Islamic Ethics: The Attributes of Al-Ihsan in the Quran and Its Effects on Muslim Morality

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Abstract
As it is common knowledge that one of the objectives of all religions is to turn societal morality to perfect morality which will be of benefit to society. Islam is no exception to this objective. The aim of this paper, therefore, is to discuss and analyze one of the ethical or moral attributes, al-Ihsan (goodness/kindness), mentioned in Quran and how this affects Muslim morality as well as enhance the faith of the believer. This paper is a library-based research which utilizes the content analysis method in the interpretation of Quranic verses that talk about al-Ihsan and the ethical usefulness of al-Ihsan in Muslim morality. The importance of this paper lies in the fact that on more than one occasion, different Qur’anic verses emphasize the role of ethics in human society, especially the believer, and it also points to the role it plays in enhancing the levels of faith. It concludes on the note that once a believer understands and imbibes the attributes of al-Ihsan his moral character is bound to be perfect both in worship and in dealing with his/her fellow human beings and this also reflects on the society at large.

Keywords: Islamic ethics, Attributes; al-Ihsan; Interpretation; al-Quran; Muslim morality.

1. Introduction
Al-Ihsan literally means goodness/kindness. It refers to the acts of worship by a believer with the belief that Allah is present and watching that act of worship. In other words, it means worshiping Allah as if one sees Allah watching him (Al-Ghamdi, 2001). This is the meaning given to the word by the Prophet when he said “al-Ihsan is to worship Allah as if you see Him, and if you do not achieve this state of devotion, then (take it for granted that) Allah sees you” (Sahih Bukhari, 1997: Hadith 47 Vol. 1). The Almighty said in the Holy Qur’an:

To those who do right is a goodly [reward]- Yea, more [than in measure]! No darkness nor shame shall cover their faces! they are companions of the garden; they will abide therein [for aye]! (Surah Yunus, 10: 26).

Sincerity in worship and the love of Allah makes one becomes one of the people of al-Ihsan. The people of al-Ihsan are the best among the servants of Allah, who are doers of good deeds which leads to goodness and guidance (Al-Maraghi, 1946; Al-Razi, 1981) as indicated by the word of Allah thus: (إنَّ الَّذينَ أَمَنُوا وَعَمَلُوا الصَّالِحاتِ إِنَّا لَا نُضِيعُ أَجْرًا مِنْ أَحْسَنِ عَمَلاً) As to those who believe and work righteousness, verily We shall not suffer to perish the reward of any who do a [single] righteous deed. (Surah al-Khaf,13: 30).
Thus, the first thing to note here is that Allah ties the concept of Al-Ihsan to worship and sincerity in worship. This shows that goodness in worship is an ethic that all Muslims should emphasize especially considering the fact that when the worship of a believer is good, other things naturally follows as Allah said when He describes the purpose of the Salat, the five daily prayers, as follow: “...and perform As-Salât (Iqâmât-as-Salât). Verily, As-Salât (the prayer) prevents from Al-Fahshâ’ (i.e. great sins of every kind, unlawful sexual intercourse) and Al-Munkar (i.e. disbelief, polytheism, and every kind of evil wicked deed).

Equally, Allah, the Almighty said in Sūrat al-Rahman: 60 (ۚۢۤ۠۱۲ۥ۸۱۸۱۸۷۸۷۸۷۸۷۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸۸
The verse indicates that the right religion with which Allah is pleased is the submission to Allah and sincerity of the heart for Him alone. “His whole self to Allah” denotes sincerity and submissiveness of the worshipper. The worshipper should also comply with the divine law [Sharīʿah] which Allah sent through the messengers and revealed in His books, and which He makes a way of worship. “And follows the way of Abraham” means His religion and His law as practiced by Abraham. “The true in Faith” means devoid of Shirk (associating partner with God), worshipping Allah alone, and seeking His help alone. “For Allah did take Abraham for a friend” denotes that Allah took Abrahmas a friend because Abraham did what he was commanded to do, he passed his trial, and then Allah made him a leader of the people. This kind of position was given to only two friends of Allah, Muhammad and Abraham, (Peace and blessings of Allah be upon them). In addition, the love of Allah is meant for the generality of believers (Ibn Ashour, 1984; Wahidi, 1994). Thus, for one to attain to the level of al-Ihsan, one has to be submissive to Allah as Abraham was submissive to Him.

3.3 Attributes of loving for the sake of Allah as stated in Surah al-Baqarah: 195 that: 

And spend of your substance in the cause of Allah, and make not your own hands contribute to [your] destruction, but do good; for Allah loveth those who do good.

Allah has commanded His servants to spend in His cause. This implies spending wealth on every good cause that is connected with Allah. It involves giving alms to the poor and relatives, fending for whomsoever it is compulsory to fend for, spending in the cause of Jihād such as physical training, strengthening Muslims, and institutionalizing the religion of Allah in the face of polytheism and the polytheists. Spending in the cause of Allah is a key element of Jihād while abandoning spending in the cause of Allah revokes Jihād and becomes enabling for the enemies. Also related to this is part of the verse which says: “and make not your own hands contribute to [your] destruction.” Spending in the cause of Allah is a type of al-Iḥsān, and Allah commands all kinds of al-Iḥsān as the verse stated: “and do good; for Allah loveth those who do good.” This involves all the types of al-Ihsan because Allah did not specify the kind of al-Ihsan to be done. Hence, al-Iḥsān covers the monetary aspects and all other aspects as mentioned before (Baghawi, 1989; Ibn Ashour, 1984). Therefore, to spend in the course of Allah, either for Jihad or helping the needy is to show love for the sake of Allah and this is part of the Ihsan of a believer. All the discussions above, in this section, are represented in Figure 1 below which is titled, The Attributes of Al-Ihsan.

Figure 1. The Attributes of Al-Ihsan
4. The effects of al-Ihsanon individual morality

Generally, al-Ihsan means goodness/kindness of whatever kind to any creature of Allah, but al-Ihsan is determined by the type of personality, rights and status of the person to whom the kindness is shown. Al-Ihsan is also determined by al-Ihsan itself and its significance, this is explained as follows:

4.1 Effect of al-Ihsan ’ilaal-waladain (Kindness to both parents): this implies obedience and respect for the parents. It also involves being kind to them. The Quranic verses that exhort kindness to parents abound in numbers. Allah said:

وَقَضَّ زَثُّكَ أَلاَّ اَعْجُدَُا إِلاَّ إِنَّ الْأَيَّامِ أَيَّامًا إِنَّكَ بَيْنَ هُذَيْنِ الْكِبَارَ أَحَدَهُمَا أَوْ كَلِمَتُهَا فَأَلْقِ لَهُمَا أَفْتَ وَلَتَتَّهَفْهَا وَقَلِ لَهُمَا وَفْلَأَ كُرِيَمًا

Thy Lord hath decreed that ye worship none but Him, and that ye be kind to parents. Whether one or both of them attain old age in thy life, say not to them a word of contempt, nor repel them, but address them in terms of honour (Surah al-Israil: 23).

As explained by the exegesis, obedience to parents is next to obedience to Allah, and it involves giving thanks to them and being kind to them because Allah mentioned kindness to the parents next to His worship. Allah, the Exalted said: (that ye be kind to parents) (Ibn Kathir, 1998; Al-Tabari, 2001). Therefore, one of the effects of al-Ihsan on individual morality is making the individual show kindness and be good to his/her parents.

4.2 Effect of al-Ihsan ’ila al-Yatamawal-Masakin (Kindness to orphans and the needy): this involves the protection of the rights of orphans and the needy. It also involves taking care of their education, having affection for them and giving them a helping hand, as Allah said:

إِذْ أَخَرْوَب مِثَابَ ثَيِّ إِسْرَائِيلَ لَا اَعْجُدَُا إِلاَّ إِنَّ الْأَيَّامِ أَيَّامًا إِنَّكَ بَيْنَ هُذَيْنِ الْكِبَارَ أَحَدَهُمَا أَوْ كَلِمَتُهَا فَأَلْقِ لَهُمَا أَفْتَ وَلَتَتَّهَفْهَا وَقَلِ لَهُمَا وَفْلَأَ كُرِيَمًا

And remember We took a covenant from the Children of Israel [to this effect]: Worship none but Allah; treat with kindness your parents and kindred, and orphans and those in need; speak fair to the people; be steadfast in prayer, and practice regular charity. Then did ye turn back, except a few among you, and ye backslide [even now] (Surah al-Baqarah: 83).

This verse contains a command in respect of the highest level of rights which include Allah’s rights and peoples’ rights. Allah’s right refers to worshipping Allah without associating a partner with Him. Peoples’ rights start with the rights of both parents because parents are the one who gives birth to a child, bringing him up, and educating him. The next level of right is that of orphans because they are in need of help since they have lost their parents. Then, the rights of the needy follow because the needy are unable to adequately provide for their needs. The next rights are the rights of other people and it involves good word, good treatment of people because people may not be in need of money but good words and a guide to the worship of Allah which will enhance their connection with their creator via Salāt and Zakāt (Baghawi, 1989; Al-Saadi, 2002). Thus, a person who has imbibed the attributes of al-Ihsan is bound to carry out the instructions concerning these rights and to be kind to those who deserve his kindness as mentioned in the verse above. Al-Ihsan, therefore, has the effect of making a believer to be kind to the orphans and the needy.

4.3 Effect of al-Ihsan ’ila al-Jār (Kindness to neighbors): Allah said:

إِذْ أَخَرْوَب مِثَابَ ثَيِّ إِسْرَائِيلَ لَا اَعْجُدَُا إِلاَّ إِنَّ الْأَيَّامِ أَيَّامًا إِنَّكَ بَيْنَ هُذَيْنِ الْكِبَارَ أَحَدَهُمَا أَوْ كَلِمَتُهَا فَأَلْقِ لَهُمَا أَفْتَ وَلَتَتَّهَفْهَا وَقَلِ لَهُمَا وَفْلَأَ كُرِيَمًا

Serve Allah and join not partners with Him; and do good- to parents, kinsfolk, orphans, those in need, neighbors who are near, neighbors who are strangers, the companion by your side, the wayfarer [ye meet], and what your right hands possess: For Allah loveth not the arrogant, the vainglorious (Surah al-Nissa: 36).

This verse mentioned kindness to the neighbors as (neighbors who are near), and it refers to the relatives for whom there are two rights: rights of being a neighbor and rights of being a relative. The statement (neighbors who are strangers) denotes the neighbor who is not a relative. Neighbors are exhorted to be kind to each other by being good to each other, protecting each other, tolerating each other, putting on a smiling face for each other, being kind in word and deeds to each other, refraining from harming each other in words or deeds, and so on. (Ibn Ashour, 1984; Tantawi, 1998). Al-Ihsan, therefore, has the effect of making the individual to be morally upright in dealing with those around him/her once the person has imbibed its attributes.

4.4 Effect of al-Ihsan ’ila al-Musi (Kindness to the unkind): Allah said:

وَلا تَسْتَيْوَى الْحَسَنَةَ وَلا السَّيِّيْهَ إِذْفَاعَ بَيْنَيْنِ هِيَ أَحْسَنُ فَإِذَا الَّذِي بَيْنَكُ بٍ وَبِئْسَةٌ عَدَاوةٌ كَانَهُ وَلَيٌّ حَمِيمٌ وَمَا يَلُغُّهَا إِلَّا الَّذِينَ صَبِرُوا وَمَا يَلُغُّهَا إِلاَّ دُوَّ حَظٍّ عَلِيمٍ
Nor can goodness and Evil be equal. Repel [Evil] with what is better: Then will he between whom and thee was hatred become as it were thy friend and intimate! And no one will be granted such goodness except those who exercise patience and self-restraint one but persons of the greatest good fortune (Surah al-Fus'ilat: 34 – 35).

The statement (Repel [Evil] with what is better) means be kind to the one who is unkind to you. This verse denotes the concept of al-Ihsan, especially when it has to do with those who have great rights such as relatives, companions, and others. In addition, one should be kind in words and deeds to those who are unkind to him in words or deeds. If they break ties with him, he should mend it, if they oppress him, he should forgive them, if they make spiteful or slanderous comments about him in his presence or otherwise, he should not reciprocate, he should forgive them, and be kind to him in words. Also, if they forsake him, he should be kind to them in words; he should talk to them and greet them. Being kind to the unkind has great benefits. Furthermore, the verse reiterates that none would be able to do it except those who are self-restraint because it takes self-discipline for one to have the ability to reciprocate kindness for unkindness because the human soul is naturally inclined to reciprocate good with good, and evil with evil. Reciprocating kindness for unkindness can be easier if one is self-disciplined, obedient to Allah’s command, and aware of the great rewards awaiting him. Also, being kind to the unkind can be easier if one is aware that reciprocating evil with evil does not help matter but compounds the problem or prolong the enmity. Likewise, if one is aware that being kind to the unkind does not denigrate his status, then he will find it easier to do it. It is said that whoever is humble for Allah’s sake, he will be elevated and his challenges will be made easier for him to surmount. The statement (none but persons of the greatest good fortune) indicates that al-Ihsan (kindness) is among the qualities of special creatures (Al-Qurtubi, 1935; Ibn Kathir, 1998), with which one can get elevated in this world and the hereafter. It is also among the qualities of good manners which manifest in how the believer treats those who do evil to him with kindness (al-Ihsan).

4.5 Effect al-Ihsan fi al-Kalâm (Kindness in speech): Allah said:

وَقَلِ لَعِبَادِيِّ يَقُولُواُ أَحْسَنُۚ إِنِّيُ السَّيْطَانُ يَنْزَعُ بَينَهُمْۚ إِنِّ السَّيْطَانُ كَانَ لِلإنسانَ عَدْنَآٓ مُّبَيِّناً

Say to My servants that they should [only] say those things that are best: for Satan doth sow dissensions among them: For Satan is to man an avowed enemy (Surah al-Israil: 53).

Allah, in these verses, commands the believers to be of good manners in their deeds and speeches because their success in this world and the hereafter lies with it. Allah said: “And tell my servants to say that which is best”, because if they refuse to do so, Shaytân would induce dissension among them in order to render them unsuccessful in this world and the hereafter (Al-Saadi, 2002; Tantawi, 1998). This is part of the attributes that we mentioned in the introduction. The effect of Al-Ihsan shows in the believers’ individual morality through their words/speeches. The better the attributes of al-Ihsan are imbibed, the better a believer becomes in the way he/she addresses others. All the discussions above, in this section, are represented in Figure 2 below titled The Effects of Al-Ihsan on Individual Morality.

Figure 2 The Effects of Al-Ihsan on Individual Morality
5. Conclusion

The attributes of *al-Ihsan* have positive effects on the morality of the individual Muslim and the development of his personality. They also have positive effects on an individual’s social interaction. For example, *al-Ihsan’ila-aal-wallidain* (Kindness to both parents), *al-Ihsan’ila al-Yatâmawa al-Masâkin* (kindness to the orphans and the needy), *al-Ihsan’ila al-Jîr* (Kindness to neighbors) all have social implication as they can strengthen the bonds of society and serve as a means to achieving peace, security and social harmony in the society.

Moreover, as discussed in the effects of *Al-Ihsan*on the individual morality, morality is something that is ingrained in the human soul and is, in turn, reflected in the behavior of the person as well as in his/her interaction with others in the society. Morality indicates good behavior while immorality indicates bad behavior. On numerous occasions, the importance of morality has been emphasized by the Quranic verses which were revealed to the Prophet of mercy, Muhammad (peace and blessings of *Allah* be upon him). The roles it played in enhancing the levels of faith were also emphasized by the Quranic verses. Particularly, it is mentioned that when *Allah* was eulogizing Prophet Muhammad (peace and blessings of *Allah* be upon him) in the verse which states that “And thou [standest] on an exalted standard of character” (*al-Q’alam* : 4), the reference is to the behaviour and moral standing of the Prophet which is second to none among the Prophets before him. Finally, to underscore the importance of morality, the Prophet himself was reported by AbûHurayrah to have said that “I have only been sent to perfect good moral character” (Musnad Ahmad, 2012: 8595). This shows that the fundamental message of the Prophet is the perfection of the human character which in Islam is said to be both vertical and horizontal. It is vertical because Muslims are expected to show good moral character in worship and in establishing a relationship with *Allah* their Lord. And, it is horizontal because they are expected to show good moral character to their fellow human beings and other creatures of *Allah* on earth. All of these, therefore, can only be achieve when man imbibles the attributes of *al-Ihsan*.

References


