

Some Aspects of Ibn Miskawayh's Thought

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The works of Ibn Miskawayh or Ibn Maskawayh have been discovered and studied. Based on his available works, Ibn Miskawayh has been acknowledged by scholars as having made a great contribution to Arabic and Islamic thought.

M. Fakhry considers Ibn Miskawayh as the leader (*imām*) of philosophical moralists in Islam.¹ In Fakhry's opinion, Ibn Miskawayh is "the most important ethical writer in Islam" and his ethical ideas are mixed with many ideas of Platonism as well as a few ideas taken from Neo-Platonism, Neo-Pythagoreanism, Stoicism and Peripateticism. He successfully, artfully and skillfully blends all these ideas with his own ideas in his ethical works.² Moreover, M. Fakhry states, "Miskawayh, like al-Tawhidi and al-Sijistani, should be reckoned chiefly among the litterateurs and polymaths of the period. His learning ranged from history to psychology to ethics."³

De Boer and C. Brockelmann say that Ibn Miskawayh was a philosopher, philologist and physician.⁴ According to M. Iqbal, Ibn Miskawayh was "one of the most eminent theistic thinkers, physicians, moralists and historians of Persia."⁵ Ibn Miskawayh was born in Persia and this perhaps made Iqbal consider him as one of the eminent Persian thinkers. However, Ibn Miskawayh's works were mainly written in Arabic; he studied and lived in Baghdad for many years.

The works and treatises written by Ibn Miskawayh are numerous. F. Sezgin mentions four works of Ibn Miskawayh as a physician.⁶ 'Umar Farrukh lists eight works of Ibn Miskawayh.⁷ A more detailed list of Ibn Miskawayh's works is provided by 'Abd al-Rahman Badawi who includes eighteen works of Ibn Miskawayh. Some of them are *al-Fawz al-akbar*, *al-Fawz al-aṣghar*, *Tajārib al-umam*, *Uns al-farīd*, *Jāwīdān Khard*, and *Kitāb tahdhīb al-akhlāq wa taṭhīr al-a'rāq*.⁸

Kitāb tahdhīb al-akhlāq, mentioned later on as the *Tahdhīb*, is one of Ibn Miskawayh's works on philosophical ethics. Many scholars have studied it. Some of them are M. Fakhry, D.M. Donaldson, R. Walzer, S. S. Hawi, and Franz Rosenthal. These scholars, excluding Hawi, have demonstrated their profound notion that the Greek traditions especially Platonism are prominent in the *Tahdhīb*.⁹ Hawi

finds in the *Tahdhib* different thing. He finds in the book the idea of human evolution of Darwin and Huxley. He says that Ibn Miskawayh (A.D. 936–1030) wrote about the evolution of man in the *Tahdhib* and the *Fawz al-aṣghar*. In this connection, Hawi says, “This philosopher [Ibn Miskawayh] possessed a profound awareness of the evolution of life that stands on a par with the views of Darwin, Huxley and others.”¹⁰

The *Tajārib al-umam* is Ibn Miskawayh’s work on history. This work made him known as a celebrated historian. He recorded in the work the historical events took place up to the year 372 A.H./982 A.D., the year in which his patron, the Buwayhid Ruler ‘Add al-Dawlah died.¹¹ The *Fawz al-aṣghar* elaborates three issues and each of them has ten sections. The first issue is on the existence of God; the second, on the soul, and the last, on the prophethood.¹²

Evidently, Ibn Miskawayh lived from the early 4th/10th century to the early 5th/11th century. M Fakhry mentions that Ibn Miskawayh was born in Rayy in 320 A.H./932 A.D. He then went to Baghdad where he worked as the librarian for the Buwayhid Ruler ‘Add al-Dawlah (d. 371 or 372 A.H.). During his stay in Baghdad he wrote the treatises on history, philosophy and chemistry. He died in 421/1030.¹³

Another report concerning Ibn Miskawayh’s genealogy and career is the following. He is Abū ‘Alī Aḥmad b. Muḥammad b. Muḥammad b. Ya‘qūb b. Miskawayh. He was known as the Khāzin because he was the writer and the librarian for the Ruler ‘Add al-Dawlah whose reign was from A.H.367 to 372. Before attending the court of ‘Add al-Dawlah, Ibn Miskawayh worked from 339/950 to 352/963 for Abū Muḥammad Ḥasan al-Muhallabī who was the vizier of Ruler Mu‘izz al-Dawlah. After Ibn Miskawayh left Muhallabī’s court, he was honored at the courts of Rukn al-Dawlah and his successors, ‘Add al-Dawlah in 367 and then Ṣamṣām al-Dawlah in 373 A.¹⁴

Therefore, it is right to say that Ibn Miskawayh found a relatively secure positions at the courts of the Buwayhid Rulers. The Buwayhids were the military dictators who were able to enforce their control and authority over the ‘Abbasid Caliphs in Baghdad for more than a century starting from A.D. 945. The Buwayhids were the Shi‘ites led by a family of Iranian princes. The Prince named Mu‘izz al-Dawlah through his vizier Muhallab successfully brought the ‘Abbasid Caliph under his control and power. During the rulership of Buwayhid princes, the philosophical and speculative scholars received greater freedom than before. The science of ethics in Islam began to gain ground in this period.¹⁵

Ibn Miskawayh was in contact with his distinguished contemporaries such as Avicenna ¹⁶ (d. 428A.H./1037 A.D.), Abū Ḥayyan

al-Tawhīdī (d. 413/1023), Abū Sulayman al-Sijistānī (d. 375/985)¹⁷, and Abū al-Khayr al-Khammār, a Christian author and philosopher. Through Ḥayyan, Ibn Miskawayh was able to receive a commentary on *Isagoge of Porphyry* and on the *Categories* of Aristotle. Furthermore, Ibn Miskawayh had deep interest in the *Tahdhīb al-akhlāq* written by Yahyā b. 'Adī (d. A.D. 974), a Syrian Christian philosopher and translator of Greek works.¹⁸

In the light of this abundant information on how Ibn Miskawayh got access to the various schools of Greek thought, one will accept without any doubt that Ibn Miskawayh's philosophical and ethical writings are dominated by Greek traditions. The clear purpose of Ibn Miskawayh is said to harmonize Greek traditions with Islamic traditions, the *Shari'ah* and the *Sunnah*. S. M. Khan says about this purpose of Ibn Miskawayh in the following words:¹⁹

...he [Ibn Miskawayh] attempts to harmonize Greek Philosophy with Islam and Greek thought with the *Shari'ah* and the *Sunnah*. He has done this successfully in the *Tahdhīb al-akhlāq* and the *al-Fawz al-asghar*.

This brief introduction on the impact of Greek thought on Ibn Miskawayh's thought is crucial because the purpose of this paper is to discuss and analyze some essential aspects of his thought based on his small treatise named *Kitāb al-sa'ādah*.²⁰ This treatise, as far as I am aware of the available studies, has not been studied by the scholars who have vigorously studied Ibn Miskawayh's *Tahdhīb al-akhlāq*. According to S. M. Khan, the *Kitāb al-sa'ādah* is one of the writings of Ibn Miskawayh which have already been published but their texts, most of them, have not been studied critically and authentically.²¹ This treatise is not mentioned by Sezgin, Farrukh, and Badawi in their lists of Ibn Miskawayh's works.

Ibn Miskawayh follows other traditional Muslim writers' style at the beginning of the *Sa'ādah*. He begins it with the sentence, "In the name of God the merciful, the compassionate." The name of the treatise is written below that sentence. He then proceeds to praise God for His generous favor to all human beings and for His special favor to His Friends (*awliyā'*). He also praises God for He has granted him some wisdom, and he asks God to allot for him the gratefulness of His grace and to grant blessings to His Prophet.²²

In the introduction, Ibn Miskawayh definitely divides human beings into two groups: the masses and the Friends. This division of human beings clearly serves the purpose of the *Sa'ādah* which is to elaborate the nature of the happiness (*sa'ādah*) in its relation to the masses and the Friends. For Ibn Miskawayh, the Friend is one who was high-mindedness, abundance of true reflection, effort to search for every virtue, and to share his mind in every truth. The Friend is worthy to speak about the happiness because he is longing for the true sciences; his nature is impressed with wisdom, and

he knows the goal of the philosopher which he is striving for.²³

It would be easy to suppose that the Friend, in Ibn Miskawayh's thought, is truly a philosopher who has the characteristics of the Friend. The philosopher with such qualifications is Ibn Miskawayh himself. He considered himself as a qualified and true philosopher since he had studied philosophy and he, as his introduction suggests, had been granted some wisdom. It is possible that Ibn Miskawayh preferred the term 'the Friend' (*walī*) instead of the common term 'the philosopher' (*ḥakīm* or *faylasuf*) because he wanted to prove that the term is a Qur'anic term, and the Qur'an is his main source for his elaboration of the happiness, the goal of true philosophers. However, the immediate reason for his writing the treatise, the *Sa'ādah*, is to respond to the question concerning the types of happiness attainable by human beings according to their ranks; the question was advanced by his respectable contemporary philosopher who had unfolded the goal of philosopher to him.²⁴

In Ibn Miskawayh's understanding, the "wisdom is a virtue of discriminating rational soul which knows all the beings..." and he goes on explaining the wisdom in different words. He says that the wisdom is knowledge of the divine matters and human matters; such knowledge provides knowledge of the intelligibles. The human virtues which are able to make a proper preparation for acquiring the wisdom are intelligence, recollection, rationalization, fast and deep understanding, pure mind and easy learning.²⁵

To begin his discussion on the wisdom, Ibn Miskawayh writes on the etymology of the word 'wisdom' (*al-ḥikmah*). He explains that the wisdom in Greek is derived from the word 'sawf' (to procrastinate or to draw out) and from the word 'aštis' which means to falsify and deceive. The combination of the two words means the falsified wisdom and the advocate of this kind of wisdom is named a sophist; he is not a philosopher because he rejects the realities of the beings; he is only a disputant whose science or art is called the art of disputation. For this art of disputation Aristotle wrote the treatise named *On Sophistical Refutations* (*al-ṣnā'āt al-ṣuḥaṣṭā'yyah*). Ibn Miskawayh denied the existence of the sophists in the ancient time but he affirmed the existence of the disputants. For him, the story about the existence of the sophists is baseless and doubtful.²⁶

Why did Ibn Miskawayh deny the existence of the sophists? In this context, one can easily trace Ibn Miskawayh's motif laying behind his denying the existence of the sophists. It seems Ibn Miskawayh thinks that the sophists are actually the disputants whose main philosophical contention is to dispute the existence of the realities of beings. Unfortunately, Ibn Miskawayh does not elaborate on the reasons why he denies the existence of the sophists. However, it is not wrong to speculate that Ibn Miskawayh has some intention to show

that all philosophers agree on the existence of the realities of beings, and the existence of the truth. The sophists are not the philosophers since they dispute what have been unanimously agreed on by the philosophers. Moreover, as a philosopher, Ibn Miskawayh is convinced that there is no inconsistency and incoherence in philosophy. Since philosophy does not have any inconsistency, it does not contradict any truth affirmed by the religion, the bearer of the revealed truth.

Ibn Miskawayh's conception of the wisdom, i.e. the special kind of knowledge restricted to the philosophers who possess the characteristics of the Friends, places the philosophers at the highest rank for the reason that they have the most virtuous knowledge. Therefore, basically Ibn Miskawayh in his treatise, the *Sa'ādah* agrees with the nature of happiness attributed to the philosophers in Greek tradition but his philosophers have the characteristics of the Friends of God (*Awliyā' Allah*).

Ibn Miskawayh opens his discussion on the happiness with the preliminary remarks on the nature of the physical world which is demonstrable through observation. He says that if one observes some artistic tools or instruments, one will discover that each instrument has its special and particular function. Basically each instrument cannot take over and perform the function of the others. If an instrument is used for the function not proper to it, it will not function properly and perfectly. A saw, for instance, cannot function like an adze. Each instrument is described as excellent and is praised as worthy if it is used to do the jobs proper and relevant to its function and purpose. Another example is the different functions and purposes of human heart and human brain. The former cannot take over the function and the purpose of the latter. Each of them has its exclusive functions and purposes.²⁷

Although Ibn Miskawayh does not mention his reference for the idea of the exclusive functions and purposes of every being, there is some similarity between his idea and the idea found in the *Nicomachean Ethics* by Aristotle. It goes as follows: "Every art and every investigation, and likewise every practical pursuit of undertaking, seems to aim at some good; hence it has been well said that the Good is that at which all things aim..."²⁸

R. Walzer equates Ibn Miskawayh with other Arabic writers who do not pay attention to mention the sources which they use in their writings since they are more concerned with the views and ideas rather than the originators of the views and ideas.²⁹ So if one can accept this general remark by R. Walzer, it is possible that Ibn Miskawayh incorporates the ideas from the *Nicomachean Ethics* with his own illustrative examples.

On the purpose and perfection of human beings on this generated world, Ibn Miskawayh obviously agrees with other philosophers who hold the view that the existence of human beings is purposeful and perfect. In their opinion, there are two types of perfection for mankind. One is called the immediate perfection and the other, the distant perfection. These two types of perfection are comparable with two kinds of the artistic instruments or physical organs. Take for example man's stomach as regards its immediate perfection is to hold and digest food and make it ready for nourishment. Concerning its distant perfection, the stomach supplies the whole body with what has been taken from the digested food to sustain the existence of the body altogether. As for human immediate perfection, man's actions emanate from his reflection and discrimination, and he arranges the actions in accordance with what is necessitated by his reason.³⁰

As for human distant perfection, Ibn Miskawayh does not separate it from the happiness, virtue and wisdom. He stresses that man who is strong in both aspects of philosophy, theoretical and practical, is happy, perfect, wise, and virtuous.³¹ In his analysis of these two aspects of philosophy, Ibn Miskawayh refers to Aristotle. In his view, Aristotle was the one who was responsible for the classifications of philosophy and he divided philosophy into the theoretical and practical divisions.³²

Therefore, it can be argued that the theory of man's perfection in Ibn Miskawayh's treatise, the *Sa'ādah*, is influenced by Aristotelian tradition. Ibn Miskawayh's theory of man's perfection is comparable with that of Alfarabi who depends to large extent on Aristotle's ideas; his ideas are traceable and protean in Alfarabi's treatise, the *Attainment of Happiness*.

M. Mahdi says, "Alfarabi's Aristotle concludes that man's perfection is the perfection of his theoretical intellect, and that everything else in man, including the practical rational powers, are for the sake of, and in service of, the theoretical intellect."³³ Ibn Miskawayh also does not consider the practical philosophy as higher than the theoretical philosophy although he thinks that the most perfect man is one who strongly and equally possesses both aspects of philosophy namely theoretical and practical aspects. Ibn Miskawayh's view on the supremacy of the theoretical aspect of philosophy over its practical one is traceable from his statement saying, "... Indeed, the theoretical aspect precedes the practical aspect because the generosity of discrimination and the faculty of discrimination attain the right in every required knowledge..."³⁴

Regarding the nature of happiness, its divisions and how to attain the happiness, Ibn Miskawayh's thought is comparable with Aristotle's thought. We can say that Ibn Miskawayh agrees with Aristotelian tradition on many aspects.

On the divisions of happiness, Ibn Miskawayh states that Aristotle classifies happiness into three categories. The classification is made based on three different loci of happiness. The happiness located in human soul is knowledge, gnosis and philosophy. This category of happiness is the most virtuous one because it is acquired for its own sake. Next, the happiness connected to human body such as a beautiful body, moderate health, and good shape. This category of happiness is needed for itself and for other purposes. Finally, the happiness exists outside the soul and the body; it is, for examples, intelligent children, friends, and facilities. This third category of happiness is imperfect. The first category of happiness is perfect and genuine. Ibn Miskawayh acknowledges that the imperfect and perfect happiness is explained by Aristotle in his treatise *Kitāb al-akhlāq*.³⁵

As for the second and the third categories of happiness, all human beings, through their efforts and actions, possibly attain both categories. However, since the first category of happiness is also the ultimate happiness, it is not attainable to all men although they have attempted to attain it. Only few of them successfully attain the ultimate happiness because it requires many qualifications such as intelligence and true discrimination which are possessed by a few individuals. Again, Ibn Miskawayh mentions by name Aristotle as the first philosopher who set up the final end for the philosophers; Aristotle pursued that ultimate aim and presented it.³⁶

Since Aristotle has two works on ethics namely the *Nicomachean Ethics* and *Eudemian Ethics*,³⁷ the *kitāb al-akhlāq* of Aristotle pointed out by Ibn Miskawayh is most probably the *Nicomachean Ethics* because in it Aristotle writes about the happiness as the final and end of all human actions. It says, "Happiness, therefore, being found to be something final and self-sufficient, is the End at which all actions aim."³⁸

Accordingly, on the question how to work and act to attain the ultimate happiness, Ibn Miskawayh answers that man should acquire both aspects of philosophy: the theoretical aspect, i.e. the realities of things, and the practical aspect, i.e. the good deeds and actions, and in his effort to the ultimate happiness man should follow the way which Aristotle set up for himself and others.³⁹

On the last few pages of the *Sa'ādah*, Ibn Miskawayh lists some works of Aristotle which are useful for anyone who wants to pursue and attain the ultimate happiness. They are works *On Sophistical Refutations*, *Kitāb al-khitāb* (the *Rhetoric*), *Kitāb al-qiyās* and *Kitāb al-burhān* (the *Prior and Posterior Analytics*), *Kitāb al-kawn wa al-fasād* (the *De Generatione et Corruptione*), *Kitāb al-samā'* (*On the Heavens*), *Kitāb al-ṭabi'iyāt* (the *Physics*), *Kitāb fi al-nafs* (*De Anima*), and the most useful work on ethical philosophy, the *Kitāb fi al-akhlāq*.⁴⁰

To summarize, Ibn Miskawayh's *Kitāb al-sa'ādah* is a treatise which aims at describing the theory of happiness, its divisions, and how to attain the happiness. In his elaboration of the theory of happiness, Ibn Miskawayh makes many references to Aristotelian ethical philosophy. Although Majid Fakhry argues that Ibn Miskawayh's ethical philosophy is greatly influenced by Platonism, his treatise the *Sa'adah* does not support M. Fakhry's claim. It seems that Ibn Miskawayh's ethical philosophy is greatly influenced by Aristotle, not by other Greek philosophers. Ibn Miskawayh has a very positive attitude toward Aristotelian tradition. It is evident that Ibn Miskawayh does see no harm for the Muslims to study and investigate the human traditions fall outside Muslim traditions. For him, philosophy is a universal discipline attainable by means of reason and speculation. The true philosophers aim at the attainment of the ultimate happiness.

NOTES

1. Majid Fakhry, *Al-Fikr al-akhlāqī al-'arabī*, 2 vols. (Beirut: Al-Ahliyyah, 1979), 2: 117.
2. _____, "The Platonism of Miskawayh and Its Implications for His Ethics," *Studia Islamica*, 42(1976): 40.
3. _____, *A History of Islamic Philosophy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1970), pp. 209–10.
4. See, T. J. De Boer, *The History of Philosophy in Islam*, trans. by Edward R. Jones (London: Luzac & Co., 1933), p. 128, and C. Brockelmann, *Geschichte Der Arabischen Litteratur*, Supplemented 1 (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1937), p. 582.
5. Muhammad Iqbal, *The Development of Metaphysics in Persia* (London: Luzac & Co., 1908), p. 26.
6. Fuat Sezgin, *Geschichte Des Arabischen Schrifttums*, 9 vols. (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1967–70), 3: 336.
7. 'Umar Farrūkh, *Tārīkh al-fikr al-'arabī* (Beirut: Dār 'Ilm lil Malāyin, 1966), pp. 325–26.
8. Abū 'Alī Aḥmad b. Muḥammad Miskawayh, *Al-Ḥikmah al-khālidah*, ed. and intro. by 'Abd Al-Raḥmān Badawī (Cairo: Maktabah al-Nahḍah al-Miṣriyyah, 1952), pp. (21–24).
9. See, Fakhry, "The Platonism," pp. 40–50; Dwight M. Donaldson, *Studies in Muslim Ethics* (London: S. P. C. K., 1963), p. 129; Richard Walzer, *Greek into Arabic: Essays on Islamic Philosophy* (Oxford: Brune Cassirer, 1962), pp. 224–30; and Franz Rosenthal, "On the Knowledge of Plato's Philosophy in the Islamic World," *Islamic Culture*, 14 (1940): 402–10.
10. Sami S. Hawi, *Islamic Naturalism and Mysticism* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1974), p. 123.
11. See, Farrūkh, *Tārīkh*, p. 325, and Badawī, "Introduction" in *Al-Ḥikmah*, p. (22).
12. Abū 'Alī Aḥmad ibn Miskawayh, *Kūb al-fawz al-asghar* (Beirut: S. n. 1319 A.H.), pp. 3, 33, 85.
13. Fakhry, *Al-Fikr*, p. 117.
14. Farrūkh, *Tārīkh*, p. 325.
15. Donaldson, *Studies*, p. 121.
16. Farrūkh, *Tārīkh*, p. 325.
17. M. S. Khan, *An Unpublished Treatise of Miskawayh on Justice* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1964), p. 1.

18. Donaldson, *Studies*, p. 122.
19. Khan, *An Unpublished Treatise*, p. 9.
20. My references are to the Cairo edition of A.H. 1346/A.D. 1928. This edition is edited and introduced by Shaykh Sayyid 'Alī al-Tawbajī al-Suyūṭī. The introduction is from page 2 to page 30. The text begins on page 31 and ends on page 61. Unlike Ibn Miskawayh's *Tahdhīb al-akhlāq* which has been translated into English by Constantine K. Zurayk and into French by Mohammed Arkoun, his *Kitāb al-sa'ādah* as not yet been translated into English or French.
21. Khan, *An Unpublished Treatise*, p.5.
22. Ibn Miskawayh, *Al-Sa'ādah*, p. 31.
23. Ibid.
24. In the treatise Ibn Miskawayh does not mention the name of his contemporary philosopher from whom he acquires the goal of the philosophers. It is possible that the contemporary philosopher referred by Ibn Miskawayh is Abū Ḥayyān al-Tawḥīdī. At least two circumstantial evidences support this possibility. Firstly, Ibn Miskawayh was in contact with Al-Tawḥīdī who provided him with the treatises on the *Isagoge* and on the *Categories*. Secondly, M. S. Khan concludes that Ibn Miskawayh wrote the treatise on the nature of justice to respond to the question advanced by Al-Tawḥīdī. The latter also put forward the psychological, moral and metaphysical questions to the former. (See, Khan, *An Unpublished Treatise*, pp. 7-8).
25. Abū 'Alī Aḥmad b. Muhammad Ibn Miskawayh, *Kitāb taḥdhīb al-akhlāq wa taḥfūr al-a'rāq* (Cairo: Maṭba'ah al-Ḥasiniyyah al-Miṣriyyah, 1329 A.H.), pp. 14-15.
26. Ibn Miskawayh, *Al-Sa'ādah*, pp. 54-55. The name in English for Aristotle's work is taken from *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 1972 ed., s.v. "Aristotle," by G. B. Kerferd.
27. Ibn Miskawayh, *Al-Sa'ādah*, pp. 32-34.
28. Rex Warner, *The Greek Philosophy* (New York: Mentor Books, 1961), p. 115.
29. Walzer, *Greek into Arabic*, p. 221.
30. Ibn Miskawayh, *Al-Sa'ādah*, p. 34-35
31. Ibid., p. 46.
32. Ibid., p. 49.
33. Muhsin Mahdi, "Introduction" in *Alfarabi's Philosophy of Plato and Aristotle*, trans. and ed. by Muhsin Mahdi (New York: Cornell University Press, 1969), p. xviii.
34. Ibn Miskawayh, *Al-Sa'ādah*, pp. 48.
35. Ibid., pp. 40-41
36. Ibid., pp. 41-42
37. *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, s. v. "Aristotle."
38. Warner, *The Greek*, p. 121.
39. Ibn Miskawayh, *Al-Sa'ādah*, pp. 48-49.
40. Ibid., pp. 54-59. Aristotle's works listed by Ibn Miskawayh are in Arabic; their English translations are adapted with Aristotle's works listed in *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, s. v. "Aristotle."

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