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Reorienting Moral Education in the Digital Era: Synthesis of the Thoughts of Imam Al-Ghazali and Syed Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas

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Abstract

Digital technology has transformed human interaction, behavior, and character formation. Although digital platforms facilitate communication and access to information, they also create ethical challenges, including misinformation, hate speech, cyberbullying, and declining communication ethics. These conditions highlight the need to reorient moral education for digital society. This article synthesizes the educational thought of Imam Al-Ghazali and Syed Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas to develop a conceptual foundation for Islamic moral education. It employs qualitative library research with an integrative review orientation. Primary sources comprise Al-Ghazali's *Ihya' 'Ulum al-Din* and Al-Attas's *The Concept of Education in Islam* and *Islam and Secularism*; secondary sources include scholarly articles and contemporary Islamic education literature. Analysis involves conceptual identification, comparison, contextualization, and synthesis. The findings show that Al-Ghazali emphasizes spiritual purification, self-discipline, virtuous habituation, and care of the heart. Al-Attas highlights *ta'dib*, the cultivation of *adab*, and recognition of the proper place of things. Their ideas are synthesized into four dimensions of digital moral education: spiritual-internal development, epistemic adab, interpersonal ethics, and digital social responsibility. This framework integrates inner moral formation with responsible technology use and supports a shift from normative instruction toward transformative education that develops morally responsible and civilized individuals in digital environments in Islamic education.

Keywords Digital Moral Education; Al-Ghazali; Al-Attas; Tazkiyat al-Nafs; Ta'dib; Islamic Education

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INTRODUCTION

The development of information and communication technology has transformed people's ways of thinking, behavior, and social interaction. Social media, search engines, and artificial intelligence have facilitated access to information, but they have also introduced moral challenges, such as the spread of misinformation, cyberbullying, hate speech, and a lack of self-control. These conditions indicate that technological proficiency is not necessarily accompanied by moral maturity.

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Therefore, education in the digital era needs to integrate technological competence with the development of moral character and responsible technology use.

From the perspective of Islamic education, moral development is an essential component of educational objectives, namely, producing individuals who possess faith, knowledge, and noble character. Imam Al-Ghazali emphasizes moral formation through the purification of the soul (*tazkiyat al-nafs*), control of desires, self-discipline (*riyadhah al-nafs*), and the habituation of virtuous behavior (Al-Ghazali, n.d.; Attaran, 2015). Meanwhile, Syed Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas positions *ta'dib* as the essence of Islamic education, referring to the cultivation of proper adab that enables individuals to recognize and appropriately position everything, including knowledge and actions (Al-Attas, 1980, 1993). Both perspectives provide relevant foundations for moral development in digital life.

Previous studies have examined the intellectual contributions of these two scholars and the issue of digital ethics. Tolchah (2019) compared Al-Ghazali's and Al-Attas's perspectives on moral education but did not develop their synthesis within a digital context. Komarudin et al. (2025) examined the relevance of Al-Ghazali's thought to moral education in the digital era, while Muksin and Afandi (2025) discussed digital ethics in Islamic Religious Education (PAI) through a literature review. These studies provide important foundations; however, the integration of *tazkiyat al-nafs* and *ta'dib* as a framework for digital moral education requires further development.

In response to this research gap, the novelty of this study lies in synthesizing Al-Ghazali's and Al-Attas's thoughts to formulate a reorientation of moral education in the digital era. This synthesis is developed into four dimensions: spiritual-internal, epistemic-adab, interpersonal-ethical, and social-digital responsibility. These four dimensions constitute the author's analytical construction rather than a classification explicitly formulated by either scholar. This study addresses three research questions: (1) How is the concept of moral education articulated in Al-Ghazali's thought through *tazkiyat al-nafs*? (2) How is the concept of *ta'dib* developed in Al-Attas's thought? and (3) How can the synthesis of these two perspectives establish a framework for digital moral education? Accordingly, this study aims to analyze the educational thought of both scholars and develop a conceptual synthesis as a foundation for reorienting moral education to address the challenges of contemporary digital life.

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METHODS

This research uses a qualitative approach with library research methods. The literature study was chosen because the research object is the philosophical and conceptual thoughts of two Islamic education figures, namely Imam Al-Ghazali and Syed Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas. This research is not directed at measuring the influence of a variable through field data collection, but rather at analyzing the ideas, concepts, arguments and relevance of the thoughts of the two figures in the context of contemporary moral education. Research data sources are divided into primary and secondary sources. Primary sources include the works of Imam Al-Ghazali, especially Ihya' Ulum al-Din, as well as the works of Syed Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas, especially The Concept of Education in Islam and Islam and Secularism. These two works were chosen because they contain basic ideas regarding the development of the soul, morals, education, manners and the position of science.

Secondary sources include academic books, scientific journal articles, and previous research discussing moral education, Islamic educational philosophy, the concept of ta'dib, digital literacy, and the ethics of using technology. Contemporary literature is prioritized to explain the context of the development of digital society, while classical works are used to understand the construction of the thoughts of the two figures in depth. Data collection is carried out through documentation by searching, selecting, reading and grouping sources based on their relevance to the research focus. The literature search was directed at several keywords, including moral education, Al-Ghazali, Al-Attas, ta'dib, tazkiyat al-nafs, digital adab, and digital ethics in Islamic education.

Data analysis was carried out in four stages. First, identify the concept, namely outlining Al-Ghazali's main ideas regarding moral education and Al-Attas' ideas regarding adab-based education. Second, comparative analysis, namely comparing the orientations, philosophical foundations, goals and educational processes in the thoughts of the two figures. Third, contextualization, namely connecting these concepts with ethical issues in digital society. Fourth, conceptual synthesis, namely developing a digital moral education framework based on common ground and the unique contributions of the thoughts of the two figures.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Imam Al-Ghazali's Philosophy of Moral Education and Its Relevance in the Digital Era

Imam Al-Ghazali is a Muslim thinker who placed great emphasis on the relationship between knowledge, action, the soul, and the formation of moral

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character (*akhlaq*). In his view, education cannot be separated from the effort to improve the inner state of a human being. The knowledge one acquires should influence the quality of one's behavior and one's proximity to Allah (SWT). This perspective demonstrates that education in Islam is not merely oriented toward the mastery of knowledge, but also toward the shaping of personality and the attainment of moral perfection (Al-Ghazali, n.d.; Attaran, 2015).

In *Ihya' 'Ulum al-Din*, Al-Ghazali explains that *akhlaq* (moral character) refers to a deeply rooted state of the soul, from which actions arise spontaneously, without the need for prolonged deliberation. This definition indicates that *akhlaq* is not merely outward behavior, but is fundamentally linked to an inner disposition formed within the individual (Al-Ghazali, n.d.). Consequently, good behavior cannot be judged solely based on isolated, momentary actions; rather, it must be viewed as the outcome of an ongoing process of character formation.

Therefore, moral education cannot be achieved simply by imparting knowledge about what is right or wrong. Education must engage with the structure of one's personality through the cultivation of the soul, the regulation of negative impulses, and the consistent practice of virtuous deeds. Attaran (2015) notes that Al-Ghazali's approach to moral education is closely tied to the cultivation of habits, character development, and spiritual support. This reinforces the idea that moral education requires a continuous process of nurturing, rather than the mere transmission of norms. A key concept in Al-Ghazali's thought is *tazkiyat al-nafs* the process of purifying the soul from reprehensible traits and fostering praiseworthy qualities. This process involves controlling one's desires, strengthening spiritual awareness, and cultivating the habit of performing virtuous deeds. Consequently, moral education possesses a robust internal dimension, as behavioral change must begin with the refinement of the state of the soul (Al-Askari & Al-Ani, 2020; Al-Ghazali, n.d.).

Al-Ghazali also emphasizes the importance of *riyadhah al-nafs*, or the training of the soul. Individuals must accustom themselves to performing good deeds so that praiseworthy behavior becomes an integral part of their personality. In an educational context, this habituation can be fostered through modeling, counsel, practice, supervision, and self-evaluation. Moral habituation is significant because values understood at a cognitive level must be practiced until they evolve into relatively stable behavioral tendencies (Attaran, 2015; Muhsi & Nadlif, 2021).

This line of thought is highly relevant to the challenges of a digital society. Social media users are frequently confronted with the urge to seek recognition,

popularity, and attention. Such impulses can manifest as ostentation, arrogance, the disparagement of others, and the dissemination of information all in pursuit of public response. From Al-Ghazali's perspective, these issues are not merely technical matters of communication; rather, they are rooted in "ailments of the heart" and an inability to govern one's own impulses (Al-Ghazali, n.d.; Attaran, 2015).

Therefore, digital moral education must focus on developing the capacity for self-control before an individual acts within the digital sphere. The ability to refrain from spreading unverified information, to avoid making comments that hurt others, and to reject the notion that popularity defines one's self-worth all represent the actualization of self-regulation within digital life. In the context of digital citizenship, the ability to act responsibly and consider the impact of one's behavior on others is a crucial component of digital citizenship competence (Choi et al., 2017; Ribble, 2015).

However, Al-Ghazali's ideas must be contextualized with care. The concept of the purification of the soul does not, by itself, account for all the structural issues within the digital ecosystem such as algorithmic design, the attention economy, information manipulation, and inequalities in access. Therefore, digital moral education must integrate individual character development with a critical understanding of the technological environment. Research on digital citizenship indicates that the behavior of internet users is not merely a matter of personal responsibility, but also involves participation, comprehension, and engagement within the digital sphere (Choi et al., 2017).

Thus, Al-Ghazali's contribution to digital moral education lies in his assertion that behavioral change must originate from the cultivation of the inner self. While technology may provide a space for action, it is the moral quality of the user that determines how such technology is utilized. The cultivation of the soul serves as an internal foundation, ensuring that the use of technology does not regardless of spiritual awareness and moral responsibility (Al-Ghazali, n.d.; Attaran, 2015).

Al-Attas's Concept of *Adab* (Proper Conduct) in the Reorientation of Moral Education in the Digital Age

Syed Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas developed a framework for Islamic education by positing the concept of *ta'dib* as the most precise term to describe the educational process. According to him, education is not merely the acquisition of knowledge or the conditioning of behavior; rather, it is the cultivation of *adab* proper conduct or refinement within the human being (Al-Attas, 1980). This concept frames education as a process of shaping individuals who understand their own

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position, the nature of knowledge, and the reality of life, all grounded in an Islamic worldview.

In *The Concept of Education in Islam*, Al-Attas explains that *adab* relates to the recognition and acknowledgment of the proper place of all things within the order of creation. Recognition refers to the capacity to understand the true nature of a thing, while acknowledgment refers to the act of placing that thing in its rightful position (Al-Attas, 1980). Thus, *adab* is not limited to mere politeness in social interaction; it encompasses the appropriateness of one's thinking, attitudes, and actions, based on a coherent order of values.

This concept carries significant implications for the goals of education. An educated person is not simply an individual who possesses a vast amount of information, but rather one who is capable of utilizing knowledge correctly and responsibly. Knowledge must never be severed from moral values and spiritual objectives. Within this framework, education should assist learners in understanding the relationship between knowledge, truth, and human responsibility as creatures of Allah (Al-Attas, 1980, 1993). Al-Attas also links the current crisis in education to the phenomenon of a "loss of *adab*." This crisis emerges when human beings lose the ability to appropriately situate knowledge, authority, actions, and responsibilities. In such a state, knowledge may be employed without wisdom, and intellectual capacity does not necessarily translate into moral behavior (Al-Attas, 1993). This line of thought is relevant to contemporary discussions on Islamic character education, which positions *adab* (proper conduct/etiquette) as a crucial element in the formation of individuals with strong character (Khairusani & Khairunnisaa, 2020).

When this concept is applied to a digital society, technological advancement may, in fact, exacerbate the issue of a decline in *adab*. The ease of accessing information does not automatically lead to a correct understanding of it. An abundance of information is not always accompanied by the ability to distinguish between fact and opinion, knowledge and prejudice, or credible and non-credible sources. This challenge relates to digital citizenship competencies specifically the ability to comprehend information, participate responsibly, and evaluate behavior within the online environment (Choi et al., 2017).

In this context, "digital *adab*" can be understood as the capacity to engage with technology, information, communication, and social relationships in alignment with values of truth and moral responsibility. Users of technology must recognize that freedom of expression does not negate the obligation to respect the dignity of others. Similarly, the freedom to disseminate information must be tempered by a

sense of responsibility toward the truth and the potential social impact. Harrison and Polizzi (2022) highlight the importance of moral considerations in understanding the behavior and incivility of adolescents in online spaces. This suggests that digital citizenship education must encompass the development of ethical judgment, rather than focusing solely on the mastery of technological skills.

Al-Attas's contribution to digital moral education lies in his emphasis on *adab* as a guiding orientation for the use of knowledge and technology. Education should cultivate individuals who are not only proficient in using technology but also cognizant of the boundaries, purposes, and moral responsibilities inherent in its use. Consequently, the concept of *ta'dib* (the process of instilling *adab*) can serve as a philosophical foundation for building a digital culture oriented toward truth, wisdom, and the common good (Al-Attas, 1993, 1980; Khairusani & Khairunnisaa, 2020).

Similarities and Differences in the Thought of Al-Ghazali and Al-Attas

The ideas of Al-Ghazali and Al-Attas converge on the view that education is a process of holistic human development. Both reject an approach to education that focuses solely on the acquisition of information and intellectual skills. Instead, they argue that education must concern itself with the cultivation of personal qualities, spiritual orientation, and behavior consistent with Islamic values (Al-Attas, 1980; Al-Ghazali, n.d.). Nevertheless, they differ in their conceptual emphasis. Al-Ghazali focuses primarily on the cultivation of the soul as the foundation for developing moral character (*akhlaq*), whereas Al-Attas emphasizes the instilling of *adab* (proper conduct/discipline) as the guiding orientation for education, shaping how human beings relate to knowledge and the broader order of life (Al-Ghazali, n.d.; Al-Attas, 1980, 1993). This distinction in emphasis has also been a subject of comparative study regarding moral education from the perspectives of Al-Ghazali and Al-Attas (Tolchah, 2019).

These differences do not represent a contradiction; rather, they can be understood as complementary dimensions. The cultivation of the soul provides an internal basis for moral behavior, while the instilling of *adab* offers a normative orientation regarding how knowledge and actions should be situated. In other words, the cultivation of the soul relates to the formation of an internal moral consciousness, while *adab* provides the guidelines for actualizing that consciousness in daily life (Attaran, 2015; Khairusani & Khairunnisaa, 2020). This analysis suggests that moral education in the digital age requires a dual orientation: first, internal development to enable individuals to exercise self-control; and second,

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normative guidance to provide individuals with a framework for using technology and interacting with others. These two orientations serve as the foundation for developing a framework for digital moral education, which emphasizes not only individual behavior but also responsibility toward the social environment (Al-Attas (Syed), 1980; Al-Ghazali, n.d.; Choi et al., 2017).

A Synthesis of the Thought of Al-Ghazali and Al-Attas for the Reorientation of Digital Moral Education

The synthesis of the ideas of Al-Ghazali and Al-Attas provides a conceptual foundation for developing moral education to address digital-age challenges. This synthesis integrates Al-Ghazali's concept of the purification of the soul (*tazkiyat al-nafs*) with Al-Attas's concept of the cultivation of *adab* (proper conduct/discipline, or *ta'dib*). Both thinkers share an orientation toward the formation of moral individuals, albeit through different conceptual emphases (Al-Attas, 1980; Al-Ghazali, n.d.; Tolchah, 2019).

This synthesis is grounded in three principles. First, moral education must begin with the cultivation of an individual's internal state. Second, the shaping of behavior must be guided by the principles of *adab* and a hierarchy of values. Third, the success of such education should be reflected in an individual's moral responsibility when interacting with their environment, including the digital realm. These three principles represent the author's own conceptual interpretation and development based on the ideas of these two thinkers; they are not formulations explicitly articulated by either Al-Ghazali or Al-Attas themselves.

Based on these three principles, this article proposes four dimensions of digital moral education. The first is the spiritual-internal dimension, which is rooted in Al-Ghazali's thought regarding *tazkiyat al-nafs* and the discipline of the soul. Education in this context is directed toward fostering the awareness that every human action carries a spiritual responsibility. In the digital space, this dimension is manifested through the ability to regulate emotions, avoid arrogance, maintain pure intentions, and refrain from making popularity the primary objective. This orientation aligns with Al-Ghazali's emphasis on the cultivation of the soul and the habituation of moral conduct (Al-Ghazali, n.d.; Attaran, 2015). The second is the epistemic-adab dimension, which is rooted in Al-Attas's concept of *ta'dib*. Education here is directed toward developing the capacity to situate knowledge and information appropriately. In digital practice, this is manifested through the verification of information, respect for scholarly authority, an awareness of the limitations of one's own knowledge, and the rejection of the dissemination of

misleading information. This dimension represents an actualization of the principle of *adab* (proper conduct/etiquette) in the human relationship with knowledge and information (Al-Attas, 1980, 1993).

The third is the ethical-interpersonal dimension, which integrates the cultivation of *akhlaq* (morality/character) and *adab* within human relationships. Education is directed toward fostering politeness, honesty, empathy, respect for differences, and responsibility in digital communication. The development of this dimension aligns with the focus of digital citizenship studies on individual behavior, participation, and responsibility within online interactions (Choi et al., 2017; Harrison & Polizzi, 2022). The fourth is the social-digital responsibility dimension, which emphasizes that technology should be utilized for the common good. Learners must understand that the use of technology carries consequences for the lives of others. Therefore, technology should be employed to disseminate beneficial knowledge, build constructive communication, and avoid actions that harm society. This orientation can be linked to the concept of digital citizenship, which stresses participation and responsibility within the digital environment (Choi et al., 2017; Ribble, 2015).

Together, these four dimensions form an educational framework that connects the cultivation of the soul, the instilling of *adab*, interpersonal behavior, and social responsibility. This four-dimensional framework is a conceptual construct developed by the author through a synthesis of the ideas of Al-Ghazali and Al-Attas, alongside a dialogue with the literature on digital citizenship. The relationships between these dimensions are mutually reinforcing. Cultivating the soul without instilling *adab* (proper conduct/etiquette) risks producing a form of piety that lacks an adequate epistemic and social orientation. Conversely, possessing knowledge of *adab* without the cultivation of the soul risks devolving into mere formal compliance that has not been truly internalized. Therefore, these two dimensions must be integrated through the habitual practice and actualization of behavior. This argument stems from the author's comparative interpretation of the educational philosophies of Al-Ghazali and Al-Attas (Al-Attas, 1980; Al-Ghazali, n.d.; Tolchah, 2019).

Thus, digital moral education is not a branch of education separate from Islamic education; rather, it is the actualization of the principles of *akhlaq* (morality) and *adab* within the context of contemporary human life. This reorientation positions the formation of a virtuous individual as the primary objective, while technology is understood as both an environment and a tool that must be utilized based on moral considerations and social responsibility (Al-Attas, 1980; Ribble, 2015).

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CONCLUSION

The thought of Imam Al-Ghazali provides a foundation for moral education through the concepts of *tazkiyat al-nafs* (purification of the soul), self-restraint, the cultivation of praiseworthy behavior, and spiritual development. Meanwhile, Syed Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas offers an educational framework based on the concept of *ta'dib* a process of instilling *adab* (proper conduct/etiquette) and recognizing the rightful place of all things within the order of existence.

This study asserts that digital moral education should not be narrowly understood as merely incorporating material on social media ethics into Islamic Religious Education (PAI) curricula. Rather, it is a process of shaping individuals who possess spiritual awareness, depth of knowledge, moral maturity, and social responsibility. Consequently, a synthesis of the ideas of Al-Ghazali and Al-Attas can serve as a philosophical basis for developing Islamic education one capable of upholding fundamental Islamic values while simultaneously responding to the shifts in contemporary society. This synthesis has significant implications for the development of Islamic Religious Education (PAI), encompassing its objectives, content, pedagogical methods, and evaluation processes. Future research should empirically test this conceptual framework to facilitate its development into an applicable and measurable model for Islamic Religious Education, tailored to the educational needs of the digital era.

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