

Reprint of 'The Myth of a Normal Muslim: 'Aql, Taklīf, and New Islamic Approaches to Neurodivergence'

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Abstract:

This paper explores the intersection of Islamic concepts, such as 'aql (intellect) and taklīf (legal responsibility), with the experiences of neurodivergent individuals, particularly those with autism. It argues for a re-evaluation of traditional Islamic understandings of disability to incorporate modern perspectives on neurodiversity. The research highlights that high-functioning autistic individuals possess the capacity to engage with religious obligations and that Islamic practices can be adapted to accommodate their unique needs. By advocating for an inclusive approach, the paper calls for a dialogue between classical Islamic jurisprudence and contemporary insights into neurodiversity, aiming to foster a supportive environment for neurodivergent Muslims within their communities. Ultimately, it seeks to provide a framework for understanding neurodiversity through an Islamic lens, promoting both spiritual engagement and social inclusion.

Keywords : Neurodivergence; 'Aql; Taklīf; ; Autism and Religion; Muslim

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Introduction

It was only as recent as 1943 that “autistic aloneness” was first officially identified and labeled as a diagnostic category, and not until the mid-to-late 90’s did advocates coin the term “neurodiversity” in repudiation of the disability-focused label, instead favoring an approach that embraces and affirms autistic individuals in being neurologically different. Between the newness of research around autism and the skepticism that many Muslims’ hold towards modern Western approaches to mental health and psychology, understanding autism from an Islamic perspective remains a relatively uncharted field. Zaynab Ansari, an American autism advocate and resident scholar at Tayseer Seminary, points out that since autism is such a new field of study, the condition was completely unknown to scholars who penned the classical Islamic manuals.

Although the Qur’an, Sunna, and ethico-legal tradition (*fiqh*) have talked about concessions regarding disability as well as the issue of sanity and reason (*aql*), autistic individuals—especially those who are high-functioning with mild-to-moderate impairments—do not fit neatly into either category, neither of the disabled, nor of those insane or without rational capacity. There is still little discourse that has been developed on issues such as neurodiversity and neurodivergence—that is, cognitive “different-ability” as opposed to disability—from an Islamic perspective. With this consideration, this paper will lay the foundations for developing an epistemological framework of understanding neurodiversity based on an engagement with Islamic beliefs, philosophy, and ethics.

Divergent secular understandings of the etiology and nature of autism

Autism is a lifelong, pervasive condition—pervasive because it affects individuals’ development, expression, and ability in multiple domains, the most notable of which are socialization and reciprocal communication. According to the DSM-5, autism manifests two main areas of delay: 1) social communication and interaction, as well as 2) restricted, repetitive patterns of behavior, interests, or activities. The degree to which an autistic individual is impaired or requires support in these categories can differ drastically from one individual to another. Thus, the DSM-5 considers it to be a “spectrum disorder”, as its manifestations “vary greatly depending on the severity of the

autistic condition, developmental level, and chronological age" (APA, 2017). The DSM-5's medical-statistical model of the diagnostic categorisation of Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is accordingly based in symptomatology rather than etiology. Isolating the precise etiology of ASD is an ongoing pursuit in research; it has been widely attributed to genetic and environmental factors (Zeliadt, 2020), but new research has been investigating its cause possibly relating to an over-reactivity in touch neurons external to the brain that contribute to redirecting the development of the brain (Orefice, 2019).

Nevertheless, its etiology remains largely unclear. Although researchers have isolated 102 genes that may be related to autism, there is still no clear understanding of how, which, or whether those genes cause the condition (Wright, 2020) and there is a lack of reliable biological markers for characterising the condition (Chouard, 2008, p. 889); environmental factors likewise remain a very subjective etiology. The nature of autism is further complicated by the fact that in the current DSM-5, the diagnostic criteria of ASD subsume and replace a wide range of neurodevelopmental conditions, including early infantile autism, childhood autism, Kanner's syndrome, high-functioning autism, atypical autism, pervasive developmental disorder not otherwise specified (PDD-NOS), childhood disintegrative disorder (CDD), and Asperger's syndrome (APA, 2017, p.57).

The *Power Threat Meaning Framework* (PTMF) is a diagnostic manual that proposes an alternative to psychiatric diagnosis according to the statistical, functional, and medical model used by manuals such as the DSM-5. While the PTMF does not entirely discount the medical model and affirms that the more severe forms of the condition meet the profile of a neurodevelopmental disorder, it also underlines the contention that many conditions characteristic of autism cannot be satisfyingly explained by biological mechanisms. It thus overhauls the understanding of DSM-5's categorisation of autism and related spectrum disorders, contending that there is evidence that the increase in ASD diagnosis in part reflects social and economical demands for successful individuals in society "to display emotional behaviours such as faked sociability, warmth, gratitude, passion and so on – skills which do not come easily to everyone" (Johnstone & Boyle, 2018, p. 70). The PTMF also points out that many behaviors related to autism may be seen as "part of the condition" from a statistical diagnostic model, but may actually be maladapted attempts to mediate emotional arousal, exert control

over physical and social environments, and communicate about distress in the face of sensory overload and extreme anxiety (Johstone & Boyle, 2018, p. 210).

In relation to this problematization of the medical-statistical model, in 1998 the autistic sociologist Judy Singer coined the term “neurodiverse”, and the term has taken off in the autistic community ever since, referring to the countless neurological variations in the range of possible expressions for the human genome (Jaarsama & Welin, 2011). According to the neurodiversity paradigm, autistic individuals as well as other persons whose neurocognitive functioning differs from dominant societal norms (e.g. dyslexia, epilepsy, or Tourette syndrome), are termed as neurodivergent or neuroatypical. Autism constitutes a form of “innate neurodivergence”, meaning that the neuroatypicality pervades the individual’s “psyche, personality, and fundamental way of relating to the world” (Walker, 2014) it is inextricably linked to an individual’s sense of self, as opposed to non-innate neurodivergence, such as epilepsy or Tourette syndrome. The neurodiversity paradigm rejects pathologizing—and attempting to get rid of—innate neurodivergence. As a side note, it is interesting to observe that, while a growing number of autistic self-advocacy groups adopt the neurodiversity and neurodivergence paradigm, the majority concentration of proponents of the pathology model of autism are *parents and caregivers* of autistic individuals, rather than autistic individuals themselves (Solomon, 2008).

Understanding neurodiversity through the framework of *akhlaq*

Due to the fact that diagnosis is usually framed within the medical context and given that the average Muslim scholar is not particularly versed in neurology, psychology, and the subculture discourse within the neurodiversity community, it is understandable that many Muslims respond to questions regarding ASD diagnoses within the rhetoric of disability and pathology. A common *hadith* that is evoked in such contexts is a tradition in which the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ teaches that “There is no disease that God has created, except that He also has created its treatment.” (al-Bukhari). Thus, parents and caregivers often resort to a plethora of methods in the attempt to “cure” ASD: behavioral therapies, unverified treatments (e.g. ingesting bone broth or camels’ milk to “cure” ASD),

spiritual litanies (*waza'if*), and Qur'anic healing (*ruqya*). Some of these treatments may render benefits—behavioral interventions are evidence-based and proven to enhance social communication and emotional regulation skills, and recitation of the Qur'an has been studied in its efficacy to render effective therapeutic effects—but the overall motivation and objective of “curing” a condition that is pervasive to an individual's identity remains problematic and can even be hurtful in the long run. Since ASD is so intertwined with an individual's thought, feeling, and sense of being, to wish to “cure” a child's autism is analogous to wishing for a different child altogether (Solomon, 2008).

On the flip side of the argument, it is not uncommon that many Muslims also reject or are skeptical towards such a medical diagnosis in the first place, especially when a child may be high-functioning, verbal, and not have any significant motor problems or other externally identifiable markers to an unfamiliar observer. However, this solution is unhelpful for individuals with autism and their caregivers, since symptoms can often be masked, hidden, or explained away, denying the very real needs that these neurodivergent individuals have. Thus, it is essential for Muslims to develop a discourse surrounding neurodiversity that makes sense from within an Islamic framework. In fact, it is arguably a religious prerogative of the prophetic tradition (*sunna*) for Muslims to develop coherent and rational systems of understanding and navigating such novel issues from a faith-based perspective (Ghuddah, 2017). As the neurodiversity paradigm is a relatively recent discourse, it does not neatly translate into the traditional and largely pre-modern Islamic lexicon. This poses a problem for Muslims who are trying to understand and frame ASD from a spiritually grounded framework, as well as for Muslim autists who are trying to make sense of their own identities and place within an Islamic worldview. Nevertheless, a maxim in Islamic logic (*mantiq*) and jurisprudential theory (*usul al-fiqh*) is that “the judgment concerning a thing depends on its conceptualization” (*al-hukm 'ala 'l-shay' far' an tasawwurihi*) (al-Shanqiti, 1995, p.1;112); accordingly, it is necessary to develop a conceptualization of autism and neurodivergence from an Islamic framework.

In a weekly discussion on Qur'anic exegesis, Ṣalāh al-Dīn al-Imbābī, a popular Egyptian preacher and medical doctor, discusses the expression of the human genome and frames the discussion

from a faith-based perspective as being a process of the expression of individuated *akhlāq* (innate traits; sing. *khuluq*). Edward William Lane's Lexicon lists the word's origins as signifying natural, inborn disposition (Lane&Poole, 1980), with the more common-usage implications of the word, such as virtue, morality, and manners, being secondary and resultant of one's nature. Al-Imbābī's characterization of *akhlāq* refers to internal dispositions and temperaments which are genetically encoded into each human in a way that is unique to each individual. In turn, these *akhlāq* unconsciously urge one's behavior, activities, cognition, and ways of communicating with the external world (al-Tijānī, 2017). The modern scientific terminology notwithstanding, this view is not unique to Al-Imbābī. The medieval Imam Fakhruddīn Rāzī similarly defined *akhlāq* as the "innate habit through which the soul displays its actions with ease and without prior thinking and deliberation" (Razi, 1978). These considerations of *akhlāq* directly relate to the concept of neurodiversity not being an aberration from the norm, but an acceptable variance in the spectrum of human createdness.

A narration that serves as being more helpful and more contextually befitting than the aforementioned *hadith* about seeking cure for illness is one that speaks directly to an instance of neurodivergence manifesting in an individual:

Narrated 'Ata bin Abi Rabah: Ibn 'Abbas said to me: "Would you not like me to show you a woman from the people of Paradise?" I said, "Of course!" He said, "This black woman came to the Prophet ﷺ and said, 'I suffer attacks of epilepsy and my body becomes uncovered, so please invoke God [to remove the condition] from me.' The Prophet ﷺ replied, 'If you wish, be patient and Paradise is yours; however, if you wish, I will invoke God to cure you.' She said, 'I will remain patient,' and then added, 'but I become uncovered, so please invoke God for me that I may not become uncovered.' So he invoked God on her behalf" (al-Bukhari)

With the neurodiversity paradigm in mind, it is important to recognize that this *hadith* demonstrates the experience of an individual with non-innate neurodivergence. The response of the Prophet ﷺ concurs with the neurodiversity paradigm, in that he validated and labeled the impediments that arise with non-innate neurodivergence, and acknowledged the permissibility of consensually attempting

to remedy such impediments (Walker, 2017), yet he still held it superior not to fundamentally interfere with the expression of genetic neurodivergence that had been implanted by God. The distinction of conditions such as autism, ADHD, dyslexia, and other conditions as being innate and intertwined with the individual's sense of self entails a stronger discouragement or even proscription from attempting to "cure" such conditions, which is supported by the underlying themes of patience (*sabr*) and acceptance (*rida*) mentioned in the *hadith* and by understanding the woman's neurodivergence as being a part of the *akhlaq* with which she was born. Nevertheless, the *hadith* shows that it is permissible and even praiseworthy to engage in interventions that target the reduction of negative behaviors, as demonstrated by the supplication of the Prophet ﷺ that she not be exposed while experiencing an epileptic episode.

Issues of jurisprudence related to autism and *taklīf*

By accepting that autistic individuals are natural variants from the range of the dominant expressions of the human genome (neurodominance), it becomes necessary to consider the position of neurodivergent individuals with respect to the sacred law (*shari'a*). According to the sacred law, *taklīf* (ethico-legal capacity) is the concept that sets basic parameters for deeming an individual accountable to carry out the injunctions of religious rites and dictates, and in order to deem such an individual culpable to the repercussions of disregarding such rules. However, as understandings of the human mind and neurodiversity have developed, the usages of definitions from classical Islamic legal manuals have not yet been adapted accordingly. This poses a problem, since it leaves neurodivergent Muslims, their caregivers, and educators in the lurch vis-à-vis their religious obligations and commitments. It is therefore appropriate to reconsider *taklīf* in a way that brings the classical sources in conversation with modern understandings of neurodiversity.

The term *taklīf* indicates "an imposition on the part of God of obligations on his creatures of subjecting them to a law" (Encyclopedia, 2013). The etymology derives from the root *k-l-f*, denoting something which may be bothersome, troubling, or inconvenient (Wehr, 1993, p. 980), alluding to the juristic paradox of obliging an individual to do the impossible or overly burdensome (*taklīf mā lā yutāq*). The notion of *taklīf* has its origins in the Qur'ān, which declares that "No soul shall

have a burden laid on it (*tukallaf*) greater than it can bear" (Q.S Al Baqarah: 233) and "God does not burden (*yukallif*) any soul with more than it can bear" (Q.S Al Baqarah, 286). In this context, *taklif* comprises the commandment on the part of God, and an ensuing obligation on the part of the individual subject. The hadith literature expands on the precise way that *taklif* is to be understood and implemented. According to a saying of the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ related by his son-in-law Ali, the Pen that records the deeds of humanity is lifted from recording the actions of sleepers until they awaken, children until they reach puberty, mad persons until they come to reason, and elderly individuals suffering from senility (Hanbal, Sunnah.com)).

Consequently, traditional manuals of jurisprudence have established the conditions for *taklif* as: 1) having received an accurate message of Islam, 2) accepting Islam as a free Muslim individual, 3) being sound in one's senses, 4) sanity, and 5) having met the age of puberty (Spevack & Fethullah, 2012, p. 425). In normal circumstances, these conditions are self-explanatory. For example, non-Muslims are not tasked with the upholding the sacred laws of Muslims; sleepers who are cut off from external senses are not responsible for anything that occurs while asleep (relating to the soundness of senses), and individuals experiencing episodes of psychosis are not responsible for what they do or say in such a state of mind (relating to sanity).

Out of the conditions of *taklif*, the one that becomes the main issue of contention in the discussion of neurodivergence is the understanding of sanity (*'aql*). Linguistically, *'aql* refers to the intellect, reason, or rational capacity. However, in discussion of *taklif*, it has been commonly rendered as sanity. As pointed out by Vardit Rispler-Chaim, a researcher of Islamic bioethics, *'aql* is mandatory to establish *taklif*. However, in making this mention, she explains that classical jurists distinguished the sane person (*'āqil*) in contradistinction with the insane or possessed (*majnūn*), who is clearly lacking this precondition for *taklif*, therefore being categorically exempt. Additionally, *shī'ī* ethico-legal thought clarifies that the condition of sanity is to be determined by weighing one's capacity of morally judging good and evil (Rispler-Chaim, 2007, p. 43). According to the *Encyclopedia of Islamic Jurisprudence* published by the Kuwait Ministry of Endowments and Islamic Affairs, loss of sanity may be continuous, intermittent, or spontaneous, and occurs in three ways: 1) when an individual lacks the ability to speak or act in a proper manner, 2) when an individual lacks the ability to distinguish between right and

wrong and/or to recognize the consequences of his or her actions, and 3) when an individual lacks the ability to understand situations from all possible angles (Awan, 2019, p. 11).

Whether due to the result of apraxia, tics, echolalia, and other behaviors and conditions, many neurodivergent individuals are impeded from controlling their behaviors, speech, and actions. They may lack control or act and speak atypically. Muhammad Faiq Afthoni, an Indonesian *sharīʿa* scholar and alumnus of Al-Azhar University is the founder of Pondok Pesantren Al-Achsaniiyyah, Indonesia's first residential institute for Autistic individuals inspired by Islamic principles. He asserts the position that—given that they exhibit developmental and behavioral abnormalities affecting the brain and nervous system, and since they are not always able to regulate behaviors and actions—most autistic individuals do not entirely meet the requirements of classical definitions of *taklīf*, and are therefore entirely absolved of its burden (Rohman, 2018, p. 874-875).

Many high-functioning adult autists struggle to independently navigate subjective moral judgements, especially with regard to the seriousness of transgressions, due to a difficulty to provide appropriate welfare-based moral justifications, or the failure to use relevant information about the others' intentions and the affective impacts of their actions in conscious moral reasoning (Zalla, 2011). According to Affect-Backed Normative Theory, actions are ordinarily judged as being moral transgressions if they violate a proscriptive moral rule, while also eliciting an affective response (Bartels, .18). This second criteria, i.e. judging emotional response, is difficult for many neurodivergent individuals. For example, autistic individuals and those with ADHD also often have difficulty understanding and exercising empathy and Theory of Mind, in contrast to typically developed neurodominant individuals. Coupled with an over-reactivity to touch and sensory processing, this can interfere with the ability to consistently make proper decisions or exercise a fully-rounded appraisal of events, people, and circumstances. These conditions may exist or be absent to varying degrees in different individuals, since autism is expressed on a varying spectrum; no two individuals are exactly alike in how they manifest behaviors, judgements, or cognitions. Nevertheless, according to the currently standing definitions regarding *taklīf*, most neurodivergent individuals—even those who are high-functioning—would be regarded as lacking in the domain of *ʿaql* (rational capacity, sanity),

and therefore exempted from bearing *taklif*.

The current understanding of how to apply *taklif*, as demonstrated by Afthoni, relies on a juristic trend in historical *fiqh* to categorically lift *taklif* in the presence of one *mubtil* (invalidating factor). This usually comes up in discussions surrounding the validity of acts of worship and transactions. For example, an individual who, according to the advice of doctors, is unable to change his or her medication schedule is proscribed from the *taklif* of fasting altogether, rather than having the concession to pause or adapt his or her fast to take medicine. While such judgements are generally made in consideration of avoiding harm and promoting the wellbeing of individuals, it raises a challenge in that many high-functioning neurodivergent individuals tread a line between acknowledging real impediments to executive functioning on one hand, versus circumventing responsibility and development of capacity on the other.

There exist other cases in which *taklif* is not categorically lifted in the presence of a *mubtil*. For example, jurists have allowed nursing mothers to pray with impurities on their clothing from their babies, according to the legal maxims stating that hardship necessitates ease, and that individuals should bear no undue hardships (Hussain, 2016m p. 128-130). Likewise is the case of the prayer of a sanitation worker, whose clothes necessarily accumulate impurities due to the nature of his work. The application of legal maxims is important in determining whether neurodivergent individuals fulfill the *taklif* condition of '*aql*'. One of the most universal of the legal maxims is that certainty is not overruled by doubt. In regard to autistic individuals, their '*aql*' is thus to be presumed, and the signifiers of the presence of an individual's rational and moral capacity are not and cannot be over-ruled by incapacities and impediments that they face in their cognition.

This discussion in fact lays bare a built-in bias in the current definition of *taklif*, since it is based on a model that is understandably predisposed towards favoring neurodominance as representing the archetypal human. This runs counter to a universal message declared in the Qur'an: "We have not sent you [Muhammad], except to humanity in its entirety" (Q.S Saba:28). In fact, neurodominance, or neurological "normalness" is a chimera concept, as there is no standard blueprint of a "typical" human being. In fact, since Islam sets out the standards of humanity as being the prophets, these are

arguably the most neurologically a-typical samples of humanity. In addition, the impediments previously mentioned do not fully paint the picture of the capacity of neurodivergent individuals to exercise rational and moral agency. Rather than being a black-and-white issue, it has been demonstrated that neurodiverse individuals such as Autists are, in fact, not only moral agents, but according to Affect-Backed Normative Theory, they are more stringent than average in terms of prescriptive and proscriptive rule-based morality. Zalla et al. also showed that they have strong rule-based morality, and Jing Li et al. have shown that autistic individuals may have a more rigid criteria for what constitute moral transgressions and upright acts. Considered in a different light, it could be equally contended that many neurodominant individuals are comparatively lacking in the degree of rule-based morality in comparison to many neurodivergent individuals.

In terms of rational-moral capacity, although they may be lacking in areas that are traditionally outlined as determinant guidelines for determining *'aql*, this does not mean that neurodiverse individuals are to be categorically classified as lacking in the domain of rational capacity; in fact, although many neurodiverse individuals may struggle with learning disabilities and cognitive delays or impairments, still many others demonstrate elevated IQ, and in fact, some neurodiverse individuals have competitive advantages over their neurotypical counterparts in terms of intellect and specialized skills (Austin & Pisano, 2017).

Considering the ability to “act and speak in a proper manner” as a marker for intellect is similarly problematic as an oversimplification. For example, some individuals who are nonverbal and have apraxia—a condition whereby the nerves are “cross-wired”, such that the individual may not be able to properly control his or her actions, despite cognitively being able to understand the actions, how to perform them, and having intent—may be seen as severely disabled by societal standards; lacking avenues to communicate and meaningfully interact with them, many would be quick to discount such individuals as being deficient in intellect, cognition, and function. A similar case exists in individuals exhibiting severe echolalia, in which case individuals cognitively understand queries presented to them, and have the intent to respond to them, but respond by “echoing” questions back or repeating other phrases, due to a neurological cross-wiring. The existence of disability itself does

not mean that such individuals are unable to appraise issues and think rationally. Social and communicative capacities may be trapped within them, but it does not mean that they lack these capacities. On the contrary, numerous such individuals have demonstrated considerable intellect, moral judgement, social consciousness, and communicate complex thoughts and ideas through tools such as letter boards and assistive technologies (Austin, 2017). Consider the testimonial of Philip Reyes, a nonverbal Autist who communicates eloquently on faith, autism, and social issues, through his online blog:

Let's pretend you are like me. You can't talk, but you have a well-functioning mind and can understand people. Imagine you answer everyone who says something to you, but only you can hear it. Others hear your voice saying things you don't necessarily mean. They think that's all you are capable of thinking. People see your repetitive flapping or tapping and they think it serves no purpose. They don't understand that the minute you stop, the moment is flooded with lights that hum, loud sounds that echo, kids moving too fast for you to keep up with and people trying to engage with you. It is hard on me to put my stimming away, but I try (Reyes, 2018).

Philip has used his platform, through the assistance of adaptive technologies, to express his voice on faith, race dynamics, apraxia, and family. His experience is far from being a rare exception, and is testimony to the fact that the definition of *'aql* used in regards to *taklīf* needs revision.

Broadening the definition of *'aql* by revisiting classical Islamic sources

As has been pointed out, *'aql* is mandatory to establish *taklīf*; however, the standing reductivist definition of *'aql* that relates to the ability of making moral judgements, speaking or acting in a proper manner, and understanding situations and their ramifications various possible angles (related to Theory of Mind) requires revision. Nevertheless, historically Muslim theologians have defined *'aql* in many ways besides how it has been categorized in the above-mentioned modern *fiqh* contexts. Imam Ja'far al-Ṣādiq, the eponym of the dominant school of *shī'ī* jurisprudence as well as a major

figure in the development of the *Mālikī* and *Hanafī* schools of *sunnī* jurisprudence, related the notion of 'aql to the human capacity of realizing a connection with God, emphasizing that 'aql is a tool that infuses mere information with spiritual illumination towards the fulfillment of one's human potential. His son Mūsā al-Kāẓim expanded on this meaning by saying that 'aql is the "faculty for apprehending the divine, a faculty of metaphysical perception, a light in the heart, through which one can discern and recognize signs from God" (Moezzi, 1994, p.6). One of the most comprehensive explanations of 'aql comes from Imam Ghazālī. In *The Niche of Lights* (*Mishkat al-Anwar*), Ghazālī expands extensively on the notion of 'aql. On one hand, he mentions 'aql as being "God's balance-scale upon earth" (al-Ghazali, 1942), resonating with the same idea of differentiation between right and wrong that is commonly alluded to in discussions of jurisprudence.

However, elsewhere he voices criticism towards those who develop overly laborious technical definitions and contends that 'aql is generally analogous to the spirit (*rūh*), heart (*qalb*) and human soul (*nafs*). He explains the intellect as being a light (*nūr*), due to its fundamental utility being perception. The 'aql, in his estimation, is the human faculty which can perceive itself and perceive others (as distinct from itself), which can perceive knowledge, and which can perceive its knowledge of itself. Along with perceiving things that are "near" within its direct range, the 'aql also has the capacity of conceptualizing and perceiving objects and ideas that are "far" and not physically present. He also considers that sight, along with the other external senses, are "spies of the intellect". In other words, the intellect is the faculty that gathers, processes, and interprets the information relayed by the body's external senses. He qualifies his definition by explaining that the rational faculty has two aspects: in its most true and unadulterated functioning, it is infallible, but since it is prone to imagination, fancy, and false beliefs, human judgements from the rational faculty are not necessarily free from committing errors in judgement (Buchan, 1998, p.5-9). The description by Imam Ghazālī of 'aql is most useful in that, while it subsumes the definitions of other scholars, it also adds an explanation of the rational capacity's functioning that is closest to a modern understanding of brain and its neurological function of processing senses, in that sensory receptors convert physical stimuli into neural activity.

These explanations are useful in relation to the discussion of neurodiversity. Ja‘far al-Sādiq, Musā al-Kāzīm, and Imam Ghazālī’s renderings of ‘*aql*’ do not entail a privileging of neurodominance as the standard of Islamic spirituality and praxis, and Ghazālī’s nuance takes into consideration the fact that individuals, such as those who are neurodivergent, may excel or be deficient in different areas of rational function. The emphasis on ‘*aql*’ as a sort of internal sense of perception is also useful, for it serves to affirm the ability of rational and moral appraisal in individuals who are “moderately-functioning”, non-verbal, and apraxic, and who may have more severe impediments that impede right speech and action.

Function and purpose of *taklīf* for autistic individuals

Taklīf, understood as the obligations and responsibilities designated by God upon His creatures, has classically been explained in the contexts of holding individuals accountable for their actions, and in context of the reward and punishment of God in the afterlife. Nevertheless, *Ash‘arī* and some *Mu‘tazilī* opinions have explained the purpose of *taklīf* as not being merely being for extra-worldly punishment or benefit, asserting that *taklīf* is for the betterment of humans and for easing their worldly experience of life (Nasir, 2016, p. 293). *Taklīf* can provide a Muslim, especially those with disabilities or varied abilities, with considerable strength and purpose, and the fact of “assuming” *taklīf* can actually help individuals find motivation and drive to cope with hardship by delegating agency to them (UNHCR, 2015).

Most modern therapeutic modalities for individuals with neurodivergent conditions such as autism revolve around behavior and social skills interventions, but moral guidance, being itself very subjective in nature, is more not often the focus of interventions. This overlooking of the moral factor has its own dangers, as was exemplified by the case of a 23-year-old autistic UK woman who was encouraged by care providers in a residential facility to have risky sexual relations with various strange men, under the pretext of helping her therapeutic wellbeing (Sawyer, 2018). Islamic ethics, especially through the approach of *fiqh*, provides a methodology of addressing behaviour through the spectrum of five juristic categories rather than an affect-based manner of navigating morality. This can arguably be more useful to neurodivergent individuals and also serve as a protective approach.

Nevertheless, the fact that *taklīf* may apply to neurodivergent individuals does not mean that it is to be forced upon them in a manner that holds them accountable beyond their capacity. For example, establishing the rules and processes of worship can be particularly confusing, especially when family practices are inconsistent. Relevant to this concern, Vardit Rispler-Chaim highlights an additional element of *taklīf*: ability (*istita'a*), which is a condition, but also exists on a spectrum, since it has “neither boundaries nor definition ... therefore [it is] an endless process” (Rispler-Chaim, 2010, p.41). This is a useful qualification to add to *taklīf*, since neurodiversity itself exists on an endless spectrum, and *taklīf* may apply differently between individuals, and one single individual may have different responsibilities of *taklīf* in various degrees with consideration to different specialized capacities.

Early Hanafis classified *taklīf* as consisting of two related elements: the passive capacity to receive an obligation, and the active capacity to execute an obligation (Rohman, 2018). The first side of the coin was the burden (*taklīf*) upon humanity that set a standard that has been designated by God, and the second side is the ensuing responsibility (*taklīf*) of action on the part of God’s creatures who receive it. The Hanafi school generally considered the two to be intrinsically linked and did not separate the two. Nevertheless, using the duality in this schema affords a new way of considering obligations and responsibilities when considering neurodiversity. The first element of *taklīf*—receiving the dictate of the standard of responsibility—may be applicable to high-functioning neurodiverse persons, whereas the scale of *istita'a* applies to being responsible for—or absolved of—the consequences of the second element.

This creates a framework through which it is conceivable that the sacred rites that are prescribed to all Muslims would generally apply to high-functioning autistic individuals, who would have a standard to put them into practice—in accordance with their capacity to receive and execute—since they have the rational and moral faculties necessary. However, the responsibility and accountability to execute their obligations would work on a sliding scale according to their *istita'a* of both processing and executing the said obligations. Being bound to the first level of *taklīf*, according to the capacity to receive the obligation, is due to an extension of prophetic care towards the individual, and the individual’s betterment and benefit entailed by enacting the rulings.

In other words, having a standard to carry out the rites of the religion holds therapeutic, restorative, and protective benefits for individuals, and the fact that the sacred law still obliges individuals to hold to these rules functions as a mercy on them. Just as the form of canonical prayer can be adjusted according to an individual's physical capacity and wellbeing (for instance, in some cases a person may lie down or use eye movements to pray), alternative arrangements and forms of fulfilling Islamic rites should likewise be adapted for neurodivergent individuals according to their ability.

Integrating Islamic practices in behavioral interventions

Some Muslim caregivers have found that implementing Islamic practices has rendered benefit to their autistic children. Dr. Brinda Jegatheesan is an educational anthropologist who has observed the interactions of practicing South Asian Muslim families that have autistic family members. The families varied in terms of how much credence or weight they gave the official diagnosis, but all of them implement Islamic-based interventions, which were effective in improving language skills, developing adaptability to routines, and integrating into a community (Jegatheesan, 2011, p. 194). Taking heart from the Qur'anic refrain, "God tasks no soul beyond its capacity" (Q. 2:286, 2:233, 6:152, 7:42, 23:62), these families felt that God had chosen them as caregivers because they had a special capacity to be responsible and loving (Jegatheesan, 2011, p. 191).

According to Jegatheesan's observations, prayer and Qur'an had a central role as therapeutic aids. Since Islamic prayer is performed five times a day, this taught the children how to adapt to transitions and the interruption of activities to make time to pray. In addition to this aiding in adapting to the common struggle amongst many autistic children to adjust to transitions, this also bolstered task initiation capacities within these transitions. Prayer also requires the memorization and reciting of short and moderately lengthy passages, and visual and rote memory are strengths exhibited by most neurodivergent individuals. By emphasizing Qur'an memorization, the strength in rote memorization and recall was continuously practiced and refined, and spiritual-moral practice grew out of their strength base. As an effect, this was correlated to effects on the children's communication abilities. In fact, most parents reported employing almost exclusively Islamic-based and culturally-based

interventions, despite the recommendation of therapists and autism professionals (who, for example, discouraged multiple language exposure), and all of the children in the study, whose diagnoses ranged from moderate to severe, improved from being non-verbal to being communicative to some degree in multiple languages by the end of the study (Jegatheesan, 2011, p. 195).

There are many traditional practices related to Qur'an memorization. For example, it is common across the world to see children in *madrasas* actively swaying and rocking back and forth while memorizing. Others walk while memorizing, such as is practiced in parts of West Africa. Others use prayer beads to repeat individual verses until they are committed to memory. In addition to Qur'an memorization, during many forms of Islamic meditative remembrance (*dhikr*), the repetition of mantras while swaying and/or handling prayer beads is a common practice. These methods all demonstrate examples of integrating regulated outlets for stimming (self-stimulating behaviors involving repeated or ritualized body or object movement) into learning. Stimming has conventionally been understood as a way for autists to self-soothe in order to reduce anxiety or deal with discomfort in social situations. Further research has also shown that stimming increases concentration and is an effective mnemonic tool for learning, in addition to calming the mind (Chandall, 2019). Pairing a behavioral practice with spiritual meaning-making is a strong potential tool in the upbringing of neurodivergent individuals.

Another traditional method of learning is a group-focused method of call-and-repeat through which the teacher will recite verses while learners repeat them back. A variation on this is the *subci* or *subac* method of Qur'an memorization common in East Africa, according to which the teacher and students take turns reciting subsequent verses to each other and finishing each other's verses. This fulfills a similar function to a scripted conversation, and the call-and-response format mirrors a "fill-in-the blank method" in music therapy (Gauntt, 2012) that is used to promote focus and communication in autistic children with speech apraxia.

It should be noted that these religious practices are not intervention methods in themselves, but they may provide preliminary elements of groundwork for Islamically-focused interventions that integrate cultural and religious ways of being and expression in manners that validate and are sensitive to the

individual's innate inner state. Classical Applied Behavioral Analysis (ABA) sees atypical behaviors as being non-functional and therefore not having innate significance. Therefore, such behaviors should be curbed so as to "force a change in a child's outward behavior [to] effect an inward psychological change" (Sparrow, 2016). It is due to this reason that some neurodivergent adults have reported having negative, and even traumatic experiences with behavioral therapy. By contrast, an Islamically-focused intervention framework would come from the framework of all behavior as a form of communication or self-regulation and could work with atypical behaviors by offering culturally and religiously relevant strength-based outlets of expressing them. The families of the children in Jegatheesan's study also used religious settings such as the mosque and communal prayers as indispensable environments for socialization. These spaces provided a structured, trusting, yet unplanned social environments with behavior expectations. Frequenting the mosque for prayer strengthened the understanding of rules, routines, interruptions, and manners.

It is important to note that ritual observances can be confusing for individuals with autism, especially when routines are complex and observances are irregular (which is often the case, considering work schedules, school schedules, and the constant changes in prayer times). Thus, drawing parallel from the concession that individuals may read from a copy of the Qur'an while praying (Adam, 2009), it would be befitting to provide such individuals with adaptive prompts to facilitate the performance of rituals, prayers and other rites, and through frequency such prompts can be combined, simplified, and eventually faded out.

Strictly behavioral interventions focus on developing social functionality, by eliminating stimming, coercing eye contact, and teaching neurotypical interpersonal play skills, but are not concerned with moral behavior, cultural preservation, or ethical discernment. In fact, there is a case to be made that the emphasis on classical ABA compliance training may contribute to individuals' vulnerability in the long run. One adult autistic advocate for neurodiversity speaks about his traumatic experiences with ABA, and asks a poignant and heartbreaking question: How will autistic individuals be able to resist abuse when they have had hours of training in submission? (Sparrow, 2016) The foundations of the ABA framework as set out by its founder, Ivar Lovaas, are based in an exaggeration of the blank-

slate psychological theory, and see the therapeutic methods of ABA as “a matter of constructing a person” psychologically; “You have the raw materials, but you have to build the person” (Murray, 2016, p. 115). By contrast, Islamically integrated approaches reject the blank-slate approach, taking basis in the Qur’anic principle stating that each human individual is endowed with a spiritual imperative. Q.S Al Isra: 70 states: “We have honoured the children of Adam and carried them by land and sea; We have provided good sustenance for them and favoured them specially above many of those We have created.”

In a similar vein, Shaykh Mouhammadou Mahy Cisse, a contemporary Senegalese scholar of Islam and a leader of the worldwide Tijaniyya spiritual order, has noted that “when you want to build a well you do not dig and then put water inside; you dig until what is inside comes out” (Cisse, 2016). These spiritual perspectives on human nature inevitably lend to a strengths-based approach of therapy that validates the experiences, behaviors, and functions of individuals regardless of their neurological disposition or ability, seeking to find a way for them to function as spiritual and social individuals. In addition, an Islamic framework would be informed by include elements of moral and ethical instruction to guide the individual through making sense of confusing and vulnerable situations.

***Dhikr* as a means of neural and emotional development**

Dhikr (meditative remembrance) is a central spiritual practice for many Muslims and has been elaborated into a science by adepts of the Sufi path. Given the constant refrain of the theme of remembrance throughout the Qur’an, *dhikr* can be considered as being the objective of spiritual remembrance in Islam. One *hadith* recorded in *Kitab al-Kafi* states that:

Abu Harun al-Makfuf said: Once Abu ‘Abdallah said: “O Abu Harun, we command our children to recite the “*tasbih* of Fatima the Resplendent” (The *tasbih* of Fatima is a form of *dhikr* consisting of repetitions of *Subhan Allah*, *Alhamdulillah*, and *Allahu Akbar*), just as we command them to perform *salat* (canonical prayer). You must hold to it, for whoever holds to it will never become unfortunate” (Ya’qub, 2013).

Numerous studies have demonstrated the efficacy of *dhikr* in

promoting emotional and neural development. For example, a study on “Sufism and Mental Health” demonstrated that spiritual practices such as *dhikr* that affect and activate the right temporal lobe, which “is involved in emotional synthesis, spatial and time orientation, and strong emotional experiences, including the elevation of mood” (Nizamie, et.al, 2013). From the perspective of Sufi cosmology, *dhikr* is a process whereby the individuated soul (*nafs*) expands its horizons in order to unify with the Universal Soul (*nafs al-kulliyya*), in which reside all individual souls (*nafs al-kulliyya*- The Dictionary of Spiritual Terms). Interestingly, Dr. Mark A. Foster, an adult autistic writes about his own pseudo-Sufi order called “The Unities”, outlining a logical framework that engages conscientiously with the Islamic tradition:

God is the Unity of unities behind all things. The prophets are not the unknowable. Essence of God, but God’s Unity, in my opinion, is also the Unity (*tawhīd*) of the Prophets. God, the highest Essential Unity of all existence, manifests ... an interpersonal structure of the Prophets. Structures are rules governing relationships, not sets of individuals. Similarly, the unknowable essence or unity of humanity was created by the Will of God. However, specific individuals, each of whom is made of the knowable attributes of human unity, come and go within this world (Foster, 2020).

There are parallels in Foster’s words to traditional elucidations on the structure of the emanation of the world as an unfurling process of *ishraq* (illumination) as in the teachings of Shihab al-Din Suhrawardi or the *Nur Muhammadi* (Muhammadan Light) in classic Sufi teachings. According to his personal testimony, after having experienced much of his life without being able to feel or understand empathy and Theory of Mind, Foster started engaging in Sufi *dhikr* practices. Inspired by the benefits that he perceived from his practice, Foster eventually developed his own eclectic *dhikr* process (to which he refers as the “echoing practice”) by which he offers other autists a spiritual process for discovering empathy and unity in their lives and relationships (Foster, 2020). The Qur’an itself insists on the benefits of *dhikr*: “Exhort [one another] regarding the remembrance, for surely the remembrance benefits believers” (Q.S Az-Zariyat: 55). It follows that *dhikr* practices along with corresponding teachings on unity should be adapted according to individual capacity into therapeutic faith-based interventions for Muslim autists.

Conclusion

This paper has explored the intersections of neurodiversity, Islamic theology, and ethico-legal traditions, challenging conventional approaches that view autism through a pathological lens. By engaging with classical Islamic concepts such as *'aql* (intellect), *taklīf* (legal and moral responsibility), and *akhlaq* (inherent disposition), we have demonstrated that neurodivergence is not an anomaly but rather an intrinsic part of the human spectrum as envisioned in Islamic thought. The historical tendency to frame neurodivergence within a binary model of either full legal competence or complete exemption from responsibility is inadequate in light of contemporary understandings of autism and cognitive diversity.

Rather than exempting neurodivergent individuals from Islamic legal and moral obligations, a more nuanced approach—grounded in both classical jurisprudence and modern insights—suggests that *taklīf* should be reconsidered as a fluid and individualized framework, balancing accountability with capacity. This study further highlights the potential of Islamic practices such as dhikr, prayer, and Qur'anic recitation as therapeutic interventions, aligning spirituality with cognitive and emotional well-being. In conclusion, embracing an Islamically-informed neurodiversity paradigm fosters a more inclusive religious and social environment, recognizing that cognitive differences are not deficiencies but expressions of divine variance in creation. By refining traditional legal and ethical frameworks, the Islamic tradition can better accommodate and empower neurodivergent individuals in their spiritual and communal lives.

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