

## THE DUAL NATURE OF GOOD DEEDS: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF MUSLIMS' THOUGHTS<sup>5</sup>

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### Abstract

*This article aims to highlight the insights of selected renowned Muslim scholars on the nature of good deeds. The article focuses on analysing spiritual insight of selected Muslim scholars towards the dual dimensions of good deeds, which is inner and outer or physical and spiritual. This article is library research which employs descriptive and analytical study. The article founds that these Muslim scholars affirms the existence of inner dimension of good deeds, and therefore, good deeds comprise of both inner and outer dimension. Both of these dimensions need to be observed accordingly. The balanced observance of these two dimensions of good deeds is critical in order to achieve its real purpose.*

**Keywords:** *Good deeds, inner dimension, outer dimension, spirituality.*

## INTRODUCTION

"Good deed" or "good work" is a generic phrase with a wide range of contexts, meanings, and applications. However, in an Islamic setting, good deeds are defined as actions that the Shari'ah commands, encourages, or praises. It is an act of goodness, beauty, virtue, or righteousness carried out in accordance with Shari'ah and done for Allah's pleasure and contentment (Mohd Rosmizi, 2014). All areas of activity, including those relating to religious rites and rituals (*'ibadah*), social activities (*mu'amalah*), and ethics, are included by the broad and all-encompassing definition of

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a good deed (*akhlāq*). It also includes verbal communication, bodily movement, and even spirituality.

There are several Arabic terms which denote good deeds. They are *'amal salih* (pl. *a'mal salihat*), *birr*, *khayr* (pl. *khayrat*) etc. However, only the first term (*'amal salih*) which is more precise and refers to righteous or deeds, performed in accordance with the Shari'ah. The other two terms are rather general to refer to all that is good.

Most followers, especially laypeople, place more emphasis on the outward observance of good deeds which include religious observance and rituals as well as moral conduct. As a result, their rigid observance of their external requirements frequently comes before their spiritual component. To some extent, this strategy results in dogmatic, ritualistic, and legalistic interpretations of good deeds. Because of that, there were some Muslims renowned scholars came and made earnest efforts in their own ways to rediscover the inner dimension of religious observance. This is to bring about a return in Muslim societies to a more profound reflection upon the inner dimension of the spiritual life.

Among those most prominent scholars is al-Ghazali. He was among the first great thinkers to properly define the issue and provide comprehensive remedies, both in theory and in practise. Al-Ghazali was aware of a lack of spirituality and awareness of the inner dimension of good deeds. He lamented that the majority of followers merely cared about the outer dimension of good deeds, oblivious to the necessity to nourish their inner selves with spirituality (the soul). The majority of other renowned Muslim thinkers who studied Sufism such as al-Muhasibi, al-Raghib al-Isfahani, and Abu Talib al-Makki likewise emphasise the dual nature of good acts, and they all collectively offer Muslims different pieces of guidance on how to follow both the inner and outside components of good deeds appropriately. They contend that each good conduct has two aspects, namely an outside and an inner aspect. These two elements need to be combined and monitored appropriately.

## **METHODOLOGY OF THE STUDY**

This article is theoretical in nature, and it involves library research. Thus, this article applies qualitative approach, employing descriptive and comparative methods. It begins by outlining the overall pertinent issue relating to good deeds. The perspectives of various prominent Muslim scholars are then compared and examined with regard to specific aspects of good deeds.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION:**

### **THE DUAL NATURE OF GOOD DEEDS FROM MUSLIM PERSPECTIVES**

Imam al-Ghazali [Imam Abu Hamid Muhammad ibn Muhammad ibn Muhammad al-Ghazali al-Tusi (1058-1111 CE / 450-505 AH)], one of Muslim most prominent and influential scholars, can be considered as the one who seriously scrutinized, experienced and revealed the dual nature of good deeds.

Al-Ghazali has not only continually exhibited a favorable attitude toward the value of doing good deeds, but he also provides his own special and profound approaches to comprehending and carrying out good deeds, developed within his own spiritual framework.

According to al-Ghazali, there are two fundamental components to creation: the physical and the spiritual, the exterior and the interior, or the visible and the invisible (al-Ghazali, 1981: 68–84). Al-Ghazali asserts that good deeds likewise have two aspects, namely an outside and an inner dimension. The core of good deeds is found in their internal component (Quasem, 1974: 50). As a result, he places a heavy focus on the necessity of observing both the exterior and interior dimensions of good deeds in a balanced manner (Mohd Rosmizi et al., 2017).

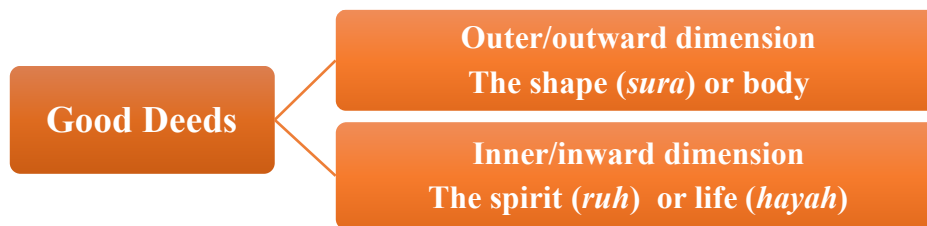
Based on al-Ghazali's view of the nature of good deeds which consists of two dimensions, namely the outer and inner, the physical and spiritual, we will examine briefly some other Muslims prominent scholars on the nature of good deeds. This is to compare and confirm al-Ghazali's view on the issue as well as to emphasize its importance. Those selected scholar are al-Muhasibi, Abu Talib al-Makki, al-Raghib al-Isfahani. However, before we embark on analyzing the views of other prominent Muslims scholars, we will first examine briefly the views of Imam al-Ghazali on the nature of good deeds.

## GOOD DEEDS ACCORDING TO IMAM AL-GHAZALI

Al-Ghazali claimed that performing good deeds is one of the paths to journeying Allah (God). Good deeds should be able to strengthen the relationship between man and Allah since they are a reflection of one's knowledge, awe, and love of Allah. Al-Ghazali consider good deeds are among the most crucial items for a pilgrim or traveller on the way of Allah since they may aid him in avoiding worldly avarice and lead to spiritual success and eternal bliss (al-Ghazali, 1986; Mohd Rosmizi, 2019).

Al-Ghazali asserts that there are two primary facets to creation: the physical and the spiritual, the exterior and the interior, or the visible and invisible (Al-Ghazali, 1981). According to him, a person is made up of two parts: a physical body (*zahir*) and an interior (*batin*) and spiritual component known as the heart or soul. The physical body which is the outer dimension is also referred to as *surah* (shape). Whereas the inner dimensions is referred to as *ruh* (spirit) or *hayah* (life). Both of these aspects have their own different nature and "world". The *zahir* or physical body belong to the phenomenal or material world which known as '*alam mulk* or '*alam al-shahadah*. The

*batin* or interior part belong to the spiritual world or the realm of the divine world which is known as *'alam al-malakut* (Al-Ghazali, 1986; Al-Ghazali, 1967; Al-Ghazali, 1953; Al-Ghazali, 2010; Al-Ghazali, 2003; Al-Ghazali, 2001; Whittingham, 2011). Al-Ghazali stresses that the heart is the king of human body, and it is the source of all actions. Therefore, al-Ghazali places great emphasis on explaining the wonder of the heart, its disease and solution. Diagram 1 show the categorization of two dimension of good deeds according to al-Ghazali.



**Diagram 1:** The Dual Nature/Dimension of Good Deeds according to al-Ghazali

Al-Ghazali reminds us that the inner dimension is the "kernel" of good deeds because without it, good deeds would only seem to be empty gestures devoid of any lasting worth. Good deeds carried out without consideration for an inner dimension may therefore be viewed as imperfect or even invalid. In fact, there is a chance that good deeds carried out improperly will ultimately be viewed as bad deeds or sins, which are particularly destructive to the soul (al-Ghazali, 1986).

Therefore, al-Ghazali emphasizes the significance of maintaining a balance between the inner and outer components of good deeds. As a result, preserving balance between the inner and outer dimensions is the only way for good deeds to have the appropriate impact on the soul and serve their intended purpose (Quasem, 1978). The balance observance of both dimensions of good deeds must be consistently maintained at all stages of life and by all classes of believers (Quasem, 1974).

## GOOD DEEDS ACCORDING TO AL-MUHASIBI

Al-Harith ibn Asad al-Muhasibi (243/857) which is called al-Muhasibi was born in Basra and died in Baghdad. He was known as a great Sufi, however, little is known about him (Mohamed, 2006). Al-Muhasibi attached great emphasis on *akhlak* (ethics and morality) and spirituality. He does not only advice the lay Muslims, but he also give guidance to advance Sufis (Al-Muhasibi, 1993; Filiz, 2006). For instance, he develops the principles of Sufi morality in his *Sharh al-Ma'rifah wa Badhl al-Nasihah*. Imam al-Ghazali is among those who benefited and influenced by the spiritual insight of al-Muhasibi.

Al-Muhasibi asserts that good deeds have a dual nature and that both should be carried out in accordance with their respective natures. This view affirms the view

of al-Ghazali. Al-Muhasibi believes that good deeds should be carried out for the sake of God and again this view is in line with the view of al-Ghazali. In his *Sharh al-Ma'rifah wa Badhl al-Nasihah*, al-Muhasibi emphasises that performing good works or praying without having *al-Ma'rifah* (essential knowledge/gnosis) causes one to become cut off from God and harden their hearts (Al-Muhasibi, 1993; Filiz, 2006).

Al-Muhasibi also offers an interesting discussion on the enigma of human behaviour. He asserts that every human organ, particularly the heart, is capable of amazing acts and deeds. The acts and deeds of the heart are beyond and more valuable than the physical limbs. It is the heart which is considered as the real essence, and the source of all actions. Because of that, he asserts that God looked more favourably upon the heart and its activities rather than the physical organs and their deeds (Al-Muhasibi, 1993; Filiz, 2006).

### GOOD DEEDS ACCORDING TO ABU TALIB AL-MAKKI

Abu Talib Muhammad Ibn Ali Atiyya al-Harithi al-A'jami al-Makki (996) is another prominent Muslim scholars which came from Persian. Like al-Muhasibi, al-Ghazali also benefited and influenced by the insights of al-Makki. *Qut al-Qulub* (Nourishment of the Heart) which is the wonderful work of al-Makki is filled with spiritual insight which reveals some aspects of inner dimensions of good deeds.

Al-Makki offer deed analysis of the heart and inner dimension in his *Qut al-Qulub*. Like al-Muhasibi and al-Ghazali, al-Makki also stress on issue regarding *ma'rifah* (essential knowledge/gnosis), which according to him is only attainable through balance observance of the inner and outer devotion to Allah. This indicates that al-Makki attach great emphasis on spiritual aspects of good deeds.

Another interesting point is that al-Makki makes a close connection between good deeds and the stations (*maqamat*) and the states (*ahwal*). Each of these phases possesses enormous virtues that raise the spiritual consciousness of man. This also shows that al-Makki relate the physical world with the spiritual world as al-Ghazali did. He breathes spirituality into different kinds of good deeds and akhlak (al-Makki, 1997; Wan Mohd Azam, 1991). Al-Makki also stress on the need of *tazkiyatun nafs* (purification of conscience). In this case, *tawbah* (repentance) is an important acts towards that goal. Knowing oneself and God, according to al-Makki, is crucial to a Muslim's daily life. It denotes the necessity of self-awareness before to beginning the road to Allah SWT (salik). The concept of taubah is of two levels . Diagram 2 shows two levels of *tawbah* according to al-Makki

1. The first is when a person repents and promises not to repeat his sins, grieves for the sins committed and continues (istiqamah) in obeying His commandments and avoiding anything He forbids.



2. In this level, one has to make sure that he is aware of the sin and to make repentance. He has to promote good life and try as much as possible to avoid making the same mistakes. It is a practical deed that Abu Talib al-Makki urges man to recompensate all the negative with good behaviour, intention and acts. It is how he should behave in showing his grief towards the mistakes. (al-Makki, 1997, p.250)

**Diagram 2:** Two Levels of *Tawbah* by Abu Talib al-Makki (Source: Dini Farhana Baharuddin, et.al, 2018, p.91)

## GOOD DEEDS ACCORDING TO AL-ISFAHANI

Abul Qasim al-Husayn ibn Muhammad ibn al-Mufaddal al-Raghib al- Isfahani (1108) is a Syafi'ites great scholar and Sufi. In the Muslim world, al-Isfahani is primarily recognised for his Quranic lexicon, *Mufradat Alfaz al-Quran* (Mohamed, 1995).

According to Al-Isfahani, good deeds can be divided into two categories: voluntary deeds by enslaving oneself and worship that has been declared to be ordered by Allah SWT (al-Isfahani, 1961). This shows that good deeds has dual nature. Maintaining that faith consists of both words and deeds, al-Isfahani asserts that complete faith cannot exist if a person is an adulterer or a thief. Al-Isfahani combines faith and *akhlak*, arguing that ethics and faith go hand in hand; while faith is a matter of the heart, it is only perfected by good deeds (Mohamed, 2006). As a result, one must incorporate good deeds into their worship in order to develop their faith. That implies that a person's level of faith will be determined by their deeds. This indicates that good deeds also has important role in one's faith. Therefore, balance observance of the dual nature of good deeds is of paramount important.

Al-Isfahani relates the prescribed acts of worship (*'ibadah*) with noble qualities (*makarim*). The noble qualities and the prescribed acts of worship are both included in his ethical book, *al-Dhari'ah ila Makarim al-Shari'ah* (The Means to the Noble Qualities of Law), which is also known as *Ahkam al-Shari'ah* (The Rules of Law). Al-Isfahani holds that noble qualities of the Law are supplementary to worship which is obligatory, and that they are unacceptable in the absence of acts of worship. However, he also holds that all types of worship are part of noble qualities. Some of the noble qualities are wisdom, justice, forbearance, beneficence, and graciousness, which the aim of all of these noble qualities is to attain paradise and be close to God (Mohamed, 1995)

## BRIEF COMPARISON

Based on the above brief discussion, we can conclude that al-Ghazali stresses that good deeds comprise of two dimensions, namely, the outer which is also the body or the physical dimension and the inner, which is the spiritual or life or the real essence. He strongly advises Muslims to observe both dimensions when performing any good deeds, whether religious devotional act or normal action.

The discussion above also suggests that al-Muhasibi affirms the existence of dual nature of good deeds. He places equal emphasis on both dimensions of good deeds. He establishes a close relationship between the outward and interior dimensions as well as between man and God. He does not only provide the standard explanation of good deeds found in typical *fiqh* works, which mostly focus on the outer dimension. This approach is consistent with that of al-Ghazali.

Like other scholars discussed above, al-Makki affirms the existence of dual nature of good deeds, namely the outer and inner or the physical and spiritual dimensions. Like al-Ghazali, he urges Muslims to learn and observe both of them accordingly. It is only through a balanced observance of both dimensions of good deeds that one can feel the sweetness of performing good deeds.

Al-Ishafani also agrees with the other scholars mentioned above that good deeds have both an inner and an exterior, or physical and spiritual, aspect. Like al-Ghazali, he exhorts Muslims to study and observed both of them accordingly. He argues that one can only experience the delight of doing good things by carefully observing each of their aspects.

## CONCLUSION

This article discovered that the selected prominent Muslim scholars affirm the dual nature of good deeds. This means that they all agree good deeds comprise of both an inner and an outer dimension. They spread the idea that each good deed has two aspects, namely the inner and outer, or the outward and interior, the physical and the spiritual dimensions, by using their own methods. These two elements need to be combined and observed appropriately. Thus, they propose the idea that good deeds can only fulfil their objectives and promote spiritual development through the balanced observance of outer and inner dimensions.

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