

## The Concept of Human Desire in Al-Ghazali's Perspective

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### ABSTRACT

Desire (*iradah*) in humans refers to a person's instinct to achieve or the 'wants' that emerge from the ultimate desire for something. It pertains to matters concerning the hereafter. This article emphasised the concept of 'human desires' that is found in the Quran based on the thinking of al-Ghazali. It also guided by his famous literary work, *Ihya' Ulum al-Din*. Using the content analysis method, this qualitative study postulated that Al-Ghazali had presumed that the trait of desire in people refers to a deep sense of longing. This trait is used to achieve happiness in the hereafter as well as in efforts to encounter Allah SWT, when all pleasures and indulgences in life become insipid to someone who does not possess this trait. The study concludes that al-Ghazali recommended that proper guidance in understanding the concept of 'human desire' and applying it can diffuse conflict produced by human desire.

*Keywords:* Al-Ghazali, human desire, Ihya' Ulum al-Din, Quran

### INTRODUCTION

Every human has his or her own wishes and wants. Nevertheless, people also have the choice of indulging good or bad desire because they have good and bad characteristics. As a result of the potential of good or bad outcomes, people have to decide whether to adhere to divine injunctions to them or to their own inclinations (*al-nafs*) (Azmi, Ismail, & Omar, 2014).

The *Sharia* (Islamic law) is a guide to life as well as a gift to the human mind for

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the evaluation of truth. It must be used in a concerted manner in daily life to enable each person to arrive at his or her final destination. This is the ultimate difference between humans and animals. Humans would not have been chosen as the *khalifah* on this earth if Allah SWT had not equipped them with the potential of becoming a *khalifah* in addition to their role of being slaves of Allah SWT (Azmi et al., 2014).

Therefore, among the main issues that need to be understood is Allah SWT's ultimate aim of creating humans, which was to worship Him solely and to make the earth prosperous (Stapa, 2009). This is elaborated on by Allah SWT in the Quran, as follows: "I did not create the jinn and humans except that they may worship Me" (*al-Dhariyyat* 51: 56). In addition, every duty performed by humans in making this earth prosperous must be carried out in the context of being aware of monotheism (*tawheed*) and worship of Allah SWT. In other words, all efforts to make this earth prosperous should be anchored on monotheism (*tawheed*); making the earth prosperous should not be done wantonly by submitting solely to the desires and demands of human inclinations. The regulations and guidelines are set and forth (*Sharia*) by Allah SWT as the disciple's core beliefs (Stapa, 2009).

The concept of 'desire' is also mentioned in psychology; Western scholars have not denied the existence of human desire. 'Desire' must be accompanied by responsibility. 'Desire' is frequently

presumed to be subjective because it is closely related to internal and external factors such as instinct, natural inclination, objectives, encouragement, suggestion, assumption of benefit, rejection of negative elements, comprehension, rationality and trust. Hence, if desire were associated with responsibility, responsibility would be determined by the outcome of desire. (Atiullah, Ismail, & Bakar, 2014).

## METHODS

This study applied the qualitative approach in the form of content analysis. The data analysis technique applied the content analysis document procedure as suggested by MAYRING; the procedure comprises the summary, explication and structuring methods (Kolbacher, 2006).

## Summary

This is one of the techniques used to present the points of the content that are most pertinent to a discussion (Kolbacher, 2006), which in this context is human desire according to the views of Al-Ghazali. Besides the original documents, other reference items used in this study were journal articles, academic literature and books. The analysis process was more concerned with summarising the content of the *syurut al-Iradah wa muqaddimah al-mujahadah wa tadrij al-murid fi suluk sabil al-riyadah*, a chapter found in the *Ihya' 'Ulum al-Din* scripture, to determine the elements of the concept of *Iradah* according to the views of Al-Ghazali.

### Explication

This technique elaborates, explains and annotates data obtained from the summary (Kolbacher, 2006) in order to determine the elements of 'human desire'. Using this technique, data were collected, categorised and related to the subject matter of this study, human desire, after which the results were collected in various forms (Sarantakos, 1993).

### Structuring

This is the most important technique in the content analysis because it can structure data according to content, form and scale (Kolbacher, 2006). In this study, the data obtained using the technique of explication was structured around the on the subject matter, human desire, as ordered by Al-Ghazali. The development of and elaboration patterns pertaining to elements of 'human desire' were then identified.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### 'Human Desire' as mentioned in the Quran

As a slave of Allah SWT created in His image, people must be cautious of every single desire they admit into their consciousness. A desire ought to be either entertained or rejected. If the desire is something detested by Allah SWT and it fosters negativity in the person or others, it should be rejected.

On a similar note, humans should always remember that no matter how

meticulously they plan their lives as subjects, the results are uncertain as the outcome relies on the wishes and consent of Allah SWT. Therefore, the author firstly adduced the religious references (*dalil*) related to the desires of Allah SWT and the wishes of humans based on the evidence found in the Quran *al-Karim*. The word (*kalimah*) *Iradah* is repeated 139 times in the Quran, either in the form of *Fi'il madi* ( فعل الماضي ) or *Fi'il mudari* ( فعل المضارع ) (Zayyan, 2010).

### References in the Quran about Allah's Wishes

Among the verses in the Quran that portray the characteristics of desire (*Iradah*) are:

(1) From *Al-Baqarah*, 2: 185:

The month of Ramadan is one in which the Qur'ān was sent down as guidance for mankind, with manifest proofs of guidance and the Criterion. So let those of you who witness it fast [in] it, and as for someone who is sick or on a journey, let it be a [similar] number of other days. Allah desires ease for you, and He does not desire hardship for you, and so that you may complete the number, and magnify Allah for guiding you, and that you may give thanks.

(2) From, firstly, *Al-Ahzab*, 33: 33 and then *Al-Ghafir*, 40: 31:

- Stay in your houses and do not display your finery with the display of the former [days of] ignorance. Maintain the prayer and pay the *zakāt* and obey Allah and His

Apostle. Indeed Allah desires to repel all impurity from you, People of the Household, and purify you with a thorough purification.

- Like the case of the people of Noah, of 'Ād and Thamūd, and those who were after them, and Allah does not desire any wrong for [His] servants.

(3) From *Al-Insan*, 76: 30:

But you do not wish unless it is wished by Allah. Indeed Allah is all-knowing, all-wise.

(4) From *Al-Baqarah*, 2: 284:

To Allah belongs whatever is in the heavens and whatever is in the earth; and whether you disclose what is in your hearts or hide it, Allah will bring you to account for it. Then He will forgive whomever He wishes and punish whomever He wishes, and Allah has power over all things.

Besides the word *iradah*, the word *yasha'* (يَشَاءُ) also carries the meaning of 'wish' or 'need'. Among some of the exhortations of Allah SWT are:

(1) From *Al-Insan*, 76: 30:

But you do not wish unless it is wished by Allah. Indeed Allah is all-knowing, all-wise.

In another verse, Allah SWT is exhorted:

(2) From *Al-Baqarah*, 2: 284:

To Allah belongs whatever is in the heavens and whatever is in the earth;

and whether you disclose what is in your hearts or hide it, Allah will bring you to account for it. Then He will forgive whomever He wishes and punish whomever He wishes, and Allah has power over all things.

Based on the verses of the Quran mentioned above, the concept of 'desire' (*al-iradah*) according to Allah SWT, is inherited in the form of goodwill to His slaves. The verses also clearly show that no matter how meticulous the planning and desire of humans, what is desired is immaterial if not for the *iradah* (desire) and consent of Allah SWT. Verily, Allah SWT is The Most Knowledgeable and Wisest in planning human matters.

### **Proof of the Existence of the Trait of Human Desire in the Quran**

The word (*kalimah*) *al-iradah* (desire) in the Quran refers to people, either individually or in a group (Zayyan, 2010). Some uses of the word are found in these verses:

(1) From *Al-Nisa'*, 4: 134:

Whoever desires the reward of this world, [should know that] with Allah is the reward of this world and the Hereafter, and Allah is all-hearing, all-seeing.

(2) From *Ali-Imran*, 3: 152:

Allah certainly fulfilled His promise to you when you were slaying them with His leave, until you lost courage, disputed the matter, and disobeyed

after He showed you what you loved. Some of you desire this world, and some of you desire the Hereafter. Then He turned you away from them so that He might test you. Certainly, He has excused you, for Allah is gracious to the faithful.

(3) From *Al-Anfal*, 8: 67:

A prophet may not take captives until he has thoroughly decimated [the enemy] in the land. You desire the transitory gains of this world, while Allah desires [for you] [the reward of] the Hereafter and Allah is all-mighty, all-wise.

(4) From *Al-Baqarah*, 2: 216:

Warfare has been prescribed for you, though it is repulsive to you. Yet it may be that you dislike something while it is good for you, and it may be that you love something while it is bad for you, and Allah knows and you do not know.

The verses of the Quran reproduced above clearly show that humans entertain desire that pertains mainly to worldly matters, when what really deserves priority are the resources for the Hereafter. This does not mean that humans completely surrender every responsibility of life to Allah SWT without extending any effort in the present world. However, it is sufficient for people to live on this earth without becoming absorbed in world matters to the extent of neglecting the responsibilities of a slave of Allah SWT. The earth should be seen as a place of wonder and pleasure that tests the

piousness of the individual; there will be an end for its splendours when the time is ripe.

### **Proof of Satan's Desires Mentioned in the Quran**

The Quran also mentions acts of 'desire' portrayed by Satan (Zayyan, 2010). Among them are:

(1) From *Al-Nisa'*, 4: 60:

Have *you* not regarded those who claim that they believe in what has been sent down to *you*, and what was sent down before to *you*? They desire to seek the judgement of the though they were commanded to defy it, and Satan desires to lead them astray into far error.

(2) From *Al-Maidah*, 5: 91:

Indeed Satan seeks to cast enmity and hatred among you through wine and gambling, and to hinder you from the remembrance of Allah and from prayer. Will you, then, relinquish?

(3) From *Al-Nisa'*, 4: 119:

And I will lead them astray and give them [false] hopes, and prompt them to slit the ears of cattle, and I will prompt them to alter Allah's creation. Whoever takes Satan as a guardian instead of Allah has certainly incurred a manifest loss.

Most of the verses in the Quran that discuss Satan's desires are related to Satan's efforts in bringing humans to destruction and wrong-doing.

### A Brief Biodata of Al-Ghazali

Al-Ghazali's full name was Abu Hamid Muhammad Bin Muhammad Bin Ahmad Al-Tusi Al-Ghazali. He was widely known as Al-Tusi, which referred to the town of his birth, Al-Tus, in Khurasan. He was given the title al-Ghazzali, which contained the Arabic letter zay (ﺯ) according to the appellation of his father, who worked as a cotton spinner (Al-Ghazzal) (al-Ghazali, 1975). Sometimes he was called Al-Ghazali with one zay (ﺯ), which referred to the name of the local village where he was born, Ghazalah (Aqil, 1993).

Al-Ghazali was born in the year 450 *Hijrah* (1058 AD) (al-Ghazali, 1975). He and his brother Ahmad lost their father when they were still young. Al-Ghazali left for Jurjan when he was 15 years old and then went to Nisabur when he was 19 or 20 to pursue his studies. Abu Nasr Al-Ismai'ili and Al-Juawayni tutored him until he was 28 years of age. While in Nisabur, Al-Ghazali studied theology, Islamic law and philosophy (Hamat, 2002). He met his demise at the place of his birth in 505 Hijrah.

Al-Ghazali was a pious religious teacher and excelled in numerous fields of knowledge. He was given appellations such as *Hujjatul Islam* (The Defender of Islam), *Zayn Al-Din* (The Ornament of Islam) and *Bahr Mugriq* (A Drifting Ark). He left behind numerous literary works. Among his famous works were:

(1) *Ihya' Ulum al-Din* (To Enliven Religious Knowledge) was his largest piece of work. This scripture took several years

to complete. He wrote it while he was moving between Damascus, Jerusalem, Hijaz and Thus. It contained matters related to Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*), *tasawuf* and philosophy.

(2) *Maqasid al-Falsafah* (*The Objective of Philosophers*) was his first literary work. It contained matters pertaining to philosophical problems.

(3) *Tahafut al-Falasifah* (*The Distracted Minds of Philosophers*) was written while he was in Baghdad, at a time when his mind was assailed with doubt. In this book, Al-Ghazali criticised philosophy and philosophers who were obstinate.

(4) *Al-Munqid min al-Dalal* (*A Saviour of the Lost*) was a book about the development of Al-Ghazali's philosophy and his attitude towards several types of knowledge and the route to Allah SWT.

### The Concept of Human Desire According to Al-Ghazali's Theory

Before elaborating on the concept of human desire according to al-Ghazali's philosophy, the author would like to first discuss *muktazilah* and '*asyairah*. From the view of *muktazilah*, humans have freedom of will and action. 'Abd Al-Jabbar stated that desire is realised in action (Ahmad, 1965). The suggests that people have desires with specific aims and objectives, just as Allah SWT too has His own desires and their specific aims and objectives (Dughaym, 1992).

Nevertheless, Abu Hassan Al-Asha'riy disagreed with this view of the *muktazilah* regarding the concept of desire as he insisted that humans do not have absolute choice with regards to their actions (Atiullah et al., 2014). According to Al-Asha'ariy, Allah SWT is responsible for creating human actions (Al-Ash'ariy, 1955; Al-Juwayniy, 1950). This is based on the *al-kasb* theory, which states that although humans have desire, they are in actuality the creation of Allah SWT and His actions while the role of human desire is metaphorical (*majaziy*). Hence, only Allah SWT possesses absolute desire. This means that whatever happens depends completely upon the will and desire of Allah SWT.

Al-Ghazali, who was one of the top religious scholars of Al-Asya'irah, seconded the view that Allah SWT is not compelled to solve the problems (*al-salah wa al-aslah*) of humans and compensate or reward people based on His actions, although Allah SWT could bestow unbearable burden on humans. The justification here is that Allah SWT has absolute power and this does not contradict any of Allah's characteristics, even Allah SWT's intent and desire to destroy His creatures or offer a pardon to infidels or punish all *mukmin*; He is absolutely free to do this if he so desires (Al-Ghazali, 2010).

Al-Ghazali did not deny that human actions were efforts that rise within individuals themselves but added that they did not originate from the desires of Allah SWT. In other words, a *mukmin* needs to believe that *qada'* and *qadar* are from Allah SWT. However, if Allah SWT wishes

onto a person, Muslim or infidel, pious or polytheist either good or bad, success or failure etc., then that is what would surely occur according to Allah SWT's desire or His *qada'* (Al-Ghazali, 1975).

However, Allah SWT would surely be merciful to His slaves. Those who do not understand this concept might accuse Allah SWT of despising them and they might question why Allah SWT does not accept them if they revealed a particular disposition. It is believed that the person intent on exercising his own desire and pleasures has allowed Satan to control him, following Satan's temptations and instigations instead of the commands and wishes of Allah SWT (Al-Ghazali, 1975).

In order to overcome this, among the main issues that people should attend to are *ma'rifah Allah* and allegiance to Allah SWT, rather than to depend solely on actions stimulated by cognisance (Al-Ghazali, 1975). Therefore, Al-Ghazali stated, the actual concept of 'human desire' is a 'want' or 'feeling of deep love' possessed by someone in order to achieve happiness in the Hereafter when he faces Allah SWT. This deep love obliterates all worldliness and temporal pleasures and delights, making them bland or tasteless to the person who chooses this feeling of deep love (Al-Ghazali, 1975; Omar, Zin, & Baru, 2010). According to him, the lack of piouness (*iman*) towards Allah SWT is the vital obstacle for anyone who intends to equip himself with this trait (Al-Ghazali, 1975).

This 'desire' is based on piouness (*iman*), which needs to be cultivated and

nurtured through the practice of traits such as honesty and sincerity. Piousness (*iman*) as defined by Al-Ghazali is not merely lip service or the professing of the two *syahadah*; it must delve deeper into the practice of truth (*al-sidq*) and sincerity (*al-ikhlas*) towards Allah.

Truth (*al-sidq*) was originally referred to as strength in something such as a particular word (Shuhari & Hamat, 2015). Al-Jurjani stated that truth (*al-sidq*) is the origin and the beginning, whereas sincerity (*al-ikhlas*) is a branch of truth (*al-sidq*) (1985). Actual sincerity according to Al-Ghazali refers to an individual who does not enslave himself and his natural inclinations; instead he subjects himself solely to Allah SWT. To pursue truth is to be steadfast in implementing the commands of Allah SWT as well as to worship Him (Al-Ghazali, 2010). Hence, sincerity, according to Al-Ghazali, is the intention found in every action taken that focusses solely on Allah SWT. In other words, actions are carried out solely because of Allah SWT. Therefore, intention is presumed to be insincere if intention is based on something other than Him (Shuhari & Hamat, 2015).

In order to ensure that the virtues of desire, *iradah*, are realised, four important conditions must be prioritised by the individual, according to Al-Ghazali. The stipulated conditions are: 1) to own only property that is truly needed and nothing beyond it, 2) to avoid being vain and to avoid showing off, 3) to believe sincerely rather than to rely on the strength of the

belief of others 4) to distance oneself from committing sins (Al-Ghazali, 1975). He dictated that wealth, pride, acts of imitation found in beliefs and vices are the main factors that impede people from possessing the true of Allah SWT (Omar et. al, 2010). If these conditions can be kept, the individual may successfully cultivate desire (*iradah*) as it ought to be cultivated in each person.

Al-Ghazali also touched on worldly matters in the *Ihya' 'Ulum al-Din*. In the chapter on *dham al-dunya*, he explained that people could become careless and lapse in their allegiance to Allah SWT when they become too busy with worldly affairs. However, he did not deny that among the main human needs are the three most basic needs, namely, food, shelter and clothing. However, in meeting these basic needs, people should take care to avoid worldliness (Yakub, 2013).

Therefore, as slaves of Allah SWT, people must always remember that the Hereafter awaits us and that heaven is generous. This means that whatever people desire is solely of Allah SWT; hence, whatever is done on earth should be done in obedience towards Allah SWT.

## CONCLUSION

The writer is able to conclude that the Quran and *Al-Sunnah* are core sources of guidance that aid people to live a life of peace, conducting their day-to-day life in peace. That is the beauty of Allah SWT's words, which outline in the Quran every aspect of life related to belief, laws and morality.



This pertains also to human desire. Although people have different desires, their desires and actions are based on the desire of Allah SWT, the Most Knowledgeable and Wisest. Hence, as the servant of Allah SWT, people should pledge allegiance to Him and rely on His strength. Al-Ghazali's views on human desire are a good explanation of Islamic life and can be used to help Muslims lead a correct and fulfilling life as Muslims. It is worth remembering that the best desires are those desires that do not contradict the guidelines set by Islamic *sharia* (law). Humans are advised to pursue their desires in a spirit of moderation in worldly matters. Desires that are in the form of ration or supplies for the afterlife (*ukhrawi*) should always be pursued. In other words, every action ought to obtain the blessings of Allah SWT. Al-Ghazali's knowledge as available in his literary works is a tremendous benefit to the *ummah*. Hence, we should keep in mind that the literary works of famous religious scholars that are grounded in the Quran and *Al-Sunnah* can help us solve problems in life.

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