

THE SOUL (AL-NAFS) AND ITS EFFECTS ON CHARACTER: AN ANALYSIS OF THE THOUGHT OF THE GREAT MUSLIM MORALIST, MISKAWAYH (D.1030)

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ABSTRACT: *Miskawayh, through his famous work on ethics, Tahdhib al-Akhlaq (The Refinement of Character), have separated ethics from other disciplines, offering a very thorough analytical system of ethics in Islam. Such a work was thus occupying a prominent place in this particular branch of Islamic ethical literature. Hence, a close examination of this unique compendium is indispensable for a proper understanding of Islamic ethics. Miskawayh defines ethics as a state of the human soul (al-nafs) which determines human actions. This state is neither the soul nor the action. The soul is innate, while ethics is a state of the soul that causes it to perform its actions. The state is acquired by training and practice, while the soul is inborn and parts of man's nature. Accordingly, ethics is viewed by Miskawayh as the science of the human soul. It defines the characteristics and the faculties of the soul as well as the methods of how to control and moderate them. This qualitative study which applies conceptual content analysis method seeks to analyse Miskawayh's theory of the human soul with special reference to his famous work on ethics, Tahdhib al-Akhlaq. Thus, what is interesting about the result of this study is the way in which the thought of Plato and other philosophers enable Miskawayh to philosophise about human soul and how Islamic faith brings about the development of that legacy.*

Keywords: *Akhlaq, Ethics, Miskawayh, Plato, Galen, Soul (al-nafs).*

1. INTRODUCTION

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. His 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 just a few of his biographers, mostly those belonging to the later generations, such as al-Shahrastani [1], al-Bayhaqi [2], and Hajji Khalifah [3], who assume that he was the son of Miskawayh (*Ibn Miskawayh*). In contrast to this, many of them including al-Tawhidi [4], al-Tha'alibi [5] and al-Sijistani [6], who was 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 [7, 8], defines the character (*khuluq*) as a state (*hal*) of the soul by which man does his action without any reflection or a fresh thought. He says further that such a state of the soul is not yet called "character" (*khuluq*) unless it becomes a relatively permanent disposition of man which produces a stable or a single type of behaviour in all or most situations. Thus, it is wrong to call a man greedy on one occasion and generous on another, unless the act of either greediness or generosity has become stable and relatively permanent to him, then he deserves to be called such. Yet this state of character, Miskawayh adds, should also induce a man to do an action spontaneously until it grows into a habit and second nature. So that all his activities are performed freely

and easily without any need for further reflection and thought. Man, therefore, is largely governed by habit, and after some time, he no longer able to transform his habit by any act of reflection and deliberation; but that habit becomes his disposition and represents a trait of his character.

Miskawayh [7, 8], further develops that character is neither the capacity, nor the soul, nor even the action. It is not the capacity, faculty, or power, for it is not right to call anyone a good or a bad man simply because one has the power or capacity to do good or evil. But only he whose goodness or badness has developed into a habit is right to be called a man of good or bad character. Neither is the character the soul, for the soul is innate, while the character is a state of the soul that causes it (the soul) to perform its actions. The state is acquired by training and practice, while the soul is inborn and part of man's nature. Hence, the character is either good or bad; the soul is neither. The character is also different from action. The character is the internal and the hidden state of the soul, while the action is its outward manifestation. The character is the inward cause, while the action is its outward consequence. A good character hence begets good actions, whereas bad character yields bad actions. Hence, he who persistently enjoys giving away his wealth, for example, is called a man of generous character. His acts of giving are called actions, while the thing that makes his soul do such a generous act is called "character" (*khuluq*).

Thus character is neither a virtue nor a vice, but a seat of both. If there proceeds from it only a single type of action, either virtues or vices, it may be called virtue or vice accordingly. But this is simply due to homonymy, not that the real nature of the one is the nature of the other. Therefore, it is because of character that man is either praised or blamed. It is because of character that he is either happy or in misery. Consequently, character has consistently become the object of the science of ethics. In Arabic, this science is called, '*ilm al-*

akhlaq (ethics or moral philosophy), its name similarly indicating that *khuluq* or character is the object of its enquiry. It is this state of the soul that has become the subject matter of Miskawayh's *Tahdhib al-Akhlaq* (The Refinement of Character). It is the book that aims at assisting future generations in achieving excellent states of character by way of understanding the nature of the soul (al-nafs), and its effects on the formation of character. Thus Miskawayh [8:1] insists:

"Our object in this book (Tahdhib al-Akhlaq), is to acquire for ourselves (lit: our souls) such a character that all our actions issuing therefrom may be good and, at the same time, may be performed by us easily, without any constraint or difficulty. The way to this end is to understand first of all our souls: what they are, what kind of thing they are, and for what purpose they have been brought into existence within us - I mean: their perfection and their end; what their faculties and aptitudes are, which, if properly used by us, would lead us to that high rank; what the causes are which hinder us from that rank; and what it is that keeps our souls pure so that they prosper, as well as what it is that corrupts them so that they fail. For God has said: "'By the soul, and the proportion and order given to it; and its enlightenment as to its wrong and its right; truly he succeeds that purifies it, and he fails that corrupts it'" (al-Qur'an, 91:7-10).

Thus, character (*khuluq*) refers to the state of the human soul which induces man to perform his actions, while ethics or moral philosophy ('ilm al-akhlaq), therefore, refers to the study in which character or such a state of the soul becomes the object of its inquiry. As the soul itself has different faculties and aptitudes - i.e. the rational, the irascible and the concupiscent - and as a good state of the soul is attainable only through the equilibrium of each of these soul's faculties, ethics was, thus, viewed by Miskawayh and many Muslim scholars as the science of human soul, defining the faculties and characteristics of the soul as well as the methods of how to control and moderate them, so that happiness, the supreme goal of ethics, may be realisable by man.

2. MISKAWAYH AND PLATO'S TRICHOTOMY OF THE SOUL

Rosenthal [9] and Walzer [10] are both probably right in believing that most of the Arab writers on ethics based their ethical reflections on Plato's trichotomy of the soul: the rational, the spirited and the appetitive. According to Plato [11], the rational is the faculty in virtue of which we reflect on the good and the bad and with which we make up our minds and take decisions accordingly. The spirited is the source of our moral sentiments such as anger, pugnacity, ambition, love and honour; and the appetitive is the faculty that concerns our biological appetites such as the request for food, drink, sexual intercourse and other desires.

In the *Timaeus* [12], Plato assigns these three partitions of the soul to different components of the human body: the rational to the head (brain) the spirited to the breast (heart) and the appetitive to the belly (liver); while in the *Republic* [11], he insists that "the reason (i.e., the rational) ought to rule having the wisdom and foresight to act for the whole, and the spirit ought to obey and support it". When the rational and the

spirited souls have been properly trained and well educated, continues Plato, "they must be put in charge of the appetitive which forms the greater part of each man's make-up and is naturally insatiable". Therefore, Plato urged that the truly virtuous wise man is he who puts the irrational parts of his soul - the spirited and the appetitive - under the command of his reason. So that concludes Plato, he "attains self-mastery and order and lives on good terms with himself".

Plato was known to the Arabs as *aflatun*, while his original writings, for example, the *Republic*, the *Laws* and the *Timaeus* were known as *Kitab al-Siyasa*, *al-Nawamis*, and *Timawas* respectively. His biography, often furnished with his literary activities, is preserved in many Arabic books that deal particularly with the history of philosophy, such as those of Ibn Juljul [13], al-Mubashshir b. Fatik [14], Ibn al-Nadim [15], al-Qifti [16], and many others. Although not a single Arabic version of Platonic dialogues has reached us today, there is evidence that the Arabs translated, probably on rare occasions in full, the *Republic*, the *Laws*, the *Timaeus* and even the *Sophist*. Besides, they also knew the commentary works on the Platonic corpus such as those of Olympiodorus on the *Sophist*, Proclus on the *Phaedo* and possibly Proclus's other commentaries on the *Timaeus* and the *Republic*, Plutarch's work on the *Timaeus* and perhaps Galen's *Synopsis of the Platonic Dialogues*.

Every so often the Arabs, mostly the Christians, also translated this commentary works into Arabic. Hunayn Ibn Ishaq (d. 874), for instance, translated Proclus's commentary on the *Timaeus*; his son, Ishaq (d. 911) translated Olympiodorus's commentary on the *Sophist*, while part of Proclus's commentary on the *Phaedo* translated by Ibn Zur'a (d. 1008). Yet others, mostly the Muslims, such men as al-Razi (d. 925), al-Farabi (d. 950) and Ibn Rushd (d. 1198), in addition, developed their own independent studies on some of the important Platonic dialogues at their disposal. Al-Razi, for example, wrote a commentary on Plato's *Timaeus*, al-Farabi prepared his own summary of the first nine books of Plato's *Laws* but omitted Book X that deals with religion, while Ibn Rushd, in his turn, wrote a commentary on the *Republic* [9, 10].

Miskawayh, on the other hand, seems to have had less interest in editing and translating the text. But there are reasons for assuming that many of the important Platonic dialogues were pretty well known to him. He refers to Plato by name, "*aflatun*", no less than four times in the *Tahdhib al-Akhlaq* [7], and three times in *al-Hawamil wa'l-Shawamil* [17]. Though all of these occur within the context of his discussion on the nature of the human soul, no specific Platonic corpus, in either case, is mentioned. But in a related second section of his *al-Fawz al-Asghar* [18], he reveals his knowledge of Plato's works by citing both the *Laws* and the *Timaeus* among his sources; while in the *Jawidan Khirad* [19], he includes Plato's *wasaya* (testaments) for his pupil Aristotle and also for the education of the young, neither of which seem to be found in any other Arabic work on ethics.

Nevertheless, the Plato of Miskawayh is Plato the psychologist whom he sees through his own eyes as a Muslim, and through the eyes of others including Aristotle,

Galen, Plotinus, Proclus and Themistius. For Miskawayh [18] himself implicitly indicates that he had access to many of the treatises, particularly on the soul, besides those of Plato. Thus, he insists, "He who has seen this discussion in the books of Plato and Galen or has read the book of Proclus on this particular subject (i.e., the immortality of the soul) will have complete familiarity with this account". The specialist study carried out by Fakhri [20] on the Platonic elements of Miskawayh's ethical thought has also demonstrated the extent to which Miskawayh has constructed his Plato using other sources.

Now turning back to Miskawayh's theory of human soul, it is true that Plato's tripartition of the soul was fully acceptable to him. Yet, Plato's and Aristotle's [21, 22] ideas, of the perfectly virtuous happy man as he who lives exclusively under the rule of his reason, who practises his virtues, or that is to say, as a moral man in action, had again been approved by Miskawayh. However, being a scholar who was himself a physician [23], Plato's and Aristotle's views were considered basically as no more than the starting point of his own investigations. Naturally, therefore, Miskawayh's main concern was never resolved with the acceptance of the Platonic trichotomy of the soul, but extended to the exploration of the psychological methods of treating people who are not mentally healthy, i.e. psychotherapy, a matter wherein Plato and Aristotle are lacking. It is in this respect that he can be said to have made distinctive contributions to knowledge in general and to moral philosophy in particular. Rosenthal's and Walzer's studies omitted these aspects, while at the same time accepting the significance of Miskawayh's works [9, 10]. Walzer acknowledged that they deserve special study, while other contemporary scholars such as Watt [24], for example, saw in Miskawayh, "an interesting example of how thinkers who were primarily philosophers nevertheless accepted a framework of Islamic conceptions", whereas Horton [25] saw the richness in the original ideas of Miskawayh's ethical thought.

3. HIS THEORY OF THE HUMAN SOUL (AL-NAFS)

"By the soul, and the proportion and order given to it; and its enlightenment as to its wrong and its right; truly he succeeds that purifies it, and he fails that corrupts it" (al-Qur'an, 91:7-10).

In the light of the above Qur'anic verses, which have been quoted successively as the objective of his *Tahdhib al-Akhlaq*, Miskawayh [7, 8] builds his theory of the human soul. Thus he insists, "Our object in this book is to acquire for ourselves (lit: our souls) such a character that all our actions issuing therefrom may be good and, at the same time, may be performed by us easily, without any constraint or difficulty". As to how this noble goal can be achieved by man, Miskawayh [8:1] specifies further:

"The way to this end is to understand first of all our souls: what they are, what kind of thing they are, and for what purpose they have been brought into existence within us - I mean: their perfection and their end; what their faculties and aptitudes are, which, if properly used by us, would lead us to that high rank; what the causes are which hinder us from that

rank; and what it is that keeps our souls pure so that they prosper, as well as what it is that corrupts them so that they fail".

Like other philosophers, Miskawayh [7] also agrees with Plato [11, 12] that the soul (al-nafs) is composed of three faculties: rational (al-natiqa), the irascible (al-ghadabiyya), and the concupiscent (al-shahawiyya). And again corresponding to Plato and his followers such as Galen [26], al-Razi [27] and others, Miskawayh also holds that the first faculty the rational, operates through the bodily organ, the brain; the second through the heart; and the third through the liver. But due to the wide diversity of their inclinations and aptitudes, a mixture of particularly Plato's and Galen's views appears to be generally adapted by Miskawayh. Thus, he defines them according to the sequence of such powers, namely, the rational, the irascible and the concupiscent:

"He who examines the nature of this soul and of the faculties finds that it is made up of three parts: the faculty which has to do with reflection, discernment, and the consideration of the realities of things; the faculty which finds expression in anger, intrepidity, the risking of dangers, and the desire for dominance, self-esteem, and the different kinds of honour; and the faculty by which we have passion, the quest for food, and the desire for the pleasures derived from food, drink, sexual intercourse and the various sensual enjoyment" [8].

We are not certain why Miskawayh responds favourably to Plato's trichotomy of the soul. Al-Qur'an, nevertheless, explicitly speaks of the three different states of the human soul in terms of (a) *nafs ammara* (the imperative soul), which is prone to evil (12:53); (b) *nafs lawwama* (the self-reproaching soul), which feels conscious of morality: reproaching itself in cases of its indulgence in passions and evil, yearning for moral perfection (75:2); and (c) *nafs mutma'inna* (the tranquil or peaceful soul), which is the highest state attained by the human soul, in which it becomes absolutely free from vices, resting peacefully in God's grace and bliss: "O thou peaceful soul, return to thy Lord, approving and approved; enter amongst My servants, enter My garden" (89:2, 27-30).

It looks likely, then, that Miskawayh [7] has tried his best to translate his understanding of the Platonic trichotomy of the human soul in the light of the Qur'anic sources. For example, he agrees with the Qur'an as well as with Plato [11, 12] that the concupiscent soul (al-Qur'an: *ammara*; Plato: *appetitive*), the lowest in the scale, always incites man to evil. Again while he is of the same mind as Plato that the second soul, the irascible, is the source of anger, love, honour and the desire for dominance, he has completed it with the Qur'anic doctrine of *al-nafs al-lawwama* that the irascible soul is aware of what is good and bad, responding positively to training. Finally, while he agrees with Plato that the rational soul is the source of reflection, discernment and judgement, he still relies on the Qur'anic conception of *al-nafs al-mutma'inna*, by believing that the rational soul is naturally pure, noble and perfect and, hence, quite capable of restraining the other part of the human soul.

Indeed, Miskawayh [28] accordingly quotes several verses of the Qur'an and the sayings of the Prophet in order to show

that "self-knowledge" is deeply rooted in Islamic *shari'a*. Yet, without such a knowledge, man will remain in ignorance of his own self, of the ways to improve it, and thereby of God himself. For Miskawayh [19] strongly believes that the knowledge of "self" leads to the knowledge of God, and the realisation of "self" to the realisation of God. Thus, he refers to the prophetic tradition: "whoever knows his own 'self', knows his God"; and to the Qur'anic verses (89: 27-30) concerning *al-nafs al-mutma'inna*, already quoted above, perhaps to give an authoritative example of how successful is he who knows his own self, who is in command of his soul's passions, realising his God.

Besides, Plato [11, 12] does not clearly resolve the question of whether the human soul is single and homogeneous or manifold, for sometimes he speaks as if a man has three souls and, another as if a man has one soul but possesses three distinct faculties. Miskawayh [7, 17, 18], on the contrary, holds that the human soul is only one and a single entity, yet it has three different powers or faculties: the first to appear in man is concupiscent; the second is irascible, and the third is the rational. However, continues Miskawayh, the first two powers, the concupiscent and the irascible, in contrast to the rational soul which is spiritual, are made of matter and corporeal things that not only become corrupt with the corruption of the body, but also perish at the death of a man. In spite of this fact, the name "soul" is still ascribed to them for they are not divisible like bodies. They are the principal members and instruments to be used by the soul, in this context the rational soul, in realising its end. Thus, they are necessary so that the body can continue to live for a long time.

Hence, a man in Miskawayh's view [7, 17, 18, 28], possesses only one soul in addition to his body. This soul is identical with the rational soul (*al-nafs al-natiqa*), and its real essence is "reason" or "intellect" (*al-'aql*). That is why this human quality, Miskawayh says further, is sometimes called "the understanding soul" (*al-nafs al-'aqla*), "the intellectual power" (*al-quwwa al-'aqla*), "the discerning power" (*al-quwwa al-mumayyiza*) and similar names. The rational soul, then is the most excellent gift and the greatest grace bestowed upon man by God. It is, therefore, divine, God's part in man, and His deputy in him. It is by virtue of this that man exercises his thought, discernment and consideration, distinguishing himself from animals, perceiving the ranks of the angels and the spiritual world. Thus, the rational soul or reason is not only the seat of revelation, for without it man is not to be burdened with religious duties, but it is also the source of life for the body. Man is alive so long as the rational soul remains in him, and he is called dead when the rational soul departs from his body, returning to God.

Thus, it becomes increasingly clear that Miskawayh's theory of the human soul, i.e., the rational, is almost identical with the Qur'anic conception of *al-ruh* (i.e., the "spirit of God" that is breathed into the body upon the creation of man); while his conception of the concupiscent and the irascible powers is much more closer to the Qur'anic notion of *al-nafs* than to the appetitive and the spirited souls of Plato. The life of the soul or the rational soul consists in motion, which is in two

directions. One is upwards towards its own essence the intellect; the other is downwards towards matter or bodily instruments, i.e. the concupiscent and the irascible powers. In the former, it becomes absorbed in its essence, unites with the essence of the Creator, perceiving the state of happiness and immortality, while in the latter, it becomes separate from its own essence, reaping the state of complete misery [8, 18, 28].

4. CONCLUSION

To sum up, Miskawayh was a devout Muslim prior to his full involvement in philosophy. That philosophy is used basically to translate his personal conviction always appears to be the case. That is why he never hesitates to criticise and, on some occasions, even rejects Greek ideas, while, in contrast, never doing so towards Islamic *shari'a*, only adhering himself to its commandments and advising others to do the same. This also applies to his theory of the human soul. He based such a theory on the Qur'anic verses (91: 7-10), which he quoted in successions: "By the soul, and the proportion and order given to it; and its enlightenment as to its wrong and its right; truly he succeeds that purifies it; and he fails that corrupts it". Then, in his interpretation of that Qur'anic doctrine, he adapted Plato's trichotomy of the soul as well as Galen's interpretation of it perhaps because they do not seem to contradict the tenets of Islam, and yet the Qur'an also speaks of the three states of the human soul, as we have already discussed above.

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