



Perspectives on Islamic Psychology: al-Raghib al-Isfahani on the Healing of Emotions in the Qur'an

YASIEN MOHAMED

YAQVEEN™
INSTITUTE FOR ISLAMIC RESEARCH

Author Biography

Yasien Mohamed is Emeritus Professor of Arabic Studies and Islamic Philosophy, Department of Foreign Languages, University of the Western Cape, South Africa. He has authored over hundred peer-reviewed articles on classical Islamic philosophy, Islamic psychology, Qur'anic ethics and modern Islamic thought. He is a founding member of the International Association of Islamic Psychology and recipient of the international award-winning book *The Path to Virtue: the Ethical philosophy of al-Rāghib al-Isfahānī*. He currently teaches a postgraduate module in Contemporary Islamic Thought at the International Peace College of South Africa.

Disclaimer: *The views, opinions, findings, and conclusions expressed in these papers and articles are strictly those of the authors. Furthermore, Yaqeen does not endorse any of the personal views of the authors on any platform. Our team is diverse on all fronts, allowing for constant, enriching dialogue that helps us produce high-quality research.*

Copyright © 2020. Yaqeen Institute for Islamic Research

Introduction

It took modern psychology a century to realize that human behavior is not only determined by physiological instincts but that human consciousness also plays an important role. Hence the emergence of cognitive psychology and the acknowledgment that thought can be modified and can serve as a source of therapy for the immoderate emotions of fear, anger, and sorrow, to name a few. This is not a new discovery; reason and its intimate connection with human emotions were central to both Hellenistic and classical Islamic psychology. If it is shown that one's thinking is factually false, then it will reveal that one's emotions that are linked to it are inappropriate. Thus, emotions could be rational or irrational, depending on whether they are true or false. Goleman's *Emotional Intelligence* states that this is not a new perspective, "as the virtue of withstanding the emotional storms that the buffeting of Fortune brings has been praised as a virtue since the time of Plato."¹ Emotions are feelings about or towards something. They have cognitive and affective aspects that drive one to action, which depend in part on one's beliefs and perceptions.²

Emotions are therefore not blind, animalistic forces but intelligent and discriminating parts of the personality, closely related to certain beliefs and therefore susceptible to cognitive modification. All major Greek thinkers from Plato onward agree that belief is a *necessary condition* of emotion in each case. These beliefs could be good or bad. To believe that something has great value is to respond with great joy when it is present, with great fear when it is threatened, with great grief when it is lost, with great anger when willfully damaged, and with great pity when lost due to no fault of one's own.³

The positive appreciation of emotions by Aristotle and their amenability to

¹ Daniel Goleman, *Emotional Intelligence* (New York: Bantam Book, 1997), 62.

² Linda Trinkaus Zagzebski, *Divine Motivation Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 60–72.

³ Martha Nussbaum, *The Therapy of Desire: Theory and Practice in Hellenistic Ethics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 79–80, 369–70.

reason are echoed in the writings of the Islamic philosophers of the eleventh century, including Miskawayh (d. 1030), al-Rāghib al-Iṣfahānī (d. 1040) and al-Ghazālī (d. 1111).⁴ Both the Greek and Islamic philosophers share the paradigm of the tripartite division of the soul, into the rational (reason), concupiscent (desire), and irascible (anger) faculties. The rational faculty enables humans to control the two lower faculties of desire and anger, leading to the four cardinal virtues of the soul: wisdom, temperance, courage, and justice.

The Islamic philosophers of the eleventh century adopted the rider-horse-dog metaphor from Galen and Aristotle. This imagery, with the dog leading the way in hunting, vividly explains the dynamic relationship between the three faculties of the soul. The rider is the metaphor for reason, the horse the metaphor for desire, and the dog the metaphor for anger (or emotions). A person guided by reason coordinates these three faculties in the right proportion. The dog is an apt metaphor for emotions. Just as the dog obeys the rider, the emotions obey reason.⁵

When the rational faculty has control over the two lower faculties of the soul, the soul will be balanced, and the four cardinal virtues of wisdom, temperance, courage, and justice will emerge. But if the soul is not in balance, the vices of the soul will emerge. For example, the irascible faculty represents the human emotions, particularly anger. The positive quality that arises out of the control of the irascible faculty is courage. But when the emotions are not in control, the negative qualities of cowardice and rashness emerge. Courage is therefore the mean between these two extremes. However, the focus of my essay is not on the positive virtues that arise from the emotions, but on the vices that arise due to

⁴ For the development of the philosophical ethics of these three Muslim thinkers, see Yasien Mohamed, “The Evolution of Early Islamic Ethics: A Conspectus,” *American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences* 18, no. 4 (2002): 89–131.

⁵ Yasien Mohamed, “The Irascibility of the Soul: The Management of Emotions in the Ethics of Aristotle and al-Isfahani,” *Philosophia Islamica, The Journal of the International Society for Islamic Philosophy* 1 (2010): 79–101; Yasien Mohamed, “The Metaphor of the Dog in Arabic Literature,” *Tydskrif vir Letterkunde* 45, no. 1 (2008): 75–86.

immoderate emotions.

Although the Islamic philosophers borrowed the psychology of the soul from the Hellenistic philosophers, they integrated it into an Islamic worldview that has its own original concepts. I shall deal with the Qur'anic perspective on emotions as interpreted mainly by Rāghib al-Iṣfahānī (d. 1040). He is known for his Qur'anic lexicon *Alfāḥ Muḥrādāt al-Qur'ān*. But less is known about his *Kitāb al-Dharī'ah ilā makārim al-sharī'ah* (Book of Means to the Noble Virtues of the Sacred Law).⁶ *Means to the Noble Virtues* in turn inspired al-Ghazālī's (d. 1111) *Mīzān al-'Amal* (The Scale of Action).⁷

I used the word 'healing' in the title as al-Iṣfahānī's focus is on self-healing rather than therapy. A professional therapist is needed when one cannot use the cognitive and spiritual tools oneself but requires a second person's intervention. The Qur'an's approach is primarily self-reorientation through ethical and spiritual transformation. Western models do not teach about spiritual well being. The Islamic treatment of irrational emotions applies concepts such as patience, forbearance, remembrance of God, and repentance. These are not intervention-based therapeutic tools but, if need be, they can be used by professional Islamic psychologists.

However, cognition is not the only force that drives emotion as emotion itself can guide human action. The typical classical view is that emotions have an intelligent element and are amenable to control by the intellect. However, there are also atypical cases of emotions that are not directed by reason at all. Nussbaum states: "There are feelings without rich intentionality or cognitive

⁶ For more details, see Yasien Mohamed, "The Ethical Philosophy of al-Raghib al-Iṣfahānī," *Journal of Islamic Studies* 6, no. 1 (1996): 51–75; Yasien Mohamed, *The Path to Virtue: The Ethical Philosophy of al-Rāghib al-Iṣfahānī* (Kuala Lumpur: ISTAC, 2006).

⁷ Yasien Mohamed, "The Ethics of Education: al-Isfahani's al-Dhari'ah ila Makarim al-Shari'ah as a Source of Inspiration for al-Ghazali's Mizan al-Amal," *The Muslim World* 101, no. 4 (2011): 633–57; cf. Yasien Mohamed, "Duties of the Teacher: Isfahani's al-Dharī'ah as a Source of Inspiration for al-Ghazali's Mizan al-Amal," in *Islam and Rationality: The Impact of al-Ghazali*, Papers Collected on His 900th Anniversary, vol. 1, ed. Georges Tamer (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 186–206.

content, let us say, feelings of fatigue, of extra energy, of boiling, of trembling and so forth.”⁸ There is the nonconscious fear of death in the background, for example. But it is a specific circumstance, such as severe illness, that makes us conscious of our fear of death. The ongoing fear of death is a hidden psychological reality, but it is only in certain circumstances that we notice the fear.⁹

There are also emotional states that are not guided by reason at all, nor by our conscious will. The Qur’an states: “God contracts and expands and to Him you shall return” (2:245). In Sufism, *bast* (spiritual expansion) is a profound involuntary spiritual state that overtakes a spiritual seeker, as a result of which they feel the presence of God. It is accompanied by feelings of joy, hope, and compassion. The person is free of all spiritual blockages.

The opposite state is *qabḍ* (contraction of the soul); here the link between the individual and God is cut, causing distress and spiritual blockages. Ironically, contraction is more beneficial as it is by trials and tribulations that one is purified. There is no intentionality nor intelligence in these emotions. They are outside human volition and completely in the Invisible Hand of God, Who directs all things from the heavens to the hearts. We are reminded of this in the Prophetic saying: “The heart is between the two fingers of the All-Merciful. He turns it from state to state and gives it whatever form He wishes.”¹⁰ Contraction is caused by God’s Majesty, and expansion is by His Grace. The former is accompanied by fear and anxiety and the latter is accompanied by joy and rapture.¹¹

Thus, these emotional states of fear and joy, of contraction and expansion, are spiritual states of the heart, controlled by God, not by human reason and volition. These emotions are spiritual states, not rational. They are advanced

⁸ Nussbaum, *Therapy of Desire*, 60.

⁹ Nussbaum, *Therapy of Desire*, 70.

¹⁰ Ibn Ḥanbal, *Musnad*, vol. 2, no. 17; cited in M. Fethullah Gulen, *Key Concepts in the Practice of Sufism*, vol. 1 (New Jersey: Fountain, 2004): 167–69.

¹¹ Gulen, *Key Concepts in the Practice of Sufism*, 167–69.

stages of the human soul. The advanced stages cannot be reached without the earlier conscious struggle of the soul against bodily desires and worldly distractions.

According to Ibn Qayyim al-Jawzīyah (d. 1350), it is important to overcome condemnable habits and mechanical ways of worship, and this can only be done through knowledge and removal of all worldly obstacles to the spiritual path. After all these preliminary modes of conscious action, the spiritual seeker will then tread the path of contraction and expansion, and it is at this level that they will transcend the station of Islam and rise to the station of faith (*īmān*) and, from the station of faith, rise to the level of excellence (*iḥsān*). It is at the level of excellence that worship no longer becomes a burden or a mechanical exercise, but will emerge spontaneously from the heart. The worshipper at this level will fluctuate between contraction and expansion, between fear and hope. In fear he or she turns to God for forgiveness and in hope he or she remains vigilant to avoid complacency.¹²

As mentioned, the early stage is important for the believer's struggle with their painful past and the dark side of the psyche. As soon as one weans oneself of the temporal and sensible, one achieves a remarkable independence, and one's soul is made happy by the Grace of God. It is important to have a realistic appraisal of oneself and not a fictitious self-perception that will impede self-knowledge. When we do not acknowledge the truth of our emotions, we are guilty of spiritual bypassing. Spiritual ascent must take place within the context of our humanity and not by escaping from it. It is only when we come to terms with the painful reality of our emotions that we are able to spiritually transcend our psyche.

Reason alone is not enough to manage the extreme emotions; we also need to turn to the Qur'an as a source of guidance. Believers try to remember God in all

¹² Ibn Qayyim al-Jawzīyah, *Tahdhīb madārij al-sālikūn*, ed. 'Abd al-Mun'im Šāliḥ al-'Alī al-'Izzī (Jeddah: Maktabat al-Ma'mum, 1997), 395–96.

of their struggles. The Qur'an is the best form of remembrance of God and its curative properties are mentioned in a few verses: "And We send down the Qur'an as a cure and a mercy for believers" (17:82). Also, the exhortation brought to the Prophet ﷺ is described as, "A cure for that which lies within breasts" (10:57). Ibn Taymiyyah (d. 1328) describes the Qur'an as a healing for all diseases of the soul:

The Qur'an is a cure for all [ailments] of the heart, including the ailments of doubt and passions. It explains how falsehood can be removed from truth, and how the diseases of corrupting doubt can be removed from knowledge, imagination, and apprehension, whereby [the believer] can see things as they really are. The Qur'an's wisdom and kind preaching instill desire and hope. Desire for that which benefits the heart, and aversion for that which harms it. The heart that used to desire vice and abhor virtue will now desire virtue and abhor vice. The Qur'an removes the diseases [of the heart] that are directed at the corrupted will. It reforms the heart and restores the will [towards what is right], and returns the heart to its original state of *fiṭrah* (primordial purity) just as the body would return to its original state [of health]. Just as the body is strengthened with nourishing food, the heart is purified with nourishing faith and the [guidance of the] Qur'an. Thus, the increasing purification of the heart is comparable to the increasing maturation of the body.¹³

The emotion of anger

The nature of anger

Anger is not just directed at a particular person but it is determined by how one views that person or how one believes that person to be. Thus, if it can be shown that the anger is based on false perception, then the anger will subside. Let us take the example of the man who bumped into a lady at a supermarket. The tomato sauce and eggs were strewn on the floor, staining her skirt and shoes. In a

¹³ Muḥammad 'Uthmān Najāfī, *al-Ḥadīth al-Nabawī wa- 'ilm al-naḥs* (Cairo: Dar al-Shurūq, 2013), 285.

rage, she took her umbrella and hit him on the head, saying: “Are you blind! Can’t you see where you are walking?” As the man tried to get up, with blood dripping, she realized that he was indeed blind, and said: “I’m so sorry, can I help?” This is a simple example of how perception can change from seeing people as vicious to seeing them as mistaken. If one can adopt this attitude to people in general, it will help to calm one’s irascible temperament.

Anger is a necessary motivation for defending things that are loved, or deemed to be important, if those things have deliberately been damaged. If you care for someone, you will fear if he or she is threatened, grieve when he or she suffers, and become angry when he or she is harmed.¹⁴ Moderate anger can lead to justice and courage; immoderate anger can lead to extreme violence or cowardice.

According to al-Iṣfahānī, the disposition of anger varies in different people.

Human anger is like fire. Some people are like grass [*Cladium mariscus*]: quick to burn and slow to extinguish. Others are like leaves [black saxaul], slow to burn and slow to extinguish. Differences in anger align with differences in human nature: a person with a hot, dry temperament has a fiery temper, while one with a cold, humid temperament has a mild temper. Differences in anger also depend on dispositions: some people are quiet and calm, having a gentle, modest temperament; while others are noisy and idly furious over small things like the dog who barks at a stranger. Young boys and women are prone to be quick-tempered, whereas the elderly are likely to be merely irritated.¹⁵

Al-Iṣfahānī explains how anger manifests itself in three situations:

When the irascible faculty, the faculty of anger [*al-ḥamīyah*], is triggered, it alters the circulation of blood. This happens in three situations: when a person is angry with his superior, or angry with his inferior, or angry with

¹⁴ Nussbaum, *Therapy of Desire*, 96–99.

¹⁵ Al-Rāghib al-Iṣfahānī, *Kitāb al-dharī‘ah ilā makārim al-sharī‘ah*, ed. Abū al-Yazīd al-‘Ajamī (Cairo: Dar al-Wafa’, 1987), 345.

his equal. If he is angry with his superior and cannot express his anger, the muscles of his heart contract, his blood flows more slowly, and his anger turns to sorrow [*al-ghamm*]. If he is angry with his inferior, and can express his anger, his blood circulates quickly, and he is ready for revenge. This is real anger [*al-ghaḍab*]. If he is angry with his equal and is uncertain whether he can express his anger at them, his circulation fluctuates between slowing down and speeding up, his nerves are agitated, and his hostility intensifies. Sorrow and anger are therefore related: they are derived from the same faculty but are different emotions.¹⁶

Thus, the emotion of anger manifests itself in different forms: with one's inferior the anger is direct and blunt, whereas with one's superior it is turned inward into sorrow.

According to al-Iṣfahānī, the nature of anger is such that it makes the blood boil, filling the veins and brain with thick black smoke so that the brain is unable to take wise action. He gives the analogy of a blazing fire. Just as the blazing fire in a small cave makes it difficult for one to come close enough to extinguish it, so too is the fire of ferocious indignation difficult to extinguish because the angry soul is impervious to guidance and religious exhortations.¹⁷

Al-Iṣfahānī regards anger as positive or negative, depending on whether it is guided by reason. It is not the obliteration of anger that is virtuous, but how it is managed through reason. One of the positive expressions of anger is 'jealous wrath' [*al-ghīrah*], which is to stand for what is just and to protect the sacred, especially women. This is a God-given faculty. It enables one to protect one's dignity, one's household and family, and one's farm and city.¹⁸

¹⁶ Al-Iṣfahānī, *al-Dharī'ah*, 342.

¹⁷ Al-Iṣfahānī, *al-Dharī'ah*, 345–46.

¹⁸ Al-Iṣfahānī, *al-Dharī'ah*, 346.

The healing of anger

Anger arises when certain human drives are stifled, including the religious drive. When the companions of the Prophet ﷺ were oppressed by the Quraysh, they adopted a harsh attitude in accordance with divine instruction: “Muḥammad is the messenger of God. Those who are with him are harsh against the unbelievers, merciful to one another” (Qur’an 48:29). However, believers are generally composed in adversity. When the Quraysh prevented them from entering Mecca to perform the pilgrimage, they responded as the Qur’an states: “When those who disbelieve set zealotry in their hearts, the zealotry of the Age of Ignorance, God sent down His tranquility upon his Messenger and the believers, enjoining the word of reverence upon them” (48:26). The zealotry in their hearts (*ḥamīyat al-jāhiliyah*) refers to the haughty way the Quraysh dictated the Treaty of Ḥudaybiyah, enforcing the prohibition of Muslims from entering Mecca. The Prophet ﷺ and his companions accepted the unfavorable treaty with patience and composure.

Al-Iṣfahānī commends those who control their anger, stating:

Those who control their anger are truly courageous and powerful. God loves the beneficent: those who curb their anger, and who pardon their fellow men (Qur’an 3:134). The Prophet ﷺ said to some young men lifting a heavy rock, “Shall I tell you who is the strongest? It is not he who conquers others with physical strength, but he who can control his anger.”

19

When the Prophet ﷺ and his companions conquered Mecca, the Quraysh were afraid that he would take revenge, but he pardoned his enemies and said:

¹⁹ Al-Bukhārī, *kitāb al-adab*, no. 6114; slightly shortened in al-Iṣfahānī, no. 345; see for advice on anger, al-Nawawī, *Forty Hadith*, trans. E. Ibrahim and D. Johnson-Davies (Lahore: n.p., 1979), 62–63. *Laysa al-shadīd bi-al-ṣūra ‘ah innamā al-shadīd alladhī yamliku nafsahu ‘ind al-ghaḍab.*

“Whoever enters the house of Abū Sufyān shall be secure; whoever remains in his own house shall also be secure; and whoever enters the Mosque shall be secure.”²⁰ This is the way of peace, not violence.

Blind anger is not justified, but anger based on sound judgment is. Although justice is a valid option, it is better to forgive according to chapter 2, verse 237.²¹ ‘Umar ibn ‘Abd al-‘Azīz (d. 101), the righteous Umayyad Caliph, instructed his slave to whip a man. When the man recited the verse, “Those who restrain their anger” (Qur’an 3:134), ‘Umar said to his slave, “Leave him.”²²

Al-Iṣfahānī explains the causes of anger, and how to manage it, stating:

It is said that anger is temporary insanity. This insanity may disturb the natural heat of the heart, leading to serious illness or damage. The causes of anger are conceit, boasting, quarrelsomeness, obstinacy, teasing, haughtiness, mockery, injustice, competitiveness, envy, and vengeance. A person overtaken by anger should pause and reflect: if he has power over the person who has enraged him, there is no point to his rage, because he is able to take appropriate action. If he is angry with his superior but is not able to express his anger directly, he should not torment himself but rather have patience until he has the power to act with anger. A sage was asked, “How shall I prevent anger?” He replied, “Remember to obey and not only be obeyed, to serve and not only be served, to endure and not only be endured, and know that God watches you constantly. This will curb anger, and if you feel angry nevertheless, it will not be fierce.”²³

An angry master should be patient and delay the punishment of his servant; and the angry servant should be patient and delay expressing anger towards his master. Fierce anger can be healed through humility, forbearance (*ḥilm*), and

²⁰ Muḥammad Husayn Haykal, *The Life of Muhammad*, trans. Isma‘īl Rāḡi al- Fārūqī (n.p.: North American Trust Publications, 1976), 403.

²¹ Al-Iṣfahānī, *al-Dharī‘ah*, 356.

²² Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī, *Iḥyā’ ‘ulūm al-dīn*, vol. 3, corrected by Abdul Aziz al-Sirwan (Beirut: Dar al-Qalam, n.d.), 192.

²³ Al-Iṣfahānī, *al-Dharī‘ah*, 346.

forgiveness (*ʿafw*).²⁴ If provoked, you naturally feel angry but you should control it; otherwise, it will lead to bitter feelings and enmity which can be toxic and self-defeating. Thus, restraining one's anger is a form of forgiveness.

Hilm [forbearance] means self-restraint in times of anger. It is accomplished by restraining the hands from harming others, the tongue from foul speech, the ears from eavesdropping, and the eyes from lustful looks. Forbearance implies emotional intelligence. Those who lack the quality of forbearance lack intellect; as God states: "Is it their intellects that commanded them to do this, or are they a rebellious nation?" (Qur'an 52:32). The disbelievers accused the Prophet ﷺ of being a poet and soothsayer. Their accusations were irrational, based on misguidance and recalcitrance.²⁵

ʿafw [pardon] and *ṣafḥ* (forgiveness; overlooking a person's faults)) are forms of forbearance. To pardon is to withhold punishment; to forgive is to overlook someone's wrongdoing. Forgiveness is praiseworthy if practiced properly: "so forgive with a most gracious forgiveness [without grudge]" (Qur'an 15:85).

God draws attention to the benefits of pardon to the pardoner:

Those who curb their anger and those who pardon their fellow men: God loves those who do good (Qur'an 3:134).

Yet, pardon them and forgive: God surely loves those who do good to others (Qur'an 5:13).

He who pardons and makes peace, his reward is with God (Qur'an 42:40).

²⁶

Pardon is sweeter than revenge. Pardon leads to gratitude while revenge leads to

²⁴ Al-Iṣfahānī, *al-Dharīʿah*, 342–46.

²⁵ Al-Iṣfahānī, *al-Dharīʿah*, 342.

²⁶ Al-Iṣfahānī, *al-Dharīʿah*, 342.

regret.²⁷ This is a divine quality to be emulated, albeit at the human level.²⁸

Forbearance is to bear the wrongs of others with patience, as God states: “O you who believe! Seek help in patience and prayer. Truly God is with the patient” (Qur’an 2:153; cf. 90:17; 10:33). That is, God is with those patient ones who are content in times of affliction.²⁹

The emotion of sorrow (*ghamm*)³⁰

Description of sorrow

Anger, fear, and sorrow are emotions of the irascible faculty of the soul. If guided by reason, they become moderate emotions; otherwise, they are expressed in extreme and irrational ways. Sorrow is connected to one’s belief that one has lost something valuable; if one is made to realize that that something is not as valuable as one thought, the sorrow will be removed. Sorrow can also be the result of shame for a defect in one’s ability or morality. Sorrow is transmuted into pity if it pertains to the misfortune of another; it becomes envy if it concerns the success of one’s competitor. Sorrow as a result of a sin can become regret.

Al-Iṣfahānī uses the term *ghamm* for sorrow, which means to cover up happiness and forbearance. *Ghamm* in the heart “veils or precludes happiness: it may therefore be rendered gloominess of mind.” It is synonymous with *ḥuzn* (sadness).³¹

²⁷ Al-Iṣfahānī, *al-Dharī‘ah*, 343.

²⁸ Al-Iṣfahānī, *al-Dharī‘ah*, 58.

²⁹ Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *The Study Quran* (New York: Harper One, 2015), 67.

³⁰ Al-Iṣfahānī, *al-Dharī‘ah*, 332–34.

³¹ Edward W. Lane, *Arabic-English Lexicon*, vols. 1–2 (Cambridge: Islamic Text Society, 1984), 2290.

Another related term is *hamm*, which pertains to anxiety connected to perceived danger of future events. And *ḥuzn/ghamm* (sadness) relates more to sorrow connected to past events. According to Abū Zayd al-Balkhī (born 235/849), author of *Maṣāliḥ al-Abdān wa-al-Anfus* (Sustenance for Bodies and Souls), a pioneer in Cognitive Behavioral Therapy: “If the sadness or grief increases in intensity, it then becomes outright depression and melancholy. A person who suffers from this extreme state will succumb to hopelessness and impatience, described by the Arabic word *jazaʿ*.”³² Stress and anxiety were to al-Balkhī the main causes of psychological illness of the soul, while joy and happiness are the main causes of the health of the soul.³³

Webster’s Dictionary defines sorrow as a general term, “‘implying a sense of loss or guilt.” Synonyms that express the same idea of ‘distress of mind’ include grief, anguish, and regret. Grief denotes intense emotional suffering; anguish denotes distress of mind that is excruciating or torturing beyond bearing, and regret connotes deep disappointment or spiritual anguish.³⁴

Extreme sorrow is called ‘depression’ in modern psychology, which is a despondent condition. One significant variety is endogenous depression, which has the following symptoms: “groundless, deeply-felt sadness (melancholia), anxiety or excitement, and typical, sometimes imaginary, ideas of impoverishment; self-accusation, convictions of sinfulness, depersonalization with a tormenting loss of emotional life... pathognomonic somatic disorders in the form of insomnia, periodical fluctuations of emotional condition with a morning low, loss of appetite and weight, and vegetative disorders... There is an essential danger of suicide in endogenous depressions.”³⁵ According to Professor

³² Malik Badri, *Abū Zayd al-Balkhī’s Sustenance of the Soul* (London: International Institute of Islamic Thought, 2012), 38.

³³ Badri, 37.

³⁴ *Webster’s New Dictionary of Synonyms* (Massachusetts: Merriam-Webster, 1984).

³⁵ Hans Jurgen Eysenck, Wilhelm Arnold, and Richard Meili, eds., *Encyclopedia of Psychology*, vol. 1 (Suffolk: Chaucer Press, 1972), 259.

Badri, endogenous depression requires medication and hospitalization as the patient is psychotic, with symptoms of severe guilt, depressive moods, and false perceptions. But reactive depression is caused by environmental factors and involves morbid feelings about real or anticipated loss or a stressful life event. This is a neurotically depressed person who does not suffer from psychotic symptoms of hallucinations and who has not lost touch with reality. Such a person can respond to cognitive therapy.³⁶ Abū Zayd al-Balkhī made this distinction between endogenous depression and exogenous depression in the ninth century. He states:

Huzn, sadness or depression, is of two kinds, The (environmental) causes for one of them is [sic] clearly known, such as the loss of a loved relative, bankruptcy or loss of something the depressed person values greatly. The other type has no known reasons. It is a sudden affliction of sorrow and distress *ghummah*, which persists all the time preventing the afflicted person from physical activity or from showing any happiness, or enjoying any of the pleasures of *shahwah* (food and sex). The patient does not know any clear reasons for his lack of activity and distress. This type of *huzn* or depression with known reasons is caused by bodily symptoms such as impurity of the blood and other changes in it. Its treatment is a physical medical one which aims at purifying the blood.³⁷

Such a person who suffers from reactive depression requires counseling or healing through natural ethical and spiritual concepts and perspectives. Al-Iṣfahānī's therapeutic counselling is intended for such persons. Our sorrow, grief, or anguish is a result of the stories we tell ourselves, about how we, or the world, are fundamentally flawed. This could be based on mental fabrication, perception, or an interpretation of one's experience. We may perceive something as right or wrong, and only through applying our reason can we distinguish between them. Sorrow is a natural emotion when we experience loss of life, illness, or some moral failure.

³⁶ Badri, *Sustenance of the Soul*, 20.

³⁷ Badri, *Sustenance of the Soul*, 21.

Sorrow takes on different forms and names. Sorrow due to the discovery of some defect of ability is shame. It is the apprehension of something dishonorable in oneself. Sorrow over the calamity of someone else is pity and may arise out of the feeling that such a condition might also befall oneself. Sorrow over the success of a competitor may lead to emulation insofar as one wants to equal or exceed that person in ability, but if it is to hinder the progress of the competitor, then it is called envy.

Sorrow in modern medical terms is called ‘depression,’ which implies treatment through medication. But if the cause of this sorrow is circumstantial, such as in losing a job or a dear one, then medication might only provide temporary relief. It cannot treat the root cause of the problem, which is psychological. We prefer the terms ‘sorrow,’ ‘grief,’ or ‘melancholy’ as they do not imply an unredeemable malady, but are natural human emotions that aid the healing process.

The healing of sorrow (*ghamm*)³⁸

In a previous article I discussed the concept of happiness³⁹ and the importance of detachment from the material world. We are often disturbed by the loss of material things because we place great value on those things of a transient nature. God states: “Wealth and children are the adornments of the life of this world, but that which endures, [such as] righteous deeds, is better in reward with thy Lord, and better [as a source] of hope” (Qur’an 18:46). The Qur’an reminds us to adopt an attitude of detachment to this world as the material world will not avail us in the hereafter. The pursuit of virtue will lead to enduring happiness. Wise believers are aware of the impermanence of this world. They are satisfied

³⁸ Al-Iṣfahānī, *al-Dharī‘ah*, 332–34.

³⁹ Yasien Mohamed, “The Idea of Happiness in the Qur’an,” *Yaqeen*, December 9, 2019.

with little, knowing that real wealth awaits them in the hereafter. They say, “Praise be to Allah who lifted our sorrow. Our Lord is indeed All-Forgiving, All-Appreciative” (Qur’an 35:34-35). Such a person is content with God’s gifts.

The rational faculty is key to the attainment of a balanced soul. Through sober reflection we can work through the troubles of the soul and overcome feelings of misery and sorrow. We also need to understand our emotions. We should be open to reflection and insight into our emotional states.

Every situation is different, and every person is faced with a different challenge, but we are not concerned here with specifics, but with a general cognitive Islamic attitude towards emotional distress. If we are engrossed in emotion and cannot step back and reflect on it in an objective manner, then we may need professional therapy to help us understand our experience in light of our own worldview, whether religious or secular.⁴⁰ The Muslim therapist will consider the Qur’anic worldview of a Muslim patient and use it as a framework for making sense of their emotional experiences and help them move forward in a manner that does not conflict with Islamic values.

Needless to say, the Muslim therapist who is trained in Western psychology, should be able to make the distinction between the Western approach and the Islamic approach to dealing with the psyche. While they are both concerned with the psyche, Islamic psychology goes beyond the psyche, as its main reference point is not the self but God. That is why the spiritual growth of the individual starts with purification of the heart and transcends the psyche spiritually towards God. Once the inner state of the heart is changed, the outward aspect of human behavior changes accordingly.

Victor Frankl is open to spiritual values that help us find meaning in our psychological suffering. Sometimes suffering is unchangeable; we cannot escape illness or death but we can change our attitude towards them. He calls these

⁴⁰ John Welwood, *Toward a Psychology of Emotion* (Boston: Shambala, 2002), 107–8.

values “attitudinal values.”⁴¹ He acknowledges the central importance of belief in divine providence in psychotherapy, stating: “It is self-evident that belief in a super-meaning—whether as a metaphysical concept or in the religious sense of Providence—is of the foremost psychotherapeutic or psychohygienic importance.”⁴²

We can also benefit from Cognitive Behavioral Therapy, which is the mainstream practice in psychology today, provided it is combined with Islamic guidance. I have alluded to the classical philosophical view on reason’s role in moderating emotions. But this is only a first step in transforming the soul. It is important to work on the psyche, but the person requires a proper regimen for the purification of the soul.

Faith in divine providence enables us to see the bigger picture. We will not be depressed over small harms if we can see the overall good of God’s bounties. This is optimism in the face of misfortune, and involves recognition that what appears evil may be good for a person, as God states: “But it may be that you hate a thing though it be good for you, and it may be that you love a thing though it be evil for you” (Qur’an 2: 216). Believers should be patient in times of misfortune. By accepting divine destiny, they will be able to cope with sorrow. However, a *cognitive* acceptance of divine destiny is not enough and does not necessarily cure sorrow, which can only come about through accepting divine destiny from the heart, as exemplified by Prophet Jacob عليه السلام.

Prophet Jacob was separated from his son and wept. However, he accepted this loss as part of divine destiny and bore his suffering with forbearance. Jacob عليه السلام exemplifies the Qur’anic attitude towards calamities:

We will indeed test you with something of fear and hunger, and loss of wealth, souls, and fruits; and give glad tidings to the patient—those who when affliction befalls them, say; “Truly we are God’s and unto Him we

⁴¹ Frankl, *The Doctor and the Soul* (New York: Vintage Books, 1973), iv-XX.

⁴² Frankl, 20.

return.” They are those upon whom come the blessings from their Lord, and compassion, and they are those who are rightly guided. (Qur’an 2: 155-157)

Jacob عليه السلام was tested with the loss of friends and relatives; the loss of ‘fruits’ could mean the death of children.⁴³ In his case, he lost his son, and became so melancholic that he became blind because of his tears. Nevertheless, he had complete trust in Divine Providence; acknowledging from the heart that our return is eventually to God. Al-Iṣfahānī reflects on what is possible and impossible with respect to the causes of sorrow, and reminds the reader that Divine Providence prevails in all matters, including old age and death. He states:

There is anxiety/sorrow [*ghamm*] over the future in response to three things: the impossible, the necessary and the possible. The impossible is of no concern to the intelligent man. The necessary includes death and the possible is old age. These are all unavoidable. Only the ignorant are anxious about them. If sorrow can be prevented, one should act quickly. If it cannot be avoided, one should have forbearance and be aware of what God has decreed: “No calamity can befall the earth, nor your own selves, unless it be [laid down] in Our decree before we bring it into existence. Verily, all this is easy for God. [Know this] so that you may not despair over whatever [good] has escaped you, for God does not love any of those who, out of self-conceit, act in a boastful manner” (Qur’an 57:22-23).⁴⁴

If we know with certainty in the heart that everything happens by Divine decree, we will cope with affliction with patience and acceptance. We should appreciate the fact that we cannot change our birth, our aging, and our death, but we can change our attitude towards them. So that which we can change we must. If we are distressed because we fail to accomplish a particular sound action, then why do we not persist in the action rather than yield to the distress? And it is no use

⁴³ Al-Qurṭubī attributes this *tafsīr* to al-Imām as-Shāfi‘ī. Al-Qurṭubī, *Tafsīr al-Qurṭubī: al-Jāmi li aḥkām al-Qur’ān* (Beirut: Mu’assasat al-Risālah, 2006), 2:463.

⁴⁴ Al-Iṣfahānī, *al-Dharī‘ah*, 333.

being distressed over that which we cannot change. And that which we cannot change we must learn to accept. We cannot alter the fact that we grow old, but we can gracefully learn to embrace it, as Ulysses counsels his elderly companions, stating:

Tho' much is taken, much abides; and tho'
We are not now that strength in old days moved earth and heaven

That which we are, we are;
One equal temper of heroic hearts,
made weak by time and fate, but strong in will
To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield.⁴⁵

Ulysses exhorts his companions to accept their fate; although weak with time, they should continue to strive and fill the time allotted to them to the brim with action and with thought. They should do their duty, avoid useless sorrow, and patiently acquiesce to the inevitable.

In a similar vein, al-Iṣfahānī counsels us to use our reason, and to come to the realization that nothing remains the same, even our age. He cites a passage from a sage:

Sages have said: Sorrow is caused either by the loss of a beloved or by an unfulfilled desire. Nobody is free of such sorrows, because this is a world of change, instability, and impermanence. He who thinks that he can live forever with his family and dear ones is not using his mind. He wishes to own what is not his. The intelligent person is aware that his fortunes will ultimately return to the owner, and those who are attached to these fortunes will inevitably suffer calamities at some stage.⁴⁶

Thus, there can be no permanence in this material world. Our possessions are not enduring, and our attachment to them will lead to sorrow. If we turn our gaze to

⁴⁵ Alfred Lord Tennyson, "Ulysses," Poetry Foundation, 2018.

⁴⁶ Al-Iṣfahānī, *al-Dharī'ah*, 332.

the heavens, away from the material world, we will not suffer that much. We can enjoy the material goods of the world, but should not be so attached to them, lest we suffer grief because of their loss. If we realize that our happiness does not depend on the ephemeral things of this world, we will learn to cope with their loss without feeling depressed. These things should be in our hands, but not in our hearts. But if we hanker after these material goods, we will suffer great disappointment, as al-Iṣfahānī states:

It is good for a person to possess fewer of those things that he would be sad to lose. When a sage was once asked why he was not sad, he replied, “Because I do not acquire those things that I would be unhappy to lose.” [Another sage was asked whether we can live peacefully], and he said: “Yes, indeed, provided a person avoids wrong, is content with wealth, and does not grieve over his fate.”⁴⁷

Why is it that although we know cognitively that God is Wise and All-Knowing, we still find it difficult to cope with the misfortunes that befall us? That is because we either lack conviction in God’s knowledge and power, or we lack insight into the momentary nature of calamities. If we know that afflictions are not a permanent reality, we will have hope that they will go away. And if we are free of afflictions, then we can be happy, but not be too complacent, as the afflictions may strike us, sooner or later. Thus, we should prepare ourselves for tragedies through faith in Divine Providence. This is how we can learn to cope, not only with the losses of the past but also the losses of the future.

Trust in God and resign yourself to His will, irrespective of the outcome. Matters of a transient nature will not avail us on the Day of Judgment, as God states: “Disgrace me not on the day they are resurrected, the Day when neither wealth nor children avail, save for him who comes to God with a sound heart” (Qur’an 26: 87-89). The ‘sound heart’ refers to knowing that God is real, that the hereafter will come, and that God will resurrect those in the graves. The sound

⁴⁷ Al-Iṣfahānī, *al-Dharī‘ah*, 333.

heart is free of polytheism, free of worldly attachments, and free of forgetfulness.⁴⁸ Al-Ghazālī felt that his heart needed to be purified. He used to impart knowledge for the sake of fame, not for the sake of God. He questioned his intentions and felt guilty. This led to his psycho-spiritual crisis, which manifested in physiological symptoms, such as loss of appetite, speech, and sleep. In his autobiography, al-Ghazālī states:

I also perceived that I could not hope for eternal happiness unless I feared God and rejected all the passions; that is to say, I should begin by breaking my heart's attachment to the world. I needed to abandon the illusions of life on earth in order to direct my attention towards my eternal home with the most intense desire for God, the Almighty. This entailed avoiding all honors and health, and escaping from everything that usually occupies a person and ties him down. Turning to look inward, I perceived that I was bound by attachments from all sides. I meditated on all that I had done, teaching and instructing being my proudest achievements, and I perceived that all my studies were futile, since they were of no value for the Way to the Hereafter. Moreover, what was my purpose in teaching? My intention had not been pure, for it had not been directed towards God the Almighty alone. Had I not preferred to seek glory and renown? I was teetering on the edge of a precipice, and if I did not step back I would plunge into the Fire.⁴⁹

The physician could not cure him, as his ailment was not physical, but spiritual. So he sought the counsel of a Sufi Shaykh, who told him: "The way is to detach yourself from the material world to such an extent that your heart does not turn even to family, wealth, country, knowledge, or power."⁵⁰ I am not sure if the average Muslim can make such a sacrifice but somehow al-Ghazālī felt compelled to make such a radical move. He did, however, make financial provision for his family before his departure from Baghdad. As seen in the

⁴⁸ Nasr, *Study Quran*, 915.

⁴⁹ Al-Ghazālī, *al-Munqiz min al-ḍalāl*, trans. Muhammad Abu Layla (Washington: Council for Research in Values and Philosophy, 2001), 92.

⁵⁰ Al-Ghazālī, *Mīzān al-ʿamal*, ed. Sulaymān Dunya (Cairo: Dar al-Maʿarif, 1964), 197.

above passage, he was overwhelmed by guilt and thought that he was on the brink of hellfire. This guilt became a redemptive force in his life, inspiring him to break away from worldly attachments and work on the purification of his soul.

People who are unable to forgive themselves for past mistakes by allowing God's forgiveness to enter into their heart will remain forever tied to their damaging effects, creating for themselves the enormous psychological burdens of guilt, shame, and resentment. For people to change, they must recognize their wrongdoing and that their lives are out of alignment with their deep values and primordial nature. We sometimes escape from the painful reality of our own wrongdoing, resorting to denial, repression, and projection. Awareness of our wrong is the first step to change, but it is not enough. We need to feel a deep sense of remorse, turn to God in repentance, followed by the decision to change our inner state. According to al-Muḥāsibī (d. 857), the first step on the spiritual path of return to God is *tawbah* (repentance), and he defined it as "regret for past sins and the resolution not to return to those sins."⁵¹ This is not a new idea but is based on the Qur'anic verse to this effect: "And those who when they do an evil thing or wrong themselves remember God and implore forgiveness for their sins, and who forgives sins but God? And they do not knowingly persist in what they did" (Qur'an 3:135). However, al-Muhasibi developed a theory of repentance as the first step on the spiritual path that will rescue one from the inner anguish of guilt and hopelessness.

In traditional societies, if a person has committed a crime, they are banished from society; in modern societies, the person is put in prison. These are both external forms of punishment, but they do not always reform the individual from within. In Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*, Raskolnikov, a poor law student, murders an elderly woman and steals her money. He is remorseful and

⁵¹ Al-Muḥāsibī, *al-Waṣāyā* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyah, 1986), 222–23; Atif Khalil, *Repentance and the Return to God: Tawbah in Early Sufism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2018), 128.

confesses to his crime. His moral conscience rehabilitates him, not the external punishment of the law. This is the ethic of self-imposed accusation (*al-nafs al-lawwāmah*). This is often more effective than the court's sentence of incarceration. Prisons tend to be crime factories, but this is not to say that people cannot be reformed in prison. Some people find God in prison. Islam does not shun external forms of punishment, as it is important for maintaining order in society.

In psychoanalysis, catharsis is a purging or release of repressed emotions associated with unacknowledged trauma. The technique of free association allows the patient to express himself freely until repressed material is brought to light.⁵² We have no issue with it if it is going to cure the patient of certain fears, such as a phobia of snakes. Psychoanalysis has the merit of helping the client develop an emotional understanding of his or her past and allows the client to express himself or herself freely without having to be judged for past mistakes. However, a demerit of psychoanalysis is that it leaves the impression that certain repressions of past sins are dangerous. While there is nothing wrong in retrieving past sins from the unconscious, the point is that religious patients may be ashamed of their sins. From a religious perspective, the sense of shame for sins committed is virtuous, but in psychoanalysis it is considered problematic.

When a believer commits a wrong, they feel guilt and experience a mild form of anxiety, which is quite normal and appropriate as it produces a feeling of shame which acts as a restraint against repeating the wrong. This sense of shame is borne out of the self-accusing soul (*al-nafs al-lawwāmah*), which is basically the human conscience. When one feels such guilt, it is prudent to consult a wise elderly person, not necessarily a professional therapist, in order to relieve oneself of the anxiety, as well as to seek advice and guidance. Some people conceal their sense of guilt, and in the process torture themselves, a punishment dealt with by

⁵² Eysenck, *Encyclopedia of Psychology*, 127.

the subconscious. They are always in a state of agitation. The correct way is to confess one's mistake and to find a way to compensate for it.

It is this sense of shame that prevents a believer from committing immoral acts, or if they do commit sins, it is this sense of shame that drives them to correct their immoral conduct. Religion must strongly disagree with psychoanalysis in this respect for, in trying to extirpate shame it has broken down one of the pillars of morality. Thus, psychoanalysis, like other Western forms of psychotherapy, has serious limitations. It cannot address the problem of sin and when the client has to make a moral choice, it can do nothing for the client and religion has to take over.

Frankl states:

But true human melancholia with its characteristic guilt feelings, self-reproaches, and self-accusations would be inconceivable in an animal. The 'symptom' of conscientious anxiety in the melancholic is not the product of melancholia as a physical illness, but represents an 'accomplishment' of the human being as a spiritual person.⁵³

The guilt of the client cannot be washed away by catharsis, which only helps to retrieve the emotions from the unconscious. The problem of sin is psychospiritual, not merely psychological. Psychoanalysis as a technique can only help the client recollect the sins but cannot deal with the problem of sin, which can only be overcome through repentance. *Tawbah* (repentance) comes from the verb *tāba*, which literally means: "He repented; or repented towards God; originally, he returned unto God from sin, or from his sin, or from disobedience to obedience... Hence, the noun *tawbah* signifies the repenting from sin; i.e., the grieving for it, or regretting it, with the confession of having no excuse for the commission thereof."⁵⁴ The verb is also used for God's response to the repentant one, as in: *fa-tāba 'alayhi* (He accepted his

⁵³ Frankl, *Doctor and the Soul*, 201.

⁵⁴ Lane, *Arabic-English Lexicon*, 321.

repentance). In turning away from sin, we return towards our *fiṭrah* (primordial nature). And we turn to God because He is the Most Forgiving, Most Merciful (Qur'an 4:17-18), and because He instructs us to turn to Him sincerely: "O You who believe, turn to God in true, sincere repentance" (Qur'an 66:8). This sincere repentance depends on three things: an acknowledgment of one's sin, remorse for the sin committed, and a firm resolution to give up the sin in the future.⁵⁵

Repentance involves a process of recollection of one's sins but it also requires self-examination (*muḥāsabah*). It is not a matter of just remembering the past but of consciously trying to recollect sinful movements, thoughts, spending, and unjust actions towards others. If believers do not consider their actions in this world, they will be subject to God's judgment in the next world.⁵⁶ In this way, they can retrieve from their memory repressed sins from their unconscious. They should have no defense mechanisms or justifications for their moral failings but should strive to rectify themselves firstly through contrition, then turning to God for forgiveness, and finally resolving not to repeat their sins.⁵⁷

People who become addicted to sin due to its repetition and are enveloped in the darkness of sinfulness do not feel that they are doing something evil. They continue to advance on the path of sinfulness until the agony of death seizes them. Repentance at the moment of death is not accepted. I know a Muslim professor who became an existentialist atheist. After rejection from family, failed marriages, an immoral life, and a humiliating academic career, he suffered from depression and committed suicide. His diary before he died reveals his regret for his past actions. He had no family to turn to for solace, and no God to turn to for forgiveness. His deep anguish and depression compelled him to take his own life. As an atheist, repentance was not an option for him. He had no recourse to repentance (*tawbah*), which could have saved him from despair.

⁵⁵ Al-Ghazālī, *Iḥyā' 'ulūm al-dīn*, 4:586; cf. Hamilton A. Gibb and J. H. Kramer, *Shorter Encyclopedia of Islam* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1991).

⁵⁶ Al-Ghazālī, *Iḥyā' 'ulūm al-dīn*, 4:362.

⁵⁷ Aḥmad Maḥmūd Subḥī, *al-Falsafah al-akhlāqīyah fī al-fikr al-Islāmī* (Cairo: Dār al-Ma'ārif, 1983), 260–61.

Repentance is a process of psycho-spiritual catharsis. It purges one of repressed emotions and liberates one from anxiety and guilt. The believer is saved through faith in a Merciful God. Faith in God, like a relief valve, helps regulate psychic urges which are themselves the mainspring of our spiritual afflictions. Faith in God gives a visage of perfect beauty to life because when one has the conviction that everything does not come to an end with this life, it creates an inner peace and makes one traverse the entire course of life with steadiness and moderation.

The healing of fear (*khawf*)

Description of fear

Fear is based on the perception of impending danger. Often fear grows over the most ordinary things, is highly exaggerated, and mostly not based on reality. Fear is often a reaction to an external situation that one anticipates resulting in harm. Fear is mostly disconnected from reality, as it is said: “Most of the terror comes from the anticipation of the terror.” Al-Balkhī states: “Some of the scholars have likened it to the things that frighten people to a thick ground fog in a cold country. An uninformed person (like an Arab Bedouin living in a hot desert) would think it to be a solid (black) object without any outlets and that it can trap people inside it. However, if daring to enter he would find it to be simply moist air that he can breathe.”⁵⁸

A synonym for fear is ‘dread,’ which implies apprehension and anxiety, but it frequently also suggests a loss of courage, amounting to cowardice. Anxiety is an internal response to this fearful external stimulus. Anxiety, depending on its source, could be acute or chronic, while fear tends to be episodic. In modern psychology, anxiety is defined as “the autonomic response pattern characteristic

⁵⁸ Badri, *Sustenance of the Soul*, 45–46.

of a particular individual organism, after the administration of a noxious stimulus.”⁵⁹ Whether the noxious stimulus comes from within or without depends on the agent. Fear and anxiety are related but require differentiation; fear is a result of a perceived external threat, whereas anxiety is triggered by cognitively-perceived impending fear. Anxiety is a more inward, subjective feeling. Anxiety is a naturally inbuilt survival tool that helps us sense real and impending danger, or where alertness is required. A chronic state of anxiety can pervade one’s normal behavior and causes a person to think or behave in an irrational manner. The degree of anxiety also depends on one’s degree of tolerance for uncertainty, which in turn relates to the extent of our faith in divine destiny. Research on the etiology of worry suggested that uncertainty is the root cause of worry and anxiety disorder, which in turn leads to fear. Increased anxiety also leads to a sense of hopelessness and pessimism about the future, which is antithetical to the Islamic perspective of hope in divine destiny.⁶⁰

As already indicated, Islam does not promote the stoic attitude of the extirpation of emotions. Emotions do have a positive role to play, provided they are properly controlled and shape the virtues that are important for happiness in this world and the hereafter. If the emotion of fear is extreme, it can be psychologically unhealthy, but if it is moderated and properly in tune with the fear of divine justice, then it is a fear that is healthy and spiritually rewarding.

Believers also experience fear; it is a natural condition of human nature, but their fear is handled differently. Many Prophets experienced fear as a natural emotion. Chapter 12 in the Qur’an describes the fear of Prophet Jacob عليه السلام, when his sons took little Joseph into the forest. Prophet Abraham عليه السلام feared something bad, as his visitors did not accept his hospitality. But they brought good news as God states: “Then he [Abraham] conceived a fear of them. They said, ‘Fear not!’

⁵⁹ Eysenck, *Encyclopedia of Psychology*, 68–69.

⁶⁰ See Osman Umarji and Hassan Elwan, “Embracing Uncertainty: How to Feel Emotionally Stable in a Pandemic,” *Yaqeen*, March 30, 2020, <https://yaqeeninstitute.org/osman-umarji/embracing-uncertainty-how-to-feel-emotionally-stable-in-a-pandemic/>.

and gave him glad tidings of a knowing son” (Qur’an 51:28). Abraham had fear because he offered his visitors food but they did not accept it. In Arab culture, not accepting food being offered is a sign of hostility. But they were not hostile and they consoled him with glad tidings of a son. The majority of commentators maintain that the son was Isaac.⁶¹

The Qur’an describes human nature as constantly tending towards anxiety and fear, whether due to misfortune or fortune. For example, one may fear the coronavirus as a real, external threat, but may have feelings of anxiety about it as it can cause us our illness or death. The fear is natural, but those who do not believe in God or the hereafter will be terrified; partly because they see death as the end of their existence. This is not to say that believers are free of death anxiety; but their anxiety is attenuated because of their faith in an eternal otherworldly existence. As for the devout believers, those who perform their prayers, they are less fretful when they experience misfortune, as God states, “Truly, man was created anxious; when evil befalls him, fretful; when good befalls him, begrudging, save those who perform prayer” (Qur’an 70:19-22). The evil in this context can be understood as illness and poverty, and the good refers to health and wealth. The word ‘fretful’ [*jazū*] indicates both distress over one’s misfortune and a lack of forbearance. According to al-Rāzī, to overcome such fret and fear, one must realize that the circumstances that give rise to them are from God and so one should be content because they are a part of divine destiny.⁶²

God described the hypocrites who refused to participate in battle alongside the Muslims as greedy for the spoils of war. When they saw that the Muslims were victorious, they looked towards the Prophet ﷺ in fear, as if death would overtake them. When their fear abated, they turned viciously against the Prophet and his companions. Although they benefited from the spoils of war, because

⁶¹ Al-Qurṭubī, *Tafsīr al-Qurṭubī: al-Jāmi li aḥkām al-Qur’ān* (Beirut: Mu’assasat al-Risālah, 2006) 19:494; cf. Nasr, *Study Quran*, 1276.

⁶² Nasr, *Study Quran*, 1418.

they claimed that they had been supportive of the Prophet ﷺ, they were not sincere. Therefore, their deeds provided no reward in the next life. Thus, God states: “But when fear (*khawf*) comes, you see them [O Messenger] looking to you [for help], their eyes rolling [in terror] like the eyes of one who swoons to death. But once fear departs, they assail you with sharp tongues, being avaricious in the goods thereof. Those have [never] truly believed, and therefore God has caused their deeds to come to nothing” (Qur’an 33:19).

Al-Iṣfahānī describes four reasons why people are anxious of death, not because of death itself, but because of distress concerning their losses in this world or because of the consequences they have to face should they die. Al-Iṣfahānī states:

In regards to distress [or anxiety] over death, it does not cease to tighten from all four directions: as for the epicure and the lustful that one will miss out, or that one’s wealth will be left behind, or because of ignorance about destiny after death, or that one is fearful of the outcome due to one’s past sins.⁶³ One ought to know that this is a disease that only leads to another disease similar to it because, for example, a person starving oneself in order to enjoy food is a disease, which only compounds the desire for hunger in order to eat more. That is a cyclical/never-ending disease, and is analogous to someone who sits in the sun to enjoy the free heat only to get into the shade assuming that he can return into the sun because it is endless. This is foolish.⁶⁴

I

The passage identifies four reasons for the distress and anxiety that people experience in anticipation of death. We shall comment on the remedy for these anxieties, especially anxiety concerning the loss of wealth and one’s past sins.

⁶³ Al-Iṣfahānī, *al-Dharī‘ah*, 334.

⁶⁴ Al-Iṣfahānī, *al-Dharī‘ah*, 334; cf. Mohamed, *Path to Virtue*, 286; cf. Abū ‘Alī Aḥmad Miskawayh, *Tahdhīb al-akhlāq*, ed. Constantine Zurayk (Beirut: American University of Beirut, 1966), 211; cf. Constantine Zurayk, trans., *The Refinement of Character* (Beirut: American University of Beirut, 1968), 187.

Fear of death

One of the central meanings and experiences of aging is the sense of approaching death, although one can be any age and become aware of one's mortality and feel genuine dread and fear. Death is an essential ingredient of living. It marks the end of life, of change and impermanence, and the start of a new life on a higher plane of consciousness. Humans naturally fear death and this particular fear is common among the elderly. It is no fantasy for we all must die as Thomas Gray says: "The paths of glory lead but to the grave."⁶⁵ Yet people pursue these worldly paths and desire immortality. They have no real faith in the immortality of the soul after death and the ultimate felicity in the hereafter. The Qur'an describes such people in the following verse:

If the abode of the hereafter with God is yours alone, to the exclusion of other people, then long for death if you are truthful. But they will never long for it because of what their hands have sent forth, and God knows the wrongdoers. You will find them the most covetous of people for life, [even] more than those who are idolaters. Each one of them would wish to live a thousand years, although that will not remove him from punishment. God sees whatever they do (Qur'an 2: 94-96).

The Islamic tradition does not encourage longing for death but rather to ask God for a long life if it is good for oneself or a short life if it is good for oneself. The Qur'an challenges those who claim that salvation belongs to them alone. If that is the case, why not hasten towards it? Because of their sins, they do not long for death but wish to live long, perhaps for a thousand years. They have a death-complex and want to flee from death; but they cannot, as God states: "Truly, the death from which you flee will surely meet you" (Qur'an 62:8). In commenting on this verse, al-Ghazālī mentions three kinds of people. The first are those who are so engrossed (*munhamik*) in this world; they abhor death and

⁶⁵ Thomas Gray, "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard," Poetry Foundation, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/44299/elegy-written-in-a-country-churchyard>.

do not want to remember it. If they do remember it, it makes them grow distant from God. Should they die while attached to the material world, they are in real danger. This is too late. Change takes place through the limbs and after death the limbs stop functioning.

The second type are those who are penitent (*tā'ib*); they only want to increase their remembrance of death as it will inspire fear and awe of God. They only fear death because it will put an end to their *tawbah*. They feel they need more time to repent, as they feel accountable to God for their sins. The third type are the gnostics (*'arif*). This is the highest level. They are the ones who always remember death because they cannot wait to meet their Beloved. They entrust all their affairs to God and yearn neither for life nor for death but only for that which pleases God.⁶⁶

The first group of people that al-Ghazālī alludes to are engrossed in the material world, and they have an eternal-worldly-life-complex (*'uqdah ḥubb al-khulūd*). No medication will prolong their life as death is decreed by God, which is something we cannot alter.⁶⁷ Immortality is in spirit, not flesh, as the Qur'an states: "Deem not those who are slain in the way of God to be dead. Rather, they are alive with their Lord, provided for, exulting in what God has given them of His Bounty, and rejoicing in those who have not joined them from among those who remain behind—that no fear shall come upon them, nor shall they grieve" (Qur'an 3:169-170).

The remedy for the fear of death

It is not death itself that people really fear; they have anxieties about the consequences of death, including the material fortune that they will leave behind and concern about their past sins. If they fear death because of the fortune they

⁶⁶ Al-Ghazālī, *Iḥyā' 'ulūm al-dīn*, 4:411.

⁶⁷ 'Adnān al-Sharīf, *Min 'ilm al-naḥs al-Qur'ān* (Beirut: Dār al-'Ilm al-Malāyīn, 1995), 83.

will leave behind, then it means they are unaware of the triviality of material existence. And they are also unaware of the transience of worldly glory compared to the eternal bliss of otherworldly existence. If one is anxious about life after death, then one must seek knowledge about it. Al-Ḥārith [ibn Mālīk al-Anṣārī] reported a statement attributed to the Prophet ﷺ: “I have turned away from this world, keeping vigil at night, suffering thirst by day, and can almost see the Throne of my Lord, with people of the Garden of Paradise visiting each other, and I can almost see the people of the Fire wailing at each other.”⁶⁸

If people are distressed about their disobedience to God, then they can remedy their distress through the healing power of repentance. Their greed for material things and lust for sensual indulgences will not avail them. But if they sincerely repent and seek God’s forgiveness, they will obtain the divine reward that God has promised them.⁶⁹ As noted, al-Ghazālī was remorseful of his pride and excessive awareness of his intellectual excellence and imagined himself to be on the brink of hell-fire.⁷⁰

According to al-Muḥāsibī, if a person commits fornication or adultery, they should rectify themselves by arranging marriages for the poor and assisting with their livelihoods. As for major crimes like murder, they should rectify themselves by purchasing slaves and setting them free.⁷¹ If sinners fail to repent before they die, they are subject to being cleansed through the fires of the infernal realms. It therefore behooves them to cleanse themselves of the impurities of their souls before they die, to avoid experiencing a painful purification through the fires of hell in the next world. Thus, al-Muḥāsibī states:

⁶⁸ Al-‘Uqaylī, *al-Ḍu‘afā’*, ed. Māzin ibn Muḥammad al-Sirsāwī (Cairo: Maktabat Dār Ibn ‘Abbās, 2008), 6:442 (see biography of Yūsuf ibn ‘Aṭīyah Abū Sahl al-Ṣaffār). Tradition cited in al-Ghazālī, *Mizān*; al-Iṣfahānī, *al-Dharī‘ah*, 334; Miskawayh, *Tahdhīb*, 214; Zurayk, *Refinement*, 190.

⁶⁹ Al-Iṣfahānī, *al-Dharī‘ah*, 334.

⁷⁰ Al-Ghazālī, *al-Munqidh min al-ḍalāl*; Montgomery Watt, trans., *Imam al-Ghazālī’s Deliverance from Error and the Beginnings of Guidance* (Kuala Lumpur: Islamic Book Trust, 2005).

⁷¹ Khalīl, *Repentance and the Return to God*, 129.

If he finds a sin within him that requires repentance, he is not prepared to meet his Lord when he continues to abide in what angers God. ...Death will come to him without question. The fearful ones, on account of their fear of encountering God with what displeases Him, rush to repentance before death overtakes their spirits and before they are unable to repent to their Lord and feel a remorse that is no longer accepted.⁷²

Al-Iṣfahānī identifies three categories of people regarding their attitude to this world and to death.⁷³ The first category is the sage who is aware that worldly life enslaves him and that death will liberate him. Worldly life is temporary, like a flash of lightning, which quickly disappears. He also knows that he is like an envoy safeguarding a seaport to protect his country. He is happy to return to his Lord and not sad to leave this world except for the lost opportunities to serve God and to be near to Him. His only anxiety is the uncertainty after death, where he will meet his Lord for the first time, not knowing what he will say to Him, or what will be said to him.⁷⁴ This is a justifiable anxiety. Al-Ghazālī experienced such anxiety and feared the result of his sins in the hereafter. Believers such as al-Ghazālī, who suffer anguish on account of their sins take recourse to *tawbah* (repentance) for the purification of their sins.

People who feel guilty may become depressed or suicidal. This is a pathological guilt. But spiritual guilt requires that one be remorseful for sins committed. Those experiencing this type of guilt are troubled by their self-reproaching soul (*al-naḥs al-lawwāmah*). This is their human conscience that blames itself for the sins of the past. If the feelings of guilt are spiritual, not pathological, the person will be morally transformed. A spiritually guilty person is not only conscious of God's wrath but also of His Mercy. But a pathologically guilty person will suffer perpetual guilt and despair. Najātī supports this view and states that irrational fear of divine punishment can lead to despair unless accompanied by hope in

⁷² Khalīl, *Repentance and the Return to God*, 130.

⁷³ Al-Iṣfahānī, *al-Dharī'ah*, 335.

⁷⁴ Al-Iṣfahānī, *al-Dharī'ah*, 335.

divine mercy.⁷⁵ The saints and prophets combined fear and hope in a balanced way, as the Qur'an states: "Truly they vied in good deeds. They called upon Us with desire and with fear, and they were humble before Us" (Qur'an 21:90). The Prophets were also distressed in times of crises. But they always had a good opinion of God and never blamed Him for their difficulties. Al-Muḥāsibī states that the repentant ones should think of death, remember their sins, fear God's wrath, and turn to Him for forgiveness. Their anxiety about divine punishment should set in motion a process of inner conversion until they are purged of all selfish inclinations.⁷⁶

The second category that al-Iṣfahānī mentions are the persons who are delighted by this world and are reluctant to leave it. They are like people who are habituated to living in a murky, dirty house. And when it is time to leave, they are reluctant to do so. But those who are content will never complain of their poverty. They know that God has prepared for them unimaginable bounties and permanent residence in the hereafter. Such people are not afraid of death and are happy to depart from the woes of this world (Qur'an 35:34-35).⁷⁷

The third category of people are blind to the stains on their souls. They are delighted and amused by this worldly life. They fear the hereafter and feel that they will be adversely affected, like the fragrance of the rose that is marred by the presence of the dung beetle. Their souls are defiled, and so they will not be well-received by prophets, saints, and angels. "Such people are blind in this world and the next world" (Qur'an 17:72). The Prophet ﷺ states: "The world is a prison for the believer and a paradise for the unbeliever."⁷⁸ By contrast, the righteous ones will nourish their souls with knowledge and good deeds. They do not long for this world, and will not loathe leaving it, like the baby leaving his

⁷⁵ Najātī, *al-Ḥadūth al-Nabawī wa 'ilm al-naḥs*, 83.

⁷⁶ Khalīl, *Repentance and the Return to God*, 127–28.

⁷⁷ Al-Iṣfahānī, *al-Dharī'ah*, 335.

⁷⁸ Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim, *kitāb al-zuhd*, no. 2957; al-Iṣfahānī, *Path to Virtue*, 336.

mother's womb crying in pain.⁷⁹

According to al-Iṣfahānī, if a virtuous person dies, he is relieved of the world, but if a vicious person dies, the world is relieved of him. Death is the exit leading to human perfection and whoever is averse to it has lost his soul. The rational person is aware of death and has nothing to fear as long as he is content, repentant, and devout in devotion.⁸⁰ The believers, according to al-Iṣfahānī, are not fearful of death but only uncertain when they should face God and be held accountable to Him. Their anxiety about death is related to their uncertainty as to whether God will be pleased with them on the Day of Judgment.

Conclusion

The Qur'an recognizes the importance of emotions and the need for them to be disciplined through faith and sound reason. Immoderate emotions are inescapable, but we need to temper them so that they do not negatively affect our psyche or block our spiritual development. The Qur'an provides many stories of Prophets who faced trials and tribulations but managed to bear them with forbearance and trust in God's Mercy.

Through the insights of Qur'anic psychology we learn to locate ourselves within a larger metaphysical worldview. We can open the doors to the sacred dimension where our lives become pregnant with meaning and we become living embodiments of the Qur'anic message. We come to experience our lives as resonant with a much greater matrix of meaning and we come to accept God's unchanging plan. We are now more motivated to see our personal struggles as mirroring a sacred process that occurs on all levels of creation.

This essay has demonstrated that, for al-Iṣfahānī, emotions are not impervious to

⁷⁹ Al-Iṣfahānī, *al-Dharī'ah*, 336

⁸⁰ Al-Iṣfahānī, *al-Dharī'ah*, 337–38.

reason but can become a powerful resource for character building. Islamic psycho-spiritual healing is not only concerned with restoring the psyche to a state of balance, or helping a person become socially-well-adjusted, but will help the psyche transcend itself and enter the higher spiritual domain that aligns with innate human nature (*fiṭrah*).

We have shown that the irrational emotions of anger, fear, and sorrow can be healed by changing one's perspective. Since these emotional states are connected to the way we perceive the world, we should readjust our thinking and be reminded that we have wrongly accorded too much importance to matters of the world and neglected the virtues that will bring us not only happiness in this world but everlasting happiness in the hereafter.

This is only a first step, which has some resemblance to Cognitive Behavioral Therapy, except that the readjustment of thought should be guided by the ethical worldview of the Qur'an. But this is only a step in the process of healing. The Islamic model of change also requires a change in the heart. We start with cognition but that should lead to the illumination and transformation of the heart. This purification of the heart requires struggle (*mujāhadah*) through ethical purification and spiritual edification.

Al-Iṣfahānī combines the wisdom of the sages with the religious guidance of the Sacred Law to heal the soul of immoderate emotions. However, the Sacred Law is not used like a psychology manual but appeals to the heart of the believer whose very faith becomes a source of solace and transformation. By reviving the teachings of the classical Islamic ethicists we can learn much about the potential of human emotions in the nurturing of moral character and the healing of the soul.