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SEMANTICS OF BIRR'S WORD: SOCIO-ECOLOGICAL GOODNESS AS AN ANSWER TO GLOBAL WARMING

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ABSTRACT

The global warming crisis fundamentally represents a failure of human ethics in relating to nature. This research proceeds from the assumption that sustainable solutions require a deep transformation of values, which can be excavated from religious texts. It focuses on the pivotal Qur'anic concept of *birr*, whose meaning is often oversimplified as individual piety. This study aims to uncover the profound *dalalat* (depth of meaning) of *birr* by applying Fadhil al-Samarra'i's integrated linguistic framework—encompassing lexical-morphological, syntactic-contextual, and semantic-comparative analysis—to 3 key Qur'anic verses meticulously selected from 32 occurrences of the root ب ر ر. The findings reconstruct *birr* not as mere individual goodness, but as "active and expansive goodness," a concept linguistically anchored in its triliteral root denoting "breadth" and syntactically expressed through sequences of operational verbs (e.g., in Al-Baqarah:177). This reconstructed concept inherently embodies the principle of anti-excess (*israf*) and is oriented toward socio-ecological justice. Consequently, *birr* emerges as a coherent and compelling ethical foundation for addressing the systemic drivers of the global warming crisis.

Keywords: Qur'anic semantics; birr; environmental ethics; fadhil al-samarra'i; global warming

1. INTRODUCTION

The contemporary world faces a civilizational paradox: unprecedented technological progress, detached from ethical and spiritual considerations, has simultaneously pushed the planet toward ecological collapse (Weaver, 1991; Shortland, 1988). Global warming represents not merely an environmental challenge, but a profound ethical and spiritual crisis stemming from humanity's fractured relationship with nature (Wright, 1970; Odimegwu, 2025).

Addressing this crisis requires more than techno-economic solutions; it demands a paradigm shift rooted in transformative values. Religion offers a vital source of such values. Islam, in particular, provides rich ethical concepts that can guide this transformation (Imran, 2024; Sadali, 2023). However, a significant gap persists between the depth of these concepts and their applied

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relevance, often due to reductionist interpretations and fragmented translations of key Qur'anic terms (Ereksoussi, 2013; Rosyada, 2018).

One such pivotal yet narrowly understood concept is al-birr. Commonly reduced to individual ritual piety, its holistic semantic scope within the Qur'an remains under-explored. This reduction obscures birr's potential as a foundation for a comprehensive socio-ecological ethic capable of addressing complex modern crises like global warming.

Semantic studies of the Qur'an have been significantly advanced by Toshihiko Izutsu's pioneering work on its worldview and key terms (Izutsu, 2002 via Al-Akoub, 2012). However, his philosophical-sociological approach lacks the rigorous Arabic linguistic analysis central to traditional Islamic scholarship (Al-Akoub, 2012; Suwarno et al., 2022).

Concurrently, contemporary Islamic environmental ethics has effectively drawn upon broad concepts like khalifah (stewardship) and amanah (trust) (Rakhmat, 2022; Wani & Azhar, 2024). Yet, such studies often rely on existing translations without undertaking a detailed semantic deconstruction of specific Qur'anic terminology (Ishfi Mufhimatul Uliyah & Kholid, 2025).

This study bridges that gap by applying the precise linguistic methodology of the contemporary scholar Fadhil al-Samarra'i—which integrates morphological (al-dalalah al-sharfiyah), syntactic (al-dalalah al-nahwiyah), contextual (al-dalalah al-siyaqiyah), and comparative analysis (al-Samarra'i, 2000)—to perform a deep semantic excavation (dalalat) of birr. This approach, as demonstrated in related studies (Abdullah, 2022; Ahmadi, 2025), promises a fresh, textually-grounded reading that connects classical linguistic precision to contemporary ecological urgency.

Consequently, this research asks:

1. How does the application of al-Samarra'i's linguistic analysis reveal the profound *dalalat* of *birr* in the Qur'an?
2. How can this reconstructed concept form a coherent socio-ecological ethical framework relevant to the global warming crisis?

The study aims to rigorously decipher *birr's* meaning and construct it as an actionable ethical framework. Its significance is twofold: it enriches Qur'anic semantic studies through a contemporary linguistic lens and offers a spiritually-grounded reference for fostering ecological stewardship and policy (Alruwaili et al., 2025).

2. METHODS

2.1. Research Design

This study employs a qualitative library research design. The approach is chosen to facilitate an in-depth textual analysis of the primary source, the Qur'an, and relevant secondary sources, including classical linguistic exegesis, dictionaries, and the works of contemporary linguists, to critically reconstruct the concept of *birr*.

2.2. Data Sources

Data comprises primary and secondary sources:

1. Primary Data: The Qur'anic text. Analysis is based on a mapping of all 32 verses containing the root ب ر ر and its derivations.

No.	Surah Name	Verse No.	Word Count
1	Al-Baqarah	44, 177, 189, 224	6
2	Al-Mumtahanah	8	1
3	At-Thur	28	1
4	Maryam	14, 32	2
5	Ali Imran	92, 193, 198	3
6	Al-Insan	5	1
7	Al-Infithar	13	1
8	Al-Muthaffifin	18, 22	2
9	Al-Maidah	2, 92	2
10	Al-Mujadalah	9	1
11	`Abasa	16	1
12	Al-An`am	59, 63, 97	3
13	Yunus	22	1
14	Al-Isra`	67, 68, 70	3
15	An-Naml	63	1
16	Al-Ankabut	65	1
17	Ar-Rum	41	1
18	Luqman	32	1

From this corpus, 3 key verses were selected for in-depth analysis based on two criteria: (a) their role as definitive, explanatory verses for *birr* (e.g., Al-Baqarah: 177), and (b) their thematic relevance to constructing a socio-ecological ethic (e.g., verses linking *birr* to material sacrifice, cooperation, and divine consciousness).

2. Secondary Data: Core methodological and analytical references include:
    - The linguistic works of *Fadhil al-Samarra'i*, especially *Dalālat al-Kalimah al-Qur'āniyyah* and *Ma'ānī al-Naḥw*.
    - Classical linguistic exegesis, such as *Al-Kashshāf* by *al-Zamakhshanī*.
    - Authoritative Arabic dictionaries, primarily *Maqāyīs al-Lughah* by *Ibn Fāris* and *Lisān al-'Arab* by *Ibn Manzūr*.

2.3. Data Analysis and Validation

Data analysis follows the integrated three-stage linguistic framework of Fadhil al-Samarra'i:

1. Lexical-Morphological Analysis: The core semantic field of the root ب ر ر is established using classical dictionaries. All Qur'anic derivations (e.g., *birr, al-abrār*) are examined to trace shifts from abstract virtue to active agency.
2. Syntactic-Contextual Analysis: The grammatical position of *birr* in each key verse is analyzed to determine emphasis. Its micro-context (adjacent words/phrases) is dissected to derive its

operational definition, while macro-context (surrounding verses) is considered for thematic coherence.

3. Semantic-Comparative Analysis: *Birr* is compared with near-synonyms (e.g., *iḥsān*) across the Qur'anic corpus. Contextual usage is contrasted to formulate precise nuances of meaning (*al-furūq al-dalāliyah*), yielding a distinctive, operational definition.

Data validation is achieved through methodological triangulation across these three analytical stages. Each stage provides a distinct lens (morphological, syntactic, semantic), and findings are cross-verified for consistency. Furthermore, interpretations are continually checked against classical exegetical sources to ensure textual fidelity.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Lexical-Morphological Analysis of *the Word Birr*

The semantic analysis of *birr* begins with its triliteral root, (ب ر ر), which functions as the conceptual core for all its derivations. Classical lexicons establish two interrelated primary meanings for this root (*Ibn Fāris*, 1972; *Ibn Manẓūr*, 2009; *al-Fairūzābādī*, 2005):

1. Expanse (*al-itti sā'*): As in *barr* (land), signifying a vast, open space conducive to life and stewardship.
2. Truthful Compliance (*al- ṣidq / al-ṭā'ah*): Denoting a goodness realized through faithful obedience to truth.

These root meanings morphologically evolve into key Qur'anic terms:

- *Al-Birr* (the abstract noun): The principle of "pervasive goodness"—an expansive virtue radiating beyond the self.
- *Al-Abrār* (the active plural noun): The "community of doers" who perpetually enact *birr*, emphasizing its nature as a collective, sustainable practice (al-Raḥman Ḥillī, 2017). This is exemplified in verses linking *al-abrār* to feeding the needy despite personal hardship, highlighting systemic action.
- Verbal forms (e.g., *barrara*, *abarra*): Signify validation, fulfillment, and perfect completion of righteous duty, framing *birr* as an active process (*al-Samarrā'ī*, 2000).

The lexical-morphological analysis establishes two foundational pillars for *birr*: it is an expansive goodness with broad socio-ecological implications, necessitating consistent, collective action. This foundation enables its further syntactic and ethical operationalization.

3.2. Syntactic-Contextual Analysis: Dissecting QS. Al-Baqarah: 177

This stage examines how *birr* is constructed and operationalized within its textual context, focusing on three pivotal verses.

QS. Al-Baqarah: 177 – From Ritual to Substantive Action

The verse begins with a powerful syntactic negation: *Laysa al-birra an tuwallū...* (It is not *birr* to turn your faces...). This structure deconstructs a ritualistic, formalistic understanding of piety, shifting the paradigm from form to substance (al-Rāzī, 2000).

The meaning of *birr* is then reconstructed through a coordinated series of verbal sentences (*jumal fi'liyyah*): *āmana* (believed), *āta al-māla* (gave wealth), *wa-aqāma al-ṣalāh* (established

prayer). This grammatical choice defines *birr* through dynamic, measurable actions, framing it as operational goodness requiring tangible commitment.

A crucial lexical detail is the phrase "giving wealth *despite love for it* (*ʿalā ḥubbih*)." This introduces the principle of proportionality and moderation, implicitly rejecting waste and excess (*isrāf*). Translated ecologically, *birr* becomes an ethic of responsible consumption and balanced stewardship, directly countering the over-extraction and waste driving climate change.

QS. Ali 'Imran: 92 & Al-Ma'idah: 2 – The Dual Imperative

Two other verses crystallize *birr*'s demands. QS. Ali 'Imran: 92 uses emphatic negation (*lan tanālū al-birr...*) to establish spending from beloved possessions as an absolute prerequisite for attaining *birr*. This makes tangible sacrifice non-negotiable, invalidating resource hoarding in the face of ecological crisis.

QS. Al-Ma'idah: 2 commands: *taʿāwanū ʿalā al-birr* (cooperate *in/for birr*). The preposition *ʿalā* frames *birr* as a goal of collective endeavor. *Birr* is thus not an individual virtue but a communal and institutional project, mandating organized cooperation—from international climate agreements to community action—as a religious obligation.

Synthesis: Birr as Active Taqwā

QS. Al-Baqarah: 189 creates a direct semantic equation: *Birr = Taqwā* (God-consciousness). Since *taqwā* is the comprehensive ethical foundation for all conduct, this positions *birr* as its active, outward manifestation. Consequently, if contemporary *taqwā* necessitates preserving creation and avoiding corruption (*fasād*), then concrete environmental stewardship becomes an inherent component of *birr*.

The syntactic-contextual analysis reveals *birr* as a dual-demand ethic: it requires personal material sacrifice (anti-*isrāf*) and organized collective effort (*taʿāwun*), grounded in active God-consciousness. This forms a robust foundation for socio-ecological action.



3.3. Semantic-Comparative Analysis

Birr* vs. *Iḥsān

To precisely locate *birr* within the Qur'anic ethical lexicon, a comparative analysis with its closest synonym and key related concepts is essential. This clarifies its unique semantic boundaries and operational scope.

Birr vs. *Iḥsān*: Structural Goodness vs. Personal Excellence

While both denote goodness, their roots reveal distinct emphases. *Iḥsān*, from the root ح س ن (beauty/excellence), emphasizes moral and spiritual quality in action—perfecting worship, interpersonal kindness, and ethical refinement (Luthfiah, Astuti, & Faridah, 2025). It is often personal and vertical (human-God) or interpersonal.

Birr, rooted in ب ر ر (breadth/obedience), demands structural, measurable, and expansive action involving resource redistribution and systemic justice. It is inherently collective, horizontal, and systemic. The difference is evident in an ecological analogy: *iḥsān* may inspire the beautiful stewardship of a private garden, while *birr* obligates collective action for clean rivers, equitable climate policy, and sustainable ecosystems for all. Thus, *birr* cannot be reduced to or replaced by *iḥsān*; it commands a broader, structural accountability.

Birr vs. *Taqwā*: Manifestation vs. Consciousness

As QS. Al-Baqarah: 189 establishes, *birr* is equated with *taqwā* (God-consciousness). However, a nuanced distinction exists: *Taqwā* is the inner state of ethical and spiritual awareness that motivates responsibility. *Birr* is the outer manifestation—the tangible, actionable fruit of that consciousness. The relationship is causal: *Taqwā* (cause) → *Birr* (effect). In an ecological context, *taqwā* is the awareness of creation's sanctity; *birr* is the concrete action (e.g., conservation laws, emission reductions) that results.

Birr vs. Its Antonyms: *Fujūr* & *Ithm*

Understanding *birr* is further sharpened by its opposites. *Fujūr* (from ف ج ر, to transgress) implies violation of natural or moral boundaries—ecological destruction as transgression. *Ithm* (sin) denotes action causing harm, injury, and imbalance—ecological harm as intergenerational sin. If *birr* is *expansive, preserving goodness*, its antonyms represent *contraction, corruption, and harm*. This contrast reinforces environmental integrity as a necessary expression of *birr*.

Birr emerges as the Qur'anic paradigm for structural socio-ecological ethics—distinct from personal virtue (*iḥsān*), grounded in divine consciousness (*taqwā*), and defined in opposition to transgressive harm (*fujur* / *ithm*). It mandates collective, measurable action for systemic justice and planetary sustainability.

3.4. Implications of *Dalalat Birr* on Social-Ecological Ethics

The semantic analysis culminates in reconstructing *birr* as a coherent socio-ecological ethical framework, defined by four integrated principles derived from its *dalālāt*.

1. An Ethic of Ecological Inclusivity

The core meaning of *birr* as expansive goodness dismantles anthropocentrism by demanding an inclusive moral circle that extends to all species and ecosystems. Environmental preservation and restoration become acts of *birr*, while destruction (*ifsād*) is its direct negation. This frames biodiversity protection as the fulfillment of humanity's role as stewards (*khalīfah*), turning ecological care into a form of worshipful obedience.

2. An Ethic of Sustainable Consumption and Production (Anti-*Isrāf*)

The principle of "giving from what one loves" institutionalizes moderation and the rejection of waste (*isrāf*). This directly confronts the overconsumption driving climate change, mandating sufficiency, circular economies, and renewable transitions as practical expressions of *birr*. It

challenges both individual luxury and unsustainable economic models, framing low-footprint living as a religiously grounded imperative (Hird & Dee, 2024).

3. An Ethic of Socio-Ecological Justice (*Al-ʿAdl al-Bīʾī*)

Birr's structural character requires equitable resource redistribution and systemic responsibility. This translates to a mandate for climate justice—holding major emitters accountable, ensuring fair adaptation financing, and protecting vulnerable communities. Ecological harm is thus a violation of *birr*'s call for universal benefit, making advocacy for just policies a religious duty.

4. An Integrative Paradigm for Islamic Environmental Ethics

This reconstructed *birr* bridges and unifies existing Islamic ecological frameworks:

- It provides the ethical imperative that turns eco-theological reverence into action.
- It supplies the teleological purpose (*maqṣad*) for environmental *fiqh* (jurisprudence).
- It channels eco-Sufism's spiritual consciousness into structured collective action.

Birr emerges as a fourth, unifying framework—a holistic, actionable, and justice-oriented basis for socio-ecological transformation (Syihabuddin et al., 2023). It integrates spiritual insight with tangible praxis, offering a robust Qur'anic paradigm for addressing the planetary crisis.

4. CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that Fadhil al-Samarra'i's linguistic methodology effectively unlocks the profound, holistic *dalālāt* of the Qur'anic concept of *birr*. The integrated three-stage analysis—lexical-morphological, syntactic-contextual, and semantic-comparative—reveals *birr* not as mere individual piety but as "pervasive active goodness." It is *active*, defined through operational verbs mandating concrete deeds, and *pervasive*, rooted in semantic expansion that demands inclusive socio-ecological justice.

This reconstructed *birr* provides a coherent, actionable ethical paradigm for the global warming crisis. It integrates spiritual consciousness with tangible action, champions moderation (anti-*isrāf*), and mandates justice (*al-ʿadl al-bīʾī*). In facing planetary crisis, *birr* emerges as an urgent moral compass guiding civilizational transformation toward equity and sustainability.

Recommendations

- Theoretical: Expand *al-Samarra'i*'s methodology to other key concepts (e.g., *fasād*, *iṣlāḥ*) and foster interdisciplinary models for green economics and policy.
- Practical: Launch educational campaigns framing ecological action as *birr*, advocate for policies embedding anti-*isrāf* and climate justice, and foster community-led "Ecological *Birr*" initiatives (e.g., waste banks, urban agriculture).

The goal is to transform this ethical insight into a spiritually-grounded socio-ecological movement, turning textual analysis into tangible planetary healing.

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