

Islamic Social Ethics: An Analysis of Miskawayh's Thought

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Abstract

Early Muslim discussions on ethics, such as those by al-Kindi (d.874) and al-Farabi (d.950), did not attain to the status of a discipline though invariably serving as an introduction or parts of their wider studies on politics, law and other fields of knowledge. Miskawayh (d. 1030), however, through his chief ethical treatise *Tahdhib al-Akhlaq* (1966), was the first Muslim moralist to work out a very clear, and in many respects, a thorough analytical system of ethics in Islam. The great Muslim scholar, al-Ghazali (d. 1111), as has been brought out by a number of writers on his ethical thought, incorporated the greater part of Miskawayh's treatise, especially in his *Ihya' 'Ulum al-Din* (1976). Miskawayh's ethical work was thus occupying a prominent place in this particular branch of Islamic ethical literature. It is scarcely an exaggeration to say that most of the later works that deal with this subject use it as their main authority and some of them are even based on it. Hence, a close examination of this unique compendium is indispensable for a proper understanding of Islamic ethical thought. Thus, this qualitative study which applies conceptual content analysis method seeks to make a critical analysis of such an influential works on ethics with the purpose of elucidating its views concerning social ethics, love and friendship.

Keywords: Miskawayh, ethics (akhlaq), society, association, love, friendship.

Introduction

Our philosopher's full name is Abu 'Ali Ahmad Ibn Muhammad Ibn Ya'qub Miskawayh. He is also called Miskawayh, but wrongly known as "ibn" or "son" of Miskawayh. The title (laqab) "*Miskawayh*" ("Maskawayh" is also a well attested vocalisation) is his own and not that of his father or grandfather. This is supported by the fact that there are many of his biographers, including al-Tawhidi (1883, 1929, 1953), al-Tha'alibi (1934) and al-Sijistani (1979), who were closely associated with Miskawayh, and who may rightly be supposed to have correct information about his name, call him "*Abu 'Ali Miskawayh*" or simply "*Miskawayh*". Trusting their evidence we may safely maintain that "*Miskawayh*" was his personal title and that the form "*Abu 'Ali Miskawayh*" is his own name, and not that of his father or grandfather. Accordingly, we will refer hereafter to him as Miskawayh.

Miskawayh was born probably around the year 320/932 in al-Rayy (somewhere in the area of Teheran today), and died at an old age on the 9th of Safar 421/16th February 1030, though the question regarding his date of birth is still unresolved. Margoliouth (1920-1921), gave it as provisionally fixed as 330/941 or a little earlier. 'Abd al-'Aziz 'Izzat (1946) tentatively fixes his birth date as 325/936, while 'Abd al-Rahman Badawi (1963-1966) holds that it should be 320/932 if not earlier. The writer feels that 'Abd al-Rahman Badawi's view is probably the most nearly correct because Miskawayh, in Badawi's argument, took over as secretary to the Buwayhids' vizier al-Muhallabi (d. 352/963) in 341/953, by which time he must have been around 19 to 21 years old to hold such an important office. Moreover, Miskawayh's (1914, 1916) own view that a boy of twenty years is decidedly young, might also persuade us that the date as suggested by Badawi is most likely to be accurate.

Miskawayh was also known as *Abu 'Ali al-Khazin* and *al-Mu'allim al-Thalith* (the third teacher). The first is probably because of his long service as librarian to several Buwayhids (al-Tha'alibi 1934). A Library in those days was known as *khizanat al-kutub* (treasury of books) and the librarian thereof was as *khazin*. The second is attributed to him by al-'Amili (1938). But there is no further indication of the basis on which this title is given to Miskawayh. It is possible, then, that al-'Amili refers to Miskawayh as the third teacher of ethics, the first and the second being Aristotle and al-Farabi (d. 950) respectively.

That Miskawayh was a *Shi'i* is also evident. He not only served successive Buwayhid rulers, whose families were of Iranian origin and of *Shi'i* persuasion, but he was also familiar himself with the *Shi'i* traditions and quoted extensively from the sayings of 'Ali (d. 661), in a section of his work entitled *Jawidan Khirad* (1983:110-113). It was also perhaps because of Miskawayh being a *Shi'i*, that al-'Amili (1938:139-204) dedicated a considerable section of his work, *A'yan al-Shi'a*, to him. Miskawayh's views (1968:62-63), that the *imam* and the philosophers are, in many respects, similar to the prophet except

that the latter is confirmed by God through obtaining revelation, might also indicate that he was a *Shi'i*. However, we have not found any clear evidence in Miskawayh's writings which could, in some way, reveal that he was proud to be a *Shi'i* or that he made an effort to disparage other Muslim sects, especially the *Sunni*. Yet Miskawayh's (1983: 117, 129, 130, 154, 157, 159) frequent references to several *Sunni* scholars including Abu Hanifa (d. 767), al-Shafi'i (d. 820), Abu Musa al-Ash'ari (d. 935), Hasan al-Basri (d. 728), and others, proved that he was not fanatically inclined towards any school of thought but instead took the stand of an open-minded scholar, who loved and appreciated knowledge and truth regardless of their sources.

The information available to us about Miskawayh's life and thought is rather scanty. Despite that, the letter sent to him by his friend al-Khawarazmi (1879) provided us with two important clues. Firstly, it tells us that his father died when Miskawayh was still young; and secondly, that his mother was remarried to another man far below her age, which Miskawayh did not approve of very much. The fact that he lamented about not having a good chance in his early life and tended to admire those who were provided with such an opportunity, in his opinion, by being accustomed to observe the morality of the *Shari'a* (Islamic law) and later studied works on ethics, arithmetic, geometry and philosophy, which he himself seemed to have missed, reveals that his parents did not pay much attention to the education and training of their son. All of these factors served to handicap his moral development, as he himself deplors:

"He (i.e., Miskawayh), on the other hand, who does not have this chance in his early life and whose ill luck it is to be brought up by his parents to recite immoral poetry, to accept its lies, and to admire its references to vile deeds and the pursuit of pleasures as is found, for instance, in the poetry of Imru'l-Qays, al-Nabighah and their like; who later serves under chiefs who encourage him to recite such poetry or to compose its like and bestow generous gifts upon him; who has the misfortune of being associated with fellows that assist him in the quest of bodily pleasures, and becomes inclined to covet excessively food, drink, vehicles, ornaments, and the possession of thoroughbred horses and handsome slaves, as was the case with me at certain times in my life; and who then indulges in them and neglects for their sake the happiness to which he is fitted" (Miskawayh 1968:45).

Despite the above disadvantages in Miskawayh's upbringing, it seemed that it was his parents who helped him to complete his early education, as was usual in those days in the *Qur'an* and the *Sunna* which had formed the basis of Islamic education since the first century of Islam (Ibn Khaldun 1958). His knowledge of these basic subjects is featured later in all his works, notably the *Jawidan Khirad* (1983). The fact that he was appointed as a secretary to the Buwayhids' viziers, al-Muhallabi (d. 964), at a young age, shows also that he must have completed this basic training to enable him to qualify for such an important office at such an early age. It is probable that the events of his younger days led Miskawayh to turn to philosophy, choosing particularly ethics, a field in which his early life, he felt, left much to be desired. It is here that the origin of his concern with ethics can be located which subsequently turned to be his main preoccupation.

Ethics (Akhlāq) According to Miskawayh

For Miskawayh (1966), ethics is not merely aimed at theoretical knowledge alone, but above all is to enable one to become oneself good. And so also with the virtues, the goals of ethics: they are not non-existent, but are real, they are actions and deeds. Thus, it is not enough to know and to have such noble states of the soul, but what is even more crucial is to use and to bring them out from potentiality to actuality by actions and deeds. For it is only by doing just acts, for instance, that the just man is produced, and by doing courageous and temperate acts, the result would be the courageous and the temperate man. Without doing so, no one would have any prospect of becoming either good or virtuous.

The same is also applied to happiness, the end of virtues, and the attainment of which is the supreme goal of ethics (Miskawayh 1966). Since happiness is also the completion of every virtue, and since virtue is realised only by deeds and actions, it follows that happiness must also lie in action and activity. It lies in living and being active. Man should, then, acquire all means to perform his actions well and to demonstrate his virtues and happiness in such activities as justice, courage, and temperance, just as the highest joy of the writer lies in displaying his writing. This is exactly what we called "the moral man in action", and it is here that the science of ethics becomes complete.

Yet since virtues are actions and deeds, and since the virtuous man cannot perform his virtues towards himself, but towards others, virtues are, therefore, realised only when one actively participates and lives with other people and has dealings and various kinds of association with them. Similarly, happiness, which is the completion and the end of every single virtue, is not, therefore, within the capacity of a single person but of the community of people as a whole. Hence, man may achieve

only a portion of it in isolation, and has to acquire the rest from contact and association with others. It is here that the indispensable need for association lies, and the rejection of some sections of ascetic life (al-zuhd) arises.

Aristotle (1980) has already spoken of the life of the happy man being hard if he were a solitary. For by himself "it is not easy to be continuously active; but with others and towards others, it is easier". Then, al-Farabi (1983) puts forward the idea that the isolated man will achieve only a portion of the human virtues and, hence, he needs the aid of others so as to become perfect and happy. His Christian pupil, Yahya (1978), in spite of being silent on the point of the connection between virtues and living in isolation, has recommended an ascetic life to the learned men and religious leaders. He claims that it is a life that consists of having little (qilla) desire for wealth, honour, high positions and other worldly pleasures, but he deemed it as unwise to kings and great men.

Miskawayh (1900; and 1966), on the contrary, has directed serious criticisms against those ascetics who seek solitude from the public, levelling accusations of being uncivilised, unjust, amoral and selfish. For virtues and their end, i.e. happiness, are not merely a matter of merit but the performance of what is specific to man through his contact and communication with other men. Such a group of ascetics obtain their necessities of life from others and yet fail to serve them in return. Here are some extracts of his unfavourable remarks:

"It is clear, therefore, that those who have sought virtue in asceticism (al-zuhd) and abstinence from association with other people and who have secluded themselves from them by living in caves in the mountain, or building cells in the desert, or roaming about from one country to another - that such people do not realise any of the human virtues we have enumerated. For he who does not mingle with other people and who does not live with them in cities cannot show temperance, intrepidity, liberality, or justice. On the contrary, all the faculties and aptitudes with which he is equipped are nullified, since they are not directed towards either good or evil. And when they become nil and cease to perform their own distinctive actions, those who possess them are reduced to the rank of inanimate objects or dead people". (Miskawayh 1968: 25-26).

These remarks and others similar to them, indicate that Miskawayh's criticism is directed not against asceticism in its totality, but, fundamentally, at those ascetics who do not mix with other people, choosing a solitary life. This is verified by the fact that he is equally drawn to *sufi* (Islamic mystic) sources as he regularly quotes excerpts from numerous eminent sufi masters including Hasan al-Basri (d. 728) Rabi'a al-'Adawiyya (d. 752) al-Junayd (d. 910), and Abu Yazid al-Bistami (d. 875), and correspondingly devotes two brief sections of his *Jawidan Khirad* to the collection of their aphorisms (Miskawayh 1966; and 1983).

Man Is a Social and Political Being By Nature

With regards to the question of why man, and even morally happy man, is in need of other man so as to become happy, Miskawayh (1900; 1966; and 1951) agrees in principle with his predecessors, particularly, Aristotle (1980) and al-Farabi (1983), that man is both a social and a political being by nature. He is born neither complete nor self-sufficient but with deficiencies. He cannot, therefore, live by himself alone but has to have recourse to the help of other people in order to preserve himself as well as to remedy his weakness and become complete through the co-operation of others. In short, man is, according to Miskawayh, in dire need of his fellowmen by the demands of his very nature and also by necessity. As he puts it:

"Man, of all the animals, cannot attain his perfection by himself alone. He must have recourse to the help of a great number of people in order to achieve a good life and follow the right path. This is why the philosophers have said: Man is a civic being by nature. This means that he needs to live in a city with a large population in order to achieve human happiness. Every man needs other people by nature as well as by necessity. He must, therefore, be friendly towards others, associate well with them, and hold them in sincere affection, for they complement him and complete his humanity; and he himself plays the same role in their life" (Miskawayh 1968: 25).

Nevertheless, Miskawayh (1966; and 1968), as is his habit, seldom leaves the ideas that he received without impressing his personal stamp on them. As in the argument that the very name "man" (*insan*) is derived from the root word *uns* (fellowship) not from *nisyan* (forgetfulness) as some people would think. Each man is, then, born with this quality of fellowship and, therefore, inclined naturally towards it. After that, the Islamic law (Shari'a) helps to develop this human quality by enjoining people to meet one with another (al-Qur'an, 49:13), and by making it obligatory upon them to observe religious duties such as prayer (*salat*), especially communal prayer, and pilgrimage to the Holy land, Mecca (*hajj*). Through

daily prayers, for instance, the members of the households and small communities come together five times a day; through Friday prayer the residents of a particular town or city gather together once a week; and through pilgrimage people from all over the world meet one another. Thus, by observing the *Shari'a*, man may first experience this inborn fellowship, and by meeting and having recourse to the help of others, he may later find his happiness. This is perhaps the meaning of what Miskawayh said: that man is, by nature, in need of other men; and it is here that Miskawayh distances himself from both his Greek and Arabic predecessors.

Another interesting improvement made by Miskawayh (1966) over those ideas of his predecessors in this connection is that man, he says, also needs the aid of others by necessity. For, unlike angels, who do not deal in business so as to need justice or have fear of anything so as to need bravery, men have to deal in various transactions with one another. And unlike animals, who are self-sufficient and need no instruction or learning, men are not self-sufficient but ought to rely themselves on the help and the instruction of others, in order to meet his basic needs as well as other necessities for life. And even then a little assistance will not suffice, for men's needs are unlimited, yet it is not within the power of any single one of them to achieve them all.

There is, then, a genuine need of a great number of individuals to form a community and live together at a particular time, or place, or in a city, exchanging and sharing their mutual needs and specialities, so that each of them may find his need and attain his perfection through the co-operation of others. Here, a significant connection between man, society, city, state or civilisation is profoundly established by Miskawayh. The following are examples of such a connection:

"It is sufficient to declare that in the provision of all these necessities and in deriving benefit from them, man has need of helpers: and because his case is different from that of animals, man is said to be sociable by nature, i.e., man has need of different kinds of help which cannot be realised except by people building towns and forming communities. The name for this gathering into communities is *tamaddun* - political or social life. Whether according to their requirements people set up tents to dwell in or build houses of earth or live on the tops of mountains in communities, whatever may be the case, because the need of mutual assistance has brought them together, their community is called *tamaddun* (civilisation) and the place *madina* (town or city)" (Miskawayh 1945:142).

Society and state are, therefore, based on the very need of man for survival. They are the essential authorities for the cultivation of virtues, political reform and social co-operation so as to restore conditions that are crucial for the attainment of collective happiness. Nevertheless, even though Miskawayh appears to be in agreement with their predecessors including Plato (1974), Galen (1937), and al-Farabi (1985; and 1985a) on some of the important political principles, such as on the idea that the philosopher, or the moral philosopher, the most learned and wisest, is most fitted to rule, and on the idea that the ruler is accountable not only for the security and moral life of his subjects, but above all, for the attainment of their happiness, yet as a whole, Miskawayh's ethics is individualistic. Though he refers to both family and political society as formative institutions, the centre of his system is fundamentally the individual. His discussions of society and state are scattered all over his works and do not offer any consistent theory of social or political determination of virtues.

Virtues Are Realised Only Through Association

In the introduction to his translation of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, Sir David Ross (1980), expresses the opinion that Aristotle's two books on friendship, books VIII and IX, stand in no vital relation to the other sections of the work, and they would probably have been a separate treatise but wrongly included in the *Nicomachean Ethics*. However, the virtues of love and friendship in Miskawayh (1966), represent some of the most important parts of his work on *Tahdhib al-Akhlaq*, for to Miskawayh, virtues and their end i.e. happiness, are realised only through companionship and association with others, or that is to say, practically through love and friendship.

Thus, it appears that in Miskawayh's thought there is a different understanding of the social motivation and existence of man. There is a view of creation which Aristotle would not have held, one which has to do with the community of faith which is the purpose of God's act of creation. There is a genuine need of a great number of people, who should form such a community, living together, exchanging and sharing their needs and specialities, so that each of them may attain his specific happiness through the co-operation of others. Hence, the men who are furthest from virtue are those who depart from a civilised life, who seclude themselves from society and remain without friends. Loving no one and loved by no one. That is why Miskawayh, for instance, stresses that the happy one, is the one who is adorned with nothing but virtues, is the one who wins friends.

To Miskawayh (1966), love (mahabba) originates from the very name man, *insan*. The word *insan* is derived from the Arabic substantive *uns* meaning "to associate" or "to be friendly" towards others. Man is, then, by nature inclined to fellowship and is never averse to others. Friendship (al-sadaqa), on the other hand, defines Miskawayh (1966:137):

" is a kind of love, but it denotes something more particular than love. It is affection (al-mawadda) in its very essence, and it does not take place among a large group, as in the case with love (al-mahabba). Passionate love (al-ishq) is the excess of love, and is more specific than affection because it takes place between two persons only".

This conception is apparently an improvement made by Miskawayh over those ideas of his predecessors, particularly Aristotle (1980:200) and Galen (1973:49). For there is no such precise distinction in either Aristotle or Galen. In the former, "love" appears to be a kind of feeling, and "friendship" to be a state of character; while in the latter, "love" is said to be a state of both the rational and the irascible souls, which exists between man and someone to whom he cannot do good such as God, the pious., and those who have gone before him.

However, as in Aristotle, Miskawayh also holds that the objects of love and their corresponding kinds of friendship are basically three in number: (a) pleasure; (b) utility; and (c) the good. Love and friendship which are motivated by pleasure, such as occur among the young, are established and dissolved quickly as with the case of their cause, pleasure. Those, which are motivated by the useful or for benefit such as exist among the old people are established slowly but dissolve quickly. Those which are caused by the good or by virtue, such as happen among the virtuous people, are lasting and hence laudable. Yet Miskawayh introduces another kind of love and friendship which is caused by the composite of this objectives, namely, pleasure, the useful and the good, such as that which takes place between a man and a woman, a husband and wife, a singer and a listener and others similar to them. The duration of this composite kind of love and friendship depends, for the most part, on the degree to which the good is involved. If the good is its dominant cause, it will certainly endure, and if otherwise, it will cease.

Another interesting example of Miskawayh's idea in this context is that he classifies love into three categories: the highest in the scale is the love of God, the second is the love of parents, and the third is the love of philosophers. The first kind of love which is experienced through the divine part in man, the soul, is attained only by a select few, namely, by those virtuous who are well-grounded in the divine knowledge, i.e., philosophers (al-hukama'), religious scholars (al-'ulama'), the men of good deeds (al-muhsinin), the righteous (al-muslihin) and others, for love is based on knowledge and, hence, no one will find the way to love God save the one who knows Him well. This divine love is bound strongly by obedience and veneration and it is not, therefore, subject to evils, corruption and deficiency. The love of parents falls near to the love of God in respect to the obedience and honour and care that one gives one's parents.

Miskawayh (1966), adds that there is no other kind of love than that which rises to the rank of those two, except the love of philosophers. But as parents are the causes of our being (i.e., physical), while philosophers and virtuous teachers are of our intellectual being and the educators of our spiritual souls, then, as the soul is superior to the body, the love of philosophers should similarly be deemed superior to that of parents since it is by the philosophers' that we attain perfect happiness. But the love of God is the highest of all love, for God is the cause of the existence of both body and soul as well as of all other goodness and blessings. Although these various ranks of love are not to be found in the ethical thought of Miskawayh's predecessors, especially Plato, Aristotle and Galen (Walzer 1962), they are widely acceptable to his successors and followers, such as al-Ghazali (1978), and al-Tusi (1964).

As to the practical question of how to choose a friend and then of how to keep him as a friend, matters wherein Plato, Aristotle and Galen again appear lacking, Miskawayh does not leave these useful subjects untouched. Thus, he who seeks a friend, Miskawayh (1966; and 1968) advises, should not covet the friendship of those who have treated their parents, relatives, brothers and their previous associates badly; those who are inclined avidly towards relaxation, pleasures, wealth and various forms of entertainment; and those who have excessive desires for domination, authority, and praise, for such people will never be fair towards their companions. If such a one does not find these defects in his potential friend he should promptly long for his friendship and be satisfied with anyone like that, because perfection is rare and hard to find, and also because he who has many friends cannot fulfil all his duties towards them. Nevertheless, Miskawayh (1968:143) warns his readers not to be excessively particular in doing so:

"You must not be led by what I have been urging upon you - i.e., to look for virtue in your prospective friend - to pay close attention to his small defects, thus ending with no one left to you and remaining without a friend. You must rather overlook

slight defects from the like of which no human being can be free, and consider the defect that you find in yourself and tolerate its equivalent in others”.

In order to become happy, man must, then, acquire a perfect friend, for perfection is realised exclusively through love and friendship. But as man cannot be friends with himself but with others, he should likewise endeavour to know and then to remedy his own defects so as to make himself acceptable to others as well. To this end, Miskawayh (1966) once refers to the view of Galen (1963), according to which man may discover his own faults by asking his virtuous and perfect friend to search, and consequently tell him of any of his manifest and hidden defects. But this method, claims Miskawayh, has its weaknesses and is non-existent nowadays. Hence, he considers Galen's other view, namely, that an enemy could be more useful than a friend in disclosing one's defects. He finds this method more truthful and perhaps more adequate than the first method, though one should never be contented with either. However, al-Kindi's (d. 873) opinions on the subject, such as that man should socialise with people and ascribe to himself the defects that he sees in others so as to train his own soul to abhor misdeeds, are, according to Miskawayh, more meaningful than those of al-Kindi's predecessors. Galen could probably be his main target of criticism in this instance.

As to how to keep a friend, Miskawayh suggests in some detail several methods which might help a man in this respect. To cite an example, man, he writes, should pay his utmost and constant attention in looking after his friend: in time of ease, he should greet him and those who are intimate with him with great joy and cheerfulness, while in time of misfortune, he should find the way to support him morally and materially if possible, and try to comfort his suffering so that it might be easier for him to bear; he should avoid bickering with his friend for bickering eradicates affection, causing discord and enmity. He should not allow those who are associated with him to say anything, about his friend, let alone to criticise him, except only in praise, for he himself is, indeed, his friend's eye, heart, and representative among people. He should tell with compassion any defects that he has found in him and show him that he is there to help him rectify them; and other lively and useful methods which all appear to be Miskawayh's own ideas.

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