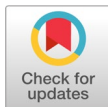
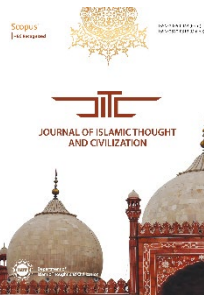



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Doctrine of *Fitrah* in the Thought of Ibn Taymiyyah: Critical Analysis with Especial Reference to the Contemporary Scholars of the Aqidah

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Abstract

The current study aimed to discuss *fitrah* as a central concept in Islamic theology and analyzed the meanings this concept carries in Ibn Taymiyyah's writings. The importance of *fitrah* lies in the fact that it has been mentioned in the Qur'an and the Hadiths of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), which refers to the state in which a human being is born. Ibn Taymiyyah's view of the meaning of *fitrah* differs from that of other Muslim scholars, and this difference stems from two main philosophical ideas found in rationalist and empirical philosophy. Ibn Taymiyyah claims that a person is born devoid of prior knowledge; therefore, *fitrah* does not contain any knowledge, while other scholars, such as al-Ghazali, claim that *fitrah* includes a set of knowledge and sciences. The research also addressed the contradictions found in Ibn Taymiyyah's writings on the concept of *fitrah*, as it presents contradictory views that indicate a lack of clarity regarding *fitrah* in Ibn Taymiyyah's thought. This research used inductive analysis to clarify Ibn Taymiyyah's position on the issue of *fitrah*. It examined the differences among Muslims on this issue, as it is one of the central differences in Islamic thought. The research relies on the induction of texts from Ibn Taymiyyah's works, analyzing, criticizing, and comparing them with the opinions of other Muslim scholars.

Keywords: *fitrah*, Ibn Taymiyyah, Islam, philosophy, theology

Introduction

Ibn Taymiyyah (1263-1328) was born in Harran, northern Syria, and came from a prestigious religious family with a high social status. Members of his family held senior positions in the Harran Sheikhdom and were engaged in teaching, book classification, and preaching.¹

Ibn Taymiyyah remains one of the leading Muslim scholars in Islamic history and an authority of the Salafi movement, which calls for a return to the Islamic sources of the Qur'an and the *Sunnah*. The impact he has had on his students and followers remains evident till date. Ibn al-Qayyim al-Jawziyah (d. 1350) and Muhammad Ibn Abd al-Wahhab (d. 1791) were amongst his most prominent followers. Muhammad Ibn Abd al-Wahhab (d. 1791) was the founder of the Wahhabi movement in the Arabian Peninsula. It should also be noted that Muhammad Ibn Saud, the founder of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, belonged to the Wahhabi Salafi school. The Saudi regime adopted this doctrine and worked to implement it in various areas of life, especially with regard to religion.² His impact on Islamic currents, especially Salafism and Sunni Jihadism, is evident in their reliance on his advisory opinions

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¹Anwar al-Zu'bi, *Wāqī'iyat Ibn Taymiyyah* [Ibn Taymiyyah's Realism] (Herndon, VA: International Institute of Islamic Thought, 2002), 53.

²Ibid., 18.

(*fatwas*) and political views. His ideas strongly influenced Islamic theology and law and continue to be relevant in the present time.³

Ibn Taymiyyah wrote nearly 500 books and treatises on various topics; unfortunately, only half of them have been preserved. These works are characterized by different writing styles and do not adhere to a single methodology. However, his views can be understood by connecting different parts of several books, which clearly reveal the methodology in presenting his principles and the consistency of his works.⁴

Fitrah (innateness) is a common concept in Islamic sources and is mentioned in the Qur'ān and the Prophetic Hadith: "Man is born with innateness/*fitrah*."⁵ However, disagreement arises regarding its nature: does it signify the ability and willingness to accept knowledge, or does innateness itself contain meanings and knowledge with which human beings are born?

Avicenna discusses *fitrah* extensively in his treatment of estimative premises (*wahmiyyāt*) in the logic section of *al-Najāh*⁶ (*The Salvation*). For Avicenna, human *fitrah* consists of judgments of the intellect and the estimative faculty that cannot be doubted arising independently of social beliefs and conventions. The indubitable judgments of the intellect are true, whereas those of the estimative faculty are sometimes false. Understanding this distinction requires a brief diversion into Avicennan psychology.⁷

Ibn Taymiyyah's view of *fitrah* is not conflicted in this manner. However, it must first be noted that, for Ibn Taymiyyah, *fitrah* is primarily an ethical or moral orientation. It is the natural human inclination to love and worship God. Beyond this, it also includes knowledge of God and the nature of reality. We could say that compliance with the *fiṭra* rubrics promotes the original values determined by God for the human purpose of recognising, loving and 'returning' to Him. Failure to comply with the *fiṭra* rubrics leads to the sub-optimal realisation of those values. However, failure to comply also entails much more: human cognitive failure. We are not thinking and feeling in the way we are supposed to. The *fiṭra*, therefore, is what enables us to be cognitive agents the way God intended.⁸

Fitrah apprehends the principles of likeness and difference, as well as logical axioms, such as the impossibility of a body being in two different places at the same time. The epistemic conflict alleged between reason and revelation is a product of corrupted reasoning or misread texts; when *fiṭrah* is morally and intellectually purified, it recognizes revelation's truthfulness and coherence. This move is

³Lyudmila B. Maevskaya, and Khaisam Muhammad Aga, "Concepts of What Is Allowed and Forbidden in Islam through the Analysis of Ibn Taymiyyah's Fatwa," *Trans/Form/Ação* 47, no. 2 (2023): e0240016, <https://doi.org/10.1590/0101-3173.2024.v47.n2.e0240016>.

⁴Sirajul Haq, "Ibn Taimiyyah's Conception of Analogy and Consensus," *Islamic Culture* 17 (1943): 87, 78.

⁵Muslim b Hajjaj, *Sahih Muslim*, Hadith no 2658e, <https://sunnah.com/muslim:2658e>

⁶Ibn Sīnā, *Kitāb al-Najāh* [The Salvation], ed. Mājid Fakhri (Beirut: Dār al-āfāq al-Jadīda, 1982), 89-99.

⁷Jon Hoover, "God as an Empirical Entity: The Expanded Scope of Sense Perception in Sunnī Traditionalist Spatialism," in *Analytic Islamic Epistemology: Critical Debates*, ed. Ramon Harvey and Safaruk Zaman Chowdhury (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2025), 2–73, <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781399533140-005>.

⁸Safaruk Zaman Chowdhury, "Ibn Taymiyya's Fiṭralism and Alvin Plantinga's Reformed Epistemology: A Comparative Study," *Religions* 16, no. 11 (2025): 1371, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel16111371>.

decisive: it honors rational inquiry and de-absolutizes it by locating its integrity inside the divine discourse that creates and guides the fitrah.⁹

Additionally, *fitrah* necessarily knows that every being that has been created requires a creator, and everything that originates requires an originator. Thus, there is no need for *kalām* or philosophical proofs for God, because *fitrah* directly infers from created things the existence of God the Creator.¹⁰

In *Ta'sīs al-taqdīs*, al-Rāzī accuses Ḥanbalī and Karrāmī theologians of corporealism in God's attributes, and he argues, by contrast, that God is incorporeal, not subject to spatial extension, and not perceptible by the human senses. Al-Rāzī explains that estimation (*wahm*) and imagination (*khayāl*) "exercise their functions only in objects of sense perception,"¹¹ and therefore cannot perceive God, God's attributes, or God's acts.¹²

In *Bayān*, Ibn Taymiyya refutes al-Rāzī at length on both rational and textual grounds.¹³ Here, only what is relevant to *fitrah* would be mentioned. Al-Rāzī states that God is neither distinct from the world nor dwells within it, in order to exonerate God from spatial extension and location. Ibn Taymiyya, by contrast, maintains that *fitrah* cannot affirm the existence of something that is neither inside the world nor outside it. To *fitrah*, something that is neither inside the world nor outside it simply does not exist at all.¹⁴ Instead, *fitrah* necessarily knows that God is above the world,¹⁵ and *fitrah* does not deny that the Creator is a body (*jism*).¹⁶

On the epistemological level, the concept of *fitrah* enabled Ibn Taymiyyah to reject the *kalām* claim that establishing the existence of God can be known only through rational speculation (*naẓar*). According to Ibn Taymiyyah, people with uncorrupted *fitrah* possess inherent knowledge of the existence of God.¹⁷

A priori knowledge may, in turn, be divided into affirmative and negative. The existence of this knowledge in the mind is the result of neither thinking nor inference; rather, it is simply posited there. This may explain why some jurists refer to this type as "innate," while others describe it as "intellectual" (*ʿaqlī*), inherent in the mind *ab initio*.¹⁸

⁹Hamdan Maghribi, "Reason, Revelation, and Sufism: The Epistemic Paradigm of al-Ghazali and Ibnu Taimiyyah," *JIOS Journal of Islamic and Occidental Studies* (2025): 3, no. 2 (2025): 171–188, <https://doi.org/10.21111/jios.v3i2.79>.

¹⁰Jon Hoover, *Ibn Taymiyya's Theodicy of Perpetual Optimism* (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 40–44. <https://doi.org/10.1163/ej.9789004158474.i-270>

¹¹Al-Rāzī, Fakhr al-Dīn, *Ta'sīs al-Taqdīs* [Establishing Sanctity], ed. Anas Muḥammad 'Adnān al-Sharafāwī and Aḥmad Muḥammad Khayr al-Khaṭīb (Damascus: Dār Nūr al-Ṣabāh, 2011), 48.

¹²Al-Rāzī, *Ta'sīs*, 52–54.

¹³Ibn Taymiyya, *Bayān Talbīs al-Jahmiyya fī Ta'sīs bida'ihim al-kalāmiyya* [A Statement on the Deception of the Jahmites in Establishing their Theological Heresies], ed. Yaḥyā ibn Muḥammad al-Hunaydī et al., 10 vols, 2nd printing (Medina: Majma' al-Malik Fahd, 1426/2005), vol. 1, 333; see also vol. 2, 294–95, 304, 315.

¹⁴Ibn Taymiyya, *Bayān*, vol. 1, 54; see also vol. 3, 509.

¹⁵Ibn Taymiyya, *Bayān*, vol. 1, 359.

¹⁶Ibn Taymiyya, *Bayān*, vol. 3, 566; see also vol. 2, 264.

¹⁷Livnat Holtzman, "The Politics of Fiṭra: On Ibn Taymiyya's Epistemological Optimism: An Essay Review on Politics, Law, and Community in Islamic Thought": The Taymiyyan Moment, by Ovamir Anjum," *Ilahiyat Studies* 5 (2014): 239–247, <https://doi.org/10.12730/13091719.2014.52.110>.

¹⁸Wael B. Hallaq, *A History of Islamic Legal Theories: An Introduction to Sunni Uṣūl al-Fiḥ* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 38, <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511801266>.

Ibn Taymiyyah adopted the first opinion and opposed the idea of prior knowledge, considering sense perception to be the source of human knowledge. Accordingly, human beings are born without prior knowledge and acquire knowledge after birth.

By contrast, there is al-Ghazali's view which contradicts that of Ibn Taymiyyah's. He maintains that human beings are born with innate and rational prior knowledge: "Sciences are embedded in the soul potentially at the beginning of nature, not actually,"¹⁹ meaning that nature includes knowledge with which human beings are born.

These two views represent two schools of philosophy—rationalism and empiricism—which have their roots in Greek philosophy. They also correspond to the two central schools of modern philosophy, and their influence continues to be reflected in the humanities and social sciences to this day.

This research aimed to clarify Ibn Taymiyyah's concept of *fitrah* (innate disposition) through textual analysis and comparison with other scholars. It revealed the reasons for their differences, which stem from their respective foundational intellectual principles. These principles diverge on whether *fitrah* is shaped by the environment after birth or is innate. Furthermore, the differing understandings of *fitrah* reflect differences in fundamental religious principles, such as the attributes of God and the concept of reason.

2. Ibn Taymiyyah's *Fitrah*

Innocence is a common concept in Islamic sources and is mentioned in the Qur'ān and the Prophetic Hadith: "Man is born over innate nature." This prophetic teaching highlights two important points. First, *fitrah* is associated with initial purity and correctness—every human being is born in a state receptive to truth, unstained by sin. In Islamic theology, this directly counterpoints doctrines of original sin found in other traditions; instead of inheriting sin, a person is born sinless with an innate tendency toward virtue. Second, it acknowledges the role of external factors (family, society) in shaping a person's religious and ethical outlook. While the *fitrah* itself is pure, it can be clouded or overridden by environmental influences, such that a person might grow up following beliefs and practices that diverge from the original *fitrah*.²⁰

However, disagreement arises concerning its nature: Does it contain meanings and knowledge with which human beings are born, or does it signify the ability and willingness to accept knowledge? Ibn Taymiyyah adopted the second view and opposed the idea of prior knowledge, considering sense perception to be the source of human knowledge. Accordingly, human beings are born without prior knowledge and acquire knowledge after birth, contrary to the view that human beings are born with innate and mental prior knowledge. For Ibn Taymiyyah, the *fitra* is the natural inclination that leads human beings to see the truth of God's existence without requiring a formal rational process of argumentation, as practised within 'ilm al-kalām. According to Ibn Taymiyyah, under normal conditions a human being is disposed to believe in God.²¹

Therefore, Ibn Taymiyyah rejects formal logic since it is based on universals and the foundations of mental metaphysics that do not exist externally: "universals are realized in the mind, not in the external world, and there is nothing outside except a particular, perceptible existence."²²

¹⁹Al-Ghazālī, *Mizān al-'Amal* [The Balance of Action] (Cairo: Dār wa-Maktabat al-Hilāl, 1995), 155.

²⁰Yanrong Shi, "Moral and Ethical Nature in Confucian Liang-Zhi and Islamic Fitra: Comparative Perspectives on Innate Morality," *Comparative Philosophy* 16, no. 2 (2025): 9.

²¹Ramon Harvey, "Primordial Human Nature (Fitra)," *St Andrews Encyclopaedia of Theology* (2024).

²²Ibn Taymiyyah, *al-Rad 'ala al-Mantiqiyin* [Reply to the logicians], Part 2, (Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyyah, 1999), 135.

Ibn Taymiyyah cites the well-known Hadith: “Every child is born upon *fitrah*, and then his parents make him a Jew, a Christian, or a Magian, just as an animal gives birth to a whole animal—do you find any of it mutilated?”²³ Scholars have interpreted this Hadith in two ways. The first view holds that human beings are born with knowledge and change occurs after birth. The second interpretation, advanced by Ibn Taymiyyah, maintains that human beings are born without knowledge and acquire it after birth through their parents. Accordingly, *fitrah* does not consist of specific knowledge with which a human being is born, for “this does not mean that when he was born, he knew this religion and desired it.”²⁴ This Hadith underlines the responsibility placed on caregivers. It suggests that a child begins life with purity and an innate awareness of Allah (SWT), but external influences can alter this path.²⁵

God Almighty says: “And God brought you out from the wombs of your mothers while you did not know anything.”²⁶ The non-distinction between science and knowledge affirms that the newborn is free of prior knowledge. *Fitrah*, or innate nature, in this sense is nothing, devoid of spiritual or moral meanings. One who does not know anything cannot possess belief or disbelief, knowledge or denial.

Although *fitrah* is free of science, it requires knowledge of religion, as “*fitrah* is a necessary requirement for Islam, its knowledge, and love.”²⁷ Hence, the question arises: How can *fitrah*, which is free of everything, be conducive to religion?

Ibn Taymiyyah interprets what is meant by necessity for religion as “the ability to know with will. Complete ability with complete will requires the existence of the object of knowledge. He has shown that ability and the will to know which is necessary for faith.”²⁸ Natural *fitrah* is the ability to know, and is not an inborn knowledge. Accordingly, *fitrah* can be understood through a multidimensional perspective, all of which relate to inherent human qualities. Within the concept of *fitrah*, human beings are born pure, with an inclination towards goodness; however, external factors may sometimes cause this inclination to shift in different directions, influenced by experiences, such as environment or heredity.²⁹

Ibn Taymiyyah also objects to the claim that human beings are “created free of knowledge and denial, without the sense that *fitrah* requires one of them”. Furthermore, he also objects to the view that the heart is like a blank tablet which equally accepts the inscription of faith and disbelief, with neither being more predisposed than the other. He considers this understanding superficial and regards it as false discourse.³⁰ “This understanding has been regarded superficial and as a false discourse in the sense that this ability is compelling towards religious knowledge and not towards other forms of knowledge”. Within *fitrah*, there is a force that is inclined towards knowledge and belief, just as, in a healthy body, there is a force that prefers beneficial foods. For this reason, it is praiseworthy, and one who corrupts it is blameworthy. It is then asked: since this *fitrah* possesses

²³Abū ‘Abd Allāh Muḥammad ibn Ismā‘īl Bukhari, *Sahih Bukhari*, Hadīth no., 1358, <https://sunnah.com/bukhari:1358>

²⁴Ibn Taymiyyah, *Dar’ Ta’arūḍ al-‘Aql wa al-Naql* [Resolving the conflict between reason and revelation], Part 4, (beirut: dar al kotob al-ilmiyah, 1977), 319.

²⁵Shadeka Jannat, “The Qur’anic Concept of Fitrah and Its Implications for Early Childhood Development,” *Pakistan Journal of Qur’anic Studies* 4, no. 2 (2025): 49–65.

²⁶al-Naḥl 16:78.

²⁷Ibn Taymiyyah, *Dar’ Ta’arūḍ al-‘Aql wa al-Naql*, Part 4, 289.

²⁸Ibn Taymiyyah, *Dar’ Ta’arūḍ al-‘Aql wa al-Naql*, Part 4, 290.

²⁹Turiansyah, Muhammad, and Herman Darmawan, “The Concept of Fitrah in Islam from a Multidimensional Perspective,” *International Journal of Islamic Psychology* 6 (2023): 68-74.

³⁰Ibn Taymiyyah, *Dar’ Ta’arūḍ al-‘Aql wa al-Naql*, Part 4, 319.

this sense of power, receptivity, willingness, and validity, is it sufficient for acquiring knowledge, or does knowledge depend on evidence learned from external sources?"³¹

3. Conflict of Ibn Taymiyyah's Views

Ibn Taymiyyah argues that the acquisition of knowledge occurs directly through *fitrah*, as a force that acquires knowledge without the need for external evidence. Even if there is a force within *fitrah* that requires knowledge by itself, and even if there is no one to teach it the evidence of knowledge, knowledge is necessarily present within it without recourse to evidentiary instruction that is heard. Whether it is said that knowledge is necessarily present within it, or that it occurs through causes, such as evidence that becomes established in the soul without hearing inferential discourse, the soul, by virtue of its *fitrah*, is able to infer without the need for anyone to articulate it. Therefore, if every newborn is born upon *fitrah*, the requirement for knowledge should be realized in every newborn.³²

In this sense, *fitrah* is a force that possesses theoretical evidence for the acquisition of knowledge. This claim appears to conflict with Ibn Taymiyyah's earlier position that human beings are born without science and knowledge, for is theoretical evidence not itself a form of science? At first glance, it seems that Ibn Taymiyyah distinguishes between evidence and the science that results from evidence, yet he ultimately affirms the necessity of innate knowledge.

A child is innately able to breastfeed on his own. If he reaches the breast, he inevitably nurses. His feeding is necessary in the absence of any impediment, and he is born disposed to breastfeed, just as he is born disposed to know God. Knowledge thus becomes inevitable for him if there is no impediment. This acknowledgment of innate knowledge—including knowledge of God and religion—is therefore necessary, provided that it is not obstructed by external factors.³³ This *fitrah* includes two important aspects, namely the biological aspect and the spiritual aspect. The biological aspect relates to the physical condition of humans who are born with the potential to develop and function in this world, while the spiritual aspect relates to the human tendency to know God and obey His commands.³⁴

This indicates that *fitrah* possesses an obligatory power of love for God, of humbling oneself before Him, and of devotion to His religion, and that it necessarily fulfills its requirements if it is free from impediments. Likewise, it possesses the power to drink milk, to which it is innately disposed through inclination and desire.³⁵

Nevertheless, Ibn Taymiyyah does not deny the role of external intervention in increasing science; however, this increase does not occur independently of *fitrah*, which remains the necessary condition for acquiring science from external sources: "It is known that if souls encounter a teacher and a specialist, they acquire science and will accordingly. It is also known that every soul possesses the capacity to acquire science and the will toward what is right. It is likewise known that mere instruction and specialization do not necessarily produce science and will unless there exists within the soul a power that is receptive to them."³⁶

³¹Ibid.

³²Ibid., 220.

³³Ibid., 221.

³⁴Sunarto, Desi Nurhabibah, and M. Indra Saputra, "The Fitrah, Potential, and Human Development According to Islamic View," *International Journal on Advanced Science, Education, and Religion* 7, no. 4 (2024): 21–26.

³⁵Ibn Taymiyyah, *Dar' Ta'arud al-'Aql wa al-Naql*, Part 4.

³⁶Ibid., 228.

The difference in meaning of the positive power of knowledge becomes apparent here. This power produces direct knowledge in religious matters while remaining neutral in mundane matters that require external intervention. The dual employment of this force undoubtedly increases ambiguity regarding its nature and cognitive function. Ibn Taymiyyah presented four different statements concerning *fitrah*: it is free of knowledge; it is a positive force of knowledge; it is a force that results in direct knowledge in religious matters; and it is a neutral force influenced by the external environment.

Nevertheless, Ibn Taymiyyah objects to the statement attributed to Ismā'īl ibn 'Abd ar-Rahmān al-Suddī (d. 745 CE/127 AH) in his explanation of the words of God: "And [mention] when your Lord took from the children of Adam—from their loins—their descendants and made them testify concerning themselves, [saying], "Am I not your Lord?" They said, "Yes, we have testified." [This]—lest you should say on the Day of Resurrection, "Indeed, we were of this unaware."³⁷ It is not the case for any of the sons of Adam except that he knows that God is his Lord.³⁸

This verse indicates that human beings acquire knowledge of God in the Unseen World, which implies that human beings are born with knowledge of God that is prior and not acquired after birth.

Despite Ibn Taymiyyah's acknowledgment of innate religious knowledge, he objects to the argument of Ismā'īl ibn 'Abd ar-Rahmān al-Suddī that knowledge itself is innate: "This report, if it were true, would imply that every one of Adam's descendants knows God. If they were born upon this *fitrah*, then they would also have been born upon knowledge. It would further imply that some of them acknowledged this knowledge unwillingly, even though they knew the status of one who knows the truth but acknowledges it only under compulsion. This does not alter the claim that knowledge is innate; however, since this notion has reached us only through this report, it cannot be relied upon."³⁹

Ibn Taymiyyah's objection lacks scientific evidence and instead focuses on the absence of evidential support from the Prophetic Sunnah and the righteous predecessors for al-Suddī's assertion. This claim is known to constitute neither legal evidence nor rational evidence.

4. Difference in the Concept of *Fitrah* between Ibn Taymiyyah and Al-Ghazali

Conversely, al-Ghazali views *fitrah* as the knowledge that human beings received in the Unseen World, that is, a set of optimal existing meanings that are born with human beings as sciences or knowledge, having been entrusted to them in the Unseen World before their birth in the visible world. These sciences function as an unseen memory—an image embedded within the *fitrah* of the human being—and thus remembering is an image inherently imprinted within the human being.⁴⁰

In this sense, *fitrah* is the knowledge that exists potentially within the human soul and can be evoked through remembrance. Reference to this unseen memory is possible under spiritual conditions and preparations that enable human beings to reach this innate nature. The Moroccan philosopher Ṭaha 'Abd al-Rahmān further develops al-Ghazali's idea: "The principle of *fitrah* holds that the human capacity for restoration derives from the fact that human beings were first created in the form that preserves their prior connection to the world of the Unseen. Accordingly, the soul carries a special force resembling a prior memory that precedes the memory possessed in the visible world.

³⁷al-A' rāf 7:172.

³⁸Ibn Taymiyyah, *Dar' Ta'āruḍ al-'Aql wa al-Naql*, Part 4. 308.

³⁹Ibid.

⁴⁰Al-Ghazālī, *Mizān al-'Amal* [The Balance of Action], 157.

This spiritual force, which preserves memories of the world of the Unseen—or this invisible or original memory—is designated in Islam by the term *fitrah*.”⁴¹

Fitrah preserves human memory, namely the knowledge that human beings received directly from God in the Unseen World when God acquainted them with His attributes. Ṭaha ‘Abd al-Raḥman refers to this event as the “Charter of Witness.” ‘Abd al-Raḥman explains the concept of *fitrah* by stating that:

[[Fitra (innateness) is a set of ideal meanings that have been placed within the human soul, connecting human beings to a horizon beyond the confines of material reality and causing them to yearn to see these meanings realized in their actions in order to benefit from them. Alternatively, *fitrah* may be understood as practical values of spiritual origin, in contrast to instinct, which consists of behavioural facts of physical origin.⁴²

Since *fitrah* is of spiritual origin and constitutes an entrustment from God, it is not influenced by the visible world and is therefore distinct from instinct, which is affected by material and sensory influences. Therefore, human *fitrah* serves as the foundational element of human creation, functioning through intuition and conscience, supported by religious values as the driving force for intellectual development. This concept is referred to as *al-fithrah al-munazzalah* (revealed *fitrah*).⁴³

5. Acknowledgement of Innate Knowledge

Although Ibn Taymiyyah expresses distrust of innate knowledge, he nevertheless acknowledges it: “Thus, all of Adam’s descendants are bound by it and bear witness to it within themselves”. This is an indispensable necessity from which no creature can detach itself, upon which they have been created and fashioned, and which has been made a necessary form of knowledge for them—one that no one can deny.⁴⁴

Ibn Taymiyyah demonstrates that this is a necessary natural science that all human beings must possess. Acknowledging *fitrah* as a necessary science known to all human beings implies that human beings are born with this science,⁴⁵ an acknowledgment of prior knowledge that Ibn Taymiyyah otherwise rejects. This inconsistency places him in a cognitive dilemma concerning the reality of *fitrah*. He fails to substantiate the position he initially adopted, which attributes knowledge to sense perception and denies prior knowledge.

Ibn Taymiyyah nevertheless continues to defend *fitrah* as the origin of pre-instructional cognitive knowledge: “The *fitrah* that was prior to the obligation of Islam preceded the instruction they argue with. This necessitates that the same intellect by which they know *tawḥīd* (the oneness of God) serves as the proof for the invalidity of polytheism, without the need for a messenger. It thus renders this as an argument against them independently of such instruction.”⁴⁶

Here, Ibn Taymiyyah introduces the concept of mind, implying that *fitrah* is self-rational. The testimony of human beings—the sons of Adam—thus consists in affirming the Oneness of God through mental cognition, which indicates either the existence of an innate mind prior to birth or that

⁴¹Ṭaha ‘Abd al-Raḥman, *Rūḥ al-Dīn* [Spirit of Religion] (Casablanca: Al-Markaz al-Thaqāfi al-‘Arabī, 2012), 52.

⁴²Ṭaha ‘Abd al-Raḥman, *Al-Ḥaqq al-Islāmī fī al-Ikhtilāf al-Fikrī* [The Islamic Right to Intellectual Disagreement] (Casablanca: Al-Markaz al-Thaqāfi al-‘Arabī, 2005), 230.

⁴³Samsuddin, Abdul Jabar Idharudin, and Rahendra Maya, “Ibn Taimiyahs Philosophy of Empiricism: Relevance and Transformation in Contemporary Science,” *Journal of Islamic Studies* 2, no. 4 (2025): 442–453, <https://doi.org/10.61341/jis/v2i4.101>.

⁴⁴Ibn Taymiyyah, *Dar’ Ta’arūḍ al-‘Aql wa al-Naql*, Part 4, 344.

⁴⁵Ibid., 345.

⁴⁶Ibid. 346.

the mind itself is a constituent part of innate nature. Ibn Taymiyya, who refers to the capacity that God has bestowed upon humans from birth to discern right from wrong as *fitrah*, asserts that as a result of this faculty, humans are born in a state that not only acknowledges the existence of God but also affirms His supremacy over all things.⁴⁷

If, within their *fitrah*, they testified that only God was their Lord, then they already possessed that which demonstrated the invalidity of polytheism, namely, the monotheism to which they bore witness within themselves. If they argued on the basis of the natural habit of following their forefathers, the argument against them was that they possessed mental *fitrah*—that is, natural sense or innateness—which preceded this patriarchal habit.⁴⁸

Ibn Taymiyyah here employs the same argument that he had previously objected to in his discussion with al-Suddī, namely, the testimony of the sons of Adam to the oneness of God in the Unseen World.

6. Denial of Innate Knowledge

After acknowledging innate knowledge prior to birth, Ibn Taymiyyah revises his position and offers a different interpretation of the concept of *fitrah*: “Every newborn is born upon *fitrah*,” without implying that, at birth, the newborn possesses knowledge of God as a unifier: “And Allah has brought you out from the wombs of your mothers while you know nothing, and He gave you hearing, sight, and hearts that you might give thanks.”⁴⁹

We know that a child has no actual knowledge of this; however, the state of *fitrah* in which the child exists after birth requires and impels him towards it. The stronger the power of knowledge and will, the greater a person’s knowledge of God and love for what is suitable to him. Moreover, human beings are born with an inclination to seek benefit and repel harm. Rational apprehension, whether it depends on reason itself and whether that reason exists externally or not, ultimately depends on the intended estimation of these two factors.⁵⁰

Ibn Taymiyyah conflates the positive power of *fitrah* with innate knowledge: at times, it is presented as a force rather than knowledge, while at other times it is treated as knowledge itself. He states, “God created His servants upon *fitrah* to know the truth, and the messengers were sent to perfect *fitrah*, not to change it: ‘We will show them Our signs on the horizons and within themselves until it becomes clear to them that it is the truth’”⁵¹ He explains that God would show them clear signs, both external and internal, through which His servants are informed of the truth. Thus, rational evidence in the Qur’ān and observable proof coincide with the necessity of transmitted legitimacy and rational evidence. “If the role of the messengers is to complete *fitrah*, this implies that *fitrah* is knowledge and not merely power, since the messengers brought religious knowledge and religious laws, which are, in essence, perfections and moral values. *Fitrah*, in this sense, constitutes a set of moral values.”⁵²

This distinction between the necessity of *fitrah* as a force, an ability, or a willingness, and innate knowledge gradually fades when both are subjected to the same description and to the process of development and change that human beings undergo after birth. *Fitrah*, in this sense, becomes an

⁴⁷Osman Zahid Çifçi, “The Two Faces of Faith: A Study on Spandrel and Fitrah,” *Beytulhikme: An International Journal of Philosophy* 14, no. 3 (2024): 705–734, <https://doi.org/10.29228/beytulhikme.78070>.

⁴⁸Ibn Taymiyyah, *Dar’ Ta’arud al-‘Aql wa al-Naql*, Part 4, 345.

⁴⁹al-Naḥl 16:78.

⁵⁰Ibn Taymiyyah, *Dar’ Ta’arud al-‘Aql wa al-Naql*, Part 4, 328.

⁵¹Fussilat 41:53.

⁵²Ibn Taymiyyah, *Manahij al-Sunnah* [Methodology of the Sunnah], ed, Muḥammad Rashād Sālim, (Riyadh: Muḥammad bin Saud Islamic University, 1996), 301.

acquisition: “The requirements and outcomes of *fitrah* occur gradually, in accordance with the perfection of one’s *fitrah*, provided that it remains intact and unharmed.”⁵³ It is intrinsic to human creation; a child is not like an adult, and therefore the adult’s knowledge and behavior correspond to his form as an innate condition that includes the “traits of *fitrah*.”⁵⁴

For instance, trimming the mustache, shaving the pubic hair, and plucking the armpits are innate practices of *fitrah* that a child does not initially know; however, as he grows older, he comes to recognize them spontaneously and adopts them in accordance with his nature.⁵⁵ All these traits relate to hygiene and purity, and to the removal of what accumulates dirt and harmful substances from the hair, nails, and skin.⁵⁶

It becomes evident that *fitrah* is transformed from a spiritual concept containing a set of meanings and ideals into a physical one that includes values and behaviors acquired after birth. Knowledge associated with *fitrah* is acquired after birth and is subject to development and change according to environmental influences. The term *fitrah* thus denotes the faculty of natural intelligence or the innate faculty of perception, which stands in contrast to acquired modes of reasoning that generate perceptions in the mind. However, Ibn Taymiyyah assigns additional meanings to this concept, enabling it to function as a source or mechanism for acquiring knowledge. Nevertheless, the capacity of *fitrah* to acquire knowledge must not involve any inferential process, and it is in this sense that the concept of *fitrah* is distinguished from the mind performing inferential operations.⁵⁷

Ibn Taymiyyah continues his sensory interpretation of *fitrah* by explaining the meaning of its change in the noble verse: “God’s *fitrah* upon which He created humankind—there is no alteration to God’s creation.”⁵⁸ He explains that human beings are not created upon something other than *fitrah*, and that the verse does not state that *fitrah* itself does not change after creation.⁵⁹ Ibn Taymiyyah distinguishes between the substitution of *fitrah* and its change: “The *fitrah* that does not change is the *fitrah* that carries the meaning of physical creation, whereas change in *fitrah* is possible after birth. Such substitution occurs entirely by God and His decree, and this differs from the state upon which human beings were created at birth.”⁶⁰ Thus, *fitrah* is understood as the form or physical constitution upon which human beings are born, without reference to spiritual dimensions.

Ibn Taymiyyah attempted to establish a sensory and material origin of *fitrah*, independent of metaphysical and spiritual dimensions. However, he did not fully succeed and was at times compelled to rely on spiritual and unseen evidence. The contradictions and inconsistencies in his explanations of the concept of innateness are evident. At times, *fitrah* is presented as having a material origin, while at other times it is treated as non-material. These fluctuations may be attributed to his use of other scholars’ evidence and arguments in responding to his opponents, as he clearly benefited from the polemical exchanges among different groups. Although he was diligent in articulating his central thesis, he nonetheless relied on the arguments of some adversaries in order to refute others.

⁵³Ibn Taymiyyah, *Dar’ Ta’arūḍ al-‘Aql wa al-Naql*, Part 4, 289.

⁵⁴Samrin Yusuf, *Nazariyat Ibn Taymiyyah fī al-Ma’rifā wa al-Wujūd* [Ibn Taymiyyah’s Theory of Knowledge and Existence] (Riyadh: Markaz al-Fikr al-Gharbī li-al-Nashr wa-al-Tawzī’, 2000), 438.

⁵⁵Ibn Taymiyyah, *Sharh al-Umda* [Explanation of the main point], ed, Ajmal Islahi (Dar Alam al-Fawaid li al-Nashr wa al-Tawzi’, 1426 h), 221.

⁵⁶Ibid.

⁵⁷Wael B. Hallaq, “Ibn Taymiyyah on the Existence of God,” *Acta Orientalia* 52 (1991): 49–69.

⁵⁸al-Rūm 30:30.

⁵⁹Ibn Taymiyyah, *Dar’ Ta’arūḍ al-‘Aql wa al-Naql*, Part 4, 309.

⁶⁰Ibid.

Wael B. Hallaq, in an article examining Ibn Taymiyyah's proofs for the existence of God, points out that the shaykh's views on natural constitution (*fitrah*) appear to be inconsistent.⁶¹ Ibn Taymiyyah sometimes presents the natural constitution as a means or faculty through which one necessarily knows, from created things, that they must have a Creator. Created things are signs that point immediately to God. At other times, however, he regards the natural constitution as an inborn knowledge of God that requires no evidence whatsoever. In this vein, he argues that natural constitutions must know the Creator without signs: "If [the natural constitutions] had not known Him apart from the signs, they would not have known that these signs pointed to Him."⁶² Hallaq observes that the latter argument is circular and contradicts the former.⁶³

7. Results and Discussion

Ibn Taymiyyah uses the term "mental *fitrah*" to indicate the relationship between *fitrah* and reason (or the mind). Islamic sources refer to this relationship as follows: "*Fitrahs* are regarded as necessary preliminaries to certainty and are closely related to rational axioms, since the mere perception of the two terms is sufficient to establish them. This applies both to axioms and to *fitrahs*; however, the difference between them lies in the fact that axioms operate without mediation, whereas *fitrahs* operate through a medium."⁶⁴

Nevertheless, Muslim scholars differ in their understanding of the reality of *fitrah* and its relationship to the mind or reason. Some scholars, such as al-Ghazali, argue that *fitrah* is analogous to reason and encompasses prior knowledge, whereas others, such as Ibn Taymiyyah, maintain that both *fitrah* and reason have a sensory origin. While all a priori knowledge and axiomatic principles are, by definition, both innate and necessary, not all necessary knowledge is a priori or innate, since Ibn Taymiyyah acknowledges the existence of additional sources of necessary knowledge.⁶⁵

Ibn Taymiyyah speaks of mental *fitrah*, or the innate mind that bears the attributes of *fitrah*. Just as *fitrah* itself may become deviant, reason or the mind can also be corrupted by misleading influences, including fallacious mental proofs. Yet even when a matter is established through the mental *fitrah* in which all people of sound *fitrah* participate, provided that their *fitrah* has not been corrupted by misleading discourses they have received, it may further be confirmed by rational evidence.⁶⁶

This constitutes an acknowledgment of the existence of reason within *fitrah*—not merely as a neutral innate faculty but as a mind that governs judgments of correctness and incorrectness. These are universal mental principles, not particular or partial rules confined to a specific object—principles that might otherwise be described as merely illusory rules.

If the innate mind is capable of making judgments, then there must be certain principles, whether acquired or inborn, upon which these judgments depend. Moreover, the innate mind is able to judge existential matters when it is presented with a supposed existence that is neither inside the world nor outside it, neither similar to it nor different from it, as well as an existence that is different from the

⁶¹Hallaq, "Ibn Taymiyyah on the Existence of God," 49–69; Jon Hoover, *Ibn Taymiyyah's Theodicy of Perpetual Optimism* (Brill, 2007), 41.

⁶²Hallaq, "Ibn Taymiyyah on the Existence of God," 49–69; Jon Hoover, *Ibn Taymiyyah's Theodicy of Perpetual Optimism*, 41.

⁶³Ibid.

⁶⁴Muḥammad 'Alī al-Tahanawī, *Kashshāf Iṣṭilāḥāt al-Funūn* [Glossary of Arts Terms] (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyya, 1996), 427.

⁶⁵Carl Sharif El-Tobgui, *Ibn Taymiyyah on Reason and Revelation: A Study of Dar' Ta'arūḍ al-'Aql wa-l-Naql* (Leiden: Brill, 2019), 255, <https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004412866>.

⁶⁶Ibn Taymiyyah, *Manahij al-Sunna*, Part 2, 142.

world yet transcendent above it. The mind's assent to the latter is stronger than its assent to the former, and this distinction is rooted in the *fitrah* of all human beings.⁶⁷

The use of the term *badīhī* is closely associated with the notion of a priori knowledge. On the basis of Ibn Taymiyyah's employment of this term, one may cautiously conclude that he considers such universal logical notions to be a priori in the strict sense—that is, present both in the mind and to the mind prior to any interaction between the mind and the external world through the senses.⁶⁸

The existence of an innate mind in every human being implies that it is an unearned, inborn mind. Ibn Taymiyyah attributes the mind to sense perception, holding that the human being is born without any knowledge and acquires it through the senses connected to the reason. However, the perception of the same meaning is both innate and acquired through the subconscious and through manifest sense perception. Through perception and witnessing, the human being apprehends both his inner and outer realities—by hearing familiar names, through sight, and through the heart. In this way, he comes to know common and distinguishing qualities. God brings human beings out of their mothers' wombs while they know nothing, and then grants them hearing, sight, and hearts.⁶⁹

The source of the mind is sensation, yet Ibn Taymiyyah does not explain how the innate mind emerges from sensation. Sense perception is the most fundamental, as it grasps an important point to consider here is that our human constitution or nature, in some sense, shapes the cognitive abilities we possess and, more importantly, dictates their intended function.⁷⁰ He has often been described as an empiricist, or at least associated with empiricism, since he identifies sensation (*hiss*) as the primary and most fundamental source of human knowledge.⁷¹ “Knowledge begins with sensation and is based on the knowledge of concrete things. This is among the most distinctive qualities of the mind, which differs from sensation: sensation perceives only particular, visible things, whereas the mind apprehends them as universal and complete entities, through representation.”⁷²

The function of the mind is to generalize the partial or the particular until it becomes complete, through the method of induction or inference. Ibn Taymiyyah is known to adopt the approach of general induction and representational analogy, especially that which is perceived by the senses, and he rejects the methodology of syllogistic deduction and formal logical measurement through which the mind moves from the universal to the particular, or from the whole to the part.

The knowledge of the absolute depends on the knowledge of visible existence, which means that the mind cannot deal with absolute matters in isolation from their visible perception. This renders the absolute a part derived from the particular visible, since the absolute results from the particular visible. How, then, can reason prove something that has no particular visible origin (*aṣl*), let alone an absolute *aṣl*? The absolute is a branch (*far'*) of the particular. Thus, anything that has no particular existence cannot be known either in a particular visible sense or in an absolute sense but is apprehended in the mind in the same way as impossibilities are apprehended.⁷³

⁶⁷Ibid., 336.

⁶⁸El-Tobgui, *Ibn Taymiyyah on Reason and Revelation: A Study of Dar' ta 'āruḍ al-'aql wa-l-Naql*, 256.

⁶⁹Ibn Taymiyyah, *al-Intisar li Ahl al-Ather* [Victory for the People of the Sunnah] (Jeddah: majma' al-Fiqh al-Islami, 2015), 319.

⁷⁰Jamie B. Turner, “Fitra Foundationalism,” in *Analytic Islamic Epistemology: Critical Debates*, ed. Ramon Harvey and Safaruk Zaman Chowdhury (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2025), <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781399533140-013>.

⁷¹El-Tobgui, *Ibn Taymiyyah on Reason and Revelation: A Study of Dar' Ta 'āruḍ al-'Aql wa-l-Naql*, 256.

⁷²Ibn Taymiyyah, *al-Rad ala al-Mantiqiyin*, Part 2, 67.

⁷³Ibn Taymiyyah, *Manahij al-Sunna*, 370.

This criticism is clearly directed at the logicians who rely on the whole as a basis for mental or rational evidence, which Ibn Taymiyyah considers unreliable. Treating particular existence as the foundation of knowledge and as the origin of the absolute entails questioning all knowledge that is not grounded in an existing and naturally perceived particular thing. Knowledge that is not based on a particular is speculative and equivalent to the mind's apprehension of impossibilities, since the mind is capable of imagining things that have no real existence.

Ibn Taymiyyah argues that sense is the foundation of knowledge in proving religious issues that rely on sensory methods, particularly frequency, upon which modern science depends: "All experiences are particular; experience applies to specific matters as well as to frequencies. Frequency is what is learned through the senses, whether auditory or visual: the auditory consists of a particular statement, while the visual consists of a particular object, a particular colour, or something specific."⁷⁴

As there is no doubt that most religious issues are known through transmission and are referred to as transmitted or auditory–visual knowledge, and that the methods of proving them are based on sensory approaches. Ibn Taymiyyah worked to affirm the sensory approach and demonstrate its validity as a method that produces certainty in knowledge. In addition, he criticized the method of logical reasoning, questioned its credibility, and regarded it as futile for attaining knowledge.

Taha 'Abd al-Raḥman claims that Ibn Taymiyyah aspired to simplify logic in accordance with the requirements of expansion. The first requirement is expanding the scope of logical reasoning and inference by grounding it in the relationship of necessity (*luzūm*), and by removing the restriction of number and cause (*'illa*) from the elements associated with this relationship. The second requirement is expanding the material of inference by introducing frequencies into the domain of what functions as proof in dispute, showing that the proximity of frequent and well-known instances of certainty is not matched by the proximity of sensory experiences, individual experiences, or axiomatic priorities. Nothing is more indicative than the well-known cases of collective practice, and nothing is more indicative of frequent cases than the expectation of future occurrence.⁷⁵

Unlike Taha 'Abd al-Raḥman, the study argued that Ibn Taymiyyah did not aim to flout or reform logic; rather, he attempted to reject it as a non-beneficial science. Moreover, Wael Hallaq also points out that Ibn Taymiyyah's contribution in this field was not intended to correct Aristotle's logic within the internal knowledge system but to characterize it as an unnecessary approach dominated by harmful metaphysical assumptions.⁷⁶

7.1. Conclusion

Despite Ibn Taymiyyah's adoption of the sensory approach, which is based on particular existence and the rejection of metaphysics as a whole, his views on the notion of *fitrah* remain contradictory. In some cases, he conceives of it as a cognitive content or a rational force with which a human being is born, or as knowledge that man received from his Lord in the Unseen World, in which case *fitrah* denotes a set of moral and spiritual principles and ideas. At other times, it appears as the form upon which the human being is created, or as knowledge acquired after birth, that is, sensory knowledge based on the perception of particulars.

It can be argued that Ibn Taymiyyah ultimately settled on the sensory meaning of *fitrah* and the denial of innate prior knowledge based on "wholes." He seeks to ground knowledge in the particular

⁷⁴Ibn Taymiyyah, *al-Rad 'ala al-Mantiqiyin*, Part 2, 54.

⁷⁵Taha 'Abd al-Raḥman, *Tajdīd al-Manhaj fī Taqwīm al-Turāth* [Renewing the Approach to Evaluating Heritage] (Casablanca: Al-Markaz al-Thaqāfī al-'Arabī, 1993), 357.

⁷⁶Wael Hallaq, *Islāh al-Ḥadātha* [Reforming Modernity], trans. 'Umar 'Uthman (Beirut: Al-Shabaka al-'Arabiyya li al-Abḥāth wa al-Nashr, 2020), 82.

as real existence, whereas the whole is regarded as a mental construct lacking real existence. Accordingly, movement in this approach proceeds from the micro to the macro, that is, from the part to the whole. Nevertheless, Ibn Taymiyyah's attempt to reconcile material sensory realities with unseen matters resulted in numerous contradictions, leading to a loss of consistency in some of his works.

Authors' Contribution

Sobhi Rayan: Conceptualization, formal analysis, investigation, methodology, project administration, supervision, writing original draft. **Issa Baraijia:** Software, data curation, visualization, writing reviewing & editing, validation.

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