Uncovering the Moral Nexus, Morality, Akhlaq, and Character in Islamic Religious Education: A Comprehensive Conceptual Analysis

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ABSTRACT

Purpose – This study aims to provide a comprehensive and novel conceptual analysis, revealing the relationship between "moral," "morality," "akhlaq," and "character," examining their similarities and differences to provide a more comprehensive understanding of their role in Islamic Religious Education (IRE).

Design/methods/approach – This study uses an in-depth conceptual analysis approach, dissecting these terms through a multi-stage process: 1) an extensive literature review to understand historical and contemporary definitions, 2) a comparison of these definitions to identify similarities and discrepancies, 3) contextual exploration that considers cultural and linguistic uses in different societies, and 4) theoretical applications based on insights from functionalist theory, Sufi psychology, and Tazkiyah theory.

Findings – The study used an in-depth conceptual analysis approach, dissecting these terms through a multi-stage process: 1) an extensive literature review to understand historical and contemporary definitions, 2) a comparison of these definitions to identify similarities and discrepancies, 3) a contextual exploration that considers cultural and linguistic uses in different societies, and 4) theoretical applications based on insights from functionalist theory, Sufi psychology, and the theory of Tazkiyah.

Research implications/limitations – The study used an in-depth conceptual analysis approach, dissecting these terms through a multistage process: 1) an extensive literature review to understand historical and contemporary definitions, 2) a comparison of these definitions to identify similarities and discrepancies, 3) a contextual exploration that considers cultural and linguistic uses in different societies, and 4) theoretical applications based on insights from functionalist theory, Sufi psychology, and the theory of Tazkiyah.

Originality/value – The research uniquely explains key moral and ethical terms, providing valuable insights to strengthen IRE science, teaching, learning, curriculum development, and learning environments. The findings may also provide information for IRE teacher education, educational technology, learning assessment, and development education.

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Introduction

The subject of moral and religious education has become the main pillar in the global educational discourse, interrelated with society development, cultural understanding, and the formation of individual character. Especially in the field of Islamic Religious Education (IRE), there is increasingly growing awareness of the need to encourage ethical development, by recognizing the complex relationship between "moral," "morality," "akhlaq," and "character." As societies become more diverse yet connected, the role of moral and character education in shaping responsible global citizens, cannot be ignored. Today, educators and policymakers are dealing with the challenge of developing a comprehensive educational framework that includes universal moral principles and specific Islamic religious teachings (Akkari & Maleq, 2020). The significance of this subject transcends geographical boundaries and cultural differences, presenting a global educational paradigm worthy of more in-depth investigations.

Over the years, the field of education has witnessed many shifts in approach and pedagogy, constantly evolving to adapt to societal changes, cultural nuances, and global influences. The focal point of this evolution is the interaction of moral and religious education, particularly in the context of Islam. The concept of morality in education is becoming increasingly relevant as educators worldwide struggle with the complexities of shaping young minds to understand and explore an increasingly multicultural and pluralistic world. This paper aims to explain the meaning of "moral," "morality," "akhlaq," and "character" to contribute to a broader understanding of their role in Islamic Religious Education (IRE).

Transforming character education into akhlaq education is very important for students to be actively involved in the global community (Sutomo, 2014). In addition, a comprehensive approach to character education at Pondok Pesantren Darunnajah (Islamic Boarding School) in Indonesia, which emphasizes Islamic values, has significantly contributed to character development. (Izfanna & Hisyam, 2012) This emphasis on Islamic values extends beyond Indonesia and is observed in various global educational contexts, such as Turkey (Suleymanova, 2015; Türkmen, 2009). Moreover, Indonesian female Muslim students face online moral challenges in the digital age, which has an impact on Indonesia's Islamic landscape (Hefner, 2022).

The significance of teaching Islamic morality in moral education lies in its potential to challenge misconceptions of Islam, engage in vigorous debate, and highlight Islam's contribution to morality (Lovat, 2016). Pedagogical strategies in faith-based character education (Cinantya et al., 2019) contribute to forming strong faith in students and emphasizing Islamic teachings. The works of the renowned scholar Al-Ghazali have provided valuable insights into morality, moral education, and the importance of divine assistance in shaping virtue (Alavi, 2007; Attaran, 2015).

Still, challenges present in implementing civic education in Indonesia, including issues like poor morality, weak tolerance, and the spread of sexual behavior among young Muslim students (Dahliyana et al., 2021). In contrast, in other countries, such as the United

Arab Emirates, efforts have been made to develop a shared culture through secular and humanist moral education programs (Pring, 2019).

Under various geographical and cultural contexts, including Iran (Mohammadi & Mirzamohammadi, 2020), Indonesia (Purwanto, 2022; Subiyantoro, 2022; Taja et al., 2021), and the United Kingdom (Bouhmama, 1988), this paper tries to examine various approaches to morality and religious education. (Bouhmama, 1988; Mohammadi & Mirzamohammadi, 2020; Purwanto, 2022; Subiyantoro, 2022; Taja et al., 2021) Furthermore, this study explores the broader implications of these approaches on society and the environment (Begum et al., 2021; Bensaid & Machouche, 2019; Nasibullov et al., 2016).

Moreover, the paper critically evaluates the tension between habituation methods and moral autonomy, the role of parents and family in character development, and the politics of moral education in the classroom (Hyoscyamina, 2017; Toosi et al., 2019; Wesselhoeft, 2017). It also emphasizes the integration of character values such as religion, nationalism, self-reliance, mutual assistance, and integrity into the curriculum (Santoso et al., 2020).

Through several case studies, in post-revolution Tunisia (Maffi, 2018) and characterbuilding programs in Pakistani higher education institutions (Nasir, 2022), the study emphasizes the importance of incorporating local wisdom, cultural values, and religious doctrines in the curriculum. The role of innovative learning models, such as the Participatory Observation learning model (Nasih et al., 2020) and the influence of parents on character formation, were also examined.

However, we still can find limitations and controversies in existing literature and practice. There are prominent disparities between implementation and understanding of moral education, especially in the context of Islam. The tension between different educational methods, such as habituation methods and moral autonomy, reflects this complexity (Hyoscyamina, 2017; Toosi et al., 2019; Wesselhoeft, 2017). Additionally, there are gaps in studying the politics of moral education in the classroom and the integration of specific values, such as religion and nationalism, into the curriculum (Santoso et al., 2020). Therefore, this study aims to provide a comprehensive and novel conceptual analysis, revealing the relationship between "moral," "morality," "akhlaq," and "character" in Islamic Religious Education. By examining a range of global practices, exploring the challenges and opportunities they present, and incorporating local wisdom, cultural values, and religious doctrine, the study has made a significant contribution to the broader discourse on moral and religious education. This research has filled the existing gaps, critically evaluated current practices, and enriched the field of moral education and Islamic character by articulating its unique contributions.

Methods

This study used an in-depth conceptual analysis approach to explain and distinguish the meaning of "moral," "morality," "akhlaq," and "character" in the context of Islamic Religious Education (IRE). It specifically focused on analyzing the books that have been used as references in the curriculum of the Akhlaq Tasawuf subject. The design of this study involved a multi-stage process, starting with an extensive literature review of these books to understand their historical and contemporary definitions (Blau, 2017). The definitions were then compared to identify similarities and differences. In addition, the study explored the contextual use of these terms in different societies, taking into account their cultural and linguistic implications. The frameworks of functionalist theory, Sufi psychology, and Tazkiyah theory were applied to gain a more in-depth understanding. Qualitative analysis was carried out to interpret the findings, ensuring adherence to ethical standards, such as proper citation and accurate representation of the author's original ideas and words.

Result and Discussion

1. Conceptual Framework

1.1 Defining Moral

The term "moral" is derived from the Latin "moralis-mos, moris," which means customs, traditions, habits, ways of behaving, or lifestyles (Bagus, 2000). Its synonym is "ethics," rooted in the Greek "Ethos." This concept is also reflected in the Arabic terms "al-akhlak" and Indonesian "budi pekerti." (Djatnika, 1985) Primarily, morality refers to the principles that govern the behavior and habits of individuals or groups of people (Runes, 1971). It is closely related to morality, often interpreted as a moral system.

Moral elements comprise customs, traditions, behavior patterns, and lifestyles. It also includes synonyms like ethics, al-akhlak, and budi pekerti. Moreover, morals refer to the rules that govern the behavior and habits of individuals or groups. It is closely related to the concept of morality, which can requently be understood as a moral framework or system.

According to W. Poespoprodjo, studying morality in a pluralistic society always maintains actuality and relevance due to the intellectual and rational capacities we share (Poespoprodjo, 1999). Our common goal lies in finding convergence points of morality, contributing to the development of collective life by human dignity. Methodical, systematic, and philosophical moral exposition remains relevant in Indonesia. However, the essence of morality has not been adequately discussed, both gradually and deeply.

Morality in this context is understood as a value system or code of behavior related to customs, traditions, habits, behaviors, lifestyle, ethics, al-akhlak, and etiquette in human life. It describes the behavior principles of individuals or communities, focusing on the human beings' spiritual-physical nature and directing them towards true development. The study aims to deepen understanding of morality beyond simply obeying the law, but encouraging earnest ethical growth.

1.2 Defining Morality

As scholars have explained comprehensively, morality serves as a guide for human behavior. Edwards (1967) describes morality as a system, while Bagus (2000) emphasizes that morality is behavior related to moral law rooted in freedom of decision-making. This concept comprises moral activities, the content of those activities, motivations, and the moral relationships that control those activities. Moreover, it also encompasses moral consciousness, reflecting these relationships and translating them into an understanding that includes norms, principles, and social expectations, not to mention concepts of good and evil, justice and injustice.

The components of morality are highly complex and multidimensional. They begin with a moral system deeply embedded in human ideas, attitudes, activities, content, and motivations, as well as truthful relationships (Bagus, 2000; Edwards, 1967). This system has developed into an understanding that includes norms, principles, societal expectations, and concepts of good and evil, justice and injustice. More importantly, this understanding is not an abstract thing but is rooted in empirical observations and everyday experiences perceived by individuals.

These experiences and observations shape human knowledge and tendencies, leading to moral and legal judgments. These decisions and laws are the basis for moral decisions, guiding individuals to act appropriately at the right time. Interestingly, the influence of the empirical world in society is inseparable from this process. This empirical world feeds the senses and feelings, ultimately shaping our understanding of morality. Morality is a complex system strongly influenced by human ideas, attitudes, activities, and relationships. It also reflects society's norms, principles, and expectations. It is rooted in empirical observations and daily experiences that shape our knowledge, tendencies, and ultimately, our moral and legal judgments. These elements are helpful in moral decision-making, which are inevitably intertwined with our empirical world.

1.3 Defining Akhlaq

Akhlaq, an Arabic term, comes from the word, The singular form is "khulq," while the plural form is "akhlaq." (خلق يخلق خلقا). "Khulq" generally refers to manners,

temperament, behavior, or character, while "akhlak," in the Dairah al-Ma'arif dictionary, represents the characteristics of an educated individual. (Ma'luf, 1986). (Asmaran, 2002) These characteristics can be good deeds, known as noble morals (noble akhlak), or bad deeds, referred to as despicable morals (despicable akhlaq), under the instructions.

Akhlaq also represent the habit of the will or 'adah al-iradah (Amin, 1977). An action becomes 'Adah when it is repeated under certain conditions: tendency or impulse towards the action and numerous repetitions that require no thinking. Iradah, on the other hand, represents the triumph of human desires after a period of doubt, emerging from the decision-making process among various desires (Mustofa, 2005).

Mahmud (2004) considers *akhlaq* a comprehensive system of mental or behavioral characteristics that distinguish individuals. These characteristics form a person's psychological framework and guide his or her behavior in different situations. *Ensiklopedia Pendidikan* describes *akhlaq* as a manifestation of ethical and moral consciousness, reflected in good behavior derived from the right attitude toward God and others.

Asmaran (2002) and Djatmika (1996) have emphasized that akhlaq is characterized by traits embedded in the psyche, from which various deeds – good or bad – originate

without any consideration. Similarly, Al-Ghazali presents *al-Khluq* as a characteristic embedded in the soul, encouraging various actions with ease without requiring any thought or consideration.

Akhlag embraces innate characteristics that exist since a human was born and embedded in the soul, arising through ordinary will. It conforms to moral and educational guidelines, reflecting temperament, behavior, or morality. The embodiment of 'Adah and iradah can deeds without bring about good or bad consideration. Akhlak represents a comprehensive system of intellectual traits and behaviors that distinguish individuals. These traits form the psychological framework of a person, which directs behavior in various situations. Ethical and moral consciousness, expressed as good behavior, emerges from a right mental attitude toward God and others.

1.4 Defining Character

The term "character" has a rich etymology, derived from the Greek word *eharrassein*, which translates as "to carve" (Ryan & Bohlin, 1999). As suggested by this derivative, a character can be seen as a unique engraving or mark similar to a sculpture, painting, carving, or stroke (Echols & Shadily, 1995). In general, especially in English, character includes individual features or qualities, psychological traits, ethics, or manners that distinguish one person from another (Nasional, 2008). This concept of individuals having clear and identifiable personalities is similar to the concept of people having "characteristics" in Indonesia – individuals known for their unique patterns of behavior, temperament, and disposition.

One aspect of character is directly related to the concept of personality. As argued by Koesoema (2007), character and personality are equally effective – they both reflect a person's unique attributes or style. (Koesoema, 2007) These attributes are not only shaped by influences from the family environment during childhood but are also present innately from birth. In addition, this character is associated with a person's consistent and generally positive life habits, emphasizing a strong moral compass and showing positive, rather than neutral, connotations (Pritchard, 1988).

Character elements are multifaceted, encompassing individual traits similar to a person's carving, personality, and behavior patterns. An important thing in this idea is that character determines a person's identity, specifically referring to emotional strength or 'strength of heart.' It extends into one's inner qualities, ways of thinking and behaving, attitudes, and actions.

Character is a unique identification of a person – a composite of their traits, behaviors, and ways of thinking. It outlines their lives and work in a variety of social contexts, whether family, community, or country. The concept of character is intrinsically connected with ethical behavior, noble ethics, morals, and even the broader perspective of multiple intelligences. This unique mix of personal qualities distinguishes one person from another, essentially making the character a mirror of individual uniqueness.

2. Similarities between Morals, Morality, Akhlaq, and Character

The definitions of morals, morality, *akhlaq*, and character have similarities and differences. All these concepts have to do with human behavior and its implications for individuals and society. The term 'moral' refers to traditions, customs, and norms of behavior that are synonymous with ethics and manners. It is closely related to 'morality,' which is seen as a moral system. Morality presents an understanding of societal norms, principles, and expectations; It forms the basis of moral decisions and is inseparable from the empirical influence of society.

'Akhlaq' refers to human characteristics from birth, which appear in habits and behaviors. This concept emphasizes moral education and guidance and includes a comprehensive system of intellectual and behavioral traits that make a person unique. *Akhlaq* reflects a person's psychological framework and awareness of ethics and morality. Character, on the other hand, signifies the unique traits of each individual, reflecting their qualities, thinking processes, and behaviors. It exposes the life and work of a person in different walks of life – family, community, country, and government. This concept is connected with civility, morals, and noble morals.

The common peculiarity between morals, morality, *akhlaq*, and character is the focus on human behavior. The direct material object is human, while the implied formal object includes the values and norms embedded in these concepts. These four terms give a comprehensive picture of human behavior, ethics, and social norms, helping to shape a person's interaction with the world around him.

3. Differences between Moral, Morality, Akhlaq, and Character

Morals, morality, *akhlaq*, and character are often interchanged in everyday conversation, leading to the assumption that they have similar connotations. However, they have different meanings and interpretations, greatly influenced by their use within a community. These words refer to a common material object, namely a human being, and a formal object, i.e. the value of human behavior in terms of good or bad. Despite the similarities, the definitions and connotations of each term vary. All these terms belong to the study of ethics or moral philosophy.

We can distinguish these words under several reasons. Educated human characteristics, adherence to guidelines, habitual actions accompanied by certain conditions, and personal psychological framework that shapes behavior are some of the distinguishing factors. *Adah*, for example, refers to the repetition of actions under certain conditions: impulse or tendency, repetition without sufficient thought, and ultimately, the triumph of *iradah*, or desire, after initial doubt. Moreover, good behavior, which comes from a correct mental attitude toward God and fellow man, is also a distinguishing factor. In particular, all these actions and characteristics usually occur without requiring thorough thinking and consideration.

These four terms – moral, morality, *akhlaq*, character – are part of a value system that is interrelated with various other factors, such as values and facts, values and actions,

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values and norms, values and morals, values and psychological aspects, and values and ethics. Understanding the concept of value here is crucial. Values are something meaningful to life, considering moral standards and human-divine orientation. It can be interesting, sought-after, fun, desirable, and wanted; In short, it is something good. Values and emotions are intrinsically related since feelings are human psychic activities in response to values. Values can evoke positive feelings like love, sympathy, happiness, and interest, and do not cause negative feelings, such as unhappiness, resentment, and hatred.

Based on assumptions that may exist, values are not identical to norms. A norm is simply a passage for embodying value. Norms, both written and unwritten, direct action and judge the truth of deeds. However, they do not have the same qualitative essence in meaning, goodness, or beauty as values. Theoretically, values are related to the quality of meaning, right-wrong, good-bad, beautiful-not beautiful, attractive, favored, and loved. They are oriented towards human considerations and religious values.

Moreover, value can be understood both as a noun and a verb. As a noun, it is represented by abstract nouns like justice, honesty, truth, kindness, and responsibility. As a verb, value means self-understanding that aims to achieve certain values. More importantly, values are inseparable from education. It is at the core of the learning process and embedded in the word value operationalized as an educational act. The value learning process can be divided into five stages corresponding to the number of letters in the word "value": (i) value identification, (ii) activity, (iii) learning assistance, (iv) unit interaction, and (v) evaluation segment. These stages aim to help learners internalize these important values on a daily basis.

4. Objects and Resources of Moral Values, Morality, Akhlak, and Character

The moral, morality, *akhlaq*, and character values have the same material object, namely human beings, while their formal object is human life filled with these values. They come in many forms, including actions, objects, facts, and events, all oriented towards significance as per human and religious considerations. In particular, the distinguishing elements among these terms lie in the variety of their understanding and use in society. In Indonesian society, six main norms steer or direct human life: religious norms, religious culture, cultural customs or traditions, state law, scientific norms, and metaphysical norms. These norms cover the spectrum of value systems that govern human life. They can come from outside, such as religion, law, society, and customs, or from within, such as individual beliefs. Each norm has moral references and values. For example, religious norms that encompass the values of *haram*, *halal*, sin, obligatory, *sunnah*, *makruh*, etc.

These values permeate every aspect of human life, whether material or immaterial, personal or impersonal, conditional or behavioral. Morals or morality represent the attitudes and behaviors demanded by these norms and values. Therefore, a norm from any source can have both positive and negative moral values. These values can also contradict each other, for instance, religious norms that forbid stealing as it carries negative values of sin and hell. Therefore, the morality commanded is to avoid such behavior.

The composition of these values may vary based on their purpose, object, and development. The source of value consists of two things: members of the individual community and society. Majid 'Irsan al-Kailany has identified three aspects of value, which include aesthetic value, instrumental value, and value dissemination. Aesthetic values can be seen in art, instrumental values are used to achieve goals, and values are propagated individually and collectively. The adjustment of value formation among individuals and societal norms culminates in a value system, a consistent tradition of laudable behavior.

This study aims to explore the complex relationship between morals, morality, *akhlaq*, and character in Islamic Religious Education. These principles serve as the basic elements directing individual behavior and social norms, with implications on personal values, ethics, and identity. Based on the existing literature, this study aims to critically analyze how these concepts interact with each other to provide information about individual and community learning in the Islamic context (Seymour, 2016). This comprehensive analysis has added something to ongoing discussions in this area, mainly focusing on educational practices that are in line with Islamic values and ethics.

The results of this study have illuminated the intricate understanding of morals, morality, *akhlaq*, and character, revealing their connected nature in Islamic education. In tune with the findings of Sutomo (2014), this study has emphasized the transformative potential of 'akhlaq' in orienting character education for global participation (Sutomo, 2014). In addition, subtle differences in *akhlaq* as innate human traits add depth to its educational application (Syukur, 2020). These results have offered an interesting perspective on Islamic education, enriching existing knowledge.

In comparison with previous studies, especially the Turkish religious education model proposed by Türkmen (2009), the results of this study have shown conformities and differences. Despite this study being in line with the importance of integrating Islamic values, as found by Sutomo (2014), it contradicts Türkmen's approach, which lacks an explicit focus on Islamic morality. This contrast has emphasized the complexity of applying these concepts in various educational paradigms and indicated that a focus on 'akhlaq' can encourage deeper ethical awareness (Cliffe & Solvason, 2022).

The intricate relationship between morals, morality, *akhlaq*, and character, as described in the findings, has revealed an inherent complexity that requires further careful interpretation. These concepts function interconnectedly, shaping human behavior and social norms through a complex framework. In this study, an interaction between external and internal influences was observed, further highlighting the multidimensional nature of these concepts, which can vary across various cultural and linguistic contexts (Wilkie, 2019).

Although these findings have provided significant insights, caution is to be careful in their interpretation. The inherent complexity and variation in individual behavior and social contexts can result in different understandings. Moreover, cultural and linguistic nuances of these concepts can influence their perception and application, suggesting the need for further exploration and more specific study of their context (Kuo & Lai, 2006).

The significance of the study lies in its enlightenment of the complex relationships between the concepts under investigation. These findings have the potential to revolutionize educational practices in an Islamic context, raising ethical awareness and moral guidance. However, the complexity of these relationships requires careful application, considering unique attributes and challenges in various educational systems and cultural landscapes.

In a broader context, the study findings have significant implications for educational theory and practice. They have pointed to the pivotal role of morals, morality, *akhlaq*, and character in shaping individual behavior and societal norms in the Islamic context. Besides, they provide opportunities to change educational approaches and inform policymaking. By acknowledging this intricate relationship and its complex nature, educators and policymakers can design strategies that encourage deeper ethical awareness, in line with Islamic principles (Wahyuningsih, 2022).

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study aims to define the concepts of "moral," "morality," "akhlaq," and "character" and provide an understanding of their respective roles in Islamic Religious Education (IRE). The study elaborated these terms using a robust methodological approach through extensive literature review, comparative analysis, and contextual exploration grounded in insights from functionalist theory, Sufi psychology, and Tazkiyya theory. The findings revealed subtle nuances and relationships among these terms, providing a richer understanding of their implications in the context of IRE. Translation: This understanding has made a significant contribution in this field, especially in improving the quality of IRE instruction, curriculum development, and an effective learning environment. However, it should be recognized that the scope of this study, which focused on conceptual analysis, may have limitations in addressing practical aspects. Future research is expected to examine the practical applications of these terms, with the ultimate goal of bridging the gap between theory and practice in IRE.

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