be the cause for differences in certain specific codes of conduct across different cultures and religions, nonetheless, there are also pieces of evidence pointing to a universal nature of moral and ethical values. There are some of these values that remain the same across cultures, and religions are causes for exploration. Therefore, the current paper seeks to explore the similarities in ethical or moral values and behavior found in religious scriptures, namely Futuwwat-nama and certain Hindu scriptures. Moreover, the paper briefly examines modern psychological theories to understand morality through religion. For this purpose, we have examined Muhammad ibn al-Husayn al-Sulami’s Futuwwat-nama, ‘The Book of Sufi Chivalry,’ and some Hindu scriptures, such as the ‘Rig Veda’, ‘Manu Smrithi’ and ‘Mahabharata’ to name a few. Three broad themes were identified and analyzed using various psychological theories.

Key Words: Moral Behaviour, Moral codes, Religion Futuwwat-nama, Hindu scriptures

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Ahlaki Davranışın Yol Gösterici Gücü ve Ahlaki Davranışın Sürdürülebilirliğinde Dinin Rolü: Psikolojik Açıdan Karşılaştırmalı Bir Çalışma

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Öz: Çok eski zamanlardan beri dünya çeşitli usul ve davranış kuralları tarafından şekillenmektedir. Zamanla değişmelerine rağmen bu kurallar, uyum ve refah sağlamaları için insan yaşamının vazgeçilmez öğeleri haline gelmişlerdir. İnsanlığı iyiliğe yönlendiren ahlaki veya etik kurallar özellikle önem arz etmektedirler. Ahlaki davranış kuralları her zaman doğru ve yanlış, iyilik ve kötülük fikrine bağlı kalmış ve neredeyse her zaman dini veya kültürel eğilimlerle birlikte takdim edilmişlerdir. Bu, çeşitli kültür ve dinlere has bazı davranış kurallarındaki farklılıkların nedeni olarak karşımıza çıkmaktadır; ancak yine de ahlaki ve etik değerlerin evrensel doğasına işaret eden kanıtlar da mevcuttur. Bu değerlerden bazıları farklı kültürlerde olmalarına rağmen aynı kalmışlardır ve dinler keşif için sebep niteliğindedirler. Dolayısıyla bu makale, dini metinlerde, bir diğer ifadeyle Fütüvvetname ve bazı Hindu metinlerinde bulunan etik veya ahlaki değerler ve davranışlardaki benzerlikleri araştırmayı amaçlamaktadır. Makale ayrıca din üzerinden ahlaki anlamak maksadıyla modern psikolojik teorileri kısa bir şekilde incelemektedir. Bu amaçla Muhammed ibn el-Hüseyin El-Sülemi'nin Fütüvvetnamesi 'Kitâbü'l-Fütüvve' ile 'Rigveda', 'Manusmriti' ve 'Mahabharata' gibi bazı Hindu kutsal metinlerini inceledik. Makalede çeşitli psikoloji teorileri kullanılarak üç geniş tema tanımlanmış ve analiz edilmiştir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Ahlaki Davranış, Ahlaki Kodlar, Din, Fütüvvetname, Hindu kutsal metinleri.

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القوة الإرشادية للسلوك الأخلاقي ودور الدين في استدامته: دراسة مقارنة من الناحية النفسية

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الملخص

تم تشكيل العالم من خلال قواعد سلوك وتصرفات مختلفة منذ عصور قديمة. وعلى الرغم من تغير هذه القواعد مع مرور الوقت إلا أنها أصبحت عنصراً لا يمكن الاستغناء عنه في حياة الإنسان من أجل توفير الانسجام والازدهار. هذه القواعد الأخلاقية أو المعنوية التي توجه الإنسانية إلى الخير لها أهمية بالغة. قواعد السلوك الأخلاقي بقيت مرتبطة بفكرة الحق والباطل والخير والشر وتم تقديمها في أغلب الأحيان بميول واتجاهات دينية وثقافية. وهذا يظهر لنا كسبب للاختلافات في بعض قواعد السلوك الخاصة بالثقافات والأديان المختلفة؛ ولكن هناك أيضاً دليل يشير إلى الطبيعة العالمية للقيم الأخلاقية والمعنوية. ورغم أن بعض هذه القيم موجودة في ثقافات مختلفة إلا أنها بقيت كما هي، والأديان هي أسباب لاكتشافها. لذلك، تهدف هذه المقالة إلى البحث في أوجه التشابه في القيم والسلوكيات الأخلاقية أو المعنوية في النصوص الدينية، بعبارة أخرى في كتاب «فتوة ناما» وبعض النصوص الهندوسية. كما تتناول المقالة بإيجاز النظريات النفسية الحديثة من أجل فهم الأخلاق من خلال الدين. ولهذا الغرض قمنا بفحص «كتاب الفتوة» لمحمد بن الحسين السلمي وبعض النصوص الهندوسية المقدسة مثل ريجفدا ومانوسمريتي ومهاباراتا. وفي المقالة تم تحديد وتحليل ثلاثة مواضيع واسعة باستخدام نظريات مختلفة في علم النفس.

الكلمات المفتاحية: السلوك الأخلاقي، الرموز الأخلاقية، الدين، فتوة ناما، النصوص الهندوسية المقدسة

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Introduction

The term ‘Futuwwah’ originates from an Arabic term called ‘Fata,’ which essentially refers to a young man.¹ Fata, as a term, has been used to identify the perfect individual or the hero. This level of being is essentially what the followers of Futuwwah are supposed to strive for. The concept of Futuwwah, originating from Islam, has been defined as an aggregate of all such values or virtues, which distinguish the brave youth.² The nobility of manner, generosity, and hospitality are just some of the values that an upright Muslim youth has to uphold. The concept of Futuwwah rose out of a need for ethical and moral values in society. It is identified to be the highest state of generosity and self-sacrifice. Although the popular narrative of Futuwwah is often presented concerning the youth, it is a message generalized to humanity as a whole. The followers of Futuwwah embody love for the Creator and all of His creations.

Furthermore, the values referred to in the Futuwwah can be traced to the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) and his close followers and is known as a ‘Futuwwat-nama’ when it is penned down. That is, the Futuwwat-nama represents a collection of the ethical and moral codes mentioned in the Quran or Hadith (sayings and practices of the Prophet Muhammed). There are several Futuwwat-nama that were written throughout history. While all of them are significant in their ways, the current paper will look into Muhammad ibn al-Husayn al-Sulami, who in his Futuwwat-nama ‘The Book of Sufi Chivalry’ reveals “the true meaning of compassion, love, friendship, generosity, self-denial, hospitality, and the right actions associated with these virtues.”

Hinduism, on the other hand, has these concepts distributed across multiple Holy Scriptures. The main scriptures of that are the ‘Vedas’ and the ‘Upanishad’, but it is in no way limited to these two scriptures. Instead, Hinduism boasts a repertoire of scriptures. Hinduism, as a religion, is distinguished by a complex set of beliefs and traditions. Originating in India, this religion is characterized by a belief in one absolute being, which has multiple manifestations in the form of deities. Hinduism also believes in reincarnation, and a Hindu’s ultimate goal in life is to break this cycle of rebirth and achieve spiritual transcendence.

Just as the idea of Futuwwah came out of Islam, Hinduism birthed the concept of ‘Dharma,’ which is essentially the ‘right way of life or living.’ It constitutes all the rules, duties, values, and laws that entail the proper way of living. But unlike Futuwwah, which later on fragmented into an organizational movement of its own, Dhar-

1 Aysylu, Saetgaraeva. Hospitality in Islamic civilization: Futuwwah in Ibn Battuta’s travelogue. (Unpublished master’s thesis). (Ibn Haldun University, Alliance of Civilization Institute, İstanbul, 2019).

2 Georgiades. “Futuwwah traditions in the ottoman empire akhis, bektashi dervishes, and craftsmen” *Journal of Near Eastern Studies*, 12.4 (1953): 128.

ma is intricately woven into the fabric of Hinduism. And it is by following one's Dharma that one can break the cycle of reincarnation and achieve spiritual transcendence. Living by Dharma provides order to life, society, and the universe, for it includes all forms of moral values and behaviors, which encompasses the entirety of one's life, and which is essential for the sustenance and well-being of the individual and society.³ As explained earlier, the distinction between Dharma and Futuwwah arises from the fact that Dharma encapsulates much more than just ethical or moral guidelines. It prescribes a set of duties for individuals; following and performing said guidelines are only one of the many duties prescribed. And it is for the reason that Dharma encapsulates not just moral codes of conduct that we will be examining multiple Hindu scriptures in the current paper, as opposed to the single source for Futuwwat-nama. Another reason for there being only one source of Futuwwat-nama has to do with the fact that most of the literature on Futuwwah focuses on the organizations that sprung out of its ideology rather than the ethical or moral values themselves.

Both religious ideologies propose a rather active form of morality in that they require the individual to act out moral values as opposed to just believing in them. And while virtue in itself is a broad term, it is not in any way limited to a specific religion. Instead, it is a universal reality. Even though this paper takes examples from just the concept of Futuwwah or Dharma (Hinduism) ideologies, all major religions in the world endorse similar moral values. Giving credence to this idea that morality is universal and that it develops in humanity irrespective of their theological beliefs, the role of religion in reinforcing said morality is to be given its due credit as well. One must understand that while morality is not, in any way, a product of just religion, there is a role that religion plays in sustaining it.

Therefore, the central idea of this paper is to explore the similarities in moral and ethical codes of conduct prescribed in the Futuwwat-nama and some Hindu scriptures. In addition to this, modern theories of moral development will also be reviewed to examine various nuances to understanding morality through religion. To begin with, three prevalent themes that are common to both Muhammad ibn al-Husayn al-Sulami's Futuwwat-nama, 'The Book of Sufi Chivalry', and some of the Hindu scriptures are presented here. Later in the paper, modern psychological theories will be explored briefly.

Hospitality

The tradition of Hospitality is perhaps the most important to the Futuwwah ideology. In simple terms, hospitality can be defined as warm and generous behavior towards guests. It is a relationship between a host and a guest that is based on mutual

³ Saetgaraeva, Hospitality in Islamic civilization.

principles of friendship, and a need to socialize. This value satisfies an individual's need to fit in and be accepted by the society they are a part of. Hospitality under the divine light is deemed holy, not just in Islam or Hinduism, but in most, if not all, major religions of the world.

In his *Futuwwat-nama*, Sulami has mentioned the importance of hospitality through the example of Prophet Abraham, for he made sure to share meals with others and was never seen eating alone.⁴ It is evident that the *Futuwwah* tradition gives importance to the value of hospitality as can be seen from the line; "through Muhammad ibn Quraysh, we hear that the Prophet said, how awful is a society that does not accept guests." Likewise, according to the Vedic view, it is an individual's dharma or duty to provide the best service to his/her guests. The *Rig Veda*, a Hindu scripture, maintains that "In men's houses, their well-loved guest was glorified"⁵ The verses mentioned above depict the principle of inviting guests into one's abode as an act of hospitality. The guests are to be treated with respect and kindness, and their needs placed over the needs of the host.

The Upanishads have gone as far as to say, "Let the guest be to you a deity!" The similitude of a guest with a deity is a recurring theme in Hindu scriptures and tradition. This implies the level of respect and care that the guests are to receive. Sulami's *Futuwwat-nama* may not share the same sentiments to be precise but emphasizes that one's approach to treating guests must be bounteous; "The host is supposed to share everything he has to his brother, even if it may be only a drop of water." The implication here is that no matter what social stature one may be, it becomes a moral duty to serve guests in the best way possible. There is only good that comes out of serving one's hosts. The same can be said for the guests as well, for all guests, no matter what their social or financial status, should be welcomed and treated graciously.

The *Manu Smrithi*, which contains the legal codes or duties proposed by Dharma, presents that "After the Brahmana, the kinsmen, and the servants have dined, the householder and his wife may afterward eat what remains."⁶ Following this; "Having honored the gods, the sages, men, the manes, and the guardian deities of the house, the householder shall eat afterward what remains." These verses are a testament to the duty of an individual, which prescribes him/her to keep the best for others and the remaining for the self. The precise needs of the guests should be taken care of, for it is with the satisfaction of the guest that an individual fulfills his/her Dharma towards hospitality.

4 Sulami, Muhammad Ibn Al-Husayn. *Book of Sufi Chivalry: Lessons to a Son of the Moment: Futtuwah*. (Inner Traditions International, 1983), 6.

5 Griffith, Ralph Thomas Hotchklin. *The Hymns of the Rigveda*. (Kotagiri Nilgiri, 1889), 7.

6 Buhler, Georg and Max Müller. *The Laws Of Manu: The Sacred Books Of The East V25*. (Literary Licensing, 2014), 116.

What is perhaps the most important here, is that different scriptures have different takes on who can be a guest or an 'Atithi.' True to the caste system which is a part of Dharma in Hinduism, certain scriptures such as the Manu Smriti refer to only the Brahmin (higher caste) as the Atithi or guest. Whereas other scriptures such as the 'Mahabharata' lays down that the honor of being a guest is open to all no matter what caste they may belong to.⁷

Brotherhood

The main goal of following Futuwwah or Dharma is to be able to cultivate the ideal society. This is what individuals are to strive for by adopting the moral and ethical values stipulated in the Futuwat-nama and Hindu scriptures. This is facilitated mainly by the spirit of brotherhood and friendship. This relationship that is based on mutual understanding, respect, and love for each other is the basic proponent of moral behavior in society at large. Brotherhood arises from common interests, similar ideals, beliefs, values, etc. these, along with feelings of love and honor become the foundations of a healthy society. The spirit of brotherhood fosters a class of people who are aware of and practice social responsibility.

Sulami's works talk about the importance of conceding to the principles of brotherhood. There are happiness and joy in an individual's relationship with his/her brethren. It can be seen in Sulami's 'The Book of Sufi chivalry' that when Ja'far ibn Muhammad was asked whether the beloved Prophet Muhammad ever joked, he answered, "Allah bestowed on him the best manner of joyfulness. Allah sent other prophets who had suffering and distress, but He sent Muhammad (s.a.w.s.) for mercy and compassion. One of the signs of his kindness and love for his people was that he joked with them"⁸. Compassion, mercy, and feelings of kinship are the fodder to sustaining society. That the Prophet, who faced many troubles in his life, was able to joke and laugh with his companions, instills a sense of hope and warmth in people. This is what a follower of the Futuwah tradition should strive to be. Friendship and brotherhood are concepts of significance in Hindu culture as well, so much so that it has been likened to the attitude that God takes towards humanity.⁹

Great souls of your kind, whose hearts are purified like yours, oh, amiable Rama, their friendship and courage will generally be stable. Gentle souls will know that silver or gold, or even prosperous ornaments are not to be apportioned among themselves as this is mine and that is yours. May he be rich or poor, saddened or gladdened, flawless or flawed, a friend is an ultimate recourse to anyone. On observing the

7 Buch, Maganlal. *The Principles of Hindu Ethics* (Delhi: Bharatiya Kala Prakashan, 2003), 194.

8 Sulami, *Book of Sufi Chivalry*, 42.

9 Buch, *The Principles of Hindu Ethics*, 187.

course of friendship and knowing which true friendship is, true friends, do not hesitate to extend wealth, pleasure, or even their own country for the sake of friendship.¹⁰

This verse from the 'Ramayana' illustrates how Rama (seventh avatar of God Vishnu) was praised for his friendship. The essence of it boils down to the idea that, if an avatar of God embodies the spirit of friendship and brotherhood, then this spirit of brotherhood extends to all and becomes a duty to be upheld. The sense of brotherhood involves sacrificing for one's brethren and leaving the best for them while accepting the worst for the self. The importance of wishing the best for your brethren is given in the Hindu scriptures; "May I not live O Varuna, to witness my wealthy, liberal dear friend's destitution."¹¹

Brethren should help one another, even if it means that doing so would require giving up their comfort. Brethren should also forgive one another and respond to the bad with the good. This is reflected in a Hadith that comes from Abu al-Ahwas; "Abu al-Ahwas's father asked the Messenger of Allah whether, if he were to go to a close friend and the man would not help him, he should do the same to the friend if he asked for help. The Messenger of Allah said "no."¹² Brethren bring joy to each other, even in times of despair as can be seen from another Hadith that reports that the Prophet Muhammed said; "When one brings joy with his words into the life of a believer or satisfies his worldly needs, whether small or large, it becomes an obligation upon Allah to offer him a servant on the Day of Last Judgment"¹³ Here it is said that God will offer the best reward for a person if he/she just brings joy to people. This verse also illustrates how most of these moral acts are reinforced with the promise of a greater reward. This will be further explained later in the paper. Hinduism further shows the beauty of brotherhood by;

O free one, the felicity of high minded and self-governed friends like you abounds and is enduring. Pious friends look upon the silver, and gold, and the elegant ornaments of pious friends as common property. Whether rich or poor, happy or miserable, good or bad, a friend is the greatest refuge (of his friend). Witnessing such affection, people can forsake wealth, comfort, and even their native land for the sake of their friends.¹⁴

The relationship among brethren is such that they may take freedom with each other; "A follower of Futuwah may go to a close friend's house without an in-

10 Rao, Desiraju Hanumanta. *Valmiki Ramayana - Kishkindha Kanda*. Accessed May 29, 2020. <http://www.valmikiramayana.net/>

11 Griffith, *The Hymns of the Rigveda*, 11.

12 Sulami, *Book of Sufi Chivalry*, 37.

13 Sulami, *Book of Sufi Chivalry*, 42.

14 Rao, *Valmiki Ramayana*, 6-9.

vation. Let there be familiarity and closeness among brethren”.¹⁵ Thus is the importance prescribed over brotherhood, for it lays the foundation of a good and sound society. And that is the ultimate goal of Futuwwah and Dharma principles.

Prosocial behavior

Prosocial behavior is considered to be those that are intended to benefit another person or a group of people. An individual engaging in prosocial behavior such as helping, sharing, or comforting, does so at a personal cost without expecting anything in return from the other party.¹⁶ The two overarching themes of moral codes mentioned in this paper may share certain features with prosocial behavior, but the specific emphasis placed on prosocial behavior by Hinduism and Islam, and other religions as well, needs to be highlighted.

Skimming briefly through the history of how Futuwwah tradition was established among the masses, the concept of ‘Waqf’ comes up. What started as opening up lodges and providing food for the needy, later turned into an organization that is alive to this date. Waqf is endowments made to a religious, educational, or charitable cause.¹⁷ It initially began as a way to fulfill the principle of hospitality prescribed in Futuwwah, but later evolved to cater to the principle of prosocial behavior.

It is reported in Sulami’s Futuwwat-nama that, when the Prophet Muhammed asked for donations, Abu Bakr (one of the companions of the Prophet) submitted a large sack of gold. When asked what percentage of his wealth his donation represented, Abu Bakr replied that it was all of his wealth. The Prophet then asked him what his family will do, and Abu Bakr again replied, “My children are in the care of Allah and His Messenger.”¹⁸ This is a powerful reminder to people of the importance of engaging in prosocial behavior. The thought of giving without expecting anything in return, coupled with intense faith, makes for a society of people who are willing to protect those who need protection.

Moreover, Sulami also notes, “Help and give to all without discrimination. Abul-Hasan ibn Muqsim declared in Baghdad that al-Mada’ini told that the last advice of Yahya ibn Khalid al-Barmaki to his son was to be generous to humanity always because giving to others is giving to oneself”.¹⁹ Religion has always reinforced these behaviors with a spiritual reward that humankind simply could not ignore. There was either blessing from God or the promise of heaven; the Prophet said, “The best of

15 Sulami, *Book of Sufi Chivalry*, 38.

16 Janssens, Jan, and Maja Deković, “Child rearing, prosocial moral reasoning, and prosocial behaviour.” *International Journal of Behavioral Development* 20.3 (1997): 509.

17 Saetgaraeva, *Hospitality in Islamic civilization*, 75.

18 Sulami, *Book of Sufi Chivalry*, 23.

19 Sulami, *Book of Sufi Chivalry*, 107.

my people will enter Paradise, not because of their achievements, but because of the Mercy of Allah and their quality of being satisfied with little for themselves and their extreme generosity toward others.”

According to the Hindu tradition, the disparity between the poor and young is as old as the Hindu civilization, and moralists have always tried to modify the barrier between the two.²⁰ The necessity of engaging in helping acts or prosocial behavior as such has been mentioned many times in the Hindu scriptures, with one such example being; “Of what use is the strength, health, and longevity of one who does no public good?”²¹

It is safe to say that it is the Dharma or duty of a person to help those in need; “Bounteous is he who gives unto the beggar who comes to him in want of food and is feeble. Success attends him in the shout of battle. He makes a friend of him in future troubles”²² This is where the concept of ‘Dana’ or charity comes in. The idea of Dana is such that a person is obliged to give something away, every day with care and a liberal spirit, even if they have a limited income.²³ Dana has thus been identified as a crucial aspect of an individual’s Dharma and falls under the umbrella of prosocial behavior.

As to what can be given away, the scriptures vary in opinion; certain scriptures emphasize food as the best charity, and yet some other scriptures place great emphasis on the gifting of life such as that of taking care of an orphan. Moreover, this kindness does not just extend to humans but nature in its entirety. The essence of prosocial behavior comes from the value of ‘Vasudhaiva kutumbakam,’ which roughly translates to the whole of humanity being a family.²⁴ The ‘Bhagavad Gita’ touches upon this by saying;

The saint enjoys without effort the Bliss, which flows from a realization of the Infinite. He who experiences the unity of life sees his Self in all beings, and all beings in his Self, and looks on everything with an impartial eye; He who sees Me in everything and everything in Me, he shall I never forsake, nor shall he lose Me. The sage who realizes the unity of life and who worships Me in all beings lives in Me, whatever may be his lot.²⁵

The idea here is; the same Super Power or Supreme Being lives amongst nature and all its entities, and it is incumbent upon a Hindu to respect all of nature just as

20 Buch, *The Principles of Hindu Ethics*, 196.

21 Buch, *The Principles of Hindu Ethics*, 213.

22 Griffith, *The Hymns of the Rigveda*, 3.

23 Buch, *The Principles of Hindu Ethics*, 197.

24 Buch, *The Principles of Hindu Ethics*, 213.

25 Purohit, Swami, Shri Purohit Swami, and Kendra Crossen Burroughs. *Bhagavad Gita: Annotated & Explained* (SkyLight Paths Publishing, 2001), 28–31.

he/she recognizes God. Anyone who so desires to cause harm rather than help others or nature is going against their Dharma.

The values mentioned above are just some of the themes that are highly emphasized in both the Futuwwat-nama and the Hindu scriptures. The inferences that can be made out of this is that both Hinduism and Islam, while not agreeing on many ideologies, do have similarities when it comes to moral etiquettes. There is a common agreement regarding the validity of being a 'good' person, of doing good deeds for others, being kind, generous, loyal, and hospitable, among many other such values. To cultivate a healthy community, one has to add in harmony, a sense of kinship, and a feeling of responsibility, not just for oneself, but towards others as well.

But the question remains, what is the difference between the morality of a believer and that of a non-believer. These moral codes are universal irrespective of whether a person is religious or not. Human beings are driven by needs or instincts, which may include basic needs such as hunger and thirst, to complex needs such as the need to be loved, of family, inclusion, and ultimately of self-actualization or self-transcendence. This is the idea that Maslow propagates through his 'hierarchy of needs.' While Maslow's theory may have its limitations, the idea that individuals have certain instincts or need to be fulfilled is not without merit. A moral code creates a need in an individual that is required to be satisfied through behavior. This could easily be just a need to belong to a community, and so the behavior of doing good for the said community is encouraged.

Moral codes of behavior are thus passed down generations to all of humankind. Kohlberg, in his theory of moral development, postulated that morality develops throughout life in stages. These three stages are the pre-conventional, conventional, and post-conventional stages.²⁶ During the pre-conventional phase, the child is merely concerned about his or her survival; later on, as the child develops into an individual in the post-conventional stage, he or she is now worried about others, family, friends, and community. This theory throws light on the idea that moral codes of conduct are universal to all of humankind as a part of the natural course of development. According to the Self-determination Theory by Deci and Ryan, individuals engage in moral behaviors or adhere to these codes of conduct out of their own volition or willingness to organize their lives at present and not for an abstract idea of 'heaven,' 'hell' or 'reincarnation.'²⁷

While the above-mentioned theories throw light on the fact that, in their

26 Kohlberg, Lawrence, and Richard Kramer. "Continuities and discontinuities in childhood and adult moral development." *Human development* 12.2 (1969): 93-120.

27 Vansteenkiste, Maarten, and Richard M. Ryan. "On psychological growth and vulnerability: basic psychological need satisfaction and need frustration as a unifying principle." *Journal of psychotherapy integration* 23.3 (2013): 263.

essence, moral values are universal, what sustains it is religion acting as reinforcement. Learning theories in psychology explores the boundaries of support in studying behavior and retaining said behavior. According to Skinner, behavior, based on its utility, is said to be reinforced with a reward that ultimately causes the behavior to occur repeatedly in anticipation of the reward. Eventually, this process results in perpetuating the reinforced behavior. Religious behavior is known to be self-reinforcing, i.e., the reinforcement is automatic and hence known as mechanical reinforcement.²⁸ Moral codes discussed in the scriptures are acted out by the believers because it provides them with intrinsic rewards such as a feeling of harmony or self-satisfaction.

On top of that, the religious narrative leaves no space for unpredictability in life.²⁹ There is a routine one follows, in the form of religious practices, and these in turn are rewarding either in the short term or in the long run. Short term rewards being feelings of fulfilment and other such positive emotions along with a general sense of acceptance and the occasional praise from the community. Long term rewards, on the other hand, may include the previously mentioned “abstract notions” of heaven or in the case of Hinduism, spiritual transcendence, or being at one with the ultimate being. These rewards, coupled with the belief system underlying said religions are strong enough to act as a potent reinforcement for moral codes of behavior.

Taking Kohlberg’s theory of moral development into consideration, we have established that people do have a predisposition towards morality and moral behavior. Adding on to this is Albert Bandura’s social learning theory wherein Bandura proposes that individuals learn various behavioral forms from the environment through a process called observational learning.³⁰ Individuals, children especially, learn by observing their environment. If their environment endorses religious values or ideals, children would be inclined to develop such behaviors at an early age onwards, especially when coupled with reinforcing rewards. Thus, a religious environment would encourage the child to retain moral behaviors that are endorsed by the same religion.

Conclusion

It is widely understood that religion is an important aspect in developing, and more importantly, sustaining moral behavior. The presence of diverse theological beliefs or lack thereof is not the sole indicator for the establishment of moral behaviors in society, but rather like the ceaseless nature versus nurture debates, the concept of morality as well should be subjected to critical discourse. And like nature versus nurture debates, one must conclude that this argument, as well, is futile. It is because

28 Strand, Paul S. “Religion as schedule-induced behavior.” *The Behavior Analyst* 32.1 (2009): 191-204.

29 Strand, “Religion as schedule-induced behaviour”, 191-204.

30 Bandura, Albert, and Richard H. Walters. *Social learning theory*. Vol. 1. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-hall, 1977.

morality is certainly not a black and white concept but a complex construct, including elements from both nature and nurture influencing it. A conversation void of either environmental influences or developmental factors, when it comes to moral codes of conduct, is of no significant purpose. Instead, one must develop a holistic approach in understanding scriptures of any religion for that matter, that these scriptures are not just a guide for the “religious,” they are a guide for the whole of humanity on how to be “human.”

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