
On Fitrah, Morality, Nature, and Equivocation

by Moustafa Elqabbany

WHAT IS FITRAH?

The *fitrah* of something is its nature, instinct, constitution, or disposition. The triliteral root that *fitrah* derives from—*فطر*—means to split (and by extension, to emerge). Thus, breaking one's fast is called *fitr* because the mouth is opened for food. Similarly, desert truffles (and mushrooms by extension) are called *fitr* because of the distinctive cracks in the soil that form when they are ready for harvest. The appearance of something out of nowhere (like desert truffles out of the cracked earth), or its creation, is also derived from the same root. As such, Allah calls Himself *Fātir al-Samāwāt wa al-Ard* ("The Creator of the Heavens and Earth") in the Qur'an.

HOW DOES FITRAH COMPARE TO NATURE?

Before discussing *fitrah* vis-à-vis nature, it is important to understand equivocation and its role in muddling logical arguments. Equivocation is the use of a word or expression in more than one sense in a single argument. An example would be:

Premise A: *Nothing is better than a rib eye steak.*

Premise B: *A hamburger is better than nothing.*

Conclusion: *A hamburger is better than a rib eye steak.*

The issue here is that the meaning of "nothing" changed from the first premise to the second. As such, the conclusion is false. Similarly, in relation to morality, the word "nature" is used in two distinct manners.



The cracked desert ground indicating the location of a truffle

The *fitrah* of something is how it was created, or **its** nature. This is distinct from Nature, which approximately means the elements and systems of the world that are not the result of human action, such as flora, fauna, and ecosystems. Thus, those who say that homosexuality is natural are referring to Nature. Those who say that it is unnatural are referring to the **transcendent nature** of man, or *al-Fitrah* (literally, “the nature/disposition”, meaning the disposition that Allah has decreed for us). In the first sense of “natural”, morality is our nature. In the second sense, morality is not natural: it is supernatural.

WHY ISN'T MORALITY NATURAL?

Materialism—the belief that the physical world exists to the exclusion of anything supernatural—provides little basis for morality. Just as psychologists have tried to place the entirety of the mind inside the brain, ignoring the spirit, people searching for morality have ended up empty-handed whenever their core assumption has been that only the physical world exists. If that were the case, then why would we care about anything that does not benefit our physical existence? Dying parents and crippled children are a waste of resources. Rape and theft are “natural” (in the sense of Nature) ways to fulfill one’s physical needs, spread one’s DNA, and obtain a livelihood. It

only takes a few moments’ reflection to realise that, as humans, we all innately know that acting “natural” is not in our nature. Human rights and humanity are real, and if our world view cannot explain them, then it is necessary to augment it such that it can.

The Prophet Muhammad ﷺ mentioned a number of distinctive practices related to sound human nature (*sunan al-fitrah*). These include acts that are altogether “unnatural”, such as removing hair from the armpits and pubic regions. Perhaps the most telling, though, is circumcision: man’s physical constitution, in the most personal and intimate way, is cut and pruned to be in harmony with Allah’s commandment. In other words, man’s nature requires that he sever a part of himself, physically and spiritually, from Nature.

THE SOURCE OF MORAL RULINGS

If Nature is not a source of moral rulings, then what about man’s nature (*fitrah*)? Can that be a source of moral rulings? In *Ihya’ ‘Ulum al-Din*, Imam Ghazali informs us that truth can sometimes be repugnant, and that people’s innate dispositions (*tibā’*) can sometimes view falsehood as good. If that is true, where does this leave us with respect to *fitrah*, our innate nature? Can a sound *fitrah* coexist with an incorrect perception of good and evil?

Human *fitrah* is the transcendent, innate nature that Allah creates in the hearts of mankind. *Fitrah* remains intact in all people who have not been corrupted, including young children and some of those unreached by Revelation. The *fitrah* of mankind imbues them with the desire to be morally upright but not the knowledge of its particulars. Thus, while *fitrah* entails that we are moral beings at our core, it does not entail knowing how to be moral. One can be of sound *fitrah* yet be ignorant of what the moral course of action is in a particular situation.

Excluding the knowledge of **how** to be moral from the requirements of *fitrah* addresses three issues:

1. Legal particulars have changed over time: previous Prophets had different laws. So if their followers were upright and Muslims are also upright, it means that the particulars of being upright can change. If they behaved according to the *fitrah* and Muslims do too, that means that particulars are not part of the definition of *fitrah*, but a practical consequence of its application.
2. Excluding knowledge of the particulars of how to be morally upright from the definition of *fitrah* allows for the existence of non-Muslims never reached by the message of Islam yet who remain true to their *fitrah*.
3. This view is consistent with the understanding that good and evil (*husn wa qubh*) are not intrinsic: left to their own devices, people will differ on what is good or evil. The source of good and evil is Revelation and nothing else. But receiving knowledge of Revelation is not part of the definition of *fitrah*, so the knowledge of moral particulars, which can only come from Revelation, is not part of the definition of *fitrah*, which even young children possess.

Finally, *fitrah* is transcendent because it is not (just) about physical survival: it entails the need to be morally upright, sometimes despite the physical cost. Morality is not a natural concept: it is supernatural. So human nature necessitates the existence of a metaphysical realm that effects morality.

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