IBN ABI AL-DUNYA’S PERSONALITY AND CREATIVE TRAITS

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ABSTRACT

Being a tutor to several Abbasid princes and leaving behind a sum of two hundred and seventeen (217) books written in various fields of sciences, Ibn Abi Al-Dunya has been well known to many, especially the Hadith scholars. He held a remarkable status among the scholars of his time. He was a deeply spiritual man and someone who seriously concerned about his society and Ummah in all. He was known for his ascetic life, and numerous scholars have transmitted Hadith reports on his authority. He was also considered one of the earliest and most prolific writers who had developed many genres. Thus, the main aim of this paper is to represent Ibn Abi Al-Dunya from a new angle that has not been presented before. It focuses on the personal traits and creative abilities of this great scholar. It is no doubt that such a great interest and care given to his works are the best proofs of the unique and creative personality of Ibn Abi Al-Dunya.

Keywords: Ibn Abi Al-Dunya, creativity, personality, Hadith.

1. Introduction

Ibn Abi Al-Dunya was born in Baghdad in 208/823. He was raised in a well-educated family who was interested in Islamic sciences and praised scholars. His father, Muhammad bin Ubaid, was a scholar and a narrator of Hadith himself. Therefore, Ibn Abi Al-Dunya was much influenced by his father’s scholarly life and benefited a lot from his knowledge and advice. Therefore, Ibn Abi Al-Dunya grew up very knowledgeable. His father’s intensive care and guidance, as well as Ibn Abi Al-Dunya’s interest in knowledge and willingness to learn have equipped him with a great deal of knowledge and good manners. Added to this his early start of learning, the surrounding environment and the competence of his teachers. Due to all of these factors, Ibn Abi Al-Dunya managed to obtain a wide range of knowledge in various fields of sciences let alone Hadith.

2. Ibn Abi Al-Dunya’s personality: Main characteristics

Based on the thorough readings of Ibn Abi Al-Dunya’s biography, it seems that his personality was formed based on three main factors: His family, especially his father, his teachers and the surrounding environment. Thus, every single factor helped Ibn Abi Al-Dunya to acquire good characteristics, which took role in shaping his morals and creative abilities. Ibn Abi Al-Dunya’s main personal characteristics can be traced as follows:

1. Firmness and courage

According to Al-Kutbi (1973: 1/494–495), Ibn Abi Al-Dunya related that once while he was teaching Al-Muktafi ‘Al-Fasih’ book, Al-Muktafi made a mistake so he pinched his cheek
painfully and left. Then the manservant followed Ibn Abi Al-Dunya and said: it is said to you that hearing detestable things is not a proper way of disciplining. Ibn Abi Al-Dunya said: Glorified be Allah! I do not say detestable things neither to my student nor to my people. Then the manservant came to him with a paper and said: it is said to you that you are right and when Saturday arrives you shall come as usual. When Saturday came Ibn Abi Al-Dunya met Al-Muktafi as usual and said: O prince, you say about me what I have not said? Al-Muktafi replied: yes my tutor, who does what should not have been done, is said about him what have not been said.

This story clearly shows the firmness of Ibn Abi Al-Dunya and his faithful efforts in disciplining and teaching people despite them being from the common or the ruling family. It indicates Ibn Abi Al-Dunya’s loyalty in work and his seriousness in scholarly matters away from bias and favour. Although Al-Muktafi was the son of the Caliph, this had not kept Ibn Abi Al-Dunya from taking a courageous action, a painful pinch, towards the prince, which he believed was worthy. It also shows the credibility of Ibn Abi Al-Dunya and the trust of the Caliph, Al-Mu’tadid, which was his personal tutor as well one day, in him. That is, Al-Mu’tadid chose to believe the tutor of his son, Ibn Abi Al-Dunya, over his son Al-Muktafi and paid less attention to what had happened between the two in favour of good disciplining.

2. Humbleness and sense of humor

Among Ibn Abi Al-Dunya’s personal features is his humbleness and sense of humor. Despite his firmness and seriousness in teaching, he managed to build a successful relationship with his students based on respect and friendship with a sense of humor. The social and scholarly status of Ibn Abi Al-Dunya did not interfere with his truthful desire to be as much closer and lenient as it could be with his students as the following story shows:

Omar bin Sa’d Al-Qaratasi (Ibn Al-Jawzi, 1992: 12/342) related that one day while they were waiting at Ibn Abi Al-Dunya’s door the sky rained. Then a servant female came to them with a written message in her hand. He opened it and found the following verses of poetry written by Ibn Abi Al-Dunya to them:

Oh my dearest friends, I miss you,
and so my ears and eyes,
How could I forget you and my heart I left by you,
sadly the rain has kept me away from meeting you

3. Charisma

Charisma usually refers to the personal trait by which a person has the ability to attract and influence the people around him/her. Ibn Abi Al-Dunya had a highly influential personality. Examples for this feature of his are many. For instance, his tutoring for prince Al-Muktafi and the refusal of the latter for other tutors. Also, the story when he met the Abbasid Caliph, Al-Mu’tadid.

4. Emotional Intelligence

Ibn Abi Al-Dunya was an influential beloved personality. He had the ability to influence the feelings of people and change their mood from happiness to sadness and vice versa. This feature is found within a long story related by Al-Baghdadi (2001: 11/293–294) in his famous book ‘Tarikh madinat al-salam.’ The story says that Al-Muktafi who is the son of Al-
Mu’tadid, the Abbasid Caliph, used to dislike tutors. But when Ibn Abi Al-Dunya was asked to become his personal tutor he liked him and was pleased with him. So when Al-Mu’tadid saw this he called for Ibn Abi Al-Dunya to see him. Ibn Abi Al-Dunya says: then I was brought and seated very near to the chair of the Caliph. I started telling tales of the Caliphs and their sermons so he cried badly. Then I switched to Arabs anecdotes so he began to laugh loudly.

This story shows Ibn Abi Al-Dunya’s well acquaintance with the tools needed to access people’s hearts and achieve their satisfaction. Although Ibn Abi Al-Dunya met Al-Mu’tadid for the first time but he was able to switch his mood from grief to joy. Alike a professional psychologist, Ibn Abi Al-Dunya dealt successfully with Al-Muktafi and his father and maintained his scholarly status without losing respect or being involved in favouritism.

5. Patience and tolerance

Patience and tolerance are two main personal traits without which success may not be achieved or may be limited. When it comes to knowledge and learning, patience and tolerance are even more needed. It is said that if one devotes all of himself for knowledge then he may gain some or otherwise he will gain none. Thus, Ibn Abi Al-Dunya was involved in the process of learning since he was a child at the age of ten. Although at this age playing is the more expected activity, but with patience, tolerance and enthusiasm, Ibn Abi Al-Dunya managed to sit for knowledge and he kept doing so until the last day of his life.

6. Knowledgeable

Ibn Abi Al-Dunya is known mostly as a Hadith scholar with many great works he left behind. However, he was very knowledgeable as well. He had the ability to learn and publish many works in different fields of science, such as: history, Qur’anic narrations, jurisprudence, asceticism and literature.

7. Self esteem and confidence

The story mentioned earlier in point four of Ibn Abi Al-Dunya with the Abbasid Caliph, Al-Mu’tadid, and his son, Al-Muktafi, indicates the confidence of Ibn Abi Al-Dunya in his knowledge and way of disciplining without fearing the results of his disliked action by Al-Muktafi. Thus, this confidence of Ibn Abi Al-Dunya was a definite outcome of his positive self-esteem. Another example of Ibn Abi Al-Dunya’s self-confidence is his evaluation and opinion of some of his teachers that were taken into consideration by Hadith scholars (Khalaf, 1997: 70).

8. Independency

As mentioned earlier, Ibn Abi Al-Dunya used to sit with his teachers for learning at around the age of ten (Khalaf, 1997: 57). Thus, a boy of such a small age being motivated to learn with endeavour and patience as well as tolerance and courage to meet scholars by his own, shows with no doubt the independency and inner motivation of Ibn Abi Al-Dunya.

3. Ibn Abi Al-Dunya’s creative traits

Apparently, there is not yet a unified definition for the term creativity, nor a set of fixed characteristics of a creative person. However, there are common features that are believed
to be found in almost every creative personality. But, not all features are necessarily found since types of creativity vary and the way creativity is perceived also varies. According to a study provided by Kerr (2009), “there are different personality traits among groups of creative people and that these traits may influence the domain in which an individual is able to be creative” (p. 186). Further, Kerr (2009: 185–187) lists a number of researchers who have interviewed, examined and explored the lives and personalities of creative individuals and have published lists of common traits. For example, John Dacey and Kathleen Lennon identified ten personality traits that contribute to the creative process: tolerance for ambiguity, ability to think outside of the box, ability to imagine how things can be used outside of their intended purpose, flexibility that allows for change, willingness to take risks, preference for disorder and complexity, willingness to delay gratification, freedom from gender role stereotyping, capacity to induce frustration and overcome obstacles and the courage to pursue creative endeavours despite consequences. On the other hand, Chaires Vervalin identified: openness to experience and emotions, freedom from inhibitions and stereotyped thinking, aesthetic sensitivity and flexibility. Morris Stein believes that the creative person is an aggressive achiever, motivated by a need for order, self-sufficient, intuitive, self-assertive, curious and empathic. Moreover, Frank Barron described creative people as having independence in judgment, greater expression of impulses and a preference for complexity. Teresa Amabile added deferment of rewards, self-motivation and perseverance when frustrated.

Furthermore, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (Kerr, 2009: 186) studied creative individuals and provided a list of ten paradoxical traits of creative people: having a great deal of energy, but also being quiet and at rest, tendency to be smart and naive at the same time, the ability to combined playfulness and discipline, alternating between imagination and reality, being both introverted and extraverted, being both humble and proud, avoidance of rigid gender role stereotyping, being both rebellious and conservative, having a passion for work and the ability to view it objectively and an openness that allows for both suffering and joy. Also, in this regard, Runco & Pritzker (1999: 170–173) stated a table of fifteen categories of positive traits: aware of creativeness, original, independent, risk-taking, energetic, curious, sense of humor, attracted to complexity, capacity for fantasy, artistic, open-minded, needs alone time, intuitive, emotional and ethical.

Thus, among the creative abilities that were found in Ibn Abi Al-Dunya’s personality through the analysis of his biography and works are as follows:

1. Fluency:

Fluency means the ability to produce a great number of ideas or problem solutions in a short period of time. A suitable example for Ibn Abi Al-Dunya’s fluency is his quick reaction and problem solving when his students were awaiting him outside his door and the sky suddenly rained, which meant it was not possible for them to take a lesson at this time due to the ‘open to sky’ nature of Ibn Abi Al-Dunya’s house. So, Ibn Abi Al-Dunya sent them a written message carried by a female servant. The message contained an apology written in the form of a poet, which shows the ability of Ibn Abi Al-Dunya to react quickly according to the situation and in a creative manner.

2. Flexibility

Flexibility means the ability to cross boundaries and make remote associations. The surrounding in which Ibn Abi Al-Dunya lived, which varied from strength to weakness shows
his flexibility to co-op with the different incidents positively. His biography, in addition to the numerous works he had left, reflect the amount of effort put by his side for the sake of correcting the path of his people when they needed an advice. Ibn Abi Al-Dunya succeeded in taking his role as a reformer without the need to clash with his opponents. This indicates his flexibility and smoothness in dealing with contradicting issues, which is a feature that may not be found in many other reformers.

3. Originality:

Ibn Abi Al-Dunya is considered one of the earliest and most prolific writers who developed many genres. For example, he is one of the earliest that developed the afterlife genre. He covered the different stages of the hereafter and presented descriptions of the upper worlds in short treatises. His work draws attention to three main ways by which the living can learn about the dead (Meri, 2006: 18).

4. Elaboration:

Elaboration usually refers to the amount of details associated with the idea. It focuses more on the solution or idea and develops it further. It means that if a creative person is given just the steps it will take to a general idea for a task or solution, he or she can figure out how to complete it. This trait is clearly found in Ibn Abi Al-Dunya’s ability to come up with many ideas and solutions to the problems he touched in his society. This trait is strongly reflected in his works, its titles and subtitles and its contents.

5. Sensitivity to problems

This trait of creative people along with other primary abilities was suggested by Guilford (1950) in his model of the ‘structure of intellect’ (Harold, 1994: 247). Ibn Abi Al-Dunya’s sensitivity to problems was reflected in his works. In it, Ibn Abi Al-Dunya tried to put his hand on several problems Muslims were suffering from. Each problem is defined well, and appropriate solutions and techniques are usually introduced. For example, one of his works was devoted for asceticism. In it Ibn Abi Al-Dunya intended to draw the attention of people towards the importance of asceticism while living in prosperity and luxury in order to obtain a balanced life.

6. Redefinition

Redefinition is one of the features of creative people introduced by Torrance and Goff (1989: 142). It refers to the ability to define or perceive in a way different from the usual established or intended way. Ibn Abi Al-Dunya showed many example of redefinition through his works. The methodology used and the wording of the headings as well as the themes chosen for his works, they all show his ability to redefine concepts and ideas. For instance, one of his works was entitled as ‘Islaah Al-Mal’ meaning ‘reformation of money.’ Thus, such combination of ‘islah’ and ‘al-mal’ has not been used before and, in fact, it gives lots of shades of meanings rather than the usual combination. For example: ‘hifz al-mal’ (i.e., reservation of money).

7. Objectivity

Objectivity of Ibn Abi Al-Dunya can be found in the incident that occurred between him and prince Al-Muktafi (Al-Kutbi, 1973: 1/494–495) where Ibn Abi Al-Dunya had to pinch Al-
Muktafi’s cheek for a mistake he made while reading ‘Al-Fasih’ book. Thus, this incident clearly shows the objectivity of Ibn Abi Al-Dunya and his seriousness in scholarly matters away from bias and favour. Although Al-Muktafi was the son of the Caliph, this had not kept Ibn Abi Al-Dunya from taking a courageous action, a painful pinch, towards the prince, which he believed was worthy.

8. Intuition

An example of Ibn Abi Al-Dunya’s quick reaction and problem solving is when his students were awaiting him outside his door and the sky suddenly rained, which meant it was not possible for them to take a lesson at this time due to the ‘open to sky’ nature of Ibn Abi Al-Dunya’s house. So, Ibn Abi Al-Dunya sent them a gentle written message carried by a female servant. In it was a polite apology for the lesson filled with hearty feelings and composed in the form of a poet.

9. Commitment and Inner motivated

This trait helps the creative person to become deeply involved in the task at hand and to be willing to work hard and to keep on working. Ibn Abi Al-Dunya began his endless journey for knowledge at a very early stage of his life, before ten years old. He continued to learn and convey the knowledge he acquired using all the possible ways and techniques until the last day of his life.

10. Intelligent

Intelligent and creativity are often being linked together. According to Hasan (1996), during the ruling period of the Abbasid Caliph Al-Mu’tadid many genius writers, thinkers and poets have appeared, among whom was Ibn Abi Al-Dunya (p. 3/24). He also noted that they were amongst the great historians of their time (p. 25). This indicates the intelligence of Ibn Abi Al-Dunya in various fields of science.

11. Open minded

This trait may be expressed through the approval of Ibn Abi Al-Dunya to become the tutor of several Abbasid princes. This is because such responsibilities are usually not sought by the religious, as they fear of being payed for or having them to teach or say something by force they do not believe in or approve. In spite of that, Ibn Abi Al-Dunya thought of the positive and bright side of this job as well as his responsibility towards this very important and powerful segment of the society. His biography shows his faithfulness and firmness in doing so without fearing anyone but Allah (swt). It also shows the fruits of this decision when later prince Al-Muktafi became the Caliph.

4. Conclusion

Although well known as a Muhadith, Ibn Abi Al-Dunya had this unique personality that spread its essence not only to the people of his time, but also to successive generations. He managed to succeed in applying his creative skills with the help of his charisma throughout his social, political and scientific journey. Indeed, the good characteristic and creative traits Ibn Abi Al-Dunya held have inspired many and they still do.
References:


