

LE VIE EST PLUS BELLE QUE LES IDEES

EXISTENTIALIST HUMANISM, INTERSUBJECTIVITY, AND TRANSCENDENCE IN
THE UNIFIED CIVIC HUMANISM OF IBN MISKAWAYH

John Peter Radez

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Doctoral Committee

John Walbridge, PhD.

Salman Al-Ani

Akram Khabibullaev

Paul Vincent Spade

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Preface

I wrote this dissertation in such a way that one can read it on two levels. On one level, this dissertation is about Miskawayh as an existential humanist who melded together the cultural and religious elements of Islamic humanism creating a special kind of Islamic existentialist humanism to teach us how we can rise above ourselves, how to transcend our own human subjectivity to experience an ever-rewarding mystical union with God. Through the social and intellectual, through the ethical and practical, Miskawayh shows us how to consider more fully, more consciously, the purpose of our own existence. In short, Miskawayh's brand of existentialist humanism is a tool to understand life.

On another level, I wrote this dissertation as an *apologia* for a liberal arts education. The new mantra for education today is the infamous acronym, STEM (i.e., science, technology, engineering, and math). STEM is popular and pushed because it provides practical and applicable results. Its benefits are usually immediate with some guarantee of social and fiduciary rewards. A liberal arts education, however, is hard pressed to compete in this environment because its value is less apparent, its results less applicable. Society does not readily recognize, much less appreciate, those rewards gained from a liberal arts education.

Nevertheless, I believe, there is still hope. In the spirit of Miskawayh, we have only to look to history to understand the value of such an education. In both the Islamic and European Renaissance, one needed the accoutrements of civility acquired from either *adab* or *humanitas* in addition to those skills necessary for his particular trade or vocation. A good lawyer needed to speak well and argue eloquently, therefore he studied rhetoric, for example.

I believe that a liberal arts education serves the same purpose that curtains do for a window—it frames how we see the world. In other words, the Ancients, mediaeval Muslims, and mediaeval Europeans all realized long ago that the world needs both—namely the humanities and the sciences. In a letter to the art critic, Cedric Wright, Ansel Adams captured the spirit of *adab* or *humanitas* and how it enriches us and teaches us about the beauty of spirit on which the world can put no price, and that life is, indeed, more beautiful than ideas.

Art is both love and friendship, and understanding; the desire to give. It is not charity, which is the giving of Things, it more than kindness which is the giving of self. It is both the taking and giving of beauty, the turning out to the light of the inner folds of the awareness of the spirit. It is the recreation on another plane of the realities of the world; the tragic and wonderful realities of earth and men, and of all the inter-relations of these.¹

¹¹ Ansel Adams, “Letter to Cedric Wright,” Yosemite National Park, June 10, 1937 in *Ansel Adams: Letters 1916–1984* (New York: Little, Brown & Co., 2001), 98.

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The dissertation investigates how the three primary works on metaphysics, history, and moral philosophy of Miskawayh, an 11th century Islamic ethicist, can be read *in toto* as one existential work that exhibits three Sartrean existential properties, namely, the materialization of *self*, the encountering of *self*, and the defining of *self*. My inquiry focuses on how Miskawayh's three works intersect with one another in one existential work with two dominant Islamic humanist themes—intersubjectivity (that is, learning about the *other* to discover the truth about one's self) and transcendence (that is, one's relationship with divinity). I begin by giving an account of Miskawayh's life in 11th century Baghdad. I then examine how his job as a royal court librarian inspired him as a historian and philosopher. Next, I discuss Miskawayh's contributions to 11th century Islamic humanism and how these contributions led Miskawayh to create a kind of civic humanism that shaped his moral philosophy. Finally, I conclude by arguing that Miskawayh was an Islamic existentialist humanist who anticipated Kierkegaard and Sartre. Traditional Miskawayh scholarship has focused primarily on Miskawayh as an Aristotelian philosopher in the Iranian tradition of political thought and courtly culture. My research goes beyond this notion and shows instead that Miskawayh's philosophy in particular—and Islamic philosophy in general—is not merely derivative of Greek philosophy. Rather, Islamic philosophy possesses and integrates something quite unique and foreign to Greek philosophy, namely, elements of existentialism, theology, metaphysics, mysticism, and humanism.

Dr. John Walbridge

Dr. Salman Al-Ani

Dr. Akram Khabibullaev

Dr. Paul Spade

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*“For just as physicians of the body heal men, so the prophets are the spiritual physicians of men and heal the human soul.”—Miskawayh, *al-Fauz al-Asghar*²*

Chapter 1: Miskawayh, His Life and Works

Miskawayh—An Overview of His Life & Times

Born around 932, Abu ‘Ali ibn Ahmad ibn Muhammad ibn Ya‘qub Miskawayh fancied himself both historian and philosopher. In his mid-thirties, he found himself in a world rife with the scent of war, greed, power struggles, and political upheavals. This was a century of “fragmentation”.³ Nevertheless, from the vantage point of a historian, Miskawayh looked around and decided to embark on that complex politico–philosophical journey that would lead him from the sublime heights of heaven to the carnal depths of the physical world.

Islamic civilization reached a cultural and intellectual zenith in the tenth century during which time Muslim ideas and scholarship matured. This is often referred to as the Golden Age of Islam.⁴ Miskawayh grew up during this period, namely the Abbasid period (750–1258). It was during this time when Muslim scholars were actively translating foreign texts, particularly Greek. Working as a librarian for various viziers of the Buwayhids, Miskawayh had rare access to many of these works thereby immersing him thoroughly in the culture of his age.

² Miskawayh, *al-Fauz al-Asghar* in *Islam and Christian Theology: A Study of the Interpretation of Theological Ideas in the Two Religions*, trans. by J. Windrow Sweetman, (London: Lutterworth Press, 1945), part 1, vol. 1, 93.

³ Goodman, *Islamic Humanism*, 101. Goodman notes that there were still those princes and *wazirs* yearning for higher culture through the patronage of poets, scientists, and philosophers.

⁴ See Maurice Lombard, *The Golden Age of Islam*, (New York: American Elsevier, 1975). See also Benson Bobrick, *The Caliph’s Splendor: Islam and the West in the Golden Age of Baghdad*, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2012). See also Amira Bennison, *The Great Caliphs: The Golden Age of the Abbasid Empire*, (New York: I. B. Tauris, 2009)

As historians go, Miskawayh was lucky in that he often found himself in the company of those individuals destined to alter the ebb and flow of history in one way or another. This undoubtedly gave Miskawayh the advantage of having access to important historical personages firsthand. The people with whom he had daily contact were for him eyewitnesses to history—a history he set out to record with the utmost competence even though to some extent the social status of both himself and his informants sometimes sharpened and at other times dulled his historical acumen.⁵

Because of his position in the Buwayhid government, Miskawayh had acquired a particular expertise in the methods of administration and the art and state of warfare of the time, and furthermore, access to one of the best libraries of the day. All this worked together nicely as he set out to write his historical and philosophical works. Miskawayh exhibits to the utmost the acumen of a philosopher and the objectivity of an historian. Particularly with his history, *Tajarib al-Umam*, everyone is fair game.

Miskawaihi is singularly outspoken in his judgments, and free from most forms of partisanship. Though a servant of the Buwayhids he makes no concealment of their crimes, and indeed at times condemns them in vehement language. The founder of the dynasty, ‘Imad al-daulah, is represented by him as an unprincipled adventurer. Muhallabi’s master, Mu ‘izz al-daulah, is reprehended in the very strongest terms for the treachery wherewith he started his career. . .⁶

All this is to say that Miskawayh’s involvement with the Buwayhid regime and its viziers enabled him to partake more freely in the political life of tenth century Iraq and Persia.⁷ Even so, Miskawayh still had to struggle against what Goodman called, “the sensuous and cynical values of the court and culture in which he had come of age.”⁸ This could be the reason why he felt that

⁵ M.S. Khan, “Miskawayh and the Buwayhids,” *Oriens* 21 (1968-1969), 235.

⁶ Margoliouth, *Lectures on Arabic Historians*, 130.

⁷ Khan, “Miskawayh and the Buwayhids,” 247.

⁸ Goodman, *Lectures on Arabic Historians*, 104.

he had to purify himself spiritually before he could begin working on his treatise on moral philosophy, namely the *Tadhib al-Akfaq*.

As a philosopher, Miskawayh is unique in that he found a way to harmonize Platonic, Aristotelian, Stoic, and Neoplatonic virtues within the context of Islamic culture. Belonging to the philosophical school of Baghdad during the second half of the tenth century and the beginning of the eleventh, in addition to his historical writings, his philosophical works embody that rich cultural and intellectual milieu of his time.⁹ Furthermore, Miskawayh was both familiar and worked with the works of many Greek writers such as Posidonius, Galen, Porphyry, Themistius, as well as Plato and Aristotle via Arabic translations or through commentaries.¹⁰

Seeing himself as a philosopher firmly entrenched in the philosophical——particularly Aristotelian——tradition and using this particular tradition as his primary point of reference, Miskawayh devised a moral philosophical system of integration that he would use to bridge the gap between philosophy and religion similar to the strategy Ibn Rushd would later come to employ. Though they seem at times derivative, tenuous, or perhaps even disconnected, Miskawayh's philosophical themes all point to his conception of God's relationship with His creation, especially humanity. The various themes within his philosophy are but components in a richly textured Aristotelian philosophical scheme that attempts to align itself with religion.

⁹ Roxanne D. Marcotte, "The Role of Imagination (*mutakhayyilah*) in Ibn Miskawayh's Theory of Prophecies (*nubuwat*)," *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 73 (1999): 39.

¹⁰ Marcotte, "Ibn Miskawayh: Imagination and Prophecy," 39.

Miskawayh believed—as did other Islamic philosophers—that the question of existence is one of *providence* and *invention* which he insists is consistent with both religious method and the *Qur'an*. The argument from providence rests on the premise that everything in the world was created for a reason and exists for the benefit of humanity. In turn, the argument from invention rests on the premise that God *invented* all created entities.¹¹ It logically follows, then, that every *invented* thing has an *inventor*. So, whoever wishes to know God need only to consider and study how things are in the world—a kind of natural theology, I suspect.¹²

“Miskawayh,” wrote Goodman, “was the most explicit and self-conscious exponent of philosophical humanism in Islam.”¹³ This is what perhaps distinguishes him from 15th century Renaissance humanists, namely, that Miskawayh’s humanism was a *philosophical* humanism as opposed to a kind of *academic* humanism as the writings of Renaissance humanists attest.¹⁴ Moreover, in his moral philosophy, Miskawayh sought the cultivation of souls, or what he called, “the refinement of character.” He brought to the forefront the virtues of fellowship, community, civility, and ultimately the fulfillment of one’s nature. This culminated in the individual’s sense of his personhood in the idea of community.

By way of *adab*, Miskawayh saw cultural cultivation in the Islamic literary tradition as a component of the natural goals of one’s life. Here, in the community, self-cultivation begins,

¹¹See Qur’an 22:73, “Those on whom, besides Allah, ye call, cannot create even a fly, if they all met together for that purpose!”

¹²*Fa:sl al-maq’al*, 37: “. . . the general public are content, as far as knowing providence and invention is concerned, with what is known through primary knowledge, which is derived from sense-impressions. The learned, however, add to what is known of existing things through sense-perception that which is known through demonstration by reference to providence and invention.”

¹³ Goodman, *Islamic Humanism*, 101.

¹⁴ Nauert, *Humanism and the Culture of Renaissance Europe*, 8.

matures, and ends in the moral, cultural and political life of the community with the good as the goal of both the community and the individual himself. Not surprisingly, then, does one hear echoes of Aristotle in Miskawayh's ethic of civic humanism.

Every state is a community of some kind, and every community is established with a view to some good; for everyone always acts in order to obtain that which they think good. But, if all communities aim at some good, the state or political community, which is the highest of all, and which embraces all the rest, aims at good in a greater degree than any other, and at the highest good.¹⁵

The Sage

A sage is someone who is happy no matter what life throws at him. He is content both *with* and *within* himself. This involves a kind of self-coherence, self-control, and self-discipline. These three elements represent those tools which the sage uses to find happiness within himself regardless of anything external (i.e. possessions, events, etc.).¹⁶ Plato and Aristotle basically say the same thing regarding a sage as someone who is independent and finds happiness within himself.

But we also say this, that such a one is most of all men sufficient unto himself for a good life and is distinguished from other men in having least need of anybody else.¹⁷

Consider also the following from Aristotle's *Nichomachean Ethics*.

And the self-sufficiency that is spoken of must belong most to the contemplative activity. For while a wise man, as well as a just man and the rest, needs the necessaries of life, when they are sufficiently equipped with things of that sort the just man needs people towards whom and with whom he shall act justly, and the temperate man, the brave man, and each of the others is in the same

¹⁵Aristotle, *Politics*, 12521a1–8. Cf. Al-Farabi, "The Political Regime" in *Medieval Political Philosophy*, trans. by Fauzi M. Najjar, ed. by Ralph Lerner and Muhsin Mahdi (New York: Collier-Macmillan Ltd., 1963), 32, "Man belongs to the species that cannot accomplish their necessary affairs or achieve their best state, except through the association of many groups of them in a single dwelling-place. . . Hence the city represents the first degree of perfection. . . The political [or civic] society is a part of the nation, and the nation is divided into cities. The absolutely perfect human societies are divided into nations."

¹⁶See Hadot, *What is Ancient Philosophy*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002), 220–224.

¹⁷Plato, *Republic*, bk. III, 388d12–e1.

case, but the wise man, even when by himself, can contemplate truth, and the better the wiser he is; he can perhaps do so better if he has fellow-workers, but still he is the most self-sufficient.¹⁸

Finding happiness (much less maintaining happiness) within oneself through self-sufficiency no matter the circumstances is undoubtedly a struggle. But as the Stoics point out, this struggle is a fundamental component of happiness itself. To endure and embrace one's struggles is a virtue, and that is all that is needed for happiness.

Consider which of the aims that you set before you at the first you have achieved, and which you have not, and how some things give you pleasure to remember and some give you pain; and if possible, recover what you failed to obtain. For those who are entering on the greatest of all struggles must not shrink, but must be ready to endure stripes; for the struggle they are concerned with is not wrestling or the pancration, in which a man may succeed or fail, and yet be worth little or worth very much—nay more, he may be most fortunate or most miserable; no, his struggle is for good fortune and happiness itself.¹⁹

In short, a sage's peace of mind rests on the equanimity of his soul, his own self-sufficiency, and his indifference to the world.²⁰ To borrow Unamuno's language, the sage affirms his "I", namely his own consciousness and, in turn, humankind itself, the true humanism—"the humanism of man, not of the things of man. . ."²¹ Could Miskawayh be teaching us the secrets of becoming a sage? Is Miskawayh arguing that we need to embrace our own existential "I" in order to gain peace of mind and happiness? Does Miskawayh believe that by refining our character, we too can better realize and embrace our "I" and its place in the scheme of the universe?

¹⁸ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, X, 1177a27ff.

¹⁹ Epictetus, "Discourses of Epictetus," in *The Stoic and Epicurean Philosophers*, 400.

²⁰ See Hadot, *What is Ancient Philosophy*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002), 220–224.

²¹ Miguel de Unamuno, *Tragic Sense of Life*, (New York: Dover Publications, 2013), 8.

Miskawayh, the Man: A Personal Aside

Abu ‘Ali Ahmad ibn Muhammad ibn Yaqub Miskawayh was born around 932 in Rayy, a district in Persia, near Tehran. Very little biographical information exists about his early life. However, we do know that he came from a well-to-do family whose reputation carried some weight politically in Rayy.

Traumatized early in life by the death of his father, Miskawayh was left in the care of his mother. Not too long thereafter, his mother then married a substantially younger man who often was mistaken as Miskawayh’s elder brother in public.²² Needless to say, this arrangement troubled Miskawayh greatly. He disapproved of his mother’s marriage to the younger man so much that it drove a wedge between son and mother. Some scholars have speculated that this estrangement served as a catalyst for Miskawayh to leave home early and pursue a career with the government in Baghdad.²³

In his early twenties, Miskawayh attracted favorable attention from al–Muhallabi (d. 963), vizier of the Buwayhid ruler Mu‘izz al–Dawla (d. 945), and shortly thereafter was appointed al–Muallabi’s secretary in 953. Such a prestigious appointment for someone of Miskawayh’s young age suggests that Miskawayh must have had a solid and comprehensive academic and cultural background.²⁴

²² See Ansari, *The Ethical Philosophy of Miskawaih*, 16.

²³ See Miskawayh, *Tajarih al–Uman*, ed. D. S. Margoliouth in *The Eclipse of the ‘Abbasid Caliphate*, English trans. (Oxford, 1921), v. 154. For an authoritative biography of Miskawayh, see al-Tawhidi, *Kitab al–Imta’ wa’lmu’anasa*, ed. Ahmad Amin and Ahmad Zayn, 3 vols. (Cairo, 1953), i, 35–6; *al–Muqabasat*, ed. Hasan al–Sandubi (Misr: al–Matba’a al-Rahmaniyya, 1929), 60; and *Risala al-Sadaqa wa’l–Sadiq*, ed. Ibrahim al–Kaylani (Damascus, 1964), 67–8.

²⁴ Mohammed Nasir bin Omar, “Miskawayh’s Theory of Self-Purification and the Relationship between Philosophy and Sufism,” *Journal of Islamic Studies*, vol. 5, issue 1 (1994), 36. By the 10th century, notes b. Omar, three classes

He started out as a courtier. Nevertheless, his experience as courtier left Miskawayh professionally unfulfilled—even to the point where he felt that he might have wasted his time. In fact, this experience created within him a moral deficit that could only be absolved through a kind of purgation of the soul. In the following excerpt Miskawayh is referring to himself in the third person as someone who was going down the “wrong way” early in his life.

He, 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’ al-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—whoever leads such a life, let him consider all this as misery rather than bliss and loss rather than gain, and let him strive to wean himself from it gradually. But what a difficult task this is! Yet it is, in any case, better than persisting further and further in the wrong way.²⁵

His next undertaking as librarian and secretary would present him unfettered joy and access to Islamic and Greek sources of learning. His position as librarian would soon catapult him into the stratosphere of learned society. During this stage of his life, he soon found himself a *bona fide* member of the intelligentsia in one of the most important centers of learning, namely Baghdad.²⁶

of people formed the circle of the ruler or his vizier: the lawyers (*fuqaha'*), schoolmen (*'ulama'*), and the courtiers (*nudama'*).

²⁵ Miskawayh, *Tahdhib al-Aklat*, 2nd discourse, 49:26–50:11.

²⁶ “Miskawayh’s Theory of Self-Purification and the Relationship between Philosophy and Sufism,” 36.

Civil Service in Baghdad

With the Abbasid Caliphs under the control of the Buwayhid military, the Buwayhid period was undoubtedly chaotic and dangerous. Mu‘izz al–Dawla (d. 967), the first Buyid emir of Iraq, had captured Baghdad through the clever negotiating skills of his vizier, al–Muhallabi, who convinced Baghdad to surrender. At the time, Miskawayh, who came from a well-to-do family, was al–Muhallabi’s young secretary and *nadim* (boon companion).²⁷ During this time, as a young man, Miskawayh engaged in the morally questionable activities of the *nadim*, but this period of his life helped lead to his conversion in his later years as he would later reflect.²⁸

As a *nadim*, it was the duty of Miskawayh to be present, in drinking parties and recite the obscene verses of the poets and sometimes his own verses as amirs were very fond of immoral verses. Miskawayh took an active part in these activities of lustful life.²⁹

He prepared an outline of the science of ethics in Arabic in addition to his other scholarly studies. Miskawayh—a Persian at a time when Persians were culturally dominant—became enamored with the study of ethics since the Syrian Christians were now making Arabic translations of Greek texts more readily available. To this outline of the science of ethics, he gave the name *Tahdhib Akhlaq wa Tathir al–A‘raq*, “The Correction of Dispositions and the Cleansing of Veins.”³⁰

²⁷ Badruddin Bhat, *Abu Ali Miskawayh: A Study of His Historical and Social Thought*, 1st ed., (New Delhi, India: Islamic Book Foundation, 1991), 30. See also Kurd ‘Ali, *Umara al-Bayan*, Cairo, 1937.

²⁸ On this point, in my opinion, I believe that Miskawayh’s life and conversion to some extent parallels that of St. Augustine.

²⁹ Bhat, *Abu Ali Miskawayh: A Study of His Historical and Social Thought*, 30. See also as cited by Bhat, Lufti Juma', *Ta'rikh Falsafat al-Akhlaq fi al-Islam*.

³⁰ Dwight M. Donaldson, *Studies in Muslim Ethics*, (London: S.P.C.K., 1953), 120–122. See also Donaldson’s interesting note 2, p. 122, “Of Ibn Maskawaihi’s *Fi Tahdhib al–Akhlaq* two clear texts may be mentioned: that of Cairo, A.H. 1322, which has al–G Kitab *al–Adab fi Din* on the margin, and that of Cairo, A.H. 1305, which is printed on the margin of al–Tabarsi’s *Mukaram al–Akhlaq*.”

While to some, Miskawayh appeared eccentric, to others he was miserly and greedy.³¹ Indeed, Miskawayh did have his hands in many pots. He was an historian, a moralist, a poet, and even dabbled in alchemy. According to Sharif, Miskawayh's interest in alchemy was not necessarily for purely academic reasons but rather "in search of gold and wealth, and was most servile to his masters."³² Others, such as Ansari, suggest that Miskawayh truly believed in the possibilities of alchemy. It is not necessarily unusual that Miskawayh was fascinated with alchemy if we historically contextualize alchemy, for example. When the Arabs encountered the mysterious and ancient cultures of Egypt and Chaldea, they quickly assimilated the esoteric sciences of astrology, alchemy, and magic, all of which were based on the Neoplatonic notion of correspondences among the divine, celestial and earthly spheres.³³ In fact, the Arabs were so interested in Hermes Trismegistus, that they produced their own Hermetic literature whose subjects covered theosophy, astrology and alchemy. I would suspect

The desire to be independent of his mother, and the avarice for money led him to study and practice alchemy. He read books of Razi and Jabir bin-Haiyan and carried on experiments. Probably a desire to know the truth about , alchemy also lay behind these pursuits. Miskawaih sincerely believed in the possibilities of alchemy, as Abu Haiyan reports. This is not at all surprising, because a number of distinguished men of learning, such as Yahya bin 'Adi, the Christian philosopher, and Abu Sulaiman al-Mantiqi also believed in its practicality. Later on, however, his experience convinced him of the futility of such an enterprise, and he subsequently gave up the idea.³⁴

³¹ See M. M. Sharif, *A History of Muslim Philosophy*, (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1963), vol. 1, 470, "Tawhidi blames him for his miserliness and his hypocrisy." See also as an historical and personal anecdote T. J. de Boer, *The History of Philosophy in Islam*, (London: Luzac & Co. Ltd., 1965), 145. Boer reports that Ibn Sina did not himself think too highly of Miskawayh, "He [Ibn Sina] criticized unfavourably Ibn Miskawaih whom he met with still more frequently."

³² Sharif, *A History of Muslim Philosophy*, vol. 1, 470.

³³ Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke, *The Western Esoteric Traditions*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 33–34.

³⁴ M. Abdul Haq Ansari, *The Ethical Philosophy of Miskawaih*, 1st ed., (Aligarh, India: The Aligarh Muslim University Press, 1964), 18. See also Abu Haiyan al-Tawhidi, *Al-Imta' wa'l-Mu'anasah*, vol. 1, p. 35 and vol. 2, p. 38.

However, as Miskawayh grew older, he became more reflective, so to speak. He now concerned himself not with wealth of the body (i.e., material goods) but wealth of the soul (i.e., spiritual goods). To this end, perhaps as atonement for his previous way, he devised for himself a strict moral code of conduct to initiate within himself a kind of moral transformation, a way to strengthen the spirit against the flesh.³⁵ Here, according to Yaqut as summarized by Donaldson are the fifteen points by which Miskawayh attempted to live³⁶:

1. He had emphasized the continuous struggle that he needed to keep up with his essential manhood (*al-mar*) and his animal nature.
2. He felt the importance of adhering to the Law (*al-Sharia*).
3. He had endeavored to remember agreements and to fulfill them, particularly agreements he made with *Allah*.
4. He showed little confidence in men, and this he accomplished by avoiding familiarity with them.
5. He had cultivated the love of the beautiful for its own sake and for no other reason.
6. He had appreciated the value of silence in times of agitation, until reason would direct him.
7. He had striven to continue any state of mind that was beneficial until it would become a habit.
8. He had approved taking the initiative in things that were creditable.
9. He had found that whole-hearted sympathy was necessary in order to work on any important undertaking without distraction.
10. He had felt that the fear of death and of poverty could be counteracted by doing what was still possible and by not being indolent.
11. He had shut out from his mind such anxieties as were aroused by sayings of the base and he had tried to suppress his desire at night to plan something against them.
12. He had come to realize that he must be inured to wealth or to poverty, and to liberality or to contempt.
13. He had tried to remember times of sickness when he was in health, and occasions of joy and pleasure when anger was apt to arise, so that there might be less injustice and transgression.

³⁵ See Yaqut's *Dictionary of Learned Men*, Gibb M. Series, ii, p. 95. See also Sharif, *A History of Muslim Philosophy*, vol. 1, 470.

³⁶See Mohammed Nasir bin Omar, Miskawayh's Theory of Self-Purification and the Relationship between Philosophy and Sufism," *Journal of Islamic Studies*, vol.5, no. 1 (1994), who discusses a work putatively attributed to Miskawayh, *Wasiyya*, by al-Tawhidi (d. 1023), a close friend of Miskawayh's. Omar reports that, "the surprising fact is that al-Tawhidi did ascribe it to Miskawayh by name. He mentions only that the *Wasiyya* was observed and followed in life by one of his friends. But it is an established fact that Miskawayh was his friend, for he himself mentions him twice as one of his companions in *Kitab al-Imta' wa'l-Mu'anasa*."

14. He had rejoiced in times of trust, appreciating the goodness of hope and confidence in Allah, turning his whole heart to Him.³⁷

In his preamble to *Tahdhib al-Akhlaq*, Miskawayh elegantly reiterates these points in terms of the object of his book on ethics. In other words, before he could set out to write such a work, in today's vernacular, he had to first "practice what he preaches".

Ahmad ibn Muhammad Miskawayh says: Our object in this book is to acquire for ourselves 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. This object we intend to achieve according to an art, and in a didactic order. 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 with us—I mean: their perfection and their end. . . For God (mighty and exalted be He!) Has said: "By a soul and That which shaped it, and breathed into it its wickedness and its piety; he who keeps it pure prospers, and he who corrupts it fails."³⁸

Miskawayh—His Works

With Miskawayh, we have an author developing an oeuvre that combines social concern with social grace. His whole oeuvre, I argue, was a reflection on both the limits of social freedom and humanity's relationship with divinity. Taken together, through the general motifs of his works, Miskawayh had revealed that our limits on freedom and our relationship with the transcendent point to the fact that we are not self-sufficient. Rather, these limits and relationship form the bedrock of basic human consciousness. In turn, this basic consciousness preserves the essentiality of the individual.

This individual, as Miskawayh explained in *The Refinement of Character*, consisting of an integration of soul and self, is a *humanely* active member of his community. The key word here

³⁷ Donaldson, *Studies in Muslim Ethics*, 123. See also, Miskawayh, *Tahdhib al-Akhaq*.

³⁸ Miskawayh, *Tahdhib al-Akhlaq*, trans. by Constantine K. Zurayk, 1:1–15

is *humanely*. A common theme that weaves its way throughout all of Miskawayh's works is that to be *humane* is essentially a matter of education—both practical and theoretical. As with the Greeks, Miskawayh also felt that human perfected existence is found in community with others, namely a *polis*. The individual, with proper training, will come to understand that the community represents a *means*, never an *end*, for overall spiritual, intellectual, and social development.

Here, I make the case that Miskawayh is more than just a philosopher. The scope of his works suggests an individual who possesses to an unusual degree a consciousness of the world yet never becomes distracted from the world or loses sight of the big picture. In his book, *Anthropologie philosophique*, Bernard Groethuysen described the relationship between the sage and the world..³⁹

Through his works on history and moral philosophy, Miskawayh links humanity with the whole world thereby establishing a kind of *intersubjectivity* between humanity and the world that clarifies the characteristics of what Sartre calls the *universal human condition*: We exist in the world; we work in the world; we live out our lives with others in the world; and, we die in the world.⁴⁰

I offer that this cosmic feature of Miskawayh links him with the ancient Stoics who argued that the task of philosophy is to educate people in order to make them more practical so that they will

³⁹Bernard Groethuysen, *Anthropologie philosophique*, (Paris: Librairie Gallimard, 1953), 80. "The consciousness of the world is something particular to the sage. The sage never ceases to make present to himself the whole world. He never forgets the world. He thinks and acts with a connection to the universe." [my translation].

⁴⁰ Sartre, *Existentialism is a Humanism*, 42.

only desire what they can reasonably attain and try to avoid those evils that are, in fact avoidable.⁴¹

Everywhere and at all times it is in thy power piously to acquiesce in thy present condition, and to behave justly to those who are about thee, and to exert thy skill upon their present thoughts, that nothing shall steal into them without being well examined.⁴²

A Brief Survey of Miskawayh's Works

Of the works mentioned below, *al-Fauz al-Asghar*, *Tajarib al-Umam*, and *Tahdhib al-Aklat* are now the only extant and have been published.⁴³ Furthermore, Muhammad Baqir ibn Zain al-‘Abidin al-Khawansari ascribes to Miskawayh some Persian treatises (*Rawdat al-Jannah*, Tehran, 1287/1870).⁴⁴ Miskawayh himself wrote *al-Fauz al-Akbar* after *al-Fauz al-Asghar*, and also he wrote *Tahdhib al-Aklat* after *Tartib al-Sa‘adah*.⁴⁵

The following survey lists the various works attributed to Miskawayh by various scholars and biographers.⁴⁶ We begin with Yaqut ibn ‘Abd Allah al-Hamawi (1179?–1229), who attributes thirteen works to Miskawayh.⁴⁷

⁴¹ Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, (Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell, 1995), 83.

⁴² Marcus Aurelius, 7.54, in *The Stoic and Epicurean Philosophers*. See also by Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, 84.

⁴³ See Sharif, *A History of Muslim Philosophy*, vol. 1, 470.

⁴⁴ See Sharif, *A History of Muslim Philosophy*, vol. 1, 470.

⁴⁵ Sharif, *A History of Muslim Philosophy*, vol. 1, 470. See also Miskawayh, *al-Fauz al-Asghar*, 120.

⁴⁶ For the sources of Miskawayh's life, see al-Tawhidi, *Kitab al-Imta' wa'lmu'anasa*, ed. Ahmad Amin and Ahmad Zayn, 3 vols. (Cairo, 1953), i, 35–6; *al-Muqabasat*, ed. Hasan al-Sandubi (Misr: al-Matba'a al-Rahmaniyya, 1929), 60; and Risala al-Sadaqa wa'l-Sadiq, ed. Ibrahim al-Kaylani (Damascus, 1964), 67–8; *al-Sijistani*, *Muntakhab Siwan al-Hikma*, ed. D. M. Dunlop (Berlin: W. De Gruyter, 1979), 151–6; al-Tha'alibi, *Tatimmat al-Yatima*, ed. ‘Abas Iqbal (Tehran: Matba'a Firdayn, 1934), i, 96–100; al-Bayhaqi, *Tatimmat Siwan al-Hikma*, ed. M. Shafi (Lahore: K. Guranditta Kapur, 1935), 28–9; al-Qifti, *Ta'rikh al-Hukama'*, ed. Lippert (Leipzig, 1903), 331–2; Ibn Abi Usaybi'a, *Uyan al-Anba' fi Tabaqat al-Atibba*, ed. A. Muller, 2 vols. (Konigsberg, 1982, 1984), i, 245; Yaqut, *Irshad al-Irshad al-Arib Ila Ma'rifat al-Adib*, ed. D. S. Margoliouth, 7 vols., (London, Leiden, 1907–26), ii, 88–96; al-Khwansari, *Rawdat al-Janna* (Tehran, 1888), 70–1; al-'Amili, *A'yan al-Sh'a*, 20 vols., (Damascus: Ibn Zaydan Press, 1938), x., 138–205.

⁴⁷ Yaqut ibn ‘Abd Allah al-Hamawi. *Irshād al-arīb ilā ma'rifat al-adīb Mu'jam al-udabā'* : *Irshād al-arīb ilā ma'rifat al-adīb / ta'līf Yāqūt al-Ḥamawī al-Rūmī* ; *taḥqīq Iḥsān 'Abbās*, vol. 2, (Beirut: : Dār al-Gharb al-Islāmī,

- (1) *Al-Fauz al-Akbar*
- (2) *Al-Fauz al-Asghar*
- (3) *Tajarib al-Umam* (history from Deluge to 979)
- (4) *Uns al-Farid* (collection of proverbs, maxims, etc.)
- (5) *Tartib al-Sa'adah* (concerning ethics and politics)
- (6) *Al-Mustaufa* (selected verses)
- (7) *Jawidan Khirad* (collection of maxims of wisdom)
- (8) *Al-Jami'*
- (9) *Al-Siyar* (concerning the conduct of life)
- (10) "On the Simple Drugs" (concerning medicine)
- (11) "On the Composition of the *Bajats*" (concerning culinary art)
- (12) *Kitab al-Ashribah* (concerning drinks)
- (13) *Tahdhib al-Aklaq* (concerning ethics)
- (14) *Wasiyya* (prolegomena to the *Tahdhib al-Aklaq*)

Of the above list, al-Qifta only notes the first, second, third and fourth but added the tenth, eleventh, twelfth, and thirteenth.⁴⁸ Sharif notes five other books not mentioned by Yaqt.⁴⁹

- (15) *Risalah fi al-Ladhdhat w-al-Alam fi Jauhar al-Nafs* (MS. In Istanbul, Raghib Majmu'ah No. 1463, f. 57a–59a)
- (16) *Ajwibah wa As'ilah fi al-Nafs w-al-'Aql* (in the above-mentioned)
- (17) *Al-Jawab fi al-Masa'il al-Thalath* (MS. In Tehran–Fihrist Maktabat al-Majlis)
- (18) *Risalah fi Jawab i Jawab fi Su'al 'Ali ibn Muhammad Abu Hayyan al-Sufi fi Haqiqat al-'Aql*, (Meshed Library in Iran, I, no. 43[137])
- (19) *Taharat al-Nafs*, (MS. in Koprulu, Istanbul, no. 767)

Mohammed Arkoun also mentions *al-Hikmat al-Khalidah*, ed. by 'Abd al-Rahman Badawi (Cairo, 1952)⁵⁰, which is the same as (7) in Yaqt's list.

1993), 88–96. See also M.M. Shariff, *A History of Muslim Philosophy*, vol. 1, (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1963), 469–470.

⁴⁸ 'Ali ibn Yusuf Qifti, *Ibn al-Qifti's Ta'rih al-hukama'*, ed. by Julius von Lippert, (Leipzig: Dieterich'sche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1903), 322. See also M.M. Sharif, *A History of Muslim Philosophy*, vol. 1, Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1963), 469–470.

⁴⁹ See Sharif, *A History of Muslim Philosophy*, vol. 1, 470.

⁵⁰ See Arkoun, "Ethics and History," 34, note 6.

Mohammed Nassir bin Omar claims that Yaqut reproduced the *Wasiyya* of Miskawayh and even attributed it to him, “This *Wasiyya* was made by Ahmad ibn Muhammad.”⁵¹ Omar notes the following:

However, Miskawayh’s other contemporaries and friends did not record the *Wasiyya* in their works. Al-Sijistani (d. 985), for example, states the list of Miskawayh’s works is too long for him to specify. Therefore, the *Wasiyya* was not listed by him; but neither did he mention the *Tahdhib al-Akdaq* of Miskawayh which was beyond doubt considered an important work on Islamic ethics at that time.⁵²

Furthermore, Dwight M. Donaldson proposes the *Wasiyya* served as an introduction to the *Tahdhib al-Akdaq*.

An attractive introduction to Ibn Maskawaihi’s formal treatise on ethics is found in his personal programme for moral conduct, which he formulated to assist him in the struggle he found that he had to carry on against himself.⁵³

Mohammed Nasir bin Omar concludes that the *Wasiyya* was undoubtedly prolegomena to the *Tahdhib al-Akdaq*.⁵⁴

Finally, Brockelmann attributes the following works to Miskawayh. Note in particular that he lists the *Wasiyya* (5th in the list) that I discussed earlier:⁵⁵

- (1) *Tajarib al-umam wata ‘aqib al-himam*
- (2) *Tahdhib al-Akdaq watahrir al-a ‘raq*
- (3) *Al-Fauz al-Asghar*
- (4) *R. fi ‘l-Laddat wal-alam fi gauhar an-nafs*
- (5) *Wa ‘-as ‘sila fi ‘nafs wal- ‘aql*
- (6) *Al-Jawab fi ‘l-masa ‘il at-talat*
- (7) *R. fi jawab fi su ‘al ‘A. b. M. a Haiyan as-Sufi fi haqiqat al- ‘adla*

⁵¹ Mohammed Nasir bin Omar, “Miskawayh’s Theory of Self-Purification and the Relationship between Philosophy and Sufism,” *Journal of Islamic Studies*, vol. 5, no. 1 (1994), 40. See also Yaqut, *Irshad al-Arib Ila Ma ‘rifat al-Adib*, vol. 2, 95–6.

⁵² Mohammed Nasir bin Omar, “Miskawayh’s Theory of Self-Purification and the Relationship between Philosophy and Sufism,” 40. See also Al-Sijistani, *Muntakhab Siwan al-Hikma*, 152.

⁵³ Dwight M. Donaldson, *Studies in Muslim Ethics*, (London: S.P.C.K, 1953), 122.

⁵⁴ Mohammed Nasir bin Omar, “Miskawayh’s Theory of Self-Purification and the Relationship between Philosophy and Sufism,” 40.

⁵⁵ Carl Brockelmann, *Der Arabischen Litteratur*, (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1937), vol. 1, pp. 417–418; suppl. 1, pp. 582–584.

(8) *Taharat an-nafs*

Finally, the following three are now extant and published:

- (1) *Al-Fauz al-Asghar*
- (2) *Tajarib al-Umam*
- (3) *Tahdhib al-Aklat*

Miskawayh—A New Interpretation

Traditional Miskawayh scholarship has focused primarily on Miskawayh as an Aristotelian writer in the Iranian tradition of political thought and courtly culture.

In addition to this, I offer something new to the corpus of Miskawayh scholarship. Namely, I propose that Miskawayh's three works in particular—*al-Fauz al-Asghar*, *Tajarib al-Umam*, and *Tahdhib al-Aklat*—can be read *in toto* as one existential work because each component (i.e., *al-Fauz al-Asghar*, *Tajarib al-Umam*, and *Tahdhib al-Aklat*), I argue, exhibits one of the three primary Sartrean existentialist properties: The materializing of *self* in the world (metaphysics); the encountering *self* in the world (history); and, the defining of *self* in the world (ethics), respectively.⁵⁶

I believe that by understanding Miskawayh's works in this way, two dominant themes—**intersubjectivity** (i.e., learning about the *other* to discover the truth about one's *self*) and **transcendence** (i.e., one's relationship with divinity)—become increasingly more apparent to us as we watch them weave their way throughout these three works linking them together as one existential philosophical work. I argue that Miskawayh's goal as a humanist and philosopher was to make one more conscious of the universal human condition. After all, I think that Miskawayh knew all too well that being more conscious of the universal human condition is the bedrock upon which Islamic humanism itself rests. I see these three particular texts of Miskawayh as the architecture that defines and establishes an argument for a tenth century Islamic existentialist humanism.

⁵⁶ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Existentialism is a Humanism*, trans. by Carol Macomber, ed. by John Kulka, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 22.

Research & Methodology

First, I trace the concept of the Islamic and Christian philosopher as *sage*. To begin, we need to consider what distinguishes a philosopher from a sage? On the one hand, philosophical discourse deals primarily with the abstract. Such discourse concerns itself with speculation, inquiry, and especially theory. Philosophy, in a manner of speaking, presents us with a somewhat static or academically myopic way of looking at the world outside the world, so to speak. For the most part, as Plato, Augustine, Kierkegaard, and many existentialists have pointed out, the philosopher's discourse is not necessarily a *discourse of praxis* but more generally a *discourse of theory* instead. On the other hand, where the philosopher relies on a specialized discourse to talk about reality, the sage utilizes what I call a kind of *meta-discourse*. This meta-discourse not only takes into account regular philosophical discourse, but it also finds a way to combine other various philosophical components into a unified whole, thereby making abstract philosophical ideas practical. This move is, of course, vertically transitional. It is a transition up from the theoretical to the practical, a whole new level. Essentially, this meta-discourse of the sage is a philosophy of praxis.

Second, I argue that Islamic and Christian sages are similar in that both take the abstract and make it practical. Furthermore, each rubs elbows with the philosopher and the common man at the same time. However, unlike the chasm existing between humanity and divinity wherein humanity can never evolve to the level of divinity, the chasm separating philosopher and sage is different. On rare occasions, the philosopher can evolve to the level of sage. This evolution occurs through a special type of discourse which the sage refines and shapes over time typically within a moralistic context. Where philosophers typically engaged in discourse of theory, for example, the sage took discourse of theory one step further, and building on it, transformed discourse of theory into a discourse of praxis.

Third, I examine how Miskawayh developed a similar *meta-discourse of praxis* in the form of existential humanism which served as the machinery that drove his unified civic ethics. To accomplish this, Miskawayh turned to the tradition of *adab* literature and Hellenistic philosophy and wove the two together, thus creating a new kind of Islamic philosophy that dealt with real issues (as opposed to abstract concepts) facing people and offered practical advice on how to rise above one's circumstances through the adoption and practice of virtue ethics. For example, Miskawayh showed that by unifying Plato's notion of the soul with Aristotle's understanding of moral development, philosophical discourse no longer remains conceptual but practical—that is, existentially relevant. In a sense, then, Miskawayh—now an Islamic archetypal figure blending religious inspiration with a keen insight into the human condition through a special kind of meta-discourse familiar to sages—has evolved from philosopher to sage by way of existentialist humanism that embraced a sense of the transcendent.

Chapter 2: Setting the Philosophical Stage

Among philosophers, the concept of *being* in the West varied in its meaning ranging from *eternal reality* (Plato) and *substance* (Aristotle) to *essence* (Avicenna) and the *act of existence* (Aquinas). The Greeks first identified *being* as the fundamental element of reality. That is, whether it was the materialism of Parmenides or the idealism of Plato, *being* was undeniably the common element or the common denominator of both.⁵⁷ As history gradually unfolded in its usual capricious and metastable manner, *being* as a concept also evolved and blossomed, thereby coloring and contextualizing the historical backdrop on which individuals and states inevitably assert their own subjectivity and intersubjectivity, thus hoping to give meaning to their relatively brief existences.

People and states (i.e., countries, empires, etc.) are alike since both participate in a common cycle of existence. They *materialize*, *encounter*, and *define* themselves in the world.⁵⁸ First, both *materialize* in the world. As *beings* without an essence at this point, they will soon come to create and define their own essence through life experiences. Indeed, these life experiences are crucial in establishing essence.⁵⁹ As Sartre pointed out, “Life is nothing until it is lived.”⁶⁰

This brings us to the next phase, namely *encountering* the self. During this phase of encountering the self, an identity begins to take shape. This can be either in the form of a unique personhood for the individual or a national image for the state. Nevertheless, encountering the self is a

⁵⁷ See Etienne Gilson, *Being and Some Philosophers*, (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1951), 8.

⁵⁸ Here, I am borrowing Sartre’s language from his essay, *Existentialism is a Humanism*, trans. by Carol Macomber, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 22.

⁵⁹ On this point, for the sake of my argument, I am subscribing to the existential claim that existence precedes essence.

⁶⁰ Sartre, *Existentialism is a Humanism*, 51.

fundamental aspect of creating identity. By creating identity, the individual or state can now *define* itself within the context of the world into which it emerged. Even though this is the final stage, this does not mean that either humanity or the state is an *end* in itself or stops here at this stage, because both will continue to change—that is, their essence is not fixed.⁶¹ In defining itself, therefore, this new entity (i.e., the individual or the state) will then come to equate its own identity with its own reality. Only in this newly discovered and created reality, will it then at last realize the possibility of choice and what exercising that choice will mean in the shaping and context of its *essential* self.⁶²

Now that I showed how an individual and a state go through the same existential process in establishing *self*, discovering *self*, and then defining *self* within the context of a constantly changing world, I connect existentialism with humanism, therein creating a kind of existential humanism that I argue captures the spirit and sense of transcendence of Miskawayh’s civic ideology—an existential humanism that weaves its way throughout his moral philosophy.

According to Sartre, one can define humanism in two ways. First, we can think of humanity as an end in itself. That is, humanity comes to stand for some kind of *supreme value*.⁶³ In other words, if we define humanism this way, then this implies that humanity has some fixed or universal essence that somehow preceded existence. Of course, this contravenes two primary existential tenets: We as human beings are constantly changing during the course of our lives; and, existence precedes essence.⁶⁴

⁶¹ Sartre, *Existentialism and Humanism*, 51.

⁶² Sartre, *Existentialism and Humanism*, 20.

⁶³ Sartre, *Existentialism is a Humanism*, 52.

⁶⁴ Sartre, *Existentialism is a Humanism*, 52.

The second definition asserts that we as human beings are always outside ourselves and spend our whole lives pursuing transcendence.⁶⁵ For some of us, this might mean figuring out how to transcend ourselves, rise above our circumstances and so on. For others, it could represent a kind of spiritual quest whereby we struggle to transcend earthly materialism in order to become more spiritual and likewise become closer to God. I believe that Miskawayh's moral philosophy, particularly his civic humanism, teaches us that we can do both.

Miskawayh's existential humanism combined with his unified civic ethics links the rich Islamic traditions of *falsafa* and *adab*, that is, the Islamic traditions of philosophy and literary culture. By linking these two traditions, Miskawayh has taught us in an existential sense through humanism how to *define*, *refine*, and *live* selfhood. Even here, one cannot help but to pause for a moment to hear that echo from Socrates resonating simultaneously with Miskawayh's own voice, "Know thyself!"

The Making of a Sage

"La vie est plus belle que les idées."⁶⁶ For the sage, life is, indeed, more beautiful than ideas. Ideas in themselves are conceptually neutral. Unless applied in a practical way, they have virtually no existential relevance. In other words, they do not make any *real* difference in people's lives. Hellenistic philosophers of Greece and Rome—Epicureans, Skeptics, and Stoics—realized this early on and sought to develop a philosophy that would address pressing human issues and alleviate some of the suffering that plagued people daily.⁶⁷

⁶⁵ Sartre, *Existentialism is a Humanism*, 52.

⁶⁶ Wallace Stevens, "Adagia," from *Wallace Stevens: Collected Poetry and Prose*, ed. by Frank Kermode and Joan Richardson, (New York: The Library of America, 1997), 906.

⁶⁷ Martha C. Nussbaum, *The Therapy of Desire: Theory and Practice in Hellenistic Ethics*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 3.

In the mediaeval Islamic world, Miskawayh picked up where the Hellenist philosophers left off with respect to practical philosophy.⁶⁸ Belonging to a group of thinkers who sought to integrate the profane with the religious through philosophical investigations, Miskawayh himself explored ways to integrate this Hellenistic tradition with the vibrant Islamic culture of his day.⁶⁹ Being in the right place at the right time, Miskawayh was able to capitalize on the resources at his disposal as a secretary and librarian to al-Muhallabi (d. 963), the vizier of the Buwayhid ruler Mu‘izz al-Dawla (d. 945). Here, Miskawayh discovered that he had unusually good access to Islamic and Greek learning and could likewise participate in intellectual discussions in the center of learning itself, namely Baghdad.⁷⁰

From this vantage point, Miskawayh more fully understood the political and social realities for both the rulers and the ruled. Nevertheless, as is typical of his style, he engaged these political and social realities head on in order to distill from them a morality for the benefit of the community around him.⁷¹ For Miskawayh, history teaches lessons, particularly moral lessons. In a sense, history was a kind of moral philosophy, and moral philosophy was a kind of history. A well-cultured individual would know how to read, interpret, and apply the moral lessons from history to his own life. This is why history was indispensable to both the moral and cultural education of the young Islamic man of his day.

⁶⁸See Muhammad Arkoun, “L’humanisme arabe au IV/X siècle, d’après le *Kitab al-Hawamil wal-Shawamil*,” *Islamic Culture*, vol. 37 (1963): 131–144.

⁶⁹Roxanne Marcotte, “Ibn Miskawayh: Imagination and Prophecy (*Nubuwwah*),” *Islamic Culture*, vol. 71, issue 2 (January 1997), 2.

⁷⁰ Mohammed Nasir bin Omar, “Miskawayh’s Theory of Self-Purification and the Relationship between Philosophy and Sufism,” *Journal of Islamic Studies*, vol. 5, no. 1 (1994), 36.

⁷¹ Nasir bin Omar, “Miskawayh’s Theory of Self-Purification and the Relationship between Philosophy and Sufism,” 36.

According to Bin Omar, Miskawayh's friends did not make it clear at what stage of his life he became interested in ethics.⁷² Most likely, Miskawayh became interested during the middle part of his life—namely, during the years when he was in service to the Buwayhids. Interestingly enough, Ibn al-Nadim (d.995), in his catalog *al-Fihrist*, who was an older contemporary of Miskawayh's did not mention Miskawayh in his catalogue on philosophy—a kind of “who's who” of Miskawayh's contemporaries: Yahya Ibn 'Adi (d. 974), Abu Sulayman al-Sijistani (d. 985), Ibn Zur'a (d. 1008), and Ibn al-Khammar (d.1017).⁷³ Ending with year 987, Bin Omar concludes that this would suggest that Miskawayh was probably not known yet as an ethicist or philosopher prior to 987.⁷⁴

As both an historian and philosopher, we can locate Miskawayh's initial interest in ethics in his work *Tajarib al-Umam*.⁷⁵ Sharif notes that our knowledge of the chronological order of Miskawayh's books comes from Miskawayh himself who wrote *al-Fauz al-Akbar* after *al-Fauz al-Aghar* and that he wrote *Tahdhib al-Akhlaq* after *Tartib al-Sa'adah*.⁷⁶ This is more than a

⁷² Nasir bin Omar, “Miskawayh's Theory of Self-Purification and the Relationship Between Philosophy and Sufism,” 36. Bin Omar notes, “His [Miskawayh's] friend, al-Tha'alibi (d.1035), states that Miskawayh had an excellent moral discipline, and this is confirmed by another close friend of his, Abu Hayyan al-Tawhidi (1023),” 36.

⁷³ Nasir bin Omar, “Miskawayh's Theory of Self-Purification and the Relationship between Philosophy and Sufism,” 37.

⁷⁴ Nasir bin Omar, “Miskawayh's Theory of Self-Purification and the Relationship between Philosophy and Sufism,” 37.

⁷⁵ In “Sources of Muslim Ethics: Miskawayh's Experience,” *Islamic Culture*, vol. 70, issue 3 (January 1996), 85, Nasir bin Omar claims that not only did Miskawayh have impeccable linguistic skills, but also that he most likely was able to read the Greek originals because he could compare the translations of the great translators of his time, namely, Abu 'Uthman al-Dimashqi (d. 914), Hasan b. Suwar (d. 1017), 'Isab b. 'Ali (d. 1001), 'Ali b. Zur'ah (d. 1008) and Yahya ibn 'Adi (d. 974). Among these, Abu 'Uthman al-Dimashqi appears to have been Miskawayh's favorite, “These are the words of this philosopher [Aristotle], which I have quoted exactly. They come from the translation of abu-Uthman al-Dimashqi, who is a man well-versed in both languages, namely Greek and Arabic, and whose translation has won the approval of all those who have studied these two languages. At the same time, he has tried hard to reproduce the Greek words and their meanings in Arabic words and meanings without any difference in expression or substance. Whoever refers to this work, i.e., the one called *The Virtues of the Soul*, will read these words as I have quoted them,” from Miskawayh's *The Refinement of Character*, trans. by Constantine K. Zurayk, (Beirut: American University, 2002), 81.

⁷⁶ Sharif, *A History of Muslim Philosophy*, vol. 1, 470.

history book, rather it is a kind of ethical treatise in itself on another level. Miskawayh saw history and ethics as inextricably linked. After all, he was thoroughly immersed in the Iranian wisdom–literature tradition while at the same time inspired by Greek ethic and political ideas.⁷⁷

People *act* in history. People *behave* in history. Miskawayh is particularly concerned with people’s actions and behaviors and translates these into his moral philosophy.⁷⁸ M.S. Khan elaborated on this point.

Throughout the *Tajarib* he upholds the idea of Divine intervention and Divine justice and the triumph of virtue over vice. Miskawayh often adopts a moralizing tone in his history and lays emphasis on good works (*al-a‘mal al-salipha*).⁷⁹

This is to say that Miskawayh considered history from a philosophical point of view as a way to study practical ethics and to propagate wisdom thereby leading some to refer to him as more of a sage as opposed to a historian because of his particularly keen devotion to wisdom.⁸⁰ By looking at history philosophically, we can see that moral lessons reveal themselves through historical events because the study of history has an existential component built into it. This existential component can in fact help us benefit from our past in three ways.⁸¹

First, a study of history enriches us as human beings. Muslims understood history in terms of chronological and ideological development wherein one could learn valuable and practical

⁷⁷ Arkoun, “Ethics and History,” 3. See also Miskawayh’s *al-Hikmat al-Khalidah*.

⁷⁸ “Miskawayh’s Theory of Self-Purification and the Relationship Between Philosophy and Sufism,” 37.

⁷⁹ As cited by Mohammed Nasir Bin Omar, M.S. Khan, “Sources of the Contemporary History of Miskawayh,” unpublished PhD. Thesis (Oxford: Bodleian Library, 1958), 26.

⁸⁰ See Mohammed Arkoun, “Ethics and History according to the *Tajarib al-Umam* of Miskawaih,” *Islamic Culture*, vol. 75, no.2 (January 2001), 2.

⁸¹ Bhat, Badruddin, *Abu Ali Miskawahy: A Study of His Historical and Social Thought*, 1st ed., (New Delhi: Islamic Book Foundation, 1991), 142.

lessons thereby enhancing his life.⁸² In short, history makes life meaningful. Miskawayh viewed history as a kind of organic structure whose life pulsated with examples of moral traits—traits which he would later discuss in his *Tahdhib al-Akhlaq*.⁸³

Second, history enables us to see past ourselves. We consult history for two reasons: To avoid repeating the errors of those before us; and, to study great nations and the lives of men who made them great.⁸⁴ Everyone can discover lessons from history and apply those to his own life. This will contribute to one's overall moral character.

Finally, history helps us realize that we are nothing by ourselves but part of a dynamic community. In short, history is a source of practical ethics.⁸⁵ It is more than a collection of facts and statistics. For Miskawayh, history is organic, a living entity whose anatomy is determined by basic human ideals and those ideals of other states.⁸⁶ “It [i.e., history] not only binds together the facts of the past into an organic whole, but also determines the shape of things to come,” explained M.M. Sharif.⁸⁷

This means that we as human beings, according to Miskawayh, need a community, a city, in order to fulfill or complete our *Sa'adah*—that is, a flourishing life.⁸⁸ To achieve those virtues of

⁸² Ernst Breisach, *Historiography: Ancient, Medieval and Modern*, 3rd ed., (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 2.

⁸³ Arkoun, “Ethics and History,” 2.

⁸⁴ Arkoun, “Ethics and History,” 3–4.

⁸⁵ Bhat, *Abu Ali Miskawayh: A Study of His Historical and Social Thought*, 148.

⁸⁶ M.M. Sharif, *History of Muslim Philosophy*, vol. 1, (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1963), 479.

⁸⁷ Sharif, 479.

⁸⁸ Bhat, “Miskawayh on Society and Government,” 29. Note that *Sa'adah* is equivalent to the Greek *eudaimonia* which I translate as “life flourishing”, which I borrowed from Martha Nussbaum in her book *Therapy of Desire*.

tolerance, generosity, and justice, for example, one needs to coexist with other people in a society to help “develop a society and develop good etiquette.”⁸⁹

Miskawayh and the Perfection of the Soul

For Ahmad ibn Muhammad ibn Ya’qub ibn Miskawayh (c.932-1030), virtue heralds the segregation of humanity from the beasts. As human reason strives to perfect itself, it yearns unyieldingly for that ultimate goal which Cicero (106BC–43BC) called *humanitas*—that is, the deriving of cultural values from a liberal education (i.e., *studia humanitatis*).⁹⁰ Miskawayh himself also believed that such an education steeped in morality and literary learning (i.e., *adab*) would somehow unify social eloquence with morality, thereby making *humanitas* socially and politically useful and practical in both civic and political Islamic arenas.

With proper training in *studia humanitatis*, the student, Miskawayh believed, would not only acquire for himself along the way those *human* characteristics of understanding, compassion, kindness, and mercy, but also would develop within himself those nobler Aristotelian (and Islamic) virtues of fortitude, judgment, prudence, love, and honor.⁹¹ As with later Italian Renaissance humanists, Miskawayh himself would soon come to see the value in such training—namely, moral indoctrination and stylistic development—skills necessary for those working for the ruling elite.⁹² For he who acquires *humanitas* on this level would thus become a privileged participant in society and on another level, in humanity itself. Essentially, this is really nothing

⁸⁹ Bhat, “Miskawayh on Society and Government,” 30.

⁹⁰ Jill Kraye, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Renaissance Humanism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 1.

⁹¹ Miskawayh, *Tahdhib al-Akhlak*, 2nd discourse, especially sections 48–50.

⁹² Charles G. Nauert, *Humanism and the Culture of Renaissance Europe* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 1.

more than the practical manifestation of the Socratic ideal—namely, the good soul. As Socrates (c. 469_{BC}–399_{BC}), the Greek sage, saw it, the good soul is a virtuous soul purged of excess so that it can carry out its civic and moral duties naturally and freely in society, thus making itself “useful to those who ruled.”⁹³

Alas, becoming such a *good soul* is not easy and entails extensive academic and moral training, it requires initially of one the developing and improving of one’s own ability to *use* and *apply* reason to life, thereby eliminating excess from one’s soul so that one can live a dutiful life freely. Such an ability in one’s application of reason is analogous to the concept of the directionality of motion (i.e., up or down) and its morally symbolic relationship and signification to happiness, unhappiness, good, and evil respectively.

With effort, one can make an existential move either upward toward reason (i.e., spiritual, light, goodness) or downward toward ignorance (i.e., material, darkness, evil). In a sense, this migration of one’s soul toward reason (or perhaps even away from reason) is in itself a special kind of personal, moral and spiritual journey. Where upward motion signifies happiness, downward motion signifies unhappiness. To borrow Sartre’s philosophical language, Miskawayh’s existentialist humanism links transcendence—an attribute constitutive of the human being who is always pursuing transcendence—with the universe of human subjectivity and intersubjectivity.⁹⁴

⁹³ See Nauert, 34, wherein he points out that humanistic studies needed to be useful and relevant “to those who ruled.”

⁹⁴ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Existentialism is a Humanism*, trans. by Carol Macomber, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 52.

Miskawayh argued, in good Aristotelian fashion, that he who discovers this *media via* the faculty of reason acquires for himself the virtue of justice, a thing *good* in and of itself since the goal of every action or choice of every action “aims at some good”.⁹⁵ This acquisition of justice brings with it happiness because justice encompasses all the other virtues thereby naming and sustaining that special equilibrium unique to all virtues.⁹⁶ Justice, then, shines forth *from* and *within* the soul thus resulting in sublime happiness. The virtue of justice, then, would soon come to form one of the fundamental components of Miskawayh’s existentialist humanism.

Using modern philosophical terminology, I propose that Miskawayh developed an Islamic existentialist humanism that defined *being* as the act of existence preceding essence. Up to this point, Islamic humanism was a poorly defined ideology subsumed under Islamic law, as I mentioned earlier. This brand of Islamic humanism was, in a sense, merely conceptual knowledge that was existentially neutral. Through his works such as *Refinement of Character*, for example, Miskawayh reformatted Islamic humanism by indirectly prioritizing existence over essence thereby making Islamic humanism an ideology both existentially and culturally relevant. Even though Miskawayh still subscribed to the Aristotelian notion that being is equal to substance and to the Avicennian notion that being equals essence, he nevertheless stressed existence as prior to essence in the development of one’s moral and intellectual character.

That is, Miskawayh took what was up to that point an individualist and apolitical type of Islamic humanism and refashioned it into a political ideal, namely, an existentialist humanism. Tipping

⁹⁵ Aristotle *Nicomachean Ethics* 1094a1. Recall that a virtue is the median between the *vice of excess* and the *vice of deficiency*.

⁹⁶ See Miskawayh, *Tahdhib al-Akhlak*, 4th discourse.

his hat to Aristotle once again, Miskawayh promoted his civic humanism through his ethics, *The Refinement of Character*, wherein he taught that the citizen should live an active life in service to the state according to the principles of an ethic of social justice. In short, Miskawayh here, I argue, recognizes and is speaking to the universal human condition: Exists in the world, works in the world, lives life among others, and dies in the world.⁹⁷

In his existentialist humanism, Miskawayh combined elements of Platonic idealism, Aristotelian ethics, and Islamic *adab*. Goodman refers to this as Miskawayh's "courtly humanism".⁹⁸

Furthermore, in his moral philosophical system, Miskawayh equated unity with moral perfection. This fusion of Platonic and Aristotelian ethical components into a kind of philosophy of praxis—namely, an ethical system that emphasizes the use of reason to help us determine what we should do as well as who we are—undoubtedly defines Miskawayh as both a humanist and as one of the founding participants of the humanist movement of his time. Furthermore, Miskawayh's humanism, as that of the Italian Renaissance in the fifteenth century, shed light on human nature, delineated the scope of human reason, and defined the ultimate goal of human life.⁹⁹

Miskawayh's ability to meld abstract thought with practical observations helped him to look at important issues in novel ways. His contemporaries found this new amalgamation attractive and useful—which propelled Miskawayh's moral philosophy forward on the turbulent tides of posterity.

⁹⁷ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Existentialism is a Humanism*, trans. by Carol Macomber, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 42.

⁹⁸ Leen E. Goodman, *Islamic Humanism* (New York: Oxford University press, 2003), 100.

⁹⁹ Nauert, 16.

Nature of Humanism

Humanism—in particular, *humanista studia*—was the key to the success of this symbiotic relationship (i.e., between theory and praxis) in both Islamic and European Renaissance societies, for example. That is, humanistic education generally provided rhetorical skills necessary for business and political life in addition to moral training useful for the ruling elite. In a sense, for both Islamic and Renaissance cultures, a *humanista studia* was not only necessary but practical in fostering a healthy and unified civic (and religious) environment.

Aristotle teaches us that one can achieve the pinnacle of philosophical happiness only in rare moments and therefore must be content with what Hadot refers to as *inferior grades of happiness*.¹⁰⁰

The figure of the sage thus plays a decisive role in the philosophical choices of life, yet it is offered to the philosopher as an ideal described by philosophical discourse more than as a model incarnate in a living human being.¹⁰¹

In part, humanism addressed those philosophical questions shared in common by both cultures (i.e., Islamic and European) concerning human nature and the limitations of human reason.¹⁰² As Nauert notes, humanism's success in Renaissance Europe lay in its relevance to political and social needs of its time.¹⁰³ I contend that the same holds true for Islamic culture's view of humanism as well. Consider, for example, Miskawayh's stress and reliance on *adab* and its evolving role in Islamic humanistic education and moral philosophy. Regarding Renaissance humanism, Nauert remarks that it seems strange to our modern ears that poetry was more

¹⁰⁰ Pierre Hadot, *trans. by Michael Chase, What is Ancient Philosophy?* (Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2002), 80. See also, Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, X, 1175a4.

¹⁰¹ Hadot, *What is Ancient Philosophy*, 224.

¹⁰² Nauert, 16.

¹⁰³ Nauert, 16.

practical to Renaissance Europeans than, say, the natural sciences; but the same holds for Islam as well. To be a man of civility was to be a man educated in *adab*. I agree with Nauert, that this could merely reflect the, “spiritual and social poverty of the modern world.”¹⁰⁴

The Islamic Philosopher as Sage—a Possible Starting Point

I argue that to pursue the research questions I proposed poses at least two fundamental problems. First, where does one locate the starting point in tracing the concept of the Islamic philosopher as sage? Second, what role does Islamic existentialist humanism play in the transformation of philosopher to sage? Having been subsumed by Islamic law, Islamic ethics and humanism are poorly developed—particularly during Miskawayh’s time. So, one would perhaps need first of all to ask from what discussions did Islamic ethical humanism grow?

To begin, one would need to turn his attention to those questions of predetermination (*qadar*), obligation (*taklif*), and the social injustices of rulers such as the caliphs, for example. Second, one would definitely need to trace the influences of Greek philosophy on those early writers of ethics from the Mu‘tazila school. By the ninth century, it appears that Islamic philosophical ethics began to take shape, having been influenced by Stoicism, Platonism, and Aristotelianism. Third, one must then consider how Miskawayh developed his own moral philosophical meta-language from this Islamic philosophical milieu thereby enabling him to link Platonism and Aristotelianism into a philosophy of praxis.

Even though by the 12th and 13th centuries, philosophy had more or less made a kinship with both mysticism and sacred law thus securing its place in Islamic religious education, I argue that

¹⁰⁴ Nauert, 16.

Miskawayh was the forerunner. Reason had placed moral knowledge in a rationalistic context, thereby giving it an organized and theoretical structure. How did Miskawayh, then, pluck this rationalistic moral philosophy from reason's grip and make it a new kind of practical, usable, and applied ethics as opposed to a normative or theoretical ethics?

Chapter 3: Facets of Miskawayh’s Civic Humanism

In this chapter, I offer a brief overview of the components of the architecture of Miskawayh’s intellectual methodology that eventually culminated in his unified ethic of civic humanism. First, I examine Miskawayh, the historian and then Miskawayh the philosopher and how he came to codify this unique brand of Islamic humanism. Here, within a richly textured mediaeval Islamic milieu, we begin to see firsthand how Miskawayh’s history shaped his philosophy, and to some extent, how his philosophy shaped his history. Together, his history and his philosophy both contextualized and provided the necessary scaffolding in the philosophico-historical development of Miskawayh as an archetype of Islamic humanism and ethics. This heralds the beginning of his transformation from philosopher to sage. Next, I offer a brief outline of Miskawayh’s ethic of civic humanism. Here, I situate Miskawayh within the philosophical tradition—a topic which I will explore more fully in the remaining chapters.

Miskawayh, the Historian

“As men are civic by nature,” noted Miskawayh, “and cannot live without cooperation—some having to serve others and some taking from, or giving to, others—they seek proportionate compensation.”¹⁰⁵ Here, we find those first seeds of Miskawayh’s concept of applied ethics, particularly with respect to social justice. For Miskawayh, social justice has more to do with the community’s refinement of itself and of the individual. In this system, both the community and those particular individuals comprising that community all work together to maintain that dynamic equilibrium in which those divinely inspired social virtues—love and friendship—dance their eternal dance, one with the other, in isochronal majesty, thereby preserving that

¹⁰⁵ Miskawayh, *Tahdhib al-Aklat*, trans. by Constantine K. Zurayk (Beirut: American University of Beirut, 1968), 115:15. Cf. Aristotle, “Politics,” in *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, Bollingen Series LXXI, v.2, ed. by Jonathan Barnes, trans. by B. Jowett (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 1252a1, “Every state is a community of some kind, and every community is established with a view to some good: for everyone always acts in order to obtain that which they think good.”

eternal harmony and melody that God continuously orchestrates throughout His symphony that we call creation.

Peering through Miskawayh's ethical kaleidoscope, we witness those various and colorful ways that people in a community interact with one another and how they should treat one another.

Moreover, this interaction demands that we step back to consider that man—Miskawayh himself—who gave us this new way of thinking about social moral philosophy *qua* community, and who saw the essence of moral philosophy in this unique nexus established between theoretical philosophy and practical religion—a humanism for the eleventh century.

The time during which Miskawayh lived provided him the canvas on which he could truthfully and sincerely portray his perceptions of community—that vast panorama of human interactions that oftentimes came together in ways both concrete and abstract, balanced and unbalanced, so as to form a portrait of a humanity that lacked definition, depth, or character. Miskawayh's life, therefore, is none other than the life of a philosopher, of a humanist, whose main purpose was to bring this picture of humanity back into focus for us. Miskawayh warned us in his ethics that if we, as a cooperative collective, cannot see what we really look like, then it is impossible for us to appreciate those colors—love and friendship—that Miskawayh himself believed to be that special equilibrium—sustained by God—necessarily essential to humanize our own existence.

Codifying an Islamic Existentialist Humanism—Individual and Society

People in a society *associate* with one another. People in a society *cooperate* with one another.

For Miskawayh, association and cooperation—naturalized Aristotelian virtues—propel society forward in a world unstable and oftentimes dangerous, hostile and at times appearing uncaring.

Because each person possesses a certain number of deficiencies, no person in himself is complete. Consequently, everyone must cooperate with one another to form a cohesive whole, a totality of one, namely a unity.

There is, then, a genuine need and a demanding necessity for a condition in which diverse persons are brought together and combined so that they become, by agreement and harmony, as one single person all of whose bodily organs associate in the performance of the single act which is useful to him.¹⁰⁶

Miskawayh views this special cooperation and association among diverse people as a type of friendship that has a very specific social and cultural role in preserving and maintaining the individual in particular and society in general.¹⁰⁷ Society is more than just a composite of individuals forming a group. Rather, society is an individual in itself. Like individuals, society has needs. Like individuals, society is a living breathing organism whose *telos* like that of the individual person is to *humanize* its own existence.¹⁰⁸ To actualize our nature as human beings, as a human society, everyone needs to work together for the good of the whole since to do otherwise would indicate an ignorance of human virtues—an ignorance of virtue ethics.

If, then, man is such by nature as well by necessity, how could a rational person who knows himself choose to live in solitude and seclusion, and exercise by himself the virtue which he sees in others? It is clear, therefore, that those who have sought virtue in asceticism and abstinence from association with other people and who have secluded themselves from them by living in caves in the mountains, or building cells in the desert, or roaming about from one country to another—that such people do not realize any of the human virtues we have enumerated.¹⁰⁹

To use Lenn Goodman's language, the notions of *cooperation* and *association* constitute for Miskawayh nothing more than *virtue ethics*.¹¹⁰ Miskawayh constructs this virtue ethics around

¹⁰⁶ Miskawayh, *Tahdhib al-Aklat*, 5th discourse, 135:5.

¹⁰⁷ Lenn E. Goodman, "Friendship in Aristotle, Miskawayh and al-Ghazali," in *Friendship East and West: Philosophical Perspectives*, ed. by Oliver Leaman (Great Britain: Curzon Press, 1996), 176.

¹⁰⁸ Goodman, 176.

¹⁰⁹ Miskawayh, *Refinement*, 29:10-15.

¹¹⁰ Goodman, 176.

literary and historical analogs in order to fuse those abstract philosophical ideals with practical behavioral demands as prescribed by the Qur'an, for example, to create what Goodman calls a *ta'dib paideia*.¹¹¹

To this end, people must love one another, for each one finds his own perfection in someone else, and the latter's happiness is incomplete without the former. Each one thus becomes like an organ of the same body; and man's constitution depends upon the totality of the organs forming his body.¹¹²

Miskawayh took very seriously Aristotle's claim that man is a social creature by nature. The individual cannot achieve his own perfection alone. He must look to others to complement his own needs. He needs other people in order to achieve a good life and to 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.¹¹³

Miskawayh's Concept of Love

Society, as a living organism, receives its nourishment and grounding from love. This love is of four kinds: First, that which is established quickly and dissolves quickly; second, that which is established quickly but dissolves slowly; third, that which is established slowly but dissolves quickly, and fourth, that which is established slowly and dissolves slowly.¹¹⁴ Miskawayh noted that love necessarily has these divisions because people generally have three objectives in mind as they carry out their desires and activities: pleasure, the good, and the useful.¹¹⁵ Additionally, these different kinds of love are in fact unique among human beings, "because they involve will

¹¹¹ Goodman, 177.

¹¹² Miskawayh, *Tahdhib al-Aklat*, 1st discourse, 15:5.

¹¹³ Miskawayh, *Tahdhib al-Aklat*, 1st discourse, 29:10-15.

¹¹⁴ Miskawayh, *Tahdhib al-Aklat*, 5th discourse 135:10; cf. Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* (1155a5ff) on friendship.

¹¹⁵ Miskawayh, *Tahdhib al-Aklat*, 5th discourse, 136.

and deliberation and lead to requital and reward.”¹¹⁶ Love, then, is more than the affinity, rather it is a way of life, namely, a way for each individual to actualize his own humanity and that of his fellow man.

However, a love founded on all of these—pleasure, mutual benefits, and the good—is the stablest, established slowly, but extinguished only with difficulty. This love, which goes beyond friendship in the narrow sense, is the stablest foundation of social order, allowing human beings to come together as one to overcome their individual deficiencies and act harmoniously to achieve the perfection no one of them could achieve alone.¹¹⁷

Miskawayh’s Concept of Friendship

Where love occurs among a large group, friendship is much more intimate according to Miskawayh. Now, friendship among the young tends to be motivated by pleasure, and as such it does not last long. Among older people, however, friendship is motivated by a possibility of benefit. Again, this type of friendship does not endure because it is tied to the possibility of benefit. Remove the benefit, and in effect you have removed the friendship. So, the friendship that endures and is most noteworthy is that among virtuous people.

Friendship among virtuous people is for the sake of the good and is caused by the good. Since the good is something stable and has an unchangeable essence, the affections of those who are bound by such friendship are lasting and unchangeable.¹¹⁸

Humanity, as a civic being by nature, looks toward friendship and the various forms of love as its final goal—happiness.¹¹⁹ However, as noble and virtuous as friendship and love may be, they are not immune to abuse and corruption.

It has, therefore, become necessary for us to try to preserve friendship and love and to toil hard to organize them because of the many imperfections of our

¹¹⁶ Miskawayh, *Tahdhib al-Aklat*, 5th discourse, 136:10.

¹¹⁷ Goodman, *Islamic Humanism*, 177-178.

¹¹⁸ Miskawayh, *Tahdhib al-Aklat*, 138:5.

¹¹⁹ Miskawayh, *Tahdhib al-Aklat*, 167:5

natures and our need to redress them, as well as because of the accidents of change and corruption which occur to us.¹²⁰

Social Justice *qua* Community

Looking around him, Miskawayh tended to see the world through Aristotelian lenses. That is, he saw a world composed of strata, all of which depended one on the other to form a cohesive whole. The virtues of love and friendship are themselves the very foundations for this praxis. They are practical, not abstract. They are what make a community a community. The community aims for the highest good, and this requires cooperation and association from those individuals partaking in this community. Here, Miskawayh relies on Aristotle.

Aristotle wrote that the aim of a state (a type of community in itself) is for some good.

Every state is a community of some kind, and every community is established with a view to some good; for everyone always acts in order to obtain that which they think good. But, if all communities aim at some good, the state or political community, which is the highest of all, and which embraces all the rest, aims at good in a greater degree than any other, and at the highest good.¹²¹

Attaining this highest good means that the individual must reach beyond his own aspirations, namely human aspirations, but instead aim for what Miskawayh calls a divine life.

For though man is small in body, he is great by wisdom and noble by his intellect. The intellect supersedes all created things because it is the chief essence which has predominance over all by the command of its Creator (exalted is His greatness!) We stated previously that as long as man lives in this world, he needs a good external condition, but he must not devote himself with all his power to the quest of this condition, nor must he seek an excess of it. For one may attain virtue even though he neither possesses much money nor is manifestly affluent, and he who is wanting in wealth and property may perform noble actions. That is why the philosophers have said that the happy are those who are provided with a moderate amount of external goods and who perform the deeds required by virtue even though their possessions may be meager.¹²²

¹²⁰ Miskawayh, *Tahdhib al-Akfaq*, 5th discourse, 167.5; cf. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*.

¹²¹ See Aristotle, *Politics*, 1252a1-5.

¹²² Miskawayh, *Tahdhib al-Akfaq*, 5th discourse, 171:15-20.

Refinement of the individual is refinement of community.

Since these human goods and the corresponding aptitudes in the soul are many in number, and since it is not within the power of any to achieve them all, it is necessary that a large group associate in this total achievement. That is why the number of individual human beings should be large, and they should get together at the same time for the achievement of these common kinds of happiness, so that each one among them may attain his perfection through the cooperation of the others.¹²³

Still, knowing this much about Miskawayh is not enough. We need to know what was going on historically. What was happening around Miskawayh that possibly shaped his philosophical and ethical views? Let us, therefore, look at the period during which Miskawayh lived and see what was going on historically.

As I mentioned earlier, Miskawayh lived in Baghdad during the latter half of the early Buyid age (944-977) to the first half of the Period of the Empire (977-1012).¹²⁴ By this point, the transition from the Abbasid government to that of the Buyids was, to say the least, complex. As Kraemer notes, there was the whole issue of preserving that delicate balance between Shi'i and Sunni demands.¹²⁵

The widespread reverence for the authority of the caliph . . . was harnessed as a vehicle of legitimization for Buyid power. They received formal authorization for rule from the caliph. Usurpers of power, they needed the aura of the Sunni caliph to confer whatever fragile legitimacy they enjoyed. They comported themselves as guardians of the caliph, who became a mere puppet in their hands.¹²⁶

¹²³ Miskawayh, *Tahdhib al-Aklat*, 1st discourse, 14:15-15:5.

¹²⁴ Joel L. Kraemer, *Humanism in the Renaissance of Islam: The Cultural Revival during the Buyid Age* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1986). 37. Kraemer divides the Buyid age into three epochs: (1) Early Period (945-977); (2) Period of the Empire (977-1012); and (3) Decline and Fall of the Empire (1012-1055).

¹²⁵ Kraemer, 37-38.

¹²⁶ Kraemer, 38.

Social Justice—Philosophy of Praxis

Now that we have laid the groundwork for the virtues of love and friendship and the roles these virtues play in community, we need to go one step further and tie all this to Miskawayh's application of social justice as a philosophy of praxis in Islamic culture wherein the tension between faith and reason, or religion and philosophy, was still quite palpable.

Happiness and Justice

In his article "Ibn Rushd on Happiness and Philosophy," Oliver Leaman draws our attention to the fact that this tension existing between philosophy and religion goes back to the philosophical dispute between Plato and Aristotle.¹²⁷ Plato posited that reason is the highest activity of man, and that man is only happy when he is reasoning. As Leaman points out, this means that only those capable of "rational contemplation" will discover this particular kind of happiness.¹²⁸ From this, I gather that one might construe that one needs to be a philosopher in order to experience true happiness. Note that this is true for Aristotle.

Aristotle attributed happiness to function and the whole range of human activity and emotion.¹²⁹ That is, what you *become* or *are* is what makes you happy. What distinguishes humanity from other animals is humanity's ability to reason. As Leaman writes, "The idea is that man realizes his function most perfectly as man when he is on the highest possible point, for him, on the continuum from animal to god."¹³⁰ Even this way of looking at happiness still made Islamic philosophers uncomfortable because it still implied that one needs to have the rational skills of a philosopher in order to experience happiness. That is, only a few of God's creatures could carry

¹²⁷ Oliver Leaman, "Ibn Rushd on Happiness and Philosophy," *Studia Islamica*, v.52 (1980), 167-175.

¹²⁸ Leaman, 166.

¹²⁹ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics.*, 1097b.

¹³⁰ Leaman, 168-169.

out their functions adequately.¹³¹ However, Ibn Rushd accepted Aristotle's other view of happiness, namely not just the activity of reason but also the full range of human activity and emotion. This means that everyone can experience some degree of happiness even though he may not be a philosopher.¹³²

Borrowing from Aristotle's method of combining social with intellectual virtues, Miskawayh located happiness, for example, within the context of religious and intellectual virtues. From Miskawayh's perspective, then, religion and philosophy both have *truth* as their common goal. Leaman writes, "Religion permits anyone to attain these desirable ends, but philosophy is limited to a few people who are attuned to intellectual work, and allows them to investigate in depth by rational methods the real sense of divine law."¹³³

One might argue that the term "justice" alone refers primarily to the individual. That is, it is the individual who through practice gives not only substance but also actuality to otherwise potential virtues of the kind mentioned earlier.¹³⁴ Such practice involves coming together with others in the community. Miskawayh most likely had Aristotle in mind here when he was thinking about this.

It is clear then that a state is not a mere society, having a common place, established for the prevention of mutual crime and for the sake of exchange. These are conditions without which a state cannot exist; but all of them together do not constitute a state, which is community of families and aggregations of families in well-being, for the sake of a perfect and self-sufficing life. . . Hence there arise in cities family connexions, brotherhoods, common sacrifices, amusements which draw men together. But these are created by friendship, for to

¹³¹ Leaman, 169.

¹³² Leaman, 169.

¹³³ Leaman, 170.

¹³⁴ Goodman, 179.

choose to live together is friendship. The end of the state is the good life, and these are the means toward it.¹³⁵

So, how does Miskawayh's understanding of justice evolve into a humanistic ethic? More importantly, how does Miskawayh codify a humanistic ethic? I posit that Miskawayh codifies this humanist ethic by looking at social justice as social justice *qua* individual as opposed to social justice *qua* justice. This, I believe, is what makes Miskawayh stand out from others who also wrote on social justice, particularly those in more recent times (e.g. Reinhold Niebuhr) who tried to put forward social justice ethics that were tied more closely to the abstract notion of justice and its relationship to the state.

Perhaps the best that can be expected of nations is that they should justify their hypocrisies by a slight measure of real international achievement, and learn how to do justice to wider interests than their own, while they pursue their own.¹³⁶

For the most part, Miskawayh constructs his concept of justice around a Platonic psychological scheme though he does incorporate Aristotelian, Stoic, and Pythagorean interpolations into his model as well.¹³⁷ He ingeniously combines both Platonic and Aristotelian elements. Where Plato was for the most part interested in what it means for either the individual or the state to be *just*, Aristotle was more concerned about what it means to act *justly*.¹³⁸ Miskawayh took both of these aspects and was able to adapt them to his own way of thinking about justice by appealing to the human being's dual nature—the corporal and the spiritual.

To reconcile the two views, it is necessary, according to Miskawayh, to distinguish between two grades of happiness, corresponding to man's dual nature: the corporal and the spiritual. The latter, which is the superior grade, is only attainable through the apprehension of the intelligibles, attendant upon attaining the condition of wisdom or philosophy.¹³⁹

¹³⁵ Aristotle, *Politics*, 1280b30-35.

¹³⁶ Reinhold Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society: a Study in Ethics and Politics* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1932), 108.

¹³⁷ Majid Fakhry, "Justice in Islamic Philosophical Ethics: Miskawayh's Mediating Contribution," *Journal of Religious Ethics*, 3/2 (1975), 245.

¹³⁸ Fakhry, 245.

¹³⁹ Fakhry, 246.

Miskawayh's intellectual methodology led him to what I call a unified ethic of civic humanism derived in part from a contextualization provided by his history and philosophy.

Chapter 4: The Structure of Islamic Medieval Society

Islamic civilization incorporates multi-dimensional aspects that all work together to create a philosophico-theological and political system that pumps an intellectual energy and life throughout the entire Islamic social structure. With Islamic social structure, like other social structures, one has to dig through many layers to arrive at the right depth. Just as one has to dig to great depths to retrieve vital fossil fuels, for example, so too one has to dig through the many and variegated layers that underpin that vast landscape of the Islamic social substructure in order to retrieve those precious bits of intellectual metals and minerals that have shaped and colored Islamic society over the centuries.

At this point, I appropriate Marx's language to illustrate how I think of the various layers that constitute Islamic society. For the most part, religion, law, philosophy, and literature all form the *superstructure* of mediaeval Islamic society—a superstructure influenced, shaped, and driven by the underlying substructure, namely, economics, politics, and to some extent, class struggle. Undoubtedly, as history has shown, ideas can dig deeply through the cold bedrock of any fundamentalism or parochialism upon which a society may rest, particularly a mediaeval Islamic society. Moreover, such a society rarely ever suspects or even notices this evolving superstructure, much less the role it plays in the interaction of humanity and nature, for instance. Yet, over time, all these elements (i.e., law, philosophy, literature, etc.) have slowly but steadily sustained a somewhat stable yet elliptical orbit around this Islamic society substructure whose gravity pulls them together and holds them in place thereby adding depth, texture, color, and richness to this intellectual atmosphere which enveloped and made the environmental conditions hospitable for the inevitable advent of a mediaeval Islamic Renaissance.

Mediaeval Islam's Societal Superstructure

For the Islamic philosopher and theologian, human consciousness can serve as the compass of the unknown because it begins from a premise of certainty—unlike Western philosophy, for example, which presumes that the human conscience begins from a premise of doubt. Looking for infinity outward requires that Islam be multi-dimensional because each dimension of Islam represents an important facet of Islamic philosophy and theology itself—Islam's societal superstructure. Only through a union of these parts is the unity of the whole revealed. Thus, one cannot properly understand the role of religion, politics, or philosophy in Islam by studying only one dimension of Islam. Furthermore, this multi-dimensional aspect of Islam enables Islamic philosophy and theology to look outside the human agent for an infinity wherein resides Divinity, revelation, and the Divine Intellect.

Three fundamental dimensions of Islam interconnect, thereby forming a network which in turn gives rise to three aspects of Islam—namely, the Law, the Path, and the Truth.¹⁴⁰

The Law (*al-Shariah*), the Path (*al-tariqah*), and the Truth (*al-al-haqiqah*) orbit around Islam whose strong gravitational pull shapes, controls, and influences the destinies of each. But just as orbiting moons affect their parent planet, so too do these three moons of Islam pull and tug on it as well. In essence, this is a symbiotic relationship whereby they all exist relationally. These orbiting satellites—the Law, the Path, and the Truth—cling to Islam with an umbilicus made from faith (*al-iman*), submission (*al-islam*), and virtue (*al-ihsan*). This umbilicus we refer to as the *aspects* of Islam as revealed to humanity by Divine consent.

¹⁴⁰Though this is specifically Sufi, I use these to illustrate my point.

Islamic Intellectual thought exists on either one of two levels depending on the context—secular humanism (i.e., characteristic of Western philosophy) and divine transcendence (i.e., characteristic of Islamic philosophy). Where the belief is that knowledge is acquired via the rational and sensuous faculties to the exclusion of prophecy including divine intellect, we will be hard pressed to find any analog of this sort of philosophy manifesting itself in Islam. Second, if we think of philosophy as a traditional philosophy based instead on certainty instead of doubt (as is typical of Western philosophy), and a philosophy wherein the Divine Intellect illuminates the mind of a human being, then we do indeed have an Islamic philosophy concerned with religion, logic, and the natural sciences. To mediaeval Islamic philosophers, then, traditional philosophy served always as the medium through which the truths of revelation are revealed and discussed with rational and intellectual discourse.

“In order to value this fretful time, it is necessary to remember our norm, the unaltered passions, the same-colored wings of imagination, that the crowd clips, in lonely places –new-grown.”¹⁴¹

Living in a century entangled in a dichotomous web of political corruption and scientific achievement, literary genius and moral degeneration, Miskawayh—politically and philosophically conscious—turned to this troubled history, this “fretful time,” as a guide and a source to the development of a practical Islamic moral philosophy. By aligning himself with the amirs and viziers such as Ibn al-‘Amid in Rayy, Miskawayh had access to some of the greatest libraries of the day wherein he served the Buwayhids for over thirty seven years.¹⁴²

¹⁴¹ Robinson Jeffers, “Still the Mind Smiles,” in *The Selected Poetry of Robinson Jeffers*, ed. Tim Hunt (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), 399.

¹⁴² Badruddin Bhat, *Abu Ali Miskawayh: a Study of His Historical and Social Thought* (New Delhi: Islamic Book Foundation, 1991), 53.

Moreover, Miskawayh, who studied history from a philosophical point of view, ardently believed that history has a purpose, namely to teach us how to benefit from our past.¹⁴³ Thus, history is not only the essence of practical ethics but also, in a sense, the fulcrum upon which practical ethics rests and revolves. To understand, therefore, how Miskawayh *remodeled* the language of history, I provide first a cursory overview of the political and historical situations that came to shape the metaphysical and philosophical foundations of Miskawayh's ethics.

Historical Perspective

According to Karl Marx, inseparable social and economic conditions shape society more than ideas. He further posited that the social and economic structure—that is, a kind of *material substructure*—of a particular culture is the nursery in which ideas themselves are born. This material substructure, he believed, shapes and influences everything from social relationships to literature, art, and especially philosophy. Furthermore, these ideas are what he calls the *superstructure* of society. In short, this substructure of society (e.g., politics and economics) motivates society's superstructure (e.g., ideas and culture) thereby creating an historical and cultural context for an intellectual, artistic, and literary renaissance.

The Buwayhid period lends itself nicely as an example to such a philosophical Marxist interpretation as a possible explanation for the emergence of a 10th century Islamic Renaissance. A lack of law and order, rampant corruption, excessive taxation, and moral decay eroded the *substructure* of the Buwayhid regime. However, from these degenerations, there evolved a societal *superstructure* from which developed intellectual and literary pursuits that would herald

¹⁴³ Bhat, 142.

the dawn of an Islamic Renaissance comparable to the European Renaissance of the 14th and 15th centuries.

The Beginning of the End

As the substructure of the ‘Abbasid caliphate began to splinter and weaken, autonomous, lesser provinces sprouted between the cracks. The emergence of these lesser independent provinces not only reshaped but also reshuffled the organization of society.¹⁴⁴ With the decline of the centralized ‘Abbasid government and the shake-up of the administration, new military warlords and administrative elites began to carve out new niches for themselves further destabilizing and displacing previous landholder *notables* of various regional villages, for instance.¹⁴⁵ Various independent provinces emerged throughout the ‘Abbasid empire: Mesopotamia—Hamdanids, Egypt and Syria—Ikhshids, Africa—Fatimids, Spain—Ummayyads, and Western Iran, southern Iraq—Buwayhids.

Ironically, the slow decay and ultimate disintegration of the ‘Abbasid empire spawned a kind of political, economic, and social Renaissance during the Buwayhid period. The cancer of economic and social decay had increasingly metastasized throughout the Buwayhid controlled territories. Iraq’s economy was hemorrhaging internally because of neglect by the caliphate (e.g., neglect of irrigation and reclamation projects), a poor infrastructure, and the decline of international trade.¹⁴⁶

¹⁴⁴ Ira M. Lapidus, *A History of Islamic Societies*, 2nd ed. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 108.

¹⁴⁵ Lapidus, *A History of Islamic Societies*, 110.

¹⁴⁶ Lapidus, *A History of Islamic Societies*, 110.

In fact, by the mid-tenth century, the caliphs were merely *de facto* heads of state. By now, the Buwayhids essentially controlled the caliphate and ruled over Baghdad for at least a hundred years. Unfortunately, for Iraq and Iran, this was bad news, domination and rule had already become the fodder for political corruption and moral decay that would soon come to consume the rich cultural, moral, and intellectual heritage of these two Islamic countries. Furthermore, because of the severity of Turkish atrocities, for example, the Buwayhids sent Mu'izz al-Dawlah (945–967) to oust the Turks. However, he did more harm than good. “Showing utter disregard for the rights of the people,” noted M. Abdul Haq Ansari, “he placed his army in civic quarters at Baghdad, which imposed a heavy burden on the citizens.”¹⁴⁷ Corruption, greed, and mismanagement eventually took their toll, and the empire slowly collapsed and revenues evaporated.¹⁴⁸

Deterioration of the Economy

During the Buwayhid period, the economic situation was not much better than the political situation because of the burdensome tax code and corruption plaguing the government (e.g., nepotism, selling of political offices, bribery, etc.). First, excessive taxation as a source of revenue to stabilize the economy proved not only disastrous but also inspired resentment and civil unrest among the middle and lower classes. Rebellions were commonplace and spread like a virus among those victimized by such draconian taxation. This tax burden strained people’s patience, resilience, and loyalty to the state. In fact, a general malaise seemed to roll over the land thereby precluding any hope of economic recovery, even as Mu'izz al-Dawlah and

¹⁴⁷ M. Abdul Haq Ansari, *The Ethical Philosophy of Miskawayh* (Aligarh, India: Aligarh Muslim University, 1964), 2–3.

¹⁴⁸ Ansari, *The Ethical Philosophy of Miskawayh*, 3.

Bakhtiyar tried to fill their treasuries.¹⁴⁹ Next, rampant corruption competed with exorbitant taxation for revenue.

Mu'izz al-Dawlah took thousands of dirhams from a person to appoint him vizier in 339 A.H. He even appointed persons without considering the requisite qualifications to some of the highest offices of the kingdom, simply on getting handsome payments.¹⁵⁰

Even though the economy soon stabilized somewhat under 'Adud al-Dawlah, he still imposed a ten percent increase in paper tax and created various new taxes. He seized profits from mills, for example, and only granted a small percentage to the owners.¹⁵¹

Titanic passions swept over the social elite and quickly thereafter found their way to the middle class. Flagrant hedonism, rampant materialism, and self-absorption infected practically every aspect of this society. Consequently, this atmosphere bred indifference and gross negligence of moral responsibility to the overall welfare of the community.¹⁵² Some just gave up on initiating any kind of reform because they were either ignored or merely cast aside because of the magnitude of this desire for power and wealth.

To reform the common people of Baghdad who had also been afflicted with the lust for pleasure, the Hanbalites made repeated efforts. In 934 A.D., for instance, they assaulted the houses of military officials and common people, spilt nabidh¹⁵³, beat songstresses and broke musical instruments.¹⁵⁴

Ever since 'Abd-al-Malik, the fifth caliph in the Umayyad period, fashioned state bureaucracy by centralizing power and authority, making Arabic the standard language (thereby replacing Greek

¹⁴⁹ Bhat, Abu, *'Ali Miskawayh*, 29.

¹⁵⁰ Bhat, *'Ali Miskawayh*, 2

¹⁵¹ Bhat, *'Ali Miskawayh*, 30.

¹⁵² Ansari, *The Ethical Philosophy of Miskawayh*, 11.

¹⁵³ That is, beer.

¹⁵⁴ Ansari, *The Ethical Philosophy of Miskawayh*, 12.

and Pahlavi), creating newly minted coinage, and using Arabic for public records such as taxes, for example,¹⁵⁵ Muslims came to identify themselves in terms of Islam, their own religion, thus bringing them all together as one tribe, one community. Yet life was still challenging for both Muslims and non-Muslims alike.

Moral and Political Corruption

Despite scientific and intellectual achievements of the tenth and eleventh centuries, moral and political crises continued to undermine Islamic social reform. After the Buwayhids replaced the Turks in Baghdad around 945, civil unrest metastasized throughout the body of the Abbasid regime thereby rendering the rule of law moot and eroding governmental authority of the caliphate to the point that it existed as nothing more than a titular head.¹⁵⁶ For over a hundred years, the Buwayhids—who were themselves merely *de facto* heads of state—ruled with a heavy hand over Baghdad. Though political corruption and a stagnating economy left its residue on an already fatigued populace, possibly dimming any hope for a brighter future, the seeds of an Islamic Renaissance had already begun to take root in fertile soil. These seeds would soon grow and blossom into a cultural florescence whose robustness and brilliance would leave its signature on world history.¹⁵⁷

Possible Inking of an Islamic Renaissance

Aside from political, social and religious problems, the Buwayhid period ushered in and witnessed a time of intellectual creativity and innovation stemming from the Arabic language and Islamic faith. A symbiosis between the Arabic language and Islamic faith created within Islamic culture an environment wherein literature, poetry, science, and philosophy all played

¹⁵⁵ Marshall G.S. Hodgson, 1977. *The Classical Age of Islam*. Vol. 1 of *The Venture of Islam*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 246.

¹⁵⁶ Hodgson, 1977. *The Classical Age of Islam*. Vol. 1 of *The Venture of Islam*, 233.

¹⁵⁷ Hodgson, 1977. *The Classical Age of Islam*. Vol. 1 of *The Venture of Islam* 237.

particular roles in shaping and defining urbanity for the *ulama*, that is, the *learned*. Miskawayh, himself, was part of this burgeoning Islamic Renaissance, one of the *learned*,¹⁵⁸ the first Muslim philosopher of philosophical humanism in Islam, and the first Muslim philosopher who wrote a general history from a philosophical point of view.¹⁵⁹

Hellenic Influences

The Islamic and European Renaissances and scholasticism shared similar characteristics derivative of Greek individualism.¹⁶⁰ Hellenic influences shaped Arab and European cultural identities through adaptation and assimilation. The easy adaptability of these Hellenic ideas enabled Hellenism to develop indigenous roots in both the Arab world and the Christian West. In fact, the assimilation of Hellenism into those cultures of the eastern Mediterranean during the 6th and 7th centuries foreshadowed the permeation of Islamic thought by Classical Greek thought and Neoplatonic social ideas.

The transmission of these Greek ideals to Muslims occurred primarily through the translation of Greek texts.¹⁶¹ It was in this manner that Muslims inherited an Alexandrine tradition of Aristotelianism propped up by Neoplatonic metaphysics. Muslims thus inherited the Classical Greek idea that social hierarchy was how the city (*polis*) was to be organized, for example. Plato emphasized the importance of hierarchy and the role of heredity in determining structure. From this, Muslim philosophers would soon thereafter conceptualize *polis* in terms of clearly ordered

¹⁵⁸ *Ulama* generally referred specifically to the religious scholars. Miskawayh would have been called *adib*.

¹⁵⁹ See Badruddin Bhat, *Abu Ali Miskawayh: a Study of His Historical and Social Thought*, 142.

¹⁶⁰ George Makdisi, in *The Rise of Humanism in Classical Islam and the Christian West* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1990), notes that with respect to Islamic and European intellectual history, the “sequence” of humanism’s and scholasticism’s development in Christianity was the reverse of that in Islam.

¹⁶¹ See Louis Marlow, *Hierarchy and Egalitarianism in Islamic Thought* (New York: Cambridge, 1997). I summarize Marlow’s main points regarding Hellenistic influence.

and ranked hierarchies. Al-Farabi stressed that the basic purpose of living is striving for happiness. Such happiness, he argued, could only be achieved by living in a community (*ummah*).

The idea is that everyone in the community would cooperate in the attainment of happiness. Furthermore, Farabi dissects society into two segments, namely, the elites and the commoners. The elites are beneficiaries of a higher degree of happiness than their counterparts, the commoners. Finally, four specific Classical Greek notions of the structure of a social system profoundly influenced European and Islamic culture and identity: heredity, social conservatism, conflation of intellectual and moral stature in classifications of professions, and social harmony based on division of labor.

One sees more evidence of these Greek ideals in what Muslim philosophers had to say about social hierarchy. Recall that Muslim philosophers proposed a social/political hierarchy among men based on intellectual and spiritual aptitude. To accomplish this, they stressed that there must exist a kind of mutual cooperation for the survival of society.

Undoubtedly, then, it was this necessity of cooperation that led to the formation of communities whereby each person was responsible for the provisions of a single common need. One's place in community, for example, was determined by one's particular natural disposition. Some believed, in fact, that social stratification was divinely ordained. This is to say that God has determined the various occupations that people should adopt.

To some extent, Islamic and European scholasticism and humanism sprouted from religion, namely sacred scripture.¹⁶² Sacred scriptures (i.e., Bible and the Quran) provided a model for human eloquence with respect to both body and soul. Second, Arabs and Europeans embraced the concept of individualism.¹⁶³ Renaissance individualism in both Islamic and European cultures was simply a desire for personal prestige. For the Europeans, such desire manifested itself primarily through art (e.g., paintings, chapels, statues, and portraits).¹⁶⁴ For Arabs of prominence, individualism expressed itself through the attainment of human eloquence as refined and offered by poets, artists, philosophers, scientists, and scholars.¹⁶⁵ Third, Arabs and Europeans shared the same humanistic conviction that *good* and *reason* are on the same side—interestingly enough, a very Greek notion. In their appeal to antiquity, Arabs and Europeans looked back toward the Greeks for inspiration. It is no coincidence, then, that Arab and European Renaissance individualism has its roots in Greek individualism. For Greek cities all shared a common written literary language, a common literature, and a common religion.¹⁶⁶

¹⁶² Makdisi, *xx*.

¹⁶³ There is a connection between the notion of individualization and the fact that both Islam and Renaissance Italy were mercantile cultures. I speculate that because of a growing “middle class”, people in this group had more disposable income and therefore could acquire more goods and services that reflected their own personal tastes and interests.

¹⁶⁴ William Fleming, *Arts and Ideas*, 10th ed., vol. 2 (Belmont, Calif.: Thomson Wadsworth, 2005), 273.

¹⁶⁵ Goodman, 101.

¹⁶⁶ Paul Johnson, *Art: a New History* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2003), 43.

Chapter 5: Overview of the European Renaissance

Mediaeval/Renaissance Christian Humanistic Philosophy

During the eleventh through the thirteenth centuries, Europe was experiencing a time of growth. Because of plague, wars, invasions, and poverty, mediaeval Europeans were just now re-emerging back onto the world scene. Following the decline of Rome, Europe entered what some have mistakenly called the *Dark Ages*. This term actually does injustice to the period because Europe was, in a sense, reinventing itself. Europe was anything but *dark*, at least not in the arena of intellectual activity. Philosophical and theological activity was still going on in the monasteries around Europe. At least at this particular time in history, Europe had to trust its instincts and not look backward because looking backward could have cost Europe what it had cost Orpheus.¹⁶⁷

Let us borrow a convenient analogy with which we are all familiar, namely, human growth. During the Romanesque period, for example, Europe was in its *infancy*. It was struggling to understand the world and to try to make some kind of sense out of the seemingly perpetual chaos that seemed to blanket both the place and the time. As an infant learns to walk and explore its surroundings, so too was Europe. It was staggering about in a world full of hostile neighbors on just about every side. But the drive for self-identification was so strong, that Europe pushed forward and sought to redefine itself and to find expression for itself as a continent and for those individuals who were trying to put the pieces back together of a Europe ravaged by fate.

We now come to the Renaissance (ca. 14th through 15th centuries). We can think of this period in European history as Europe's *teenage* years. For the most part, European communities were

¹⁶⁷ Having made a deal with the devil, Orpheus rescued his wife Eurydice from Hades and could take her back to the world of the living on the condition that he not look back at her. He had to trust the devil, in other words. But temptation got the better of him. He looked back and lost Eurydice forever. *See also, Genesis 19:26.*

somewhat stable by this point. That is, towns had evolved into cities, commerce was bustling, disease was relatively under control (except for outbreaks of the Plague), and Europe could defend itself much better now. Yet there was one other interesting change that needs mentioning, namely, the role of the Church.

With the advent of the Renaissance, the Church had lost some of its authority and grip on Europe. Foreigners from various countries from as far away as Asia, for example, were now melding their traditions and customs with those of the Europeans. Religion, itself, was undergoing a metamorphosis of sorts. People were thinking about religion, faith, and God differently now. Rather than being defined *en masse*, Europeans in general and Christians in particular pressed for *individual recognition*. As Fleming notes, this struggle for individual recognition would be the signature of the Renaissance during Europe's maturation from infancy to adolescence.

The Renaissance ushered in a new era, namely, an era of *intellectual awakening*. As mentioned earlier, with the heavy hand of the Catholic Church lifting, individual thought took off into new and exciting directions. These individuals who led the charge were called *humanistic scholars*. They were responsible in part for the resurgence of Greco-Roman classics, for instance. No longer were these classics studied merely to sift out "Christian" values. Rather, these scholars relished the *humanism* and *naturalism* so characteristic of Greco-Roman literature. From now on, the celestial could be enjoyed side by side with the secular. Moreover, people soon realized that heaven could be found right here on earth. That is, beauty is all around us now, and we do not necessarily have to wait for it in the afterlife.

The Renaissance man saw the world anew, as human-centered, and unabashedly saw humanity at the top of the food chain in nature. In the words of the Ancients, and what would soon become the motto of Renaissance humanism, "Nothing is more wonderful than man."¹⁶⁸ In short, Renaissance humanism encouraged self-expression, naturalistic artistic expression, and philosophical inquiry. God was no longer outside nature as someone to fear but as someone who cares about humanity. This was a time of making opposites work together, of harmonizing opposing forces, of promoting the celestial in the secular, of reconciling the secular with the Divine. It was time for humanity to start following reason, "for what obeys reason is free."¹⁶⁹

The Florentine Renaissance revolved around three fundamental concepts, namely, classical humanism, scientific naturalism, and Renaissance individualism.¹⁷⁰ First, regarding *classical humanism*, artists and sculptors sought to capture not necessarily the *ideal* human figure as one would find in the works of Classical Greece, for example. Rather, they recast old ideas into new concepts. This so-called borrowing from the Ancient Greeks added a sort of legitimacy to their (for the times) radically new artistic interpretations and ideas. Furthermore, during the Florentine Renaissance, Plato replaced Aristotle as the philosopher of choice. This shift from Aristotelianism to Platonism is significant on two counts. First, this was what Fleming calls a "conscious departure from scholastic thought."¹⁷¹ That is, in the spirit of the Renaissance, intellectual endeavor once freed from the secular and rigid structure of Aristotelianism could now soar to the heights of Platonic ideals where imagination and creativity had more room to

¹⁶⁸ Fleming, 244.

¹⁶⁹ *Paradise Lost*, 9.352.

¹⁷⁰ Fleming, 270.

¹⁷¹ Fleming, 272.

play, so to speak. Second, Aristotle might have appeared dry to Renaissance man, but through Plato Renaissance man could begin to ascend that celestial ladder leading to the divine. Fleming summarizes thus, "*This confident picture of human potential and destiny animates the spirit of the great humanistic artists Botticelli, Michelangelo, and Raphael, and it is one of the most important keys to the interpretation of their works.*"¹⁷²

Next, we turn to ***scientific naturalism***. Here, sculptors and painters tried to adhere more to realistic representations of *what actually is* rather than those idealistic impressions of *what ought to be* as artists and sculptors of the medieval period attempted to do. Once again, innovation was at work here. For those artists and sculptors who embraced these concepts of scientific naturalism, they dared to experiment and develop a new perspective on the concept of space and form in artistic representations. In a sense, then, they *redefined* perspective. That is, as Fleming points out, in order to represent the human body as true to form as possible, sculptors now needed to have a working if not somewhat rudimentary knowledge of anatomy. Likewise, painters needed more and more to familiarize themselves with geometry to gain a better understanding of symmetry, proportion, and linearity. Specifically with painting, artists now concerned themselves with such techniques as *foreshortening*, namely, making objects or figures less prominent in size but more proportional with respect to their surroundings.

Finally, we come to ***Renaissance individualism***. Here we find various types of artistic human expression from set patterns and established themes (e.g., religious paintings, mathematical rhythmic ratios, etc.) to self-awareness and individualistic certainty. Artists in various media

¹⁷² Fleming, 272.

(e.g., painting, sculpture, music, etc.) now pursued their desire for personal prestige. Private patronage, according to Fleming, began to outpace Church patronage. For artists, this meant exposure.

With the encouragement of private patronage came the encouragement of experimentation. Fleming points out how specific "technical considerations point toward individualization and recognition of the viewer."¹⁷³ This means that figures within paintings, for example, because of perspective, were now on equal footing with the observer on the same reality, just different dimensions. For the Renaissance artists, the painting itself contains everything important, and the viewer can take it all in with only one glance.¹⁷⁴ Thus, the Renaissance man is one who embodies every aspect of Renaissance naturalism, humanism, and individualism all within himself.

As mentioned earlier, the Renaissance was a time of self-expression and experimentation. It was not so formal and idealistic as the Gothic period. Rather, from roughly the fifteenth century on, humankind sought to make its own mark on the world. Artists and authors alike brought to light the human condition in its natural environment. Their subject matter was not about humanity *as it should be* (idealism) but about humanity *as it is* (realism). This was all part of the great Renaissance experiment. It is not surprising, then, that self-expression and experimentation, two fundamental elements of the Renaissance style, found their way into the literature of the time as well.

¹⁷³ Fleming, 273.

¹⁷⁴ Fleming, 273.

Consider, for example, Boccaccio's *Decameron*. Unlike Albert Camus (1913–1960) who in his novel, *The Plague*, introduced us to the angst of the human condition namely, an analysis of the condition of human existence all of which is colored by our emotions, actions and thoughts, Boccaccio reminds us of the reality and finality of death, namely, a finality that implies no sense of an afterlife. His human angst is more physical than that of Camus's, for example. For in the face of such finality, as Boccaccio observed, human bonds break down to the extent that it is everyone for himself. Yet, in classic Renaissance style, Boccaccio shows that the human will to survive is even stronger and that no fear of death's finality can fence it in ever. With Boccaccio, there is no *redemption* but only *rebirth*, or more specifically, starting over. In the *Decameron*, the characters seem not too preoccupied with or concerned about an afterlife and the rewards or punishments that await us there. Recall in *The Inferno* how Dante (1265–1321) reminds us that we must forever be mindful of our reclamation to avoid those terrible punishments doled out to sinners in Hell.

But Boccaccio wants us to focus not on what can happen to us in the afterlife but rather to focus on the "here and now" namely, that we experience our own hell right here on earth. Thus, in the *Decameron*, we must face directly and realistically not only the damage that disease can do to people, but also we must accept the fact that we can do far worse damage to one another than perhaps any disease. Boccaccio writes, "In the face of so much affliction and misery, all respect for the laws of God and man had virtually broken down and been extinguished in our city. . . Hence everyone was free to behave as he pleased".¹⁷⁵

¹⁷⁵ Boccaccio, 1457.

Finally, where Boccaccio introduced us to the fantastic realism of plague, Petrarch (1304–1374) recaptures for us the spirit of Classical Greek and Roman works. His *Canzoniere* echo those long gone voices of Virgil (70BC–19BC), Livy (59BC–17BC), and Ovid (c.43BC –18AD). Yet, as Longman notes, Petrarch's classical literary references are more than mere intellectual pedantry, rather, "Such classical references are not included simply for the sake of displaying intellectual wares. They help to situate Petrarch's often unanchored persona. . ." ¹⁷⁶

In fact, we see in Petrarch's writings a tension between the fiction of his poetry and the nonfiction of the world about him; a tension reverberating between his interior life and his external life. Throughout his *Canzoniere*, he is seeking a joy that is anything but worldly. For worldly joys are fleeting. In short, he awaits an absolution that may never come, ". . . and from my vanities there comes shame's fruit, and my repentance, and the clear awareness that worldly joy is just a fleeting dream." ¹⁷⁷

As Victor Hugo wrote in his wonderfully moralistic novel *Les Misérables*, "*Beauty lost is still splendid in its reinvention*" his quote nicely captures the sentiment of the Renaissance. For Renaissance humanists tried to recapture and at times repackage the beauty that was classical Greek and Roman art, architecture, music, literature and philosophy. Just as Copernicus (1473–1543) showed that the sun was at the center (i.e., heliocentrism) and not the earth (i.e., geocentrism), Renaissance man boldly placed humanity at the center of creation (i.e., anthropocentrism). Consequently, anthropocentrism and heliocentrism both had interesting implications for Christian philosophy and theology that would play out through history. After all,

¹⁷⁶ Longman, 1480.

¹⁷⁷ Longman, 1481.

heliocentrism and anthropocentrism were major paradigm shifts for how we would come to think about the world and God from the Renaissance up to the present day.

Thus, because of the Renaissance, we had to rethink our place in the universe. In so doing, the Renaissance, then, brought the Divine within reach of humanity. Now, with sublime humility and a respectful gaze, Adam could confidently reach out for the first time to touch the hand of the Divine, an image Michelangelo (1475–1564) so beautifully illustrated on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel in his painting *The Creation of Adam* (ca. 1511). So, if we listen carefully, we can still hear today that faint yet steady echo from the Renaissance and still see in the eyes of Michelangelo's Adam that, "we are the universe, and it is within us!"

The story of the Islamic Renaissance, I offer, parallels to some extent the story of the European Renaissance. Both share an era of intellectual awakening. Youth in tenth and eleventh century Islamic society as well as in Renaissance Europe were preparing for active careers in public life. Through either an *adab* or *studia humanitas* curriculum, they would acquire the necessary skills such as oratory and social values, for example, for civic and political life. Learning the etiquette of social eloquence along with moral philosophy would ultimately usher in a moral and cultural renewal of both Islamic and European Renaissance societies. In both Islamic and Renaissance European societies, the educated man was expected to engage fully in politics and public affairs. My point is that humanism in both societies proved itself to be socially useful.

Chapter 6: History of Islamic Humanism

Mediaeval Islamic Humanistic Philosophy

Protagoras (490–420BC) proclaimed that, “Man is the measure of all things.”¹⁷⁸ This revolutionary statement would change the course of human intellectual history because now the gods are on the verge of becoming obsolete and irrelevant. The task of humanity went from serving and pleasing mercurial divinities to the realization of self-creation. Three primary concerns stubbornly nudged the Greeks forward to prepare for the birth of this new intellectual movement that would inevitably change humanity’s perspective of itself: social relationships, humanity’s place in the natural environment, and humanity’s stake in the universal scheme of things, namely its relationship with divinity.

From the natural, a *culture of the body* emerged whereby the human body—no longer a strategic and helpless pawn in the divine chess game that was the universe, the playground of the gods—evolved and radiated with spiritual and physical activity. Now, humanity had a kinship with both nature and itself. Humanism reinforced the role of the individual, and most importantly, reinforced the individual’s faith in himself. The echoes of the effects of Classical and Hellenistic Greek humanism reverberated throughout history thereby shaping and reshaping humanity’s relationship with itself, the world, and divinity.

In Chapter Four, I explore the concept of Islamic civic humanism, specifically its origins and its major proponent, Ibn Miskawayh. In fact, Miskawayh would contravene those Greek notions that one’s nature cannot be changed or the Stoic belief that we are the company that we keep.¹⁷⁹

¹⁷⁸ Plato, *Theaetetus*, 152a.

¹⁷⁹ Miskawayh, *Tahdhib al-Akhlak*, 2nd discourse, 31.10, “It is for this reason that the ancients held different views regarding character. Some said that character belongs to the non-rational soul; others that the rational soul may have

Greek humanism would undergo a transformation under Islam. This transformation would be a shift from individual *qua* individual to individual *qua* family. For this captures the spirit of *Sharia*, the essence of Islamic society, the basis of Islamic intellectual culture. “In Miskawayh’s ideal man,” writes Ansari, “the Neoplatonic indifference to society is replaced by an Aristotelian ideal of active social life.”¹⁸⁰

Islamic Existential Humanism

As Makdisi pointed, classical humanism produced two movements, namely, humanism and scholasticism.¹⁸¹ Philology and literary arts would blossom on the sprawling limbs of humanism, whereas legal science would take root in the solidly traditional and fertile soil of scholasticism. Both humanism and scholasticism had their own vested interests. Where humanism was more concerned with preserving the purity of Qur’anic Arabic, Islamic scholasticism dealt with expounding or justifying religion.¹⁸²

Do intellectuals have a special responsibility for the health of a civilization? Miskawayh would say yes because an intelligent man ought to seek virtue for the betterment of himself, others, and society in general.

The intelligent man should then seek virtue in his rational soul (the soul by which he has become man), examine the imperfections of his soul in particular, and strive to remedy them to the extent of his capacity and effort. For these are the goods which are not concealed, and when one attains them one does not withhold himself from them by any sense of shame or hide himself behind walls or under the cloak of darkness; on the contrary, they always exhibited among the people and in the assemblies of men.¹⁸³

a share of it. Then people have differed on another point. Some have expressed the view that he who has a natural character does not lose it. Others have said: No part of character is natural to man, nor is it non-natural.”

¹⁸⁰M. Abdul Haq Ansari, “Miskawayh’s Conception of Sa ‘adah,” *Islamic Studies*, vol. 2 (1963): 331.

¹⁸¹George Makdisi, *The Rise of Humanism in Classical Islam and the Christian West*. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1990), 2.

¹⁸² Makdisi, *The Rise of Humanism in Classical Islam and the Christian West*, xix.

¹⁸³ Miskawayh, *Tahdhib al-Akhlak*, 2nd discourse, 49.5

Miskawayh's conception of humanism also has an existential aspect to it. That is, existence by itself has no meaning. However, as an individual self, one can choose to give his own existence meaning through the perfection of his character through practice and intersubjective experience ultimately perfecting the state.¹⁸⁴ For it is through the refinement of our character, as Miskawayh argued, that some of our *humanities* would be better than those *humanities* of others.¹⁸⁵ Our thoughts become our actions. Our actions become our habits. Our habits become our character. Finally, our character becomes our destiny. As Miskawayh warns time and again, our experience will lack meaning unless we constantly seek out virtue in our rational soul. Essentially, he is saying that we work with what we have, and we try to make it better.

Miskawayh's idea of a *existential humanism*—that is, a unified civic ethic that has as one of its core tenets the perfected character—embodies the Aristotelian ideal of active civic participation as opposed to what Ansari calls a “Neoplatonic indifference to society.”¹⁸⁶ Active civic participation shapes (and eventually perfects) one's character through the practice of law and justice, for instance.¹⁸⁷ Miskawayh adopts this Aristotelian notion into his civic humanism because he believes this to be a primary component of *Sharia*.¹⁸⁸ Predominantly through civic participation, argued Miskawayh, the soul becomes more disposed to the virtue of *Sa'adah* (i.e., the good life, cf. Greek *eudaimonia*). This path, according to Miskawayh, begins with one's

¹⁸⁴ M. Abdul Haq Ansari, “Miskawayh's Conception of Sa'adah,” *Islamic Studies*, vol. 2 (1963): 331.

¹⁸⁵ Miskawayh, *Tahdhib al-Akhlak*, 2nd discourse, 49.5

¹⁸⁶ Ansari, “Miskawayh's Conception of Sa'adah,” 331.

¹⁸⁷ Aristotle, *Politics*, 1253a30.

¹⁸⁸ Miskawayh, *Tahdhib al-Akhlak*, 125:15–20. See also Ansari, “Miskawayh's Conception of Sa'adah,” 331.

desire for knowledge and science which will lead him to perfection which, in turn, will instill within him *complete* happiness.¹⁸⁹

It is likely that Miskawayh might have had Aristotle's four causes in mind as he was fine tuning his ethic of civic humanism. First, God is undoubtedly the *efficient* cause of the state. That is, the state is divinely ordained by God. Citizens comprise the *material* cause, that is, the fundamental components of the state. The formal cause of the state is to serve and promote community. The *final* cause the *purpose* of the state is to allow one to attain the best life possible, that is, to aim at some good.¹⁹⁰ Like Aristotle, Miskawayh believed that man was by nature a social animal and, therefore, required the state wherein to complete and fulfill his *Sa'adah* within the context of community. Man creates a society in which to foster good etiquette.¹⁹¹ "Every state is a community of some kind," explained Aristotle, "and every community is established with a view to some good; for everyone always acts in order to obtain that which they think good."¹⁹² Badruddin Bhat captured the spirit of Miskawayh's ethic of civic humanism, "A man who does not mix with the people and does not live in a society, cannot achieve the high qualities of tolerance, forbearance, generosity, and justice."¹⁹³

Like Aristotle, Miskawayh believed that individuality can only happen within community. This is similar to John Stuart Mill's notion of the individual in community as a *progressive being*.¹⁹⁴

Unlike Mill, however, and in line with Islam, Miskawayh never considered pleasure to be the

¹⁸⁹ Miskawayh, *Tahdhib al-Akhlak*, 71.5.

¹⁹⁰ See Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1094a1.

¹⁹¹ Badruddin Bhat, "Miskawayh on Society and Government," *Islamic Studies*, vol. 24, no. 1: 29.

¹⁹² Aristotle, *Politics*, 1252a1.

¹⁹³ Badruddin Bhat, "Miskawayh on Society and Government," *Islamic Studies*, vol. 24, no. 1: 29.

¹⁹⁴ See John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty*.

means to a moral life.¹⁹⁵ Here, Miskawayh is basically laying out for us the primary aim of an Islamic humanistic education, namely, to bring out one's *true* nature.¹⁹⁶

In his *Refinement of Character*, Miskawayh has offered and outlined an *Islamized* Aristotelian virtue ethics for the individual to adopt within community. Generally speaking, virtue ethics itself is to a degree humanistic, a special kind of moral objectivism which is, as Goodman notes, “pluralistic and potentially cosmopolitan.”¹⁹⁷ Community requires a refinement of the individual's character through the acquisition of virtue ethics—a refinement consisting of learning, social skills, and personal development which all work together to contribute to his ideal nature of one's true character.¹⁹⁸ It is specifically through social cooperation namely, civic humanism, that one becomes wise and thereby has a social and ethical responsibility to educate others in community for the betterment of the (Islamic) state.¹⁹⁹ An individual needs the state to perfect and fulfill his ultimate end. Collectively, individuals form a society and, in turn, develop social etiquette for the development of mind, spirit, and moral values—qualities which one cannot acquire from mere book learning alone.²⁰⁰

Islamic Civic Humanism

Islam represents the deepest source of Muslim self-consciousness and identity. Islam organizes society around the written word, thereby establishing a *logocentric* society wherein knowledge becomes identified with writing and texts.²⁰¹ Furthermore, since Islam is a religion whose

¹⁹⁵ M.S. Khan, “Humanism and Islamic Education,” *Muslim Education Quarterly*, vol. 4, no. 3 (January 1987), 27.

¹⁹⁶ Miskawayh, *Tahdhib al-Akhlak*, 1st discourse, 3.5.

¹⁹⁷ Goodman, *Islamic Humanism*, 107.

¹⁹⁸ Goodman, *Islamic Humanism*, 107.

¹⁹⁹ Ansari, “Miskawayh's Conception of *Sa'adah*”, 332.

²⁰⁰ Bhat, “Miskawayh on Society and Government,” *Islamic Studies*, vol. 24, no. 1 (January 1985): 29.

²⁰¹ Chase F. Robinson, *Islamic Historiography* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 40. N.B., Robinson discusses logocentricity in the context of historiography.

substructure is grounded in revelation—similar to that of Christianity, for example—it sees itself as existing in history, anchored in history, and participating in historical thinking using such tools as the *Qur'an*, narratives of pre-Islamic battles, and *hadith*.²⁰² Thus, within an Islamic context, these three factors situate humanity morally, politically, and socially within the geometry of history, namely, a three-dimensional historical grid with longitude, latitude, and altitude wherein humanity can locate itself spiritually and determine its place within God's universal plan from which an intellectually rich Islamic self-consciousness emerges.

Islam's humanistic legacy is embroidered within an historically rich tapestry of a pluralist jurisprudence, a tolerance toward other religious traditions, and a rejection of ethno-cultural barriers in the evolution and growth of the Muslim community (*umma*).²⁰³ These three threads made it possible for an Islamic Renaissance to occur in the tenth and eleventh centuries.

Humanism and Its Relationship to Community

The goal of humanity, Miskawayh reminds us, is to rise above our animalistic and creaturely inclinations and strive to live a divine life.²⁰⁴ Living such a life requires self-discipline, self-control, dedication, good character, and proper education, or especially a *moral humanistic* education. More importantly, Miskawayh believed that people need one another to perfect themselves. Such perfection can only happen in community.

We have already spoken of the need which people have for one another, and it has become clear that every one of them finds his completion in his friend and that necessity requires that they should seek one another's assistance. The reason is that men are born with deficiencies which they have to remedy and, as we have explained before, there is no way for any single individual among them to become complete by himself. There is, then,

²⁰² Robinson, *Islamic Historiography*, 43–44.

²⁰³ Aryn B. Sajoo, "The Islamic Ethos and the Spirit of Humanism," *International Journal of Politics, Culture and Society*, vol. 8, no. 4 (1995): 580.

²⁰⁴ Cf. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, X, 7, 1177b31f.

a genuine need and a demanding necessity for a condition in which diverse persons are brought together and combined so that they become, by agreement and harmony, as one single person all of whose [bodily] organs associate in the performance of the single act which is useful to him.²⁰⁵

Like its European counterpart, Islamic humanism has its roots in the Graeco-Roman tradition as well—an ancient tradition into which European and Islamic cultures both tapped. From this ancient well, both drew the waters of the *humanitas* ideal and assimilated it into their own cultures in different ways.

Humanitas

I now turn to a discussion concerning the historical background of the *humanitas* tradition within a Graeco-Roman and Islamic context which eventually culminates into an Islamic Renaissance. I will consider this discussion in three parts.

First, this culmination came about through the development of humanism and assimilation of foreign and ancient elements, thereafter shaping a nascent Islamic ethos. Islam and humanism share a common bond, namely, religious tolerance. Likewise, a humanistic education fosters an understanding of different peoples and cultures. Islam, therefore, exhibits humanistic characteristics in that it (i.e., Islam) studies and concerns itself with other faiths, civilizations, and cultures, which Khan claims, “represents a positive humanistic ideology.”²⁰⁶ Next, there are those scholars who argue that there was, in fact, no Islamic renaissance because Islamic culture did not assimilate the Graeco-Roman heritage in quite the same way nor for the same purposes as the Europe Renaissance, for example. Finally, one could argue that a kind of Islamic

²⁰⁵ Miskawayh, *Tahdhib al-Aklat*, 5th discourse, 135.5.

²⁰⁶ Khan, “Humanism and Islamic Education,” 28.

enlightenment in the 9th century gave rise to an Islamic renaissance around the 10th and 11th centuries which in some way rivaled that of the Europeans.

Part I: The Ancients, Humanism, and Assimilation

In his article, “*Humanism in the Renaissance of Islam: a Preliminary Study*,” Joel Kraemer argues that any advanced or “highly developed” civilization assimilates “alien cultural elements” in roughly three phases. In the case of Mediaeval Islamic civilization, these three distinct phases came about through a “fusion” of Jewish and Christian elements with Arab traditions, acquisition of new administrative methods, artistic forms, and religious tenets with each conquest, and finally what Kraemer refers to as the “appanage of the *Graeco-Arabic* Renaissance.”²⁰⁷ Nevertheless, the Graeco-Roman footprint is evident and figures prominently in all three phases.

The Ancients

Did Islamic culture somehow now become “Westernized” because of these Graeco-Roman assimilations? The answer is, of course, no. In fact, by dipping into the same ancient well of wisdom as the Renaissance Europeans, Islamic civilization faced a new kind of dilemma. That is, in its struggle with Westernization, Islam wrestled with how it could assimilate these “alien” foreign ideals of the Graeco-Roman tradition into its own society while at the same time holding on to its own uniquely Islamic tradition.²⁰⁸

Kraemer lists three elements comprising Classical humanism: a kinship and unity of mankind; the adoption of ancient classics as an educational and cultural ideal during the formation of one’s

²⁰⁷ Joel L. Kraemer, “Humanism in the Renaissance of Islam: a Preliminary Study,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, vol. 104, no. 1 (1984): 135.

²⁰⁸ G.E. von Grunebaum, *Modern Islam, the Search for Cultural Identity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1962), 24.

mind and character (*paideia*); and the love of humanity (*philanthropia*).²⁰⁹ Islam quite easily adopted these particular elements because Hellenistic philosophy did not affect in any significant way the “objective” of Islamic thinking.²¹⁰

Theological Aspects of Humanism

Although Islamic humanism evolved from the Hellenistic spirit, it also took on a consciously theological coloration that set it apart from the classical—primarily secular—humanism of Renaissance Europe. Where the humanism of Renaissance Europe was a search for examples from classical antiquity to legitimize and enrich new practices, Islamic humanism was on a search for both theological examples to better help humanity understand “the external ordering of life and the internal realization of truth” (i.e., theological humanism) and simultaneously to bring out one’s true nature through a humanistic education (i.e., secular humanism).²¹¹

Within Islam then, two branches of humanism emerged—theological and secular—and coexist in a peculiar asymptotic relationship. However, both theological and secular humanistic attitudes concern themselves with the Socratic question of *how to live*. Islamic theological humanism distinguishes itself from Islamic secular humanism because of its implicit desire to return to some halcyon past, whereas Islamic secular humanism focuses on the refinement of character to revitalize those norms and values undergirding society.²¹² Likewise, divine unity (*tawhid*) plays an important role in both because it unites both the religious and secular spheres of Islam.²¹³

²⁰⁹ Kraemer, “Humanism in the Renaissance of Islam: a Preliminary Study,” 136.

²¹⁰ G.E. von Grunebaum, *Modern Islam, the Search for Cultural Identity*, 23.

²¹¹ S.A. Ashraf, “Humanism in Islam,” *University Islamic Society*, (January 1976): 15; See also, Khan, op. cit., “Humanism and Islamic Education,” 27.

²¹² Aryn B. Sajoo, “The Islamic Ethos and the Spirit of Humanism,” *International Journal of Politics, Culture and Society*, vol. 8, no.4 (1995), 579.

²¹³ Sajoo, “The Islamic Ethos and the Spirit of Humanism,” 580.

Some Islamic scholars espouse a kind of theological humanism, wherein *living* means being one with the universe by achieving to some degree a harmony, balance, purification, and eventual perfection within a divinely guided universe. To accomplish this, the human intellect necessarily requires divine law to sharpen it (i.e., human intellect), thereby allowing one to discern good from bad and to gain a holistic view of the universe.²¹⁴ S. A. Ashraf and Ashgar Ali Engineer are proponents of Islamic theological humanism, for example. “Man is expected to conform to Divine Law as revealed in the Qur’an and as enshrined in the *sunnah*” explains S. A. Ashraf, “because only then does human nature acquire a specific perceptive capacity and the ability to intuit. . . .”²¹⁵

Other scholars talk about a kind of secular humanism involving *ars dictaminis*, art of dictation (or composing), wherein refinement of character came from a strict curriculum of *studia humanitatis*. Some scholars have argued that the *ars* in this case is native to classical Arabic. Such a curriculum would have consisted of works of grammar, lexicography, poetry, practical rhetoric, history, and moral philosophy—the works are called in classical Arabic literature *al-Amali* (i.e., dictations).²¹⁶

Part II. Arguing Against an Islamic Humanism

In his article, “Islam and Humanism?” M.P. Rege disagrees with Ali Asghar Engineer who maintained that the tenets of humanism are, in fact, in accord with Islam. Rather, Rege argues that the kind of humanism that sprouted in the Islamic milieu came about through the “liberating influence of the humanistic Greek culture which upheld the values of free, critical inquiry and

²¹⁴ S.A. Ashraf, “Humanism in Islam,” 15.

²¹⁵ Ashraf, “Humanism in Islam,” 14.

²¹⁶ George Makdisi, “*Ars Dictaminis* in Classical Islam and the Christian Latin West,” *Reveu des Etudes Islamiques*, vol 55–57 (1992), 300.

search for a rational order in the universe and in human affairs,” not from Islam orthodoxy, rather in spite of it.²¹⁷

To understand the role of humanism in an Islamic context, one must first grasp a few philosophical basic premises characterizing humanism *per se*. First, the task of humanity is self-creation. This act of self-creation presupposes a kind of autonomous human nature which forms the core of humanism. Second, essentially, humanism has built into itself the classical sense that everything has a fixed nature and perfection—a nature striving to fulfill that nature on its own. Around this time, an operative dictum emerged that spoke of man as the symbol of existence (*Al-insan ramz al-wujud*).²¹⁸ This foreshadowed the epistemological shift wherein Muslims now desired an outlook or concept of the universe in which both heaven and earth mattered—namely, the religious and secular.²¹⁹

For humanity to fulfill its true nature required an epistemological or paradigm shift from understanding itself and the world within the scope of a heavenly context to one more natural or secular in nature. We see evidence of this in the humanism of the European Renaissance, for instance. In turn, this shift produced a side effect, namely human autonomy, wherein the role of the individual to recognize himself as the *necessary* and *sufficient* source of all human values contravened those traditionally held faith beliefs purporting God’s *sovereignty over* and *empowering of* humanity to be stewards of the world—theological tenets shared by both Christianity and Islam. To some extent, Christianity nervously but necessarily integrated various

²¹⁷ M.P. Rege, “Islam and Humanism?” *New Quest*, vol. 10 (1978): 278.

²¹⁸ Sajoo, “Islamic Ethos and the Spirit of Humanism,” 584.

²¹⁹ Sajoo, “Islamic Ethos and the Spirit of Humanism,” 584.

aspects of this classical humanism into its later theology following the Council of Trent. Islam, however, was a different story.

As Rege explains, where humanism imposes humanity's sovereignty on God, Islam subjugates humanity itself to God's sovereignty. In other words, according to Islamic theology, God *empowered* humanity, within its own jurisdiction, to steward the world in accordance with those principles set forth in sacred scripture, the *hadith* of the Prophet, and the *sunna*. Thus, one's sense of fulfillment, perfection, or completion lies not within himself but in the fulfillment of God's plan and expectations. In short, one's happiness depends on the extent to which he aligns himself with God's purpose, not his own.²²⁰

Furthermore, Rege disagrees with Engineer that Islam is preaching humanistic values within the context of religious doctrine.²²¹ Everything comes down to *freedom*. Do we, as human beings, create our own freedom? Humanism says that our freedom and dignity as individuals lies in the realization that we are capable of understanding what the Greeks called, *eudaimonia*, the *good life* and then figuring out how to achieve it. However, as Rege and Engineer point out, in Islamic theology, freedom means the freedom to act, not the freedom to choose.²²² By *choose*, I mean the freedom to decide for yourself what is good.

But it should be clear that the freedom to act without the freedom to choose is merely the freedom to obey or to suffer for disobeying a 'heteronomous' command, a command which has no sanction beyond the power of the authority which issues it.²²³

²²⁰ Rege, "Islam and Humanism?" 276.

²²¹ Rege, "Islam and Humanism?" 276.

²²² Rege, "Islam and Humanism?" 276.

²²³ Rege, "Islam and Humanism?" 276.

In a sense, true or real freedom lies with God because only God can impart true justice, that is, divine justice. As humans, we can only impart natural or conventional justice. Because we are composed of matter and live in a material world, we lack a unity or what Miskawayh calls a oneness but instead are composed of four contrary elements.²²⁴ One could argue that is itself a handicap preventing us from acting as truly autonomous individuals and thereby achieving true freedom. Rege suggests that as autonomous beings, we can *freely* determine our own ends and acquire the ability to evaluate those ends.

Freedom is not latitude extended by alien authority; it is self-determinism. The notions of human dignity and responsibility are bound up with the conception of man as an ‘end in himself.’ That Islam has no proper hold on these notions is established by the fact that it has lent its sanction to the institution of slavery. The very idea of a slave is an affront to human dignity.²²⁵

As Rege pointed out, Renaissance humanism exhibits three conspicuous characteristics: Free assertion of human nature, celebration of human achievements, and liberation from the restrictions of medieval Christianity.²²⁶ There is no room for these in Islam. “There is no room in Islam for a free and critical exercise of the faculty of human reason and the pursuit of truth based on it,” argued Rege, “Indeed, there cannot be any in a religion which recognizes the prophetic office and certainly there can be none in a religion which insists on the finality of the message of its prophet.”²²⁷

In the end, Rege concludes that the great thinkers of Islam arose not from the “natural flowering of the Islamic spirit but in spite of it and owing to the liberating influence of the humanistic

²²⁴ Miskawayh, *Risala fi mahiyat al-‘adl li Miskawaih*, trans. by M.S. Khan. Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1964, 25 (4R).

²²⁵ Rege, “Islam and Humanism?” 276.

²²⁶ Rege, “Islam and Humanism?” 278.

²²⁷ Rege, “Islam and Humanism?” 278.

Greek culture which upheld the values of free, critical inquiry and search for a rational order in the universe and in human affairs.”²²⁸ His conclusion makes sense if we set it side by side with Kraemer’s tripartite sociological schematic that advanced or developed societies adapt foreign cultural elements in three stages as mentioned earlier—namely, religious integration, administrative integration, and finally what Kraemer calls the “appanage of the Graeco-Roman Renaissance.”²²⁹

In the case of Islam, for example, religious and administrative integration of foreign elements would have occurred roughly around the 9th and 10th centuries as Islam was expanding and codifying its religious and administrative practices. The scope of this essay is primarily concerned with the third integration—the influence of Graeco-Roman antiquity in the development of Islamic humanism.

The third integration began to take shape from the 10th through the 11th centuries during the height of the Abbasid period in its continued role of empire building. Each of the three phases of development of Islamic culture reinforced one another thereby making it possible for these foreign elements (e.g., Jewish and Christian) to be absorb and reshape into Islamic intellectual society through Hellenistic channels.²³⁰ Note, however, that the full integration of Hellenism into Islam took place rather later—ca. 14th century. Historically speaking, as empires grow, they begin to cultivate or conceptualize the notion of what Kraemer calls the “unity of mankind.”²³¹

²²⁸ Rege, “Islam and humanism,” 278.

²²⁹ Kraemer, “Humanism in the Renaissance of Islam,” 136.

²³⁰ Kraemer, “Humanism in the Renaissance of Islam,” 136.

²³¹ Kraemer, “Humanism in the Renaissance of Islam,” 136.

Though empires are usually forged in the crucible of power and violence, they nevertheless become receptive to the creative forces indigenous to the arts, humane letters, and philosophical thought, “And it is always the most powerful empires which promoted letters and learning.”²³²

The Islamic empire undoubtedly followed the same pattern as its historical antecedents.

Ashgar Ali Engineer on Islam and Humanism

“Islam conceptualizes man as the vice-regent of God on earth and the symbol of His power,” claims Engineer.²³³ This is the pivotal point where Rege and Engineer part company with respect to whether Islam is, in fact, compatible with humanism. For Rege, humanism has more of a secular flavor, namely, that humanity is the center of the world and serves only itself with the aid of reason. Humanity, in short, is independent of divinity.

This shift from a theocentric to an anthropocentric society undoubtedly blossomed in the unfolding of history in the West and ironically deprived humanity of what it sought most as humanity moved farther away from the stronghold of religion in the 14th century: A sense of its existential *self*. During the European Renaissance, for example, intellectual freedom made significant headway with the advent of materialism through commerce, the acceleration of scientific progress, technological advancements, and the deterioration of the feudal political system. Economic, technological, and political progress reshaped, to some extent, the way in which humanity thought of itself in the West. Now, the center of its own universe, humanity slowly and to its detriment took its own *humanness* for granted—its own existence—thereby

²³² Poggio Bracciolini, *Historia tripartite*, cited by Richard Koebner, *Empire* (New York, 1965), 49.

²³³ Engineer, “Islam and Humanism,” 19.

losing sight of what makes one uniquely human, namely, what Heidegger calls, “the marvel of marvels: that what-is *is*.”²³⁴

Rege did not focus on the theological-existential but rather the secular aspect of humanism; nevertheless, both Islam and humanism share a few characteristics. For him, religion contravenes the very premise of humanism because religion subjugates humanity to a transcendental, divine power, thereby comprising man’s true freedom *to choose* and *to act*. Thus, religion poses a serious dilemma for the secular humanist. However, for Ashraf Ali Engineer, no such dilemma exists. In fact, Islam and humanism are actually in one accord.²³⁵

First, Islam and humanism both discourage asceticism and instead encourage a “this-worldly” perspective and allow humanity a certain amount of latitude.²³⁶ Rege would say that religion somehow limits man’s freedom. However, Engineer is careful to point out that man does not have total freedom in secular humanism either because of various social and natural laws.

Let us not think that man in humanist philosophy enjoys absolute freedom. This is not to be. He is bound by certain social and natural laws (although, unlike Islam, these laws are man-made).²³⁷

Human freedom, then, comes in degrees which society and/or religion calibrates according to some specific standard or moral code. Human beings, therefore, whether secular or religious, do exercise some form of freedom but not necessarily total freedom as Rege suggests.

²³⁴ Martin Heidegger, “Postscript to *What is Metaphysics?*” in *Existence and Being*, ed. by Werner Brok, (Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1949), 355.

²³⁵ Engineer, “Islam and Humanism,” 20.

²³⁶ Engineer, “Islam and Humanism,” 22.

²³⁷ Engineer, “Islam and Humanism,” 22.

S.A. Ashraf would agree with Rege but for slightly different reasons. What makes Ashraf suspicious is that humanism is an ideal that cannot be proved and conceived by philosophers. He argues that philosophers waffle between atheism, materialism, and denying God's existence yet cannot agree if a human being is more than just a lump of biological matter, so to speak.

Humanism is an ideal conceived by philosophers and thinker who cannot believe in the existence of God but who at the same time cannot agree to treat man just as a scientific, biological product. They exert the existence of mind and the need for a moral code of life.²³⁸

Nevertheless, as an ideal, humanism possessed two fundamental components: namely, the *studia adabiya* for Islam and the *studia humanitatis* for the Christian West.²³⁹ Islamic civilization itself absorbed this *humanitas* ideal in the explication of its religion, socio-economic structure, and its moral philosophy.²⁴⁰ However, this is not anything new. History has shown that the greatest empires—Greece, Rome, Persia—had always promoted throughout the course of their existence *humanitas*, that is for example, letters and learning, into their socio-cultural milieu.²⁴¹

Not surprisingly, then, Islamic culture incorporated this tradition of *humanitas*—particularly Greek philosophical aspects— into its own spiritual and moral culture thus prompting scholars such as H. H. Schaeder to refer to Islamic spiritual culture (*geistige Kultur*) as an Islamicized Hellenism (*islamisiertes Hellenismus*).²⁴² For the cultural influences of the Graeco-Roman world touched Islamic civilization leaving behind fingerprints to remind us of their legacy in the shaping of Islamic mediaeval society.

²³⁸ Ashraf, "Humanism and Islam," 11.

²³⁹George Makdisi, "Scholasticism and Humanism in Classical Islam and the Christian West," 181.

²⁴⁰Kraemer, "Humanism in the Renaissance of Islam: A Preliminary Study," 136.

²⁴¹ Kraemer, "Humanism in the Renaissance of Islam," 136.

²⁴² See H.H. Schaeder, "Der Orient und das griechische Erbe," in *Der Mensch im Orient und Okzident*, ed. by G. Schader, (Munich: R. Piper, 1960), 150. Also cited by Kraemer, "Humanism in the Renaissance of Islam," 140.

All cultural links of this kind lead to areas where the civilization of classical antiquity—that is to say Hellenism and, in so far as it reached the East in Greek garb, Roman civilization—had left its mark.²⁴³

Next, Islam and humanism were both born from decaying social systems.²⁴⁴ In humanism’s case, feudalism was giving way to a more commercial and capitalist society. During the 14th century, cities were growing, trade was increasing, and technological progress influenced both economic and artistic life.²⁴⁵ With Islam, the *umma* was replacing traditional tribal systems. Where tribal humanism of the Arabs emphasized individual human achievement, one’s individual freedom—humanism’s core ingredients—was “subordinated to tribal honor.”²⁴⁶

Finally, another similarity involved class division and stratification. As with the Europeans, trade and commerce in Arab society created a new class of wealthy families who amassed power.

The rich merchants boasted of their wealth and disregarded other human values. This created an imbalance in society along with its attendant conflict and tension. The Prophet sensed this danger and through the message of his new religion sought to restore balance in society.²⁴⁷

This societal imbalance thwarted Muhammad’s call for egalitarianism and soon came to oppress economically, politically, and even spiritually those in the lower class of society.

Additionally, dominant social groups usurped Islamic and humanistic ideologies such that those at the bottom of society could never really “avail” themselves of the value systems of either of these (i.e., Islam or humanism).²⁴⁸ This is nothing new though, historically speaking. The poor and the underprivileged never had an opportunity to participate fully or help develop the value

²⁴³ Franz Rosenthal, *The Classical Heritage in Islam*, trans. from the German by Emile and Jenny Marmorstein, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975), 1.

²⁴⁴ Engineer, “Islam and Humanism,” 22.

²⁴⁵ Norman Davies, *Europe: A History*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 477.

²⁴⁶ Engineer, “Islam and Humanism,” 20.

²⁴⁷ Engineer, “Islam and Humanism,” 20.

²⁴⁸ Engineer, “Islam and Humanism,” 20.

systems of religious or secular ideologies. In other words, social taboos, religious tenets, or humanistic tendencies never quite applied to those at the top of the social food chain. At this point, a line from Victor Hugo's *Les Miserables* seems apropos, "There is more misery at the bottom than there is humanity at the top."

Though Islam and humanism share a few similarities as illustrated earlier, distinct contrasts exist between the two as well. Humanism, unlike Islam or Christianity for example, is ideologically secular. It recognizes no divine authority. Rather, humanism found a voice for its ideology in art, literature, science, and philosophy in both the Islamic and European Renaissances respectively. Humanism's message was quite simple, namely, that through its own intelligence and capability, humanity can improve its present condition without the intercession of any transcendent divinity. Humanity can *choose* and *act* according to its own kind of cultural traditions and beliefs as opposed to some mysterious or vague objective moral reality.

From the Islamic perspective, an objective moral reality guides human choices thereby providing human beings the freedom to choose.²⁴⁹ Though both humanistic and Islamic ideologies provide room for dissent, Islam does so only within a *set framework*.²⁵⁰ Islamic orthodoxy dictated such an intellectual framework, thereby subordinating reason to theological and legal Islamic doctrine.²⁵¹

²⁴⁹ Engineer, "Islam and Humanism," 23.

²⁵⁰ Engineer, "Islam and Humanism," 23.

²⁵¹ Engineer, "Islam and Humanism," 25.

Despite these ideological differences, classical Islam developed its own brand of humanism over time that incorporated both religious and secular aspects. In classical Islam, three categories of knowledge emerged: Arabic literary arts; Islamic religious sciences; and, the *sciences of the Ancients*.²⁵² One can find evidence of a similar division of knowledge in the 11th century text, the *Qabus Nama* (Mirror for Princes), a guide for the author's son on how to avoid the bad in life and how to develop a good character.²⁵³

The number of professions is very large and to expatiate on each separately impossible, since otherwise my book would become excessively long and be diverted from its original plan. Now whatever the quality of a profession, it must fall into one of three categories, namely, a science linked with a craft, a craft linked with a science or a craft existing independently. Of the science linked with a craft, examples are: geometry, medicine, surveying, versification and the like; of the craft linked with a science, examples are: musicianship, the veterinary art, architecture, the construction of underground channels and the like. Each has its own subject-matter, and if you are ignorant of its rules and subject-matter, even though you may be a master in other respects, in that respect you are no better than a poor captive.²⁵⁴

Division of knowledge helped not only to organize these various branches, but also they provided one the opportunity to learn a humanistic curriculum in a systematic way. Furthermore, as with the Italian Renaissance, *adab* humanism gave rise to two types of humanists: professionals and amateurs. Professional humanists consisted of ambassadors, chancellors, court orators, court poets, prime ministers, secretaries-historians, tutors; and, amateur humanists were primarily astrologers-astronomers, booksellers, calligraphers, copyists, and lawyers.²⁵⁵ As Makdisi explains, professional humanists served as secretaries in all levels of government from prime minister to secretary of state, to the private secretary of the caliph or sultan, for

²⁵² George Makdisi, *The Rise of Humanism in Classical Islam and the Christian West*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1990), 88.

²⁵³ The *Qabus Nama*, written around 1082 by Kai Ka'us ibn Iskandar ibn Qabus ibn Washmgir for his son Qabus. The *Qabus Nama* represents a collection of the father's life experiences, namely the lessons he learned.

²⁵⁴ Kai-Ka'us ibn Iskandar, *A Mirror for Princes: The Qabus Nama*, trans. from the Persian, Reuben Levy, (London: The Cresset Press, 1951), 145.

²⁵⁵ Makdisi, *The Rise of Humanism in Classical Islam and the Christian West*, 232.

example.²⁵⁶ Moreover, this community of humanists saw itself as a kind of brotherhood though it lacked the autonomy and independence of legal guilds.²⁵⁷

Part III: Existentialism and Islamic Humanism

Both Rege and Engineer represent two camps regarding Islamic humanism, namely, the theological and the secular. As mentioned earlier, Engineer leans more to theological humanism whereas Rege is closer to secular humanism. Nevertheless, both positions have something in common in that they are commenting on a *style* of education, so to speak. Yet there is more going on here than just style of education. For this is one small aspect of humanism in general and Islamic humanism in particular.

Islamic humanism as a whole revolves around a couple of core tenets that the theological and secular aspects of Islamic humanism share: Every person possesses intrinsic values; and most people possess the capability for self-improvement or a kind of spiritual rebirth.²⁵⁸ It is fundamental to Islam that each individual is morally and spiritually responsible for himself and himself only.

I argue that these two tenets are more than just commonalities. Rather, they are part of a larger philosophical style that bridges the gap between Islamic theological and secular human. I am referring here to existentialism. My claim is that Islamic humanism is, in fact, Islamic

²⁵⁶Makdisi, *The Rise of Humanism in Classical Islam and the Christian West*, 232.

²⁵⁷ Makdisi, *The Rise of Humanism in Classical Islam and the Christian West*, 233.

²⁵⁸ Mohammed Ajmal, "Islamic Humanism and Amir Khosrow," *Journal of the Regional Cultural Institute*, vol. 8i & ii (January 1976), 5–6.

existentialism. More broadly, existentialism is a kind of humanism that actually minimizes friction between faith and reason.²⁵⁹

Human knowledge is incomplete when compared to God's knowledge. In fact, only God is capable of comprehending the whole of the world or the whole of reality. Let's consider briefly the basic anatomy of existentialism so that we can better understand and clarify the relationship between Islamic theological humanism and secular humanism.

First, within an existentialist framework, existence precedes essence. The idea is that one is born into the world (existence) and then must discover his life's purpose (essence). Note that Ibn Sina argued just the opposite. According to him, metaphysically speaking, essence precedes existence because God imparts existence to essence since form and matter cannot actualize existence for a thing. It must have an agent-cause, namely God. Practically speaking, per Ibn Sina, *being* is an essence and *becoming* is a property.

On this point, it might look as though Islamic philosophy and existentialism are at odds with one another. However, a closer look will show that they actually are emphasizing the same point, namely, that the human being is a *thinking subject* who defines himself by *becoming* in the world. In other words, *becoming* entails *action*, and *action* entails a certain type of *freedom*. Recall the point of contention between Engineer and Rege. Rege argued that Islam contravenes the basic tenet of humanism because a person does not have the right *to choose* and *to act*, but only the right *to act* within an Islamic framework. Engineer countered that working within an

²⁵⁹ Rudi Visker, "Was Existentialism Truly a Humanism?" *Sartre Studies International*, vol. 13, issue 1 (2007), 3.

Islamic framework does not necessarily limit one's freedom, but rather it offers one a different kind of freedom—a freedom to act within a morally objective structured framework.

In this context, *to act* still requires freedom, decision and responsibility. It is just that one is now free(r) in a different sense. By free, I mean that one is free from having to choose what is right and wrong and then act. One can now choose to act more freely in a morally prescribed universe by refining his own character. Freedom to act and to choose in a moral or secular universe is the main ingredient in existentialism and the core of personal being.²⁶⁰ It follows then that because Islamic existentialism is humanism, every person has the choice for self-renewal and self-regeneration.²⁶¹

As Mohammad Ajmal noted, there appeared in Islamic society, particularly in the 11th and 12th centuries, a disconnect between ritual and observance on the one hand, and meaning and significance on the other, thereby resulting in what he called a “profanity” that metastasized throughout Islamic religious institutions.²⁶² “It was one of the functions of Islamic humanism,” argued Ajmal, “that it tried to liberate society from such profanity and such perversion.”²⁶³

Islamic humanism teaches that one does not *become* by himself but through the assistance of another.²⁶⁴ *Becoming*, in this respect, is a process rather than a state of being. A proper becoming occurs through a rigorous refinement of character so that one can in a sense purify

²⁶⁰See John Macquarrie, *Existentialism*. (London: Westminster of Philadelphia, 1972), 3–4.

²⁶¹ Mohammad Ajmal, “Islamic Humanism and Amir Khosrow,” 7.

²⁶² Ajmal, “Islamic Humanism and Amir Khosrow,” 12.

²⁶³ Ajmal, “Islamic Humanism and Amir Khosrow,” 12.

²⁶⁴ Bayraktar Bayrakli, “Existentialism in the Islamic and Western Educational Philosophies,” *Hamdard Islamicus*, issue 1 (January 1996), 10.

himself from base human desires and behaviors (e.g., greed, envy, lust, gluttony, etc.) and restore a proper relationship with God. This process attributes value to one's life—an important component of Islamic humanism.²⁶⁵ Additionally, this points to the fact that where European humanism focused more on the horizontal relationship of human to human, Islamic humanism stressed a vertical relationship between human and God and perhaps indirectly a horizontal relationship between human and human as well.

For the desire to improve oneself is a constitutional desire as opposed to a situational desire. Self-renewal, according to Ajmal, is not dependent on religious, political, or socio-economic situations, yet it can devolve to such conditions.²⁶⁶ However, man does not become God but rather the universal man, the vice-regent and representative of God (*Khalifutullah*).²⁶⁷ Islamic humanism stresses this important point, namely for one to give gratitude to God always lest one runs the risk of excluding God from life and thereby undermining life's very foundation. The ancient Iranian poet Ferdowsi touched on this theme in his poem *Shahnameh (Book of Kings)* written in the 10th century. King Jamshid who witnessed the prospering of his kingdom, gave in to pride and apostasy by claiming he was the creator, divine-like, and responsible for the prosperity and the well-being of his subjects. This excerpt speaks to the worries of what can happen when one loses touch with his own humanity and forgets his place in the scheme of the universe.

Seeing he had no peer in the world, he forgot the gratitude that is God's due
and called the nobles of his court before him, making this fateful
proclamation: "From this day forward, I know no lord but me: *my*
word brought beauty and skilled men to adorn the earth! *My* word!
Sunshine and sleep, security and comfort, the clothes you wear, your

²⁶⁵ Bayrakli, "Existentialism in the Islamic and Western Educational Philosophies," 6.

²⁶⁶ Ajmal, "Islamic humanism and Amir Khosrow," 6.

²⁶⁷ Ashraf, "Humanism in Islam," 13.

food—all came to you through me! Who else ended death’s desolation and with medicine vanished illness from your lives? Without me, neither mind nor soul would inhabit your bodies. So who besides me can claim, unchallenged, the crown and its power? You understand this now. So now, who else can you call Creator but me!”²⁶⁸

Unfortunately, humanism was primarily for a certain class of people in Islamic society just as it was in ancient Greek society. This reflects the reality of agrarian civilization. Nevertheless, European and Islamic humanism each share a few common objectives of humanism in general: (1) The reception of classical traditions; (2) the restoration of humanity; and (3) recognition of human dignity in every person.²⁶⁹

One major difference between European and Islamic existentialism concerns the value of life. Where European existentialism such as Sartre, for example, considered life to be meaningless, Islamic existentialism saw life as meaningful and essential to the becoming of the individual.²⁷⁰ The key to both European and Islamic existentialism is reason. Western existentialists see life as a hindrance to reason, where Islamic philosophers view reason as a tool to probe and understand life, to tackle some of life’s problems. “Setting out from the principle, ‘one without reason is also without religion,’ the Islamic thought assumes that it is only by reason that existence is felt, grasped and improved.”²⁷¹

²⁶⁸ Ferdowsi, *The Teller of Tales: Stories from Ferdowsi’s Shahnameh*, trans. by Richard Jeffrey Newman, (New York: Junction Press, 2011), 39–40.

²⁶⁹ Karl Jaspers, *Existentialism and Humanism*, ed. by Hann E. Fischer, trans. by E. B. Ashton, (New York: Russell F. Moore Co., 1952), 65.

²⁷⁰ Bayrakli, “Existentialism in the Islamic and Western Educational Philosophies,” 6.

²⁷¹ Bayrakli, “Existentialism,” 7.

An Islamic humanistic education does two things²⁷²: First, as mentioned above, it makes conceptual knowledge existentially relevant such that one can use what he learns through literature and ethics, for example, to shape his *becoming* in the refinement of his character; and second, with the support of a proper humanistic education—which especially involves a study of moral philosophy—one gains the prerequisites to ascend to the transcendental because humanity itself, as Bayrakli asserts, needs the transcendental constantly.²⁷³

Earlier, I mentioned that conceptual knowledge *per se* is existentially neutral. To make conceptual knowledge existentially relevant, the subjective consciousness takes this knowledge within itself, thereby connecting it with human life.²⁷⁴ This connection, I claim, is the backbone of Islamic humanism. The Islamic mystic Rumi supports the notion that knowledge come from inside oneself thereby forming a kind of individual subjectivism.

Its knowledge gushes perpetually from its soul: it (this bird) has nothing that is borrowed (from others) and (owes) no debt.²⁷⁵

²⁷² Bayrakli, “Existentialism,” 21, “Man is a being of possibilities. He possesses the possibility of improving his abilities related to the seed embedded in him. Education makes man use these possibilities to develop and enrich himself.”

²⁷³ Bayrakli, “Existentialism,” 12.

²⁷⁴ Bayrakli, “Existentialism,” 32.

²⁷⁵ Jalalu’ddin Rumi, *The Mathnawi of Jalalu’ddin Rumi*, trans. by Reynold A. Nicholson, vol. 6, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1934), verse 1149.

Chapter 7: Al-Fauz al-Asghar (Metaphysics)

I selected these three particular works of Miskawayh—*Al-Fauz al-Asghar*, *Tahdhib al-Akhlaq* & *Tajarib al-Umam*—to illustrate how they form what I call a kind of meta-discourse on Islamic existentialism when read together. That is, individually each work represents a major constitutive facet of the constructed *self*.

Miskawayh first had to establish a metaphysical foundation for his ethics. *Al-Fauz al Asghar* discusses this metaphysical foundation in terms of the nature of the human soul, the afterlife, and prophethood. Here, then, we have the *materialization* of the self. By materialization, I mean the fusing of the body and soul to form (or construct) the *self* which owes its existence to God.

For the Fountain of Grace bestowed existence on all existences and the perfections of all things are due to It. The Holy Essence has the highest degree of existence, and all created things obtain their existence from it.²⁷⁶

Following the materialization of the *self* comes *definition* of the *self*. We now turn to *Tahdhib al-Akhaq*. This is Miskawayh's work on moral philosophy, in particular, the refining of one's character. The *self* defines itself through the refinement of its own character. As Sartre pointed out, you are after all nothing than what you make of yourself.²⁷⁷ Finally, with *Tajarib al-Umam*, the *self* comes to be in history wherein it *encounters* both itself and itself within the world. Once in history, the *self* discovers true life, and with life comes what Gabriel Marcel calls, *creative development*.²⁷⁸ Here, Miskawayh stresses time and again that real life, or creative development,

²⁷⁶ Miskawayh, *al-Fauz al-Asghar* in *Islam and Christian Theology: A Study of the Interpretation of Theological Ideas in the Two Religions*, trans. by J. Windrow Sweetman, (London: Lutterworth Press, 1945), part 1, vol. 1, 105.

²⁷⁷ Sartre, *Existentialism is a Humanism*, 22. I also adopted Sartre's language of materialize, encounters, and defines to clarify my point in establishing a language for a kind of Islamic existentialism.

²⁷⁸ Gabriel Marcel, *A Gabriel Marcel Reader*, ed. by Brendan Sweetman, (South Bend, Ind.: St. Augustine's Press, 2011), 75.

can only occur within community where each self can attain and fulfill its perfection and realize that it is merely part of a larger *Self*, namely community.

To this end, people must love one another, for each one finds his own perfection in someone else, and the latter's happiness is incomplete without the former. Each one thus becomes like an organ of the same body; and man's constitution depends upon the totality of the organs forming his body.²⁷⁹

Let us consider each of these works individually in more detail to better understand how they shape for us a picture of the existential self and the role it plays in Miskawayh's concept of a unified civic moral philosophy.

Al-Fauz al-Asghar—An Introduction

Miskawayh's philosophical metaphysical treatise, *al-Fauz al-Asghar*, is similar conceptually to al-Farabi's *Ara' Ahl al-Madinah al-Fadilah*.²⁸⁰ His treatment of philosophy in particular is heavily indebted to al-Farabi with respect to the reconciliation of Plato, Aristotle, and Plotinus.²⁸¹ As an historian, Miskawayh carefully acknowledges his sources. In part 1, chapter 5 of *al-Fauz al-Asghar*, for example, Miskawayh cites Porphyry (234–305 A.D.).

So there is no other possibility remaining than that from the single agent some acts properly proceed by essence and some by the medium of others. This view was first adopted by Aristotle as Porphyry says: "Plato holds that from the Creator the abstract form of every existing thing proceeds, and by means of it He perceives what exists."²⁸²

He also quotes the commentators of Plato (i.e., Proclus and Galen) and Aristotle (i.e., Themistius).²⁸³ For example, in chapter X, he cites Galen, "What the philosopher Galen says, to

²⁷⁹ Miskawayh, *Tahdhib al-Aklat*, 1st discourse, 15.5.

²⁸⁰ Sharif, *History of Muslim Philosophy*, vol. 1, 470.

²⁸¹ Sharif, *History of Muslim Philosophy*, vol. 1, 470.

²⁸² Miskawayh, *al-Fauz al-Asghar in Islam and Christian Theology: A Study of the Interpretation of Theological Ideas in the Two Religions*, trans. by J. Windrow Sweetman, (London: Lutterworth Press, 1945), part 1, vol. 1, 110.

²⁸³ See Sharif, *History of Muslim Philosophy*, vol. 1, 470, especially for a more technical analysis of Miskawayh's philosophy.

wit, that every existence is produced from another existence, is utterly mistaken and its falsity obvious.²⁸⁴

Miskawayh divides his *al-Fauz al-Asghar* into three parts. Essentially, his metaphysics goes from God to prophethood and everything in between. The first part deals with the existence of God. The second concerns the nature of the soul. Finally, the third deals with prophethood.²⁸⁵

Farabi's outline is quite straightforward. Chapters one through nine cover basic Islamic metaphysics. He begins with a discussion of the First Cause. In the next couple of chapters, he describes the attributes of the First Cause as being unity and the origin of all being. This sets the Neoplatonic stage for a top-down or emanationist cosmology. In chapters three through nine, he delves into a cosmological discussion about sublunar bodies. According to Farabi, he argues that from the Necessary One all creation emanates. Furthermore, spiritual attraction moves the spheres such that the inferior is always attracted to the superior.²⁸⁶

Existence of God—Part One of *Al-Fauz al-Asghar*

The first part deals with the existence of God. Miskawayh begins with a reference to Aristotle who compares the bat which cannot see the sun to human reason which is inadequate to perceive God's essence.²⁸⁷ God's attributes are three: His essence is one; He is eternal; and, He is

²⁸⁴ Miskawayh, *al-Fauz al-Asghar* in *Islam and Christian Theology: A Study of the Interpretation of Theological Ideas in the Two Religions*, trans. by J. Windrow Sweetman, (London: Lutterworth Press, 1945), part 1, vol. 1, 117.

²⁸⁵ See Abu Nasr al-Farabi, *Mabadi' Ara Ahl al-Madina al-Fadila*, trans. by Richard Walzer, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985)

²⁸⁶ See Sharif, *History of Muslim Philosophy*, vol. 1, 459, "This process is a spiritual dynamism similar to that of Leibniz in spite of its dependence on unequal spiritual powers. It seems that al-Farabi, the musician, is attempting to introduce into the world of spheres the system of musical harmony."

²⁸⁷ See also, Miskawayh, *al-Fauz al-Asghar* in *Islam and Christian Theology: A Study of the Interpretation of Theological Ideas in the Two Religions*, 93.

immaterial.²⁸⁸ In chapter VIII, Miskawayh turns to those issues of defining God affirmatively and negatively (*via negativa*).²⁸⁹ In the end, Miskawayh comes out in support of the *via negativa*.

In this method the negation and inapplicability of ideas to the Holy Essence has to be established, e.g., that God is not a body, not moved, not manifold, not created, or that it is possible that the chain of causes in the universe should not end at a single cause. Thus it is proved that for the explanation of divine things the most fitting is negative proof.²⁹⁰

In chapter IX, Miskawayh reveals his Neoplatonic stripes, so to speak. First, we notice his use of Neoplatonic terminology.

This is the reason why the existence of the First Intelligence is perfect and will survive for ever, and why it is always in one condition without change or alteration, because the overflowing bounty of the Real Outpurer at all times and forever continues to flow upon it.²⁹¹

Sweetman points out that *Real Outpurer* is a specific example of Neoplatonic terminology. That is, the Arabic *fayd* and other words derived from the same root are equivalent to the Greek *ὑπερρῶνη* and *ἐξερρῶνη* of Plotinus, namely, “He overflowed.”²⁹² Miskawayh goes on to list the order of creation as thus: The Creator gave rise to the Intelligence, which in turn gave rise to the First Reason; First Reason then gave rise to the soul. After the soul come the spheres, and from these come our bodies. God established this order of the universe and maintains it.

From this explanation it will be clear that all existing things came to exist by the bounty and goodness of the Creator, and that the order of the Universe is set up by Him. His power and might encompass all creatures.²⁹³

²⁸⁸ Miskawayh, *al-Fauz al-Asghar in Islam and Christian Theology: A Study of the Interpretation of Theological Ideas in the Two Religions*, trans. by J. Windrow Sweetman, (London: Lutterworth Press, 1945), part 1, vol. 1, 106–111.

²⁸⁹ See Pseudo-Dionysius: *Divine Names*, vol. 3, and the *Mystical Theology*. Cf. Plotinus, *Enneads*, VI, viii, 11.

²⁹⁰ Miskawayh, *al-Fauz al-Asghar in Islam and Christian Theology: A Study of the Interpretation of Theological Ideas in the Two Religions*, trans. by J. Windrow Sweetman, (London: Lutterworth Press, 1945), part 1, vol. 1, 112.

²⁹¹ Miskawayh, *al-Fauz al-Asghar in Islam and Christian Theology: A Study of the Interpretation of Theological Ideas in the Two Religions*, trans. by J. Windrow Sweetman, (London: Lutterworth Press, 1945), part 1, vol. 1, 113–114.

²⁹² Miskawayh, *al-Fauz al-Asghar in Islam and Christian Theology: A Study of the Interpretation of Theological Ideas in the Two Religions*, trans. by J. Windrow Sweetman, (London: Lutterworth Press, 1945), part 1, vol. 1, 113, not 4.

²⁹³ Miskawayh, *al-Fauz al-Asghar*, part 1, vol. 1, 114.

In chapter X, in the spirit of a good theologian, Miskawayh sets out to prove creation *ex nihilo*. Sweetman draws our attention to the fact that it seems odd for Miskawayh to be a card-carrying emanationist while at the same time defending the proposition of *creatio ex nihilo*.²⁹⁴ However, the *ex nihilo nihil fit* principle, which is Aristotelian²⁹⁵, “does not necessitate anything eternal and external to the Divine Creator from which creation should take place.”²⁹⁶ Sharif nicely summarizes Miskawayh’s proof.

Forms succeed each other, the substratum remaining constant. In this change from one form to another, where do the preceding forms go? The two forms cannot remain together because they are contrary. Secondly, the first form cannot go elsewhere, because motion in place applies only to bodies, and accidents cannot go from one place to another. There remains only one possibility—the possibility that the first form goes into nothing. If it is proved that the first form cannot be Non-Being, then the second form comes and so the third, the fourth, and so on also from nothing. Therefore, all things generated are generated from nothing.²⁹⁷

Overall, as Sharif points out, Miskawayh’s theory of evolution is no different from that of the Brethren of Purity in that it consists of four evolutionary stages: Mineral, vegetable, animal, and the human.²⁹⁸

Coral (*marjan*), date-palm, and ape (*qird*) mark the transition from the mineral to the vegetable, from the vegetable to the animal, and from the animal to the human kingdom, respectively. The prophet, in the end, completes the circle of Being by imbibing the celestial soul within him.²⁹⁹

Miskawayh began his metaphysics with the nature of God. Beginning with God is important for two reasons. First, God is the source of creation and the *Necessary Existent* as both Ibn Sina and Miskawayh referred to Him. This kind of metaphysics must be grounded in transcendence

²⁹⁴ Miskawayh, *al-Fauz al-Asgha*, part 1, vol. 1, 116, note 1.

²⁹⁵ This concept (*ex nihilo nihil fit*) is Aristotelian in the sense that Aristotle accepted it. However, it goes back much further than that. In fact, one may locate it in Parmenides’s Fragment 8.

²⁹⁶ Miskawayh, *al-Fauz al-*, part 1, vol. 1, 116, note 1.

²⁹⁷ Sharif, *History of Muslim Philosophy*, vol. 1, 472.

²⁹⁸ Sharif, *History of Muslim Philosophy*, vol. 1, 472.

²⁹⁹ Sharif, *History of Muslim Philosophy*, vol. 1, 472–3.

wherein a divine creator is at the top of the cosmological emanational scheme. After all, creation has to start somewhere. Second, unlike Western philosophy which starts from a position of doubt, Islamic philosophy begins from a position of certainty.

However, beginning from a position of certainty requires a sophisticated and often complicated metaphysics, very technical in nature—a type of rigorous thinking not suitable for everyone as Miskawayh noted. In other words, not everyone is equipped with the intellectual hardware, so to speak, to grasp fully the implications or the import of such metaphysical arguments.

Many men have thought that the philosophers have selfishly hidden this matter and have not allowed these things to be revealed to the common people. But this is not so. The fact is that the intellect of common people is quite incapable of grasping this subject, as the illustration above shows.³⁰⁰

Miskawayh's obvious Aristotelian and Neoplatonic tendencies surface here in the first part of his metaphysics as they will in the remaining two sections. Relying on ancient influences does not suggest, however, that Miskawayh's work is merely derivative.

Mohammad Nasir bin Omar summarizes this claim quite elegantly.

It is clear, however, that no such precise codification existed previously amongst the Arab writers, nor in the Greek, and we may therefore conclude that this was an original contribution by Miskawayh to the development of ethical thought.³⁰¹

³⁰⁰ Miskawayh, *al-Fauz al-Asghar in Islam and Christian Theology: A Study of the Interpretation of Theological Ideas in the Two Religions*, trans. by J. Windrow Sweetman, (London: Lutterworth Press, 1945), part 1, vol. 1, 94. Here is the illustration to which Miskawayh refers, "Wherefore sages and rational philosophers have endured great pains and mortifications to achieve this honourable quest and, becoming inured to the hardships of the task, have gradually progressed to that measure of contemplation of the Creator which is within the compass of the creature. And in truth, there is no other way to the knowledge of God except these mortifications and gradual advances," Miskawayh, *al-Fauz al-Asghar*, 93.

³⁰¹ Mohammad Nasir bin Omar, "Preliminary Remarks on Greek sources of Muslim ethics: Miskawayh's Experience," 274. See also R. Walzer, *Greek into Arabic*, (Oxford, 1962), 240–241; and Majid Fakhry, *Ethical Theories in Islam*, (Leiden, 1991), 111–115.

Psychology—Part Two of *Al-Fauz al-Asghar*

The second part of Miskawayh's work, *Al-Fauz al-Asghar*, deals with the nature of the soul. Indeed, as Miskawayh himself admits, attempting to ascertain the soul's nature—its quiddity and type of existence—is no easy task.³⁰² Nevertheless, in a metaphysics grounded in a divine transcendence, a treatise on the ontological and phenomenological nature of the soul is necessary if one is to appreciate and understand the teleological aspects of Islam, namely judgment and the hereafter.

And because our primary aim and the scriptural creed, i.e., judgment and the hereafter, and other religious doctrines, cannot possibly be established without proof that the Soul exists, and that it is manifestly not a body, nor an accident, nor a disposition (*mizaj*) but a substance subsiding per se and free from death and mortality, it is necessary for this subject to be discussed.³⁰³

Essentially, Miskawayh's psychology is Platonic and Aristotelian with more of a leaning toward the Platonic.³⁰⁴ In both the *al-Fauz al-Asghar* and his *Tahdhib al-Aklat*, he for the most part gives the same account concerning the nature of the soul although he does go into more detail in *al-Fauz al-Asghar*. In fact he uses the same arguments, examples, and practically the same words.³⁰⁵

In chapter one of part two, Miskawayh argues against the materialists by affirming that the soul is something immaterial and likewise special because it can take on different and opposing forms simultaneously.

It is plain that a body can accept a form when it leaves its former form and is entirely separated from it, e.g, silver can take the form of a ring when it completely leaves the form of a button, or a seal can be impressed on wax

³⁰² Miskawayh, *al-Fauz al-Asghar* in *Islam and Christian Theology: A Study of the Interpretation of Theological Ideas in the Two Religions*, trans. by J. Windrow Sweetman, (London: Lutterworth Press, 1945), part 1, vol. 1, 118.

³⁰³ Miskawayh, *al-Fauz al-Asghar* in *Islam and Christian Theology: A Study of the Interpretation of Theological Ideas in the Two Religions*, trans. by J. Windrow Sweetman, (London: Lutterworth Press, 1945), part 1, vol. 1, 118.

³⁰⁴ Sharif, *A History of Muslim Philosophy*, vol. 1, 473.

³⁰⁵ Sharif, *A History of Muslim Philosophy*, vol. 1, 473.

when the previous impression has been completely obliterated from it. This is the case with all bodies, and this is so obvious that it does not seem necessary give any special proof of it. Therefore, when we see something with which it is not the case as explained of bodies, but which takes diverse and manifold forms even while the previous form has not disappeared or become erased from it, then it must be admitted that this thing cannot be a body.³⁰⁶

Concerning the incorporeality of the soul, Miskawayh relied on Aristotelian and Neoplatonic sources. For example, in Prop. 186 *Elements of Theology*, Proclus states categorically that every soul is an incorporeal substance and separable from the body.

For if it know itself, and if whatever knows itself reverts upon itself (prop.83), and what reverts upon itself is neither body (since no body is capable of this activity [prop.15]) nor inseparable from body (since, again, what is inseparable from body is incapable of reversion upon itself, which would involve separation [prop.16]), it will follow that soul is neither a corporeal substance nor inseparable from body.³⁰⁷

Miskawayh advances a second argument for the soul being immaterial (i.e., not a body).

All the members, external and internal, small and great, of all animals (of whom man is one) are made for a purpose, and each member is the instrument for such special purpose as cannot be achieved except by means of such an instrument. So when all the members are reckoned to be instruments, it is then necessary that there should be someone to use them, e.g., the carpenter and the builder and

³⁰⁶ Miskawayh, *al-Fauz al-Asghar in Islam and Christian Theology: A Study of the Interpretation of Theological Ideas in the Two Religions*, trans. by J. Windrow Sweetman, (London: Lutterworth Press, 1945), part 1, vol. 1, 118. Cf. Aristotle, *De Anima*, 429a, 27ff, “It was a good idea to call the soul the place of forms, though this description holds good only for the intellectual soul.” See also, Aristotle, *De Anima*, 431b, 27ff, “Within the soul the faculties of knowledge and sensation are potentially these objects, the one what is knowable and the other what is sensible. They must be either the things themselves or their forms. The former alternative is, of course, not possible. It is not the stone which is present in the soul but its form. It follows that the soul is analogous to the hand; for as the hand is the tool of tools, so the mind is the form of forms, and sense the form of sensible.” Cf. also Proclus, *Elements of Theology*, trans. by E. R. Dodds, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1963), Prop. 195, “Every soul is all things, the things of sense after the manner of an exemplar and the intelligible things after the manner of an image. For being intermediate between the indivisible principles and those which are divided in association with body (prop. 190), it produces and originates the latter and likewise manifests its own causes, from which it has proceeded. Now those things whereof it is the pre-existent cause it pre-embraces in the exemplary mode, and those from which it took its origin it possesses by participation as generated products of the primal orders. Accordingly it pre-embraces all sensible things after the manner of a cause, possessing the rational notions of material things immaterially, of bodily things incorporeally, of extended things without extension; on the other hand it possesses as images the intelligible principles, and has received their Forms—the Forms of undivided existents parcelwise, of unitary existents as manifold, of unmoved existents as self-moved. Thus every soul is all that is, the primal orders by participation and those posterior to it in the exemplary mode.”

³⁰⁷ Proclus, *Elements of Theology*, trans. by E. R. Dodds, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1963), Prop. 186.

others use tools. If one member uses another member, this would be quite unreasonable, for that member proposed as the user is itself the instrument in some work or a part of some member. And it has been conceded that all members are capable of being used in the way of tools. So it is certain that the one who employs them all must be distinct from them. Thus since the user is someone other and is not a part, it is certain that it cannot be. . . And it is certain also that it will not serve instead of body and will not comprise bodily instrument (i.e., will not be the place of bodily instruments). Because, by reason of its not being a body, it has no need of place.³⁰⁸ It will also use equally at one time all those instruments which have been made for diverse purposes and will fulfill those purposes without any error or infirmity, so that by all the instruments a set purpose may be achieved. It is clear that all the attributes mentioned above cannot be qualities of body and all this work cannot be accomplished by bodies.³⁰⁹

Additionally, this points to the fact that the rational soul is not an accident or a disposition. It perceives simple and complex things, hidden and visible but with different faculties.³¹⁰ Even though the soul is one and indivisible, can it perceive different things with different faculties and in different ways?³¹¹

Now we will explain this with greater clearness. The rational soul perceives intelligibles by one method and sensible by another. That is, the power of perception is one but the mode varies. For when the soul is in quest of intelligibles and wishes to perceive them, it reverts³¹² to its own essence which is separated and pure from matter, and casts about as though in search of some-

³⁰⁸ Cf. Aristotle, *De Anima*, 406a, 16ff, “But if the essence of soul be to move itself, its being moved cannot be incidental to it, as it is to what is white or three cubits long; they too can be moved, but only incidentally—what is moved is that of which white and three cubits long are the attributes, the body in which they inhere; hence they have no place: but if the soul naturally partakes in movement, it follows that it must have a place. Cf. also, Dante, *Paradiso*, Cant. xxvii, 109ff.

³⁰⁹ Miskawayh, *al-Fauz al-Asghar in Islam and Christian Theology: A Study of the Interpretation of Theological Ideas in the Two Religions*, trans. by J. Windrow Sweetman, (London: Lutterworth Press, 1945), part 1, vol. 1, 119–120.

³¹⁰ Miskawayh, *al-Fauz al-Asghar in Islam and Christian Theology: A Study of the Interpretation of Theological Ideas in the Two Religions*, trans. by J. Windrow Sweetman, (London: Lutterworth Press, 1945), part 1, vol. 1, 120. Cf. also Aristotle, *De Anima*, 431b, 20ff, “Let us now summarize our results about soul, and repeat that the soul is in a way all existing things; for existing things are either sensible or thinkable, and knowledge is in a way what is knowable, and sensation is in a way what is sensible: in what way we must inquire. . .”

³¹¹ See Sharif, *A History of Muslim Philosophy*, vol. 1, 473.

³¹² Cf. Proclus, Prop. 81, “All that is participated without loss of separateness is present to the participant through an inseparable potency which it implants.” Cf. also Proclus, Prop. 82, “Every incorporeal, if it be capable of reverting upon itself, when participated by other things is participated without loss of separateness.” Cf. also, Proclus, Prop. 83, “All that is capable of self-knowledge is capable of every form of self-reversion.” See also Sweetman, *Islam and Christian Theology: A Study of the Interpretation of Theological Ideas in the Two Religions*, trans. by J. Windrow Sweetman, (London: Lutterworth Press, 1945), part 1, vol. 1, 124, note 1, “Here in the act of intellection the soul reverts upon itself in contradistinction to its apprehension of sensibles when the soul is directed to that which is outside itself.”

near to itself.³¹³

Basically, Miskawayh's answer is twofold. Here, Sherif simplifies Miskawayh's position by explaining that from a Platonic perspective, similar perceives similar, and from an Aristotelian perspective that the soul has one faculty that it uses to perceive complex material things and another to perceive simple non-material things, but in different ways.³¹⁴ Here, also, Miskawayh cites Themistius (317–390) who he says presented this topic in a “most excellent fashion in his book of the soul.”³¹⁵

Aristotle, Augustine, and Bonaventure on the Soul/Mind

In Aristotle's *On the Soul*, one passage especially stands out as the one cited authoritatively by the Averroists in proof of the existence of an “active intellect”—the entity responsible for human cognitive activity. Medieval Islamic, Jewish, and Christian philosophers studied and debated this passage intensely:

Mind as we have described it is what it is by virtue of becoming all things, while there is another which is what it is by virtue of making all things: this is a sort of positive state, like light; for in a sense, light makes potential colours into actual colours. . . . Mind in this sense of it is separable, impassible, unmixed, since it is in its essential nature activity (for always the active is superior to the passive factor, the originating force to the matter which it forms).³¹⁶

Aristotle posited that two factors characterize every class of things: (1) matter, potentially all particulars of a class; and, (2) cause or agency, transforming matter from potentiality to actuality.³¹⁷ These distinct elements, reasoned Aristotle, must also be characteristic of the human

³¹³ Miskawayh, *al-Fauz al-Asghar in Islam and Christian Theology: A Study of the Interpretation of Theological Ideas in the Two Religions*, trans. by J. Windrow Sweetman, (London: Lutterworth Press, 1945), part 1, vol. 1, 124.

³¹⁴ See Sharif, *A History of Muslim Philosophy*, vol. 1, 473.

³¹⁵ Miskawayh, *al-Fauz al-Asghar in Islam and Christian Theology: A Study of the Interpretation of Theological Ideas in the Two Religions*, trans. by J. Windrow Sweetman, (London: Lutterworth Press, 1945), part 1, vol. 1, 125. See also Themistius's *Commentary on De Anima*.

³¹⁶ Aristotle, *De Anima*, 3.5.430^a15-25, 592.

³¹⁷ Aristotle, *De Anima*, 3.5.430^a10-15, 591-592.

soul. “Mind is what it is,” observed Aristotle, “by virtue of becoming all things, while there is another which is what it is by virtue of making all things.”³¹⁸ This active intellect—or mind (*nous*) as Aristotle called it—is impassible and unmixed.³¹⁹ Averroes similarly commented as follows: “This is another explanation. The material intellect is neither the body nor a virtue in the body. . . . It is not mixed with the body.”³²⁰ “Although Aristotle did not even expressly coin the term *active intellect* for the second of the two intellects,” observed Herbert A. Davidson, “the seed he sowed grew not merely into a mighty oak, but into a veritable, barely penetrable forest.”³²¹

Aristotle wrote that the rational part of the soul must be potentially identical to its object, that which it is trying to cognize, without being or becoming the object.³²² If thinking is like perceiving, he stated, then this “thinking part of the soul” must be impassible (*apathes*), “capable of receiving the form of an object,” unmixed (*amiges*), and separable (*choristos*).³²³ That is, the intellect—the rational part of the soul—receives sensations and converts them into images (*phantasmata*), which continue to last after the object is no longer present. As raw data, these images become concepts.³²⁴ This is the process of abstraction, a process that the rational mind carries out. “Mind must be related to what is thinkable, as sense is to what is sensible.”³²⁵

³¹⁸ Aristotle, *De Anima*, 3.5.430^a15, 592.

³¹⁹ Aristotle, *De Anima*, 3.5.430^a15-20, 592.

³²⁰ Averroes *Aristotelis opera cum Averrois commentariis*, 3.6F, 153 ver.: “Haec est alia demonstratio quod intellectus materialis non est aliquid hoc, neque corpus, neque virtus in corpore. . . . Ergo non est mixtum cum corpore.”

³²¹ Herbert A. Davidson, “Averroes on the Active Intellect as a Cause of Existence,” *Viator* 18 (1987): 191.

³²² Aristotle, *De Anima*, 3.3.429^a15, 592.

³²³ Aristotle, *De Anima*, 3.5.430^a15, 592.

³²⁴ Cf. Aristotle, *De Anima* 429^a29–b⁵ for the distinction between the impassibility of the sense organ and the mind.

³²⁵ Aristotle, *De Anima* 3.3.429^a15, 492.

In other words, the mind abstracts the form from the matter of the sensible object, and then the form actualizes the potentiality of the mind for thinking it, thereby actually allowing form to be present and exist in the mind itself. Averroes interpreted this abstraction to be the disposition of the human material intellect to receive intellectual thoughts within imaginative forms.³²⁶ That is, the material intellect is a type of disposition in the imaginative faculty of the human soul.³²⁷

The human mind (*nous*) is part active and part passive. The passive intellect becomes what it thinks. What the passive intellect thinks, according to Aristotle, “must be in it just as characters may be said to be on a writing-tablet on which as yet nothing actually stands written: This is exactly what happens with mind.”³²⁸ Since “act precedes potency,” according to Aristotle,³²⁹ the intellect energizes the passive intellect to carry out the process of abstraction, whereby the active intellect abstracts forms from sensible matter and actualizes the passive intellect’s potential for thinking.³³⁰

Aristotle did not in fact say much about the nature of the active intellect other than it is always in act, immutable, eternal, and separate from the body; neither was he clear, as Diogenes Allen noted, as to whether there is one active intellect common to all persons or whether each person

³²⁶ Averroes, *De anima cum Averrois commentariis* 3.18E, 161 v.: “Et fuit necesse attribuere has duas actiones in nobis animae, recipere intellectum, et facere eum, quamvis agens et recipies sint substantiae aeternae propter hoc, quia hae duae actiones reductae sunt ad nostram voluntate abstrahere intellecta, et intelligere ea. Abstrahere enim nihil est aliud quam facere intentiones imaginatas in actu, postquam erant in potentia. Intelligere aut nihil est aliud quam recipere has intentiones.”

³²⁷ Averroes, 3.18B, 161 r.: “Causa enim propter quam facit intellectum, qui est in potentia, intelligere omnia in actu, nihil aliud est nisi quam sit in actu. Hoc enim, quia est in actu, est causa ut intelligat in actu omnia. . . Et hoc pronomen, ipsum, potest referri ad intellectum materiale, sicut diximus: et potest referri ad hominem intelligentem. . . Cum enim invenimus idem transferri in suo esse de ordine in ordinem, intentiones imaginatas, diximus quam necesse est ut hoc sit agente et recipiente. Recipiens igitur est materialis et agens est efficiens.”

³²⁸ Aristotle, *De Anima* 3.4.430^a, 591-592.

³²⁹ Aristotle, *De Anima*, 3.4.430^a, 591-592.

³³⁰ Diogenes Allen, *Philosophy for Understanding Theology* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1985), 131.

possesses his or her own active intellect.³³¹ The commentators Theophrastus (360-287 B.C.) and Alexander of Aphrodisias (ca. 200 A.D.) introduced the term “agent intellect.”³³² Though the agent intellect shares the same characteristics—separable, unmixed, and impassible—with the material intellect, Averroes purported that the agent intellect’s nature is always in act, whereas that of the material intellect is in potentiality.³³³ The agent intellect empowers the human mind to actualize the intellectual potential.³³⁴

When Bonaventure speaks of uncreated light in relation to human cognitive activity, for example, he is thinking of both Divine Light as well as the natural light of the human intellect (*lumen naturale*). For Bonaventure, the difference between the two is quite obvious.

Bonaventure writes that from its creation, the human soul has a light (*lumen*), a natural light (*lumen naturale*), which guides the intellect as it sets out to acquire knowledge.³³⁵ God created this light to be in some degree conformable to Himself.³³⁶ According to Bonaventure, the created natural light of the human intellect is connatural and inseparable from it.³³⁷ In addition,

³³¹ Cf. Arthur Hyman, “Averroes’ Theory of the Intellect and the Ancient Commentators,” in *Averroes and the Aristotelian Tradition*, ed. by Gerhard Endress and Jan A. Aertsen (Leiden: Brill, 1999), 197.

³³² Hyman, 190.

³³³ Averroes 3.17F, 160 v.: “Cum declaravit naturam intellectus, qui est in potentia, et qui est in actu, et dedit differentiam inter ipsum et virtutem imaginationis, incepit declarare quam necessarium est tertium genus intellectus esse: et est intelligentia agens, quae facit intellectum, qui est in potentia, esse intellectus in actu.”

³³⁴ Averroes 3.18B, 161 r.: “Et cum necesse est inveniri in parte animae quae dicitur intellectus, istas tres differentias, necesse est ut in eo sit pars, quae dicitur intellectus secundum quod efficitur omne, modo similitudinis, et receptionis: et quod in ea sit etiam secunda pars, quae dicitur intellectus, secundum quod facit istum intellectum, qui est in potentia intelligere omnia in actu. Causa enim propter quam facit intellectum, qui est in potentia, intelligere omnia in actu, nihil aliud est nisi quod sit in actu. Hoc enim, quia est in actu, est causa ut intelligat in actu omnia: et quod in ea etiam sit tertia pars, quae deinde intellectus quam facit omnem intellectum in potentia esse intellectum in actu.”

³³⁵ Bonaventure *Sent.* II, d. 39, a. 2, q. 1, 944: “Ab ipsa creatione animae intellectus habet lumen, quod est sibi naturale iudicatorium, dirigens ipsum intellectum in cognoscendis.”

³³⁶ Bonaventure *Sent.* II, d. 17, a. 1, q. 1, ad 6, 424: “Cum autem sit omnipotentissima, potest producere et facere lucem creatam aliquo modo sibi conformem; quae tamen sibi non sufficit, etiam postquam producta est nisi adsit ei summae lucis influentia.”

³³⁷ Bonaventure *Sent.* IV, d. 6, p. 1, a. 1, q. 1, 126: “Similiter in intellectu est lumen connaturale, inseparabile, non sufficiens ad dirigendam cognitionem, nisi superveniat habitus scientiae.”

Bonaventure writes that our intellect understands nothing unless in the first light (*prima lux*) and truth.³³⁸

Augustine needed some way to account for eternal principles, since anything that we can perceive with our senses is mutable, finite, and imperfect. He reasoned that mutable, fallible, and finite senses could not grasp eternal principles *per se*. Plato had handled this by positing his theory of recollection—all knowledge is recollection.³³⁹ Aristotle, however, had argued that our intellect abstracts eternal principles from particulars.³⁴⁰ Augustine, not entirely accepting either of these options, was more concerned with certitude than with origin.³⁴¹ Just as the eye sees a properly illuminated object, so too can the mind see eternal truths when they are properly illuminated by God.

. . . and this is the mind to which has been allotted a kind of power to see invisible things, and to which the senses of the body also bring all things for judgment as it presides, so to say, in the innermost and uppermost place of honor, and which has nothing above it to whose government it is subject except God.³⁴²

According to Augustine, the human intellect requires a special illumination from God—divine illumination—to grasp eternal principles.

And so it was with me at that time, when I did not know that my soul needed to be illumined by another light, if it was to be a partaker of truth, since it is not itself the essence of truth.³⁴³

³³⁸ Bonaventure *Sent.* I, d. 8, p. 1, a. 1, q. 2, 118: “Intellectus noster nihil intelligit nisi per primam lucem et veritatem, ergo omnis actio intellectus, quae est in cogitando aliquid non esse, est per primam lucem; sed per primam lucem non contingit cogitare, non esse primam lucem sive veritatem: ergo nullo modo contingit cogitare, primam veritatem non esse.”

³³⁹ Plato *Meno* 85C-D, 370.

³⁴⁰ Aristotle, *De Anima*, 2.5 417^b-419^b, 565-570.

³⁴¹ Marrone, *Certitude of God?* 149: “In short, talk about divine illumination was commonly an integral part of discussion both of knowledge of the truth and of cognitive certitude.”

³⁴² Augustine, *De Trinitate*, 15.6.49 (CCSL, L., 531): “. . . quod est ipsa mens cui quidam rerum inuisibilium tributus est visus, et cui tamquam in loco superiore atque interiore honorabiliter praesidenti iudicanda omnia nuntiant etiam corporis sensus, et qua non est superior cui subdita regenda est nisi deus.”

³⁴³ Augustine, *Confessions*, 4.15, 86.

He believed that the light of eternal principles exists within the human soul itself, thereby providing proper lighting for the soul to be aware of and to grasp them. Albeit such light emanates from God, that light is not the source of our ideas but is rather the measure against which we judge the certainty, truth, and eternity of eternal principles.³⁴⁴ For Augustine, then, divine illumination is not a cognitive process whereby our intellects acquire ideas and concepts, as the Averroists thought, but rather it is the enlightenment of our judgment that allows us to perceive the eternal and immutable truths of our ideas.³⁴⁵ For Olivi, this explanation would not suffice. “Since this enlightenment,” comments Olivi, “is from God through creation rather than through continuation or through presence, it relates more to God insofar as He is the efficient cause, rather than to the natural light of our intellect or to some habit of it.”³⁴⁶

Augustine (354–430) did, however, embrace the belief that divine illumination makes it possible for the intellect to know these remembered notions. That is to say, divine illumination allows the intellect the possibility of knowing those things that it already claims to know whether they be *a priori* truths, principles, or sensible objects. As a result of this illumination, all human intellects can—presumably in this lifetime, as Augustine implies—come to know these eternal principles that exist as ideas in the mind of God.³⁴⁷ Augustine wrote in *On Free Will* that all persons seek wisdom, a combination of truth and happiness. He also maintained that because the human

³⁴⁴ Marrone, *Certitude of God?*, 148.

³⁴⁵ Samuel Enoch Stumpf, *Philosophy: History and Problems* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co., 1977), 145-146.

³⁴⁶ Olivi, *De Deo Cognoscendo*, Qu. 2, 513: “Cum enim haec irradiatio sit a Deo per creationem quam continuationem vel praesentiam, potest habere maiorem ad Deum, in quantum est causa efficiens, quam lumen naturale intellectus nostri aut quam aliquis habitus eius.”

³⁴⁷ Bruce Bubacz, *St. Augustine’s Theory of Knowledge: a Contemporary Analysis* (New York: Edwin Mellen Press, 1981), 147.

intellect cannot rely solely on the fallible and mutable bodily senses, it must also therefore necessarily come to rely on God Himself, the principle of understanding.³⁴⁸

Bonaventure (1221–1274), on the other hand, posited that in addition to divine illumination, natural light enables the human intellect to carry out its normal cognitive activities. From its creation, according to Bonaventure, the soul possesses in the intellect a natural light that directs it in acquiring remembered notions.³⁴⁹ This natural light, according to Bonaventure, not only completes the soul but also belongs to the soul itself and enables it to comprehend and abstract ideas from the objects that it encounters. This created, natural light in the intellect is connatural with, and inseparable from, the intellect. Yet by itself, the created light of the created intellect is not sufficient for certainty in the comprehension of anything without the illuminating rays of faith.³⁵⁰

If eternal principles assist and inform the intellect in its cognitive activity, then they do so in the same way that the remembered notions assist and inform the intellect, as opposed to the way that the notions in the focal point of the intellect assist and inform it. That is to say, remembered notions relate to the focal point of the intellect as a visible object relates to the pupil of the eye.³⁵¹ In the process of intellectualization, the focal point of the intellect turns to the remembered notions—a kind of database of stored information, namely memories, *a priori* knowledge, principles—from which it acquires data for its cognitive functions.

³⁴⁸ Augustine, *Confessions*, 4.15, 86.

³⁴⁹ Bonaventure *Sent.* II, d. 39, a. 2, q. 1, 944: “Ab ipsa creatione animae intellectus habet lumen, quod est sibi naturale iudicatorium, dirigens ipsum intellectum in cognoscendis.”

³⁵⁰ Bonaventure *Sent.* IV d. 5, a. 3, q. 1, ad 3, 119: “Et sicut ad ea quae supra naturam sunt solus Deus elevat cognitivam, infundendo habitum cognitivum; . . .cognitiva, Deo cooperante, potest se perficere aliquo habitu naturali, utpote cognitionis naturalis, aliquo vero non, utpote infusae.”

³⁵¹ Bonaventure, *De Deo Cognoscendo*, Qu. 2, 507: “Quia secundum Augustinum, species quae sunt in memoria se habent ad aciem sicut se habet obiectum visibile ad aciem oculi.”

Miskawayh and the Immortality of the Soul

With respect to the topic of the soul's immortality, Miskawayh cites Aristotle in chapter five and then Plato in chapter six. With respect to Plato, he mentions three arguments briefly: (1) The soul bestows life on all those things in which life is to be found; (2) Everything susceptible to corruption is so corrupted by reason of some badness in it³⁵²; and (3) The soul moves by an essential movement, and that thing which is moved per se (by its essence) cannot be corruptible, therefore the soul also is incorruptible.³⁵³

In chapters seven and eight, Miskawayh draws on Plato's *Laws* and *Timaeus*. Miskawayh points out that it was Plato who said that the essence of the soul is motion, "For in the book *The Laws* he wrote that the essence and substance of that thing which moves its essence is itself movement."³⁵⁴ In fact, Miskawayh claims that the soul's movement is circular because of its nature.

The soul continues always in this motion and because it is not bodily
motion therefore it is not movement in place and it is also not outside

³⁵² Sweetman notes that Miskawayh's second argument is more Neoplatonic than Platonic. The view that evil does not exist and that the soul by its very nature is good is Plotinian. See Plotinus, *Enneads*, I.8.7, trans. by Stephen MacKenna, (New York: Pantheon Books Inc., [1957]) "But why does the existence of the Principle of Good necessarily comport the existence of the Principle of Evil? Is it because the All necessarily comports the existence of Matter? Yes: for necessarily this All is made up of contraries: it could not exist if Matter did not. The Nature of the Cosmos is, therefore, a blend; it is blended from the Intellectual-Principle and Necessity: what comes into it from God is good; evil is from 'the Ancient Kind'—a phrase which means the underlying Matter not yet brought to order by the Ideal-Form."

³⁵³ Miskawayh, *al-Fauz al-Asghar in Islam and Christian Theology: A Study of the Interpretation of Theological Ideas in the Two Religions*, trans. by J. Windrow Sweetman, (London: Lutterworth Press, 1945), part 1, vol. 1, 133–135.

³⁵⁴ Miskawayh, *al-Fauz al-Asghar in Islam and Christian Theology: A Study of the Interpretation of Theological Ideas in the Two Religions*, trans. by J. Windrow Sweetman, (London: Lutterworth Press, 1945), part 1, vol. 1, 136. See also Plato, *Laws*, 895c–896c; See also Aristotle, *De Anima*, 405b, 31ff; "Such are the traditional opinions concerning soul, together with the grounds on which they are maintained. We must begin our examination with movement: for, doubtless, not only is it false that the essence of soul is correctly described by those who say that it is what moves (or capable of moving) itself, but it is an impossibility that movement should be even an attribute of it." See also Proclus, *Elements of Theology*, Prop. 20, "Beyond all bodies is the soul's essence; beyond all souls, the intellective principle; and beyond all intellective substances, the One: For every body is moved by something not itself: self-movement is contrary to its nature, but by communication in soul it is moved from within, and because of soul it has life. When the soul is present, the body is in some sense self-moved, but not when soul is absent: showing that body is naturally moved from without, while self-movement is of soul's essence."

the essence of the soul. For this reason Plato said that the substance of the soul, i.e., its essence, is motion.³⁵⁵

Miskawayh goes on to say that the motion of the soul is of two kinds, namely, one towards the intellect and one towards matter.

When the soul moves towards the intellect it acquires light and splendor, and itself becomes bright and illuminated.

He argues that the movement of the soul is analogous to the movement of the heavens, and likewise the life of the heavens is more “honourable” and “complete” than the life of created things, “because the universe of becoming and corruption is the lowest stage from the heaven and the movement of generated things is obtained from the soul by the medium of the heaven.”³⁵⁶ Moreover, Miskawayh explains that the farther away the effect gets from its cause, then the number of intermediaries in between grows, and the effect will increasingly lose its likeness to its cause.³⁵⁷

³⁵⁵ Miskawayh, *al-Fauz al-Asghar in Islam and Christian Theology: A Study of the Interpretation of Theological Ideas in the Two Religions*, trans. by J. Windrow Sweetman, (London: Lutterworth Press, 1945), part 1, vol. 1, 136. Miskawayh is speaking here of the concept of procession and reversion. See also Plato, *Timaeus*, 36b; See also Proclus, *Elements of Theology*, Prop. 33, “All that proceeds from any principle and reverts upon it has a cyclic activity.” See also Proclus, *Elements of Theology*, Prop. 199, “Every intra-mundane soul has in its proper life periods and cyclic reinstatements.” See also Proclus, *Elements of Theology*, Prop. 200, “Every psychic period is measured by time; but while the periods of the other souls are measured by some particular time, that of the first soul measured by time has the whole of time for measure.” Cf. Plato, *Laws*, 896b–c, “Then must not the motion which, wherever it arises, is induced by something else, but never confers the power of self-motion on anything, come second in the scale, or as low down as you please to put it, being, in fact, change in a truly soulless body. . . . Consequently, it will be a right, decisive, true, and final statement to assert, as we did, that soul is prior to body, body secondary and derivative, soul governing in the real order of things, and body being subject to governance.”

³⁵⁶ Miskawayh, *al-Fauz al-Asghar in Islam and Christian Theology: A Study of the Interpretation of Theological Ideas in the Two Religions*, trans. by J. Windrow Sweetman, (London: Lutterworth Press, 1945), part 1, vol. 1, 138.

³⁵⁷ Miskawayh, *al-Fauz al-Asghar in Islam and Christian Theology: A Study of the Interpretation of Theological Ideas in the Two Religions*, trans. by J. Windrow Sweetman, (London: Lutterworth Press, 1945), part 1, vol. 1, 138. Cf. Plotinus, *Enneads*, V.8.1, “. . . everything that reaches outwards is the less for it, strength less strong, heat less hot, every power less potent, and so beauty less beautiful.” Cf. Proclus, *Elements of Theology*, Prop. 64, “. . . Accordingly those substances which are complete in themselves, while by their discrimination into a manifold they fall short of their original monad, are yet in some wise assimilated to it by their self-complete existence; whereas the incomplete not only as existing in another fall away from the monad which exists in itself, but also as incomplete from the all-completing monad. But all procession advances through similarities until it reaches the wholly dissimilar.”

In chapters eight and nine, Miskawayh deals with the two conditions of the soul, namely, happiness and misery. Whether a soul is happy or miserable depends on which direction it takes. The closer it gets to its essence, the happier it gets, while the closer it gets to the material, the unhappier it gets because it is getting farther from its cause, namely God.

One moves the soul towards its essence, i.e., that motion which the soul makes towards the intellect, which is God's First Creation, and which is never in any circumstances or for any reason cut off from the bounty of its First Principle and Cause. . . It is clear that one of these brings the soul to happiness and causes it to gain that immortality and perpetuity which is fitting of it. And the other movement by the other direction is for the soul a cause of decline and exodus or projection from its essence.³⁵⁸

Miskawayh then explained that even though "ancient philosophers" who spoke to this issue referred to these two directions as "high" and "low", they only used these two terms for lack of any better terms to use.³⁵⁹ In short, if the soul properly sets its sights upward, then its own essence will merge with God's essence so that unity or oneness is once again introduced into the universe. Only when the soul willingly turns away from God does its essence become separate from God's essence and thus, "it reaps a sort of misery which this direction entails."³⁶⁰ Quoting Plato, Miskawayh claims that philosophy itself is a kind of voluntary death, or a "habituation to death."

On account of this theory, Plato says that philosophy is habituation to death. For to Plato, death and life are of two kinds, because the life which the soul has by its motion upwards is other than that which is produced by its movement

³⁵⁸ Miskawayh, *al-Fauz al-Asghar in Islam and Christian Theology: A Study of the Interpretation of Theological Ideas in the Two Religions*, trans. by J. Windrow Sweetman, (London: Lutterworth Press, 1945), part 1, vol. 1, 139.

³⁵⁹ Miskawayh, *al-Fauz al-Asghar in Islam and Christian Theology: A Study of the Interpretation of Theological Ideas in the Two Religions*, trans. by J. Windrow Sweetman, (London: Lutterworth Press, 1945), part 1, vol. 1, 139. Miskawayh writes, "It remains to say that the Law of Islam calls these two directions by the names "Right" and "Left". Cf. Plotinus, *Enneads*, VI.4.16, "So long as the image-soul has not been discarded, clearly the **higher** [emphasis mine] will be where that is; if, on the contrary, the higher has been completely emancipated by philosophic discipline, the image-soul may very well go alone to that **lower** [emphasis mine] place, the authentic passing uncontaminated into the Intellectual, separated from that image but none the less the soul entire. Let the image—offspring of the individuality—fare as it may, the true soul when it turns its light upon itself, chooses the higher and by that choice blends into the All, neither acting now nor extinct."

³⁶⁰ Miskawayh, *al-Fauz al-Asghar in Islam and Christian Theology: A Study of the Interpretation of Theological Ideas in the Two Religions*, trans. by J. Windrow Sweetman, (London: Lutterworth Press, 1945), part 1, vol. 1, 140.

downwards. For this reason there are also two sorts of death, for there is an opposition in both kinds of life and death. The life which the soul has by moving toward the intellect, Plato calls “natural life” and he calls movement towards matter “voluntary life,” and on this basis he holds as opposed to these natural death and voluntary death.³⁶¹

However, as Sharif points out, Miskawayh quickly corrects himself by stating that this voluntary death does not mean that one should renounce the world but rather partake in it and experience happiness.

It is fitting that every person should gain the world according to his dignity and rank. That of which he is worthy that he should receive. . . He should continue to walk the straight path of the true Law and perform his religious duties, possess good morals and pleasing qualities. In short, this is the straight path of understanding. Acting on it is the way to salvation, and the way to happiness. And in this way the bliss and well-being of both worlds is possible.³⁶²

Here, I believe this to be the core of Miskawayh’s philosophy and would agree with Sharif that this would explain Miskawayh’s interest in ethics.³⁶³

The last chapter of the second part, namely chapter ten, deals with the question of immortality. Miskawayh begins by stating that it has already been proved that upon death, our intellectual soul survives. In this state of immortality, the soul is either happy or miserable.

Whatever degrees and stations there are of the nature, of the soul, and of the intellect, their state is this: every station has no acquaintance with the one above it, but comprehends and is informed of the degrees under it, and according to the extent of their desert and capacity bounty reaches it. . . Like-wise with the opposite of the happy soul, the wicked and miserable. The wicked soul is perfected by its bad form, for the form of everything is its perfection. And because the overflowing bounty of the divine is cut off from it, due to Its being unreceptive to the overflow, and having no capacity for the spiritual,

³⁶¹ Miskawayh, *al-Fauz al-Asghar in Islam and Christian Theology: A Study of the Interpretation of Theological Ideas in the Two Religions*, trans. by J. Windrow Sweetman, (London: Lutterworth Press, 1945), part 1, vol. 1, 140. Cf. Plato, *Phaedo*, 81c, “And we must suppose, my dear fellow, that the corporeal is heavy, oppressive, earthly, and visible. So the soul which is tainted by its presence is weighed down and dragged back into the visible world, through fear, as they say, of Hades or the invisible, and hover about the tombs and graveyards.”

³⁶² Miskawayh, *al-Fauz al-Asghar in Islam and Christian Theology: A Study of the Interpretation of Theological Ideas in the Two Religions*, trans. by J. Windrow Sweetman, (London: Lutterworth Press, 1945), part 1, vol. 1, 143.

³⁶³ See Sharif, *A History of Muslim Philosophy*, vol. 1, 474.

The wicked soul is continually in affliction and trouble essential to it, and this Affliction and punishment are never separate from it.³⁶⁴

Basically, a soul that gets off track or loses sight of its direction becomes bogged down with the material, with the sinful, with despair.

But when desire prevails over the sense and sensibles, then it moves the soul to occupy itself with the delights of the body as, for instance, the pleasures of food, clothes and copulation, etc. When wrath spreads it moves the soul to vengeance and stirs it up to occupy itself with the pursuit of honour, dominion, and the love of preeminence and rule. But all these desires plunge the soul into error and hinder it in its proper motion. They are superficial adornment and guilt and have no reality in themselves.³⁶⁵

Such desires, according to Miskawayh, weigh down the soul thereby rendering it impotent and thus getting in the way of its happiness. Miskawayh writes, “They make a veil for the soul just as when tarnish adheres to a mirror preventing it from its perfection.”³⁶⁶

³⁶⁴ Miskawayh, *al-Fauz al-Asghar in Islam and Christian Theology: A Study of the Interpretation of Theological Ideas in the Two Religions*, trans. by J. Windrow Sweetman, (London: Lutterworth Press, 1945), part 1, vol. 1, 154. Cf. Plotinus, *Enneads*, I.8.10, “Thus it is quite correct to say at once that Matter is without Quality and that it is evil: it is Evil not in the sense of not having Quality but, precisely, in not having it; give it Quality and in its very Evil it would almost be a Form, whereas in truth it is a Kind of contrary to Form.” In other words, the closer we get to divinity, the more spiritual we become (or the more immaterial) and thereby attain not only the quality of virtue (our starting point) but also the quality of beauty. On the other hand, the farther from divinity (our cause) we descend, the more material we become thereby losing our quality since here our starting point is vice. Our soul, simply speaking, becomes evil because it is devoid of quality at this point.

³⁶⁵ Miskawayh, *al-Fauz al-Asghar in Islam and Christian Theology: A Study of the Interpretation of Theological Ideas in the Two Religions*, trans. by J. Windrow Sweetman, (London: Lutterworth Press, 1945), part 1, vol. 1, 156.

³⁶⁶ Miskawayh, *al-Fauz al-Asghar in Islam and Christian Theology: A Study of the Interpretation of Theological Ideas in the Two Religions*, trans. by J. Windrow Sweetman, (London: Lutterworth Press, 1945), part 1, vol. 1, 156. Cf. Plotinus, *Enneads*, I.4.10, “When the Intellect is in upward orientation that (lower part of it) which contains (or, corresponds to) the life of the Soul, is, so to speak, flung down again and becomes like the reflection resting on the smooth and shining surface of a mirror; in this illustration, when the mirror is in place the image appears but, though the mirror be absent or out of gear, all that would have acted and produced an image still exists; so in the case of the Soul; when there is peace in that within us which is capable of reflecting the images of the Rational and Intellectual-Principles these images appear. Then, side by side with the primal knowledge of the activity of the Rational and the Intellectual-Principles, we have also as it were a sense-perception of their operation. . . . When, on the contrary, the mirror within is shattered through some disturbance of the harmony of the body, Reason and the Intellectual-Principle act unpictured: intellection is unattended by imagination.”

Chapter 8: *Tajarib al-Umam* (Experiences of Nations)

Introduction

As mentioned earlier, Miskawayh has a foot in both camps as a philosopher and a historian, or more specifically, as a moralist and a historian. Sharif refers to Miskawayh's ethics as *genetic*—namely, humanity's place and position in *cosmic evolution*.³⁶⁷ As Badruddin Bhat commented in his article "Miskawayh as an Historian," "He considers history as a practical discipline with a purely utilitarian purpose."³⁶⁸ But Miskawayh did not write history for its own sake; rather, it was his concern for gleaning morals from history, sharing life's lessons that history teaches, and admiring the inherent wisdom of history that can benefit all humanity. This, I argue along with others, is what puts Miskawayh in the company of sages.

Indeed he is by vocation a philosopher, or better still, a sage and not an historian. It was his devotion to wisdom and the concern to propogate it which led him to write a history; history studied for its own sake did not attract his attention.³⁶⁹

Also, writing the *Tajarib* was for Miskawayh a kind of purging and existential experience. That is, he needed to be of pure heart before tackling his work on moral philosophy. Furthermore, he needed to be existentially connected to the collective mind of history because history is, after all, only intelligible as an "expression of mind".³⁷⁰ In a sense, then, history helped put him in the right frame of mind to write moral philosophy, and it seemed logical to him that a work on moral philosophy should follow a work on history considering that he viewed history as a kind of introduction to practical guide to moral philosophy. Thus, it should not strike the reader as odd

³⁶⁷ Sharif, *A History of Muslim Philosophy*, vol. 1, 478.

³⁶⁸ Badruddin Bhat, "Miskawayh as an Historian," *Islamic Quarterly*, vol. 33, no. 22 (January 1989), 137.

³⁶⁹ Arkoun, Mohammed, "Ethics and According to the *Tajarib al-Umam* of Miskawaih," *Islamic Culture*, vol. 75, no. 2 (2001), 2.

³⁷⁰ See B. H. Siddiqi, "Ibn Miskawaih's Theory of History," *Iqbal*, vol. 12 (January 1963), 76.

that Miskawayh felt that he had to purify himself morally before he could even begin writing *Tahhib al-Aklaq*.³⁷¹

Miskawayh was an intellectual working at the edges of high politics. It is in the eleventh century when Arabic historical literature reaches its zenith during the rise of the Buwayhids.³⁷² I specifically cite Miskawayh here because I believe that he is the best representative of this genre of literature, that is, historical literature. Some scholars have argued that Miskawayh is perhaps the first Muslim philosopher who wrote a general history.³⁷³ Nevertheless, as a philosopher, Miskawayh approached history rationally and with an eye towards moral themes and lessons. In other words, history for him was but another source of practical ethics. Furthermore, even though Miskawayh's work deals with a period later than that of Tabari (839–923)—Persian scholar and historian—Miskawayh's history is not merely derivative but does, in fact, contain original matter.³⁷⁴

Miskawayh's Moralistic View of History

Miskawayh's history is scientific, philosophical, and to some extent critical.³⁷⁵ For him, history is a serious business. It is more than a glorified kind of gossip about royal personages. Instead, history is a reflection or an index to a society's birth and demise. He felt that a good scholarly historical account should be stripped of nonessential material such as legends, miracles, and other supernatural events since these serve no useful or practical purposes.³⁷⁶

³⁷¹ Sharif, *A History of Muslim Philosophy*, vol. 1, 478.

³⁷² See Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam*, vol. 1, 296, 451–457.

³⁷³ See Badruddin Bhat, "Miskawayh as an Historian," *Islamic Quarterly*, vol. 33, no. 22 (January 1989)

³⁷⁴ Amerdroz, H. F., "The *Tajarib al-Umam* of Abu 'Ali Miskawaih," *Zeitschrift Geschichte und Kultur des Islamische Orients*, vol. 5 (January 1914), 24.

³⁷⁵ Sharif, *A History of Muslim Philosophy*, vol. 1, 478.

³⁷⁶ Badruddin Bhat, "Miskawayh as an Historian," *Islamic Quarterly*, vol. 33, no. 2 (January 1989), 133.

A good Muslim historian should adhere to the following tenets.³⁷⁷ History is more than a mere grocery list of facts and events. It is a repository of human experiences, human behavior, and the human condition. The Muslim historian also realizes that nothing happens by accident. It is part of a larger plan of creation. History, then, is a living organism that is dynamic not static, nourished by humanity's hopes, desires, fears, and aspirations.

First, a historian should look not just at the facts but try to examine more closely the underlying motives behind specific events. Miskawayh peered beneath the surface to look for these motives and to analyze their moral implications and what these events have to say about human behavior. Miskawayh believed that because history repeats itself, we can understand better our moral obligations. In other words, as Mohammed Arkoun pointed out, Miskawayh realized that history has prepared for us an inventory of human behavior that we can examine from a moral point of view.³⁷⁸

Second, just as in nature, there are no accidents in history. Everything happens for a reason. Miskawayh understood that the point of history lies in a diversity from which everyone can find a lesson.

Thus it appears that the ordinary father of a family, the modest artisan, the little-known writer, provided they are receptive to wisdom, can draw more profit from the study of the *Tajarib*, than any prince who is a slave to his ambitions.³⁷⁹

³⁷⁷ See Sharif, *A History of Muslim Philosophy*, vol. 1, 478.

³⁷⁸ Mohammed Arkoun, "Ethics and History according to the *Tajarib al-Umam of Miskawaih*," *Islamic Culture*, vol. 75, issue 2 (January 2001), 3.

³⁷⁹ Arkoun, "Ethics and History according to the *Tajarib al-Umam of Miskawaih*," 6.

History for Miskawayh is a pre-cursor to his moral philosophy. It is an expression of the human mind and therefore consists of just as many layers and complexities. As Siddiqi said, “It can’t all be on the surface.”³⁸⁰

Third, as I mentioned earlier, the historian is akin to an artist. That is, as an artist, he is in a sense painting a picture for us of people’s fears, hopes, failures, and aspirations. Just as a painting is more than an arrangement of colors, so too is history more than a collection of data and events. The historian is creating a work of art that is informative, moving, multi-layered, and alive.

Fourth, history is a dynamic organism with an anatomy not all that unfamiliar to us. It possesses a heart which circulates throughout time the life-giving force of human experiences. These experiences keep history alive. It has a mind that holds memories of past events and the hopes of a nation, of a people. In his *Tajarib*, Miskawayh peered deeply into the mind of history only to discover “a network of intrigues and treacheries, of sordid lures and tricks.”³⁸¹

Sharif pulls this together by suggesting that Miskawayh’s way of writing history, namely his style, anticipates that of Western and many modern historians.

The very title of his work, *Tajarib al-Umam* (The Experiences of Nations), is itself suggestive of its aims and method, which, in the words of Leon Caetani, are “much akin to the principles followed by Western and more modern historians.”³⁸²

³⁸⁰ Siddiqi, “Ibn Miskawaih’s Theory of History,” 76.

³⁸¹ Siddiqi, “Ibn Miskawaih’s Theory of History,” 77.

³⁸² Sharif, *A History of Muslim Philosophy*, vol. 1, 479. See also, Leone Caetani, Preface to *Tajarib al-Umam*, Leyden, 1909, vol.1, p. xii.

Now, we can compare Sharif's observation with Miskawayh's to see the parallels between the two lists. Here, I paraphrase Badruddin Bhat's analysis of Miskawayh as a historian.³⁸³

Notable Features of Miskawayh as an Historian

Miskawayh was the first Muslim historian who saw history as having a purpose.³⁸⁴ He was very specific about what events to include and what to exclude. Typically, this depended on the moral point he was trying to make. Miskawayh had to tweak the two apart. This tweaking process illustrates history's three fundamental purposes: (1) History enriches our experience; (2) history perpetuates the lessons of past events; and (3) history allows us the opportunity to use reason and deliberation.³⁸⁵ He only included those facts necessary to the account and discarded what he considered to be superfluous material that would compromise the objective integrity of the actual factual account. Also, he figured that the reader would find too many irrelevant fact and data boring anyway.

Miskawayh had the advantage of obtaining his information of specific events from firsthand accounts of court officials, secretaries, clerks, wazirs among others. He happened to be in the right place at the right time and figured that these people would serve as good sources since they would have inside knowledge, so to speak, about the goings-on of government and such. Unlike other historians, Miskawayh wrote unabashedly and poignantly about his own period.

Previous historians avoided doing this because of what we might call today *political correctness*. They feared retribution were they to cast their rulers or other officials in a disparaging light. For

³⁸³ Bhat, "Miskawayh as an Historian," 132–136.

³⁸⁴ In what follows, I have summarized Bhat's major points from his article, "Miskawayh as an Historian," 132–136.

³⁸⁵ Arkoun, "Ethics and History according to the *Tajarib al-Umam* of Miskawaih," 8.

example, Tabari avoided giving details to political activities of his time. Miskawayh, however, never backed away from boldly criticizing those in the courts.

As a historian, Miskawayh is often noted for his impartiality and sound judgment.³⁸⁶ For instance, Miskawayh describes ‘Imad al-Daulah, as being a “dexterous but unscrupulous adventurer.” He also notes the reprobation of Mu‘izz al-Daulah who began his career with treachery. Moreover Miskawayh was also the first Muslim historian who tried to develop a system of historiography that focused on objectivity and clear rational thinking. In fact, his *Tajarib* serves as the primary historical source on the Buwayhid period.³⁸⁷

Now, the parallels between Sharif’s observations and those of Bhat should be apparent. They both see Miskawayh as a pioneer in Islamic historiography. Though Miskawayh’s approach is annalistic, by interweaving moral philosophy with historical objectivity, he showed that moral philosophy and political philosophy work together regarding historical objectivity to create for us an awareness of history thereby intertwining us with community. This, I believe, is what sets Miskawayh apart from other historians. In the *Tajarib*, existentialism touches humanism. The result of these two coming together is increased self-reflection and one’s own historic conditioning.

Overview of Islamic Historiography

Being first and foremost a philosopher, Miskawayh indeed peered beneath the surface to extricate those moral lessons bound up in life’s events. As a rationalist, he believed that everything had a rational explanation. Everything is to some extent predetermined thereby ruling

³⁸⁶ Siddiqi, “Ibn Miskawayh’s Theory of History,” *Iqbal*, vol. 12 (January 1963), 74.

³⁸⁷ Bhat, “Miskawayh as an Historian,” 132–136.

out the possibility that things happen by chance or accident. Next, Miskawayh viewed history as more than just a grocery list of events. Rather, all history was a kind of *muted gospel* waiting to instruct people on how to live better lives and how not to repeat the mistakes of the past. For Miskawayh, writing history was a different way of moralizing. Consider the following excerpt from his *Tajarib*.

When administration is based on unsound principles, the fact though it may be at first concealed manifests itself in course of time. It is as when a man diverges from the high road; a slight divergence may go unnoticed at the first, but if it continues he loses his direction, and the further he travels the further astray he is; and he becomes conscious of his error when it is too late to repair it. One such error committed by Mu'izz al-Daulah was that he allocated most of the districts of the Sawad in fief while they were out of cultivation and before they had returned to it, so that their value was reduced; in the next place the viziers were complaisant to the assignees, took bribes, in some cases receiving gratuities themselves, in others letting themselves be influenced by intermediaries. Thus the fiefs were assigned at variable rates.³⁸⁸

Previously, we examined Miskawayh as a philosopher who tweaked apart the evolution of creation, the human soul, and the human being himself. Here, Miskawayh's canvas was metaphysical—wherein the human soul evolves—as well as the physical—wherein the human soul strives for perfection. Soon thereafter, Miskawayh noticed that once the body and soul merge into one being, namely a human being (i.e., where *human* represents the physical part, namely, body, and *being* represents the metaphysical part, namely, soul), this newly created being emerges in time—nay, in history—as a historical being with a pre-determined destiny that will gradually unfold according to a divine plan.

Miskawayh turns to history as a tool that not only shows the succession of important events and people but also reveals an evolution of a kind of world soul that yearns for perfection as it makes

³⁸⁸ Miskawayh, *Tajarib al-Umam*, vol. 5, 100, section [97].

its way through time to some undisclosed yet divinely promised *telos* whereby history will teach its lessons or moral guidance whereby one can come to that existential understanding that his own perfection lies waiting in the warmth and unity of God.

On one level, writing history had to serve two fundamental purposes for the Muslim historian: It should be *useful*; and, it should *improve* the social standing of the person(s) who are the historian's patron(s) or acquainted with the historian himself.³⁸⁹ On another level, Miskawayh thought that a study of history would refine one's character, thereby equipping him with another set of intellectual accoutrements fundamental for success.³⁹⁰ That is, in a humanistic context, knowledge of history (or historical works) would presumably instill within the student political wisdom, refined conversational skills necessary for worldly success, and a sense of humility and piety—indispensable virtues in themselves guaranteed to hold one's place in the afterlife.³⁹¹ Interestingly enough, to some extent, along with the Arabs, the West perceived the same “material value of historical lessons.”³⁹²

Enough about the fact of common ground among them all, there is nothing more delightful to a man more refined, there is nothing virtuous of civil prudence more useful, than to know the history of the times.³⁹³

The point is that even today, we still raise the question of the value of history.

³⁸⁹ Franz Rosenthal, *A History of Muslim Historiography*, (Leiden: Brill, 1968), 61.

³⁹⁰ Siddiqi, “Miskawaih's Theory of History,” 75.

³⁹¹ Rosenthal, *A History of Muslim Historiography*, 60–61.

³⁹² Rosenthal, *A History of Muslim Historiography*, 61.

³⁹³ Gerardus Joannes Vossius, *De historicis Graecis libri quatuor*, (Lugduni Batavorum: Apud Ioannem Maire, 1624), 2, “Satis de eo convenit inter omnes, nihil homini elegantiori jucundius, nihil civilis prudentiae studioso utilius esse, quam historiam temporum scire.”

As Rosenthal noted, the Muslim historian's agenda was quite different from modern contemporary historiography. That is, the specific kind of material usefulness that we attach to historiography was unknown to the Muslim historian.³⁹⁴

History was not used as a means for the propagation of ideas, or, more exactly, historians as a rule did not consciously intend, in writing their works, to re-interpret historical data so as to conform to the ideas they might have wished to propagate.³⁹⁵

Rather, Muslim historiography preserves Muslim achievements of Islamic culture as well as reveals fundamental principles of human nature—principles important to someone who was both an historian and moralist like Miskawayh.³⁹⁶ According to Siddiqi, Muslim historiography is uniquely Muslim. That is, neither Greek nor Persian history influenced the shaping of Muslim historiography, and there is no evidence that any Greek historians were ever translated into Arabic.³⁹⁷ On this point, specifically with Saddiqi's claim that Persian history did not influence pre-Islamic or early Arab historians, I disagree. Personally, I lean more towards Richter's position that pre-Islamic Persian history was, in fact, quite alive for the Arab historians.

In his article "Medieval Arabic Historiography," Richter makes a case that pre-Islamic Persian history "was most vivid in the consciousness of the Arabs."³⁹⁸ First, Persia itself had produced a grand *corpus* of historical literature influential in the development and refinement of early Islamic historiography, specifically those parts dealing with ancient Persia.³⁹⁹ In the 8th century,

³⁹⁴ Rosenthal, *A History of Muslim Historiography*, 61.

³⁹⁵ Rosenthal, *A History of Muslim Historiography*, 61.

³⁹⁶ B. H. Siddiqi, "Ibn Miskawaih's Theory of History," *Iqbal*, vol. 12, (January 1963), 71.

³⁹⁷ Siddiqi, "Ibn Miskawaih's Theory of History," 71. See also Richter, "Medieval Arabic Historiography," 142, note 2, on this point.

³⁹⁸ G. Richter, "Medieval Arabic Historiography," trans. and ed. by M. Saber Khan, *Islamic Culture*, vol. 34, no. 1 (January 1960), 146.

³⁹⁹ Richter, "Medieval Arabic Historiography," 146.

the Persian *Rozbih*—later called Ibn al–Muqaffa after he converted to Islam—translated into Arabic an important text on Persian history, the *Khudainame*.⁴⁰⁰ One can see distinct influences of the *Khudainame* in al–Tabari’s work, for example though it was not the sole influence.

The influence of this work on al–Tabari’s history of ancient Persia is very distinct, but this influence does not come only from Ibn al–Muqaffa’s translated version. Al–Tabari’s [sic] work also records a parallel version which differs partly in its information, and which may perhaps best be recognized in its original form in Firdawsi’s [sic] (d. 1020–21) famous *Shahname*, the Persian national epic poem. This anonymous version certainly made use also of the other valuable Persian sources which probably were not known to Ibn al–Muqaffa.⁴⁰¹

Finally, Muslim historiography was generally free from internal biases and prejudices as Miskawayh himself best exemplified according to Siddiqi, “the highest standard of impartiality” by writing about everyone no matter his standing.⁴⁰² Miskawayh was honest in his observations of his historical subjects. Consider the following anecdote wherein Miskawayh paints us a picture of his benefactor ‘Adud al–Daulah who embodied the virtue of generosity towards his subjects by putting their needs ahead of his own. This anecdote is an example of how to practice the virtue of generosity and whose example to follow.

Among all monarchs there is the monarch who is liberal to himself and to his subjects; the monarch who is miserly to both; the monarch who is liberal to himself and miserly

⁴⁰⁰ Richter, “Medieval Arabic Historiography,” 146, translates title as *Book of Kings*, a chronicle of the Sassanids.

⁴⁰¹ Richter, “Medieval Arabic Historiography,” 146.

⁴⁰² Siddiqi, “Ibn Miskawaih’s Theory of History,” 72. In addition to impartiality, one could speculate that for Miskawayh, writing history required the historian to see history from the vantage point of the spiritual wherein moral lessons reside. The historian such as Miskawayh shows how one should see the spiritual as opposed to the corporeal for true happiness. Being both an historian and a philosopher, Miskawayh must balance corporeal, spiritual, and intellectual acts within himself. And he must bring these out in his history in particular. Thus, in a sense, history is the proving ground for such a thesis. Avempace echoes this sentiment regarding the corporeal, spiritual, and the intellectual. See Avempace, “The Governance of Solitary,” in *Medieval Political Philosophy*, ed. by Ralph Lerner & Muhsin Mahdi (New York: Cornell University Press, 1972), 131. “In order to achieve its highest perfection, the philosophic nature must, then, act nobly and high-mindedly. Therefore, whoever prefers his corporeal existence to anything pertaining to his spiritual existence will not be able to achieve the final end. Hence no corporeal man is happy and every happy man is completely spiritual. But just as the spiritual man must perform certain corporeal acts—but not for their own sake—and perform [particular] spiritual acts for their own sake, similarly, the philosopher must perform numerous [spiritual] acts—but not for their own sake—and perform all the intellectual acts for their own sake: The corporeal acts enable him to exist as a human, the [particular] spiritual acts render him more noble, and the intellectual acts render him divine and virtuous.”

to his subjects; and the monarch who is miserly to himself and liberal to his subjects. The most excellent is the first; the next is the monarch who is miserly to himself and liberal to his subjects—‘Adud al–Daulah was of this latter type. It becomes the noble character better to aim at the highest type, to aspire at the furthest goal.⁴⁰³

In another anecdote, Miskawayh talks about the misgivings of Ibn al–Ra‘i, governor of Nisbin during the 10th century. Notice the strong language and how critical Miskawayh is of Nisbin’s actions. Previous historians would never have spoken so frankly or critically about someone so powerful, much less a contemporary.

This Ibn al–Ra‘i was an unprincipled scoundrel, the narrative of whose blinding has already been told in *The Experience of Nations*.⁴⁰⁴ After this event he became governor of Nisbin, where he ill-treated the people, and violated their homes. When rumour spread of first the illness and then the death of ‘Adud al–Daulah, the populace rioted and made for his palace with the intention of assaulting him. He left the palace in woman’s dress, but was pointed out, caught, and put to death with mutilation. His corpse was burned.⁴⁰⁵

Even subjects that were taboo socially (e.g., homosexual relations), Miskawayh handled impartially and objectively. For example, in the following, Miskawayh delicately narrates an episode wherein the beloved Turkish slave-boy, Baitakin, whose master was Bakhtiyar, was taken prisoner. Baitakin was so grief-stricken because his beloved was missing that he could not carry out the duties of his office. It seems to me that there is a homo-erotic subtext to this which Miskawayh acknowledges but does not in any way condemn Bakhtiyar’s feelings for Baitakin.

Among the extraordinary things that happened to Bakhtiyar at this time was that a Turkish slave-boy of his was taken prisoner at the battle of Ahwas. Towards this lad, whose name was Baitakin, he had not previously displayed any attachment or affection; but now he went mad of his loss, and could bear with fortitude all other losses save this. Unheard-of grief seized him in consequence; he would neither eat nor drink; he could not rest or keep still; he did nothing but groan and lament, and declined to receive anyone, as he wished to weep undisturbed. He grew weary of the army and was nauseated by their

⁴⁰³ Miskawayh, *Tajarib al-Umam*, Trans. by D. S. Margoliouth, (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, Broad Street, 1921), vol. 6, 75, section [74]

⁴⁰⁴ Miskawayh is referring to *Tajarib al-Umam*, vol. 2.

⁴⁰⁵ Miskawayh, *Tajarib al-Umam*, vol. 6, 54, section [83].

presence; he abandoned public care, and declared that he felt the loss of this lad more than the loss of his kingdom, and deprivation of it and of his fortune. . . . The officers now gathered round Ibn Baqiyyah and said to him: Do you manage our affairs. We are with you and will obey you. Ibn Baqiyyah, who for a time had concealed the contempt which he felt for Bakhtiyar's infatuation, at last openly expressed it, and decided to look after his own interests. Bakhtiyar on the other hand openly abandoned all sense of decency with regard to this lad and begged of him the restoration of the lad; and wrote besides to a number of the courtiers who were about 'Adud al-daulah or in his employ to solicit their support of this request. By this proceeding he added to his disgrace among the troops and in the towns, and incurred the reproaches of persons near and remote.⁴⁰⁶

If this were not enough, Bakhtiyar added insult to injury by dispatching his envoy to negotiate the release of the boy no matter the cost. Again, Miskawayh reports this encounter in quite sobering and impartial language void of any kind of value judgments with respect to Bakhtiyar's feelings for Baitakin.

This did not bring him [i.e., Bakhtiyar] to his senses. Indeed he went further than ever, and dispatched Abu Ahmad Husain bin Musa Musawi as envoy to 'Adud al-daulah on this matter, offering as ransom for the lad two slave-girls in his possession who performed on the lute, and were unrivalled in skill and mastery, and for whom the Hamdanid Abu Taghlib had offered 100,000 dirhems, and been refused. Bakhtiyar added in his instructions: If there is any hitch about this ransom, go on bidding higher and higher, and have no scruple about offering anything to compass this end. I shall be quite satisfied to take the lad and go to the ends of the earth relinquishing to him all that I possess.⁴⁰⁷

In his book *Islamic Historiography*, Chase Robinson lists three types of Islamic historiography: Biography, prosopography, and chronography. Concerning Miskawayh's history, I will focus primarily on chronography as the style most prominent in his work *Tajarib al-Umam*. There are two types of chronographies, namely, annalistic history (*ta'rikh 'ala al-sinin*) and caliphal

⁴⁰⁶ Miskawayh, *Tajarib al-Umam*, Trans. by D. S. Margoliouth, (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, Broad Street, 1921), vol. 5, 406–407, sections [371]–[372].

⁴⁰⁷ Miskawayh, *Tajarib al-Umam*, vol. 5, 407–408, section [372].

histories (*tar'rikh al-khulafa*).⁴⁰⁸ Annalistic history organizes its narrative with lemmas (headings) ordered according to Hijra years, whereas caliphal history organizes its narratives according to successive caliphs.⁴⁰⁹ Miskawayh utilized the caliphal history chronography method in his history since this style was in vogue from the ninth to the eleventh centuries.⁴¹⁰ Robinson offers a couple of reasons why this particular style was popular.

Caliphal chronography provided two primary attractions to Muslim historians. First, caliphal history orbits around the sovereign who represents the imposition of order on history itself.⁴¹¹ “One wonders,” writes Robinson, “if this is not unrelated to the culture and economics of court patronage.”⁴¹² Important people like to have important parts in history—and to see themselves (written) in history. Second, the history had literary or prosaic reasons as a way to fill in the gaps with precise chronologies since his material may not have had specific dates, for example.⁴¹³ Thus, caliphal chronology was more attractive since it tended to be more forgiving as far as chronologies went.

Where al-Tabari’s historiographical style resembled more of a kind of record of past events arranged chronologically through *isnad*, or kind of provenance of transmitters of the events,

⁴⁰⁸ See G. Richter, “Medieval Arabic Historiography,” trans. and edited by M. Saber Khan, *Islamic Culture*, vol. 34, no. 1 (January 1960), note 2. I paraphrase M. Saber Khan’s argument here. Khan notes that the general assumption has always been that the early Arabic historians learned how to write the *chronicle style* of history from the Christian historians even though there is no literary evidence to support this claim. Rosenthal was one of the proponents of this assumption, for example. Richter, on the other hand, supports the claim that this style of historiography was unique to the early Arab historians. He argues that aside from a lack of literary evidence—no Greek or Byzantine historical work was ever translated into Arabic during the first two centuries (i.e., 7th and 8th). Thus, he concluded that no Muslims knew Greek or Latin (much less wrote in these two languages). For these two languages, after all, were the primary languages in which the Greco-Byzantine-Syrian historical works were written.

⁴⁰⁹ Chase F. Robinson, *Islamic Historiography*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 75.

⁴¹⁰ Robinson, *Islamic Historiography*, 75.

⁴¹¹ Robinson, *Islamic Historiography*, 76.

⁴¹² Robinson, *Islamic Historiography*, 76.

⁴¹³ Robinson, *Islamic Historiography*, 76.

Miskawayh did not so much concern himself with this chain of transmitters but did continue to use the annalistic approach.⁴¹⁴ However, from time to time, he did cite his sources to establish the legitimacy of an historical event.

The following was narrated by Abu Mansur Ahmad bin Laith: I was told, he said, as follows by Samsam al–daulah: I was, he said, in a hut in the Shafi‘i, with nothing between me and Sharaf al–Daulah except the felt walls and the canvas of the neighboring tent. The riot had commenced and my name was mentioned among the Dailemites. I heard Nihrir the Eunuch advising Sharaf al–Daulah to put me to death, and say: We are on the verge of disaster, And what security have we that the Dailemites will not attack us, and rescue him from our hands, in which case he will go to the throne and we into captivity?⁴¹⁵

For Miskawayh, both an historian and a moralist, is interested less in the actual events per se but more in the motives underlying these events—motives he can excavate from their historical underpinnings to reveal the kernels of moral wisdom fossilized within these motives.⁴¹⁶

Wedded to the utilitarian view of history, he, therefore, makes his chronicle to be specially instructive in respect of the underlying human aspirations and the analysis of the causes of political discontent, economic unrest, and the success or failure of military expeditions, the very title of his massive work, *Tajarib al–Umam wa Ta‘aqub al–Himam*—The Experiences of Nations and the Pursuit

⁴¹⁴ Siddiqi, “Ibn Miskawaih’s Theory of History,” 74. See also M.Z. Siddiqi, “Islamic Studies,” *Islamic Culture*, vol. 35, no. 4 (1961), 218–219. See also B. H. Siddiqi, “Ibn Miskawaih’s Theory of History,” 74, note 5, for an interesting commentary concerning *isnad* and the Arabs, “L. Caetani holds that the system of *isnad* could not have originated among the Arabs. The wild desolation of the Arabian desert and the restive nature of the primitive, ignorant, and intolerant Arabs did not suit its origin and early growth. This contention, however, is based on presumption rather than on facts, for Caetani has failed to show that it was used by any other people before the Arabs. Horovitz, in his turn, made good the deficiency. Giving several instances from the Jewish literature, he as conclusively proved that the system of *isnad* was used by the Jews before the Arabs. But the main facts of the researches of the German Orientalist were anticipated by Ibn Hazm., in his *al–Fisal fi al–Milal*, wherein he records that the instances of *isnad* are met within the Christian as well as in the Jewish literature. In Hindu Jaina and Buddhist literature too frequent use of *isnad* is found. But as M. Z. Siddiqi rightly points out, ‘The Indians and the Jews did not possess the necessary materials to check the veracity and reliability of the persons mentioned in their *isnad*. They did not possess biographical dictionaries containing the biographies of the transmitters of the various reports, nor did they have any idea of chronology or chronological method. The Arabs, however, created the necessary apparatus and laid down the principles for the criticism of the *isnad* and thus perfected the system and put it more or less on a scientific basis.

⁴¹⁵ Miskawayh, *Tajarib al–Umam*, vol. 6, 136, section [132].

⁴¹⁶ B. H. Siddiqi, “Ibn Miskawaih’s Theory of History,” 75.

of Ambitions—outlines explicitly both its aim and method.⁴¹⁷

Let us consider now a few examples from Miskawayh's *Tajarib al-Umam*. This particular incident takes place during the caliphate of Abu 'l-Fadl Ja'far ibn Ahmad al-Mu'tadid (895–932), usually referred to by his regal name, al-Muqtadir bin-Allah, roughly sometime in the 10th century (A.H. 305) as Miskawayh recorded.

This year Baghdad was visited by two envoys⁴¹⁸ from the Byzantine Emperor, who had come by the Euphrates route, bringing splendid presents and numerous marks of friendship, and soliciting a truce. Their entry was on Muharram 2 (June 25, 917), and they were housed in the palace of Sai'id B. Makhlad.⁴¹⁹ Ibn al-Furat gave orders that this residence should be specially furnished and provided with all utensils, etc., which they could require, and that they and their retinue should be liberally provided with supplies, including animals for food and sweets. They solicited an audience of Muqtadir for the purpose of delivering the letter which they had brought; they were told that this was a matter of great difficulty, only possible after an interview with the vizier, informing him of their design, arranging the matter with him, and requesting him to facilitate the granting of the audience and to advise the Caliph to accord their petition. Abu 'Umar 'Adi B. 'Abd al-Baqi, who had escorted them from the frontier requested Abu'l-Hassan Ibn al-Furat to permit them to visit him and he promised them an interview on a day which he named.⁴²⁰

Miskawayh goes on to report how preparations were made to see the envoys. Apparently, no expense was spared. Notice Miskawayh's attention to details, or more specifically, the type of details. This is an example of what Rosenthal referred to as *khobar*—a style of historiography wherein each narrative was complete in itself without supplementary reference material and resembled a vividly narrated short story (with the occasional smattering of political insertions, of course).⁴²¹

⁴¹⁷ B. H. Siddiqi, "Ibn Miskawaih's Theory of History," 75.

⁴¹⁸ As cited in translation note: See Lebeau—Saint-Martin xii, 409; the two envoys were Joannes Radeznos and Michael Toxaras.

⁴¹⁹ A vizier of Mu'tadid.

⁴²⁰ Miskawayh, *Tajarib al-Umam*, Trans. by D. S. Margoliouth, (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, Broad Street, 1921), vol. 4, 56–57, sections [53]–[54].

⁴²¹ Rosenthal, *History of Muslim Historiography*, 66–67.

The vizier gave orders that the soldiers should line the streets the whole way from the palace of Sa' id to the palace which he (the vizier) occupied in Mukharrim, and that his own retainers and troops with the vice-chamberlains posted in his palace should form a line from the doorway of the palace to the reception-room. A vast saloon with gilt roof in the wing of the palace called the Garden Wing was splendidly furnished and hung with curtains resembling carpets; on fresh furniture, carpets and curtains a sum of 30,000 dinars was expended. No mode of beautifying the palace or increasing the magnificence of the occasion was neglected. The vizier himself sat on a splendid praying-carpet, with a lofty throne behind him, with serving-men in front and behind, to the right and to the left, while the saloon was filled with military and civil officials; the two envoys were then introduced having witnessed on their way such troops and crowds as might well fill them with awe.⁴²²

From this excerpt, one can easily visualize the setting as preparations are made for a state reception. Miskawayh integrated important personages within a visually descriptive narrative to help set the scene. So, on one level, one could read this as what Rosenthal would call a “well-rounded description of a single event.”⁴²³ Al-Tabari 839–923, a prominent Persian scholar and historian, had recorded this actual historical event.

Miskawayh’s Philosophy of History and the Persian Influence

Earlier, I outlined features of Miskawayh as an historian and his moralistic view of history. History had more than just a practical purpose, however. Miskawayh himself is part of the Persian tradition which emphasized and stylized a utilitarian view of historiography. A good historian wrote in such a way to make learning history both practical and to have it serve as tool for moral guidance—both of which are features of *adab*.

In the Persian tradition, history was a source of moral philosophy.⁴²⁴ Moreover, the Persians had a flair for romanticizing history and providing illustrations of the virtuous life where

⁴²² Miskawayh, *Tajarib al-Umam*, vol. 4, 57. Sections [53]–[54].

⁴²³ Rosenthal, *History of Islamic Historiography*, 66–67.

⁴²⁴ G. Richter, “Medieval Arabic Historiography,” *Islamic Culture*, vol. 34, no. 1 (January 1960), 147.

appropriate.⁴²⁵ Richter goes on to point out the characteristics of this Persian style whose prominence would later factor so prevalently into Medieval Arabic historiography. On the whole, the Arabs made use of non–Arab methods and materials according to Richter.⁴²⁶

A bon mot, if possible with historical illustrations giving instruction towards virtuous life, perhaps quite detached from history, fairy tales, or serious legends from the heroic age, all these were favourite subjects in the society of the cultured Persians. History writing and history belonged to the national–social circle. Of course, the chronicles written under the direct influence of the Zoroastrian clergy or in accordance with court politics had a narrower base.⁴²⁷

History for Miskawayh is more about the *why* than the *what*. It is more about motives than actions. Miskawayh thought that our motives have more to say about our character than our actions. However, to get at the level of motive is no easy task. The historian must get *inside* the event. Miskawayh only deals with human events as opposed to supernatural. This explains why, for example, he overlooks the miracles of the Prophet as necessary or relevant to historiography.⁴²⁸

Miskawayh saw history as a dialectical movement from cause to effect, from motive to counter-motive. To some extent, then, past events shape future events. So, we experience a psychological reaction now to what happened in the past.⁴²⁹ Furthermore, Miskawayh believed that history is never wrong. As I mentioned before, nothing happens by chance or accident. During a specific historical period, as Siddiqi notes, the moral tone, social patterns, and the political atmosphere of

⁴²⁵ G. Richter, “Medieval Arabic Historiography,” 147.

⁴²⁶ G. Richter, “Medieval Arabic Historiography,” 147.

⁴²⁷ G. Richter, “Medieval Arabic Historiography,” 147.

⁴²⁸ Siddiqi, “Ibn Miskawaih’s Theory of History,” 75–76.

⁴²⁹ Siddiqi, “Ibn Miskawaih’s Theory of History,” 75–76

that period are shaped or possibly even influenced by a type of *Zeitgeist*. We can acquire the virtue of wisdom by studying these lessons, these dialectical movements of history.

On another level, one could read this on a moral philosophical level within an *adab* context. That is to say, as part of a humanistic curriculum, a young man (or prince) would read this kind of history for the moral lessons, political wisdom, and proper conduct (*adab*) that it would impart. In short, as Robinson points out, this style of historiography is typical in traditionalist cultures such as medieval Islam or Rabbinic Judaism, both of which assert that knowledge is *conserved* more than it is *created*.⁴³⁰

In particular, they hold that the best kind of knowledge is the wisdom of pious and inspired forefathers, which, whether recorded in their day or generated retrospectively by subsequent generations, can validate and guide the experience of the present. As distrustful of creativity as they are convinced of the inerrancy of those who came before them, traditionalists are generally critical about the present and nostalgic about a ‘golden age’ in which men, acting in accordance with fresh truths, accomplished great things.⁴³¹

The following narrative is another example of Miskawayh’s ability to create vivid imagery while writing in high context. In a sense, because Miskawayh writes in what I call high context, one has to read him on both an historical and a moral level. The moral message here is to be on guard against plots wherein someone could attempt to subdue you when you are most vulnerable.

A most queer and curious incident was the following. When Nasir al-daulah was at the Shammasiyyah Gate, facing the camp of Mu‘izz al-daulah, a man came one night and entered his tent, when he was sleeping, unperceived by the guards, chamberlains, doorkeepers or attendants, and proceeded to find out where he lay and saw him sleeping. Taking note of the part of the pillow where his head lay, the visitor went back to put out the lamp and a candle which were close by outside the tent, his intention being to return and plunge his knife into the place where Nasir al-daulah throat was. It happened that Nasir al-daulah shifted from side to side in his sleep at the time when the man went back to

⁴³⁰ Robinson, *Islamic Historiography*, 85.

⁴³¹ Robinson, *Islamic Historiography*, 85–86.

extinguish the candle. When he had done this and returned, the place was dark, and he thrust his knife into the place where he imagined Nasir al-daulah's throat to be, and had no doubt that it would lodge there. The knife however remained fixed in the pillow in lieu of Nasir al-daulah's head. The man, supposing that

he had killed Nasir al-daulah had departed from the tent unnoticed; Nair al-daulah, waking, saw the knife; a hunt was made for the man, but he was not caught. The story was circulated, and Nasir al-daulah received congratulations on his escape. The man made his way to Mu'izz al-daulah with the good news that he had slain his enemy; but Mu'izz al-daulah asked for a circumstantial account of his proceeding, and when it was given him, said: A man like this is a public danger. He delivered him to Saimari to put him in confinement, and Salamari put him to death.⁴³²

Conclusion

Miskawayh's *Tajarib al-Umam* sets the stage for his work on moral philosophy, *Tahdhib al-Aklat*. Moral lessons are worked out in history. Because our existence as human beings is located in history and specifically in community, we participate in a kind of intersubjectivity whereby we encounter one another in the world. As Miskawayh showed in his *Tajarib*, community is a *means*, never an *end*, for the individual. Only in history and community, can we discover the truth about ourselves.

In essence, what Miskawayh is saying is that through history, humanity can continually rediscover itself. We are essentially dependent on one another to help find the moral truth within ourselves. The *Tajarib* gives us a *techne biou* (i.e., art of life) through history. Miskawayh will then go on to refine and codify this *techne biou* in his *Tahdhib al-Aklat*. After all, we have to plunge into history to retrieve our sense of who we are and how we ought to act. As Nussbaum exclaimed, "We do not inquire into the human good by standing on the rim of heaven."⁴³³

⁴³²Miskawayh, *Tajarib al-Umam*, vol. 5, 98–99, sections [95]–[96].

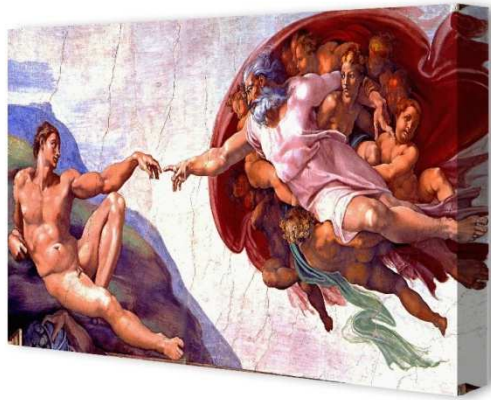
⁴³³ Nussbaum, *The Therapy of Desire*, 21.

Chapter 9: *Tahdhib al-Aklaq* (The Refinement of Character)

Introduction

“When man reaches the limit of his realm, he touches the beginning of the realm of angels.”⁴³⁴

The space between the realm of humanity and the realm of angels is as close yet as far as that distance between Adam’s finger and God’s finger in Michelangelo’s 1511 masterpiece, *The Creation of Adam*.



Though reaching such a realm may seem daunting and even quite impossible to us, Miskawayh nevertheless assures us that even this space between humanity and divinity is within our grasp. After all, on the other side, in the realm of angels, lies complete happiness. Complete and perfect happiness is our lifelong goal as human beings.

To reach this ethereal place, and to attain this perfect happiness, Miskawayh instructs us in his *Tahdhib al-Aklaq* that one needs first to acquire desire, that is, a desire to better oneself such that this betterment will ultimately lead him “in a straight path” and “in the right direction” until he reaches “the end of his perfection which is complete happiness.”⁴³⁵ Therein, he becomes one

⁴³⁴ Miskawayh, *Tahdhib al-Aklaq*, 2nd disc., 69:15.

⁴³⁵ Miskawayh, *Tahdhib al-Aklaq*, 2nd disc., 71:5.

among many in “the partakers in the nature of angels.”⁴³⁶ Each of us possesses the means within ourselves to traverse this distance between humanity and divinity, between imperfection and perfection, and that vehicle—a simple yet independent substance—is a soul.

The Soul of a Community

In his ethical treatise, *Tahdhib al-Aklaq*, Miskawayh begins with the soul and ends with the soul. Metaphysically, this makes sense because he believed that the soul is the foundation, the essence, and ultimately the perfection of who we are in relation to ourselves, to others, and to God. The sciences, various forms of knowledge, and avoidance of corporeal pleasures, for instance, constitute the virtue of the soul and will propel it ever more quickly to its final goal of complete and perfect happiness.⁴³⁷

However, for those unfortunate souls who stray off the straight path or lose sight of their virtue, the consequences are dire. Should one perform actions contrary to “the object for which he was created,” then he is no better than a mere beast because he let “deficient” and “incomplete actions” such as carnal pleasures and lustful desires detract his soul from its opportunity to achieve perfection. On this point, Miskawayh turns to the Qur’an, surah 32:17 (*al-Sajdah*, i.e., Adoration).

“No soul knoweth what delight of the eyes is hidden in reserve for them,”⁴³⁸ and brings him near to the Lord of the worlds in the everlasting bliss and to the pleasures which no eye has ever seen, of which no ear has ever heard, and which never occurred to any man’s heart—if he lured away from this noble and heavenly gift by such base and unstable evils, then, indeed, he deserves to be despised by his Creator (mighty and exalted is He!) and to suffer a speedy punishment which will deliver the people and the land from him.⁴³⁹

⁴³⁶ *Tahdhib al Aklaq*, 2nd disc., 46:5, 71:5.

⁴³⁷ Miskawayh, *Tahdhib al-Aklaq*, 1st disc., 9:15.

⁴³⁸ See Qur’an, surah 32:17 (*al-Sajdah*, i.e., Adoration). See *Meaning of the Holy Quran*, 10th ed., (Beltsville, Md.: Amana Publications, 2001).

⁴³⁹ Miskawayh, *Tahdhib al-Aklaq*, 1st disc., 14:1–5.

Throughout his ethics, Miskawayh often refers either directly or indirectly concepts of happiness and love. These two primary concepts represent the scaffolding from which we work to refine our souls. According to Miskawayh, God has already provided us with the necessary blueprints on how to carry out this lifetime construction project, but it is ultimately up to us to fulfill and perfect God's design through our will despite our imperfections as human beings.⁴⁴⁰

Miskawayh warns that such project will not be easy, and some will give up early and settle for baser human desires, thereby believing that these inferior desires (e.g., materialism, pleasures, lust, etc.) represent the true standard of happiness. Though each of us at one time or another might have set the bar too low on what we thought happiness meant, Miskawayh firmly asserts that we can change that and—with God's help—raise the bar. But this act of will requires recognition that the bar is too low to begin with and a desire to do the hard work necessary to raise it. Miskawayh himself speaks from experience on this point.

Let it be known to the reader of this work that I, in particular, have gradually succeeded in weaning myself from these things since becoming advanced in years with well-established habits. I have struggled hard against them, and I am wishing for you, who are looking for the virtues and seeking the genuine morality, precisely what I have accepted for myself. I have even gone further in my advice by pointing out to you what I myself missed at the beginning of my life so that you may yourselves achieve it, by showing you the way to safety before you go astray in the wilderness of error, and by bringing the ship to you before you sink in the sea of destruction.⁴⁴¹

I propose that at the core of Miskawayh's *Tahdhib al-Aklaq* resides a kind of hybrid of that and speaks to his *sensitivity to* and *awareness of* the human condition. Experience, consciousness, and spirituality constitute the fundamental components of human existence and comprise the

⁴⁴⁰ Miskawayh, *Tahdhib al-Aklaq*, 2nd disc., 39:15.

⁴⁴¹ Miskawayh, *Tahdhib al-Aklaq*, 2nd disc., 51:10–15.

various facets of Miskawayh's notion of community *qua* person. When diverse persons come together and agree to form a community, this newly formed community itself becomes as one person "whose bodily organs associate in the performance of the single act which is useful to him."⁴⁴² This single act is the attainment of happiness. But to attain happiness, one needs the mediation of the other—this applies to both a person and a community *qua* person.

Furthermore, we have already shown that man is civic by nature and have explained what is meant by civic. It follows necessarily that man's complete human happiness is realized through his friends; and whoever finds his completion through others cannot possibly attain his full happiness in solitude and seclusion.⁴⁴³

Al-Farabi uses this analogy as well in his comparison between a city and a body wherein all the parts have to work together to promote harmony and perfect the larger whole, namely the community.

Indeed, the head, chest, stomach, back, hands, and feet are to the body as the households of the city are to the city. The action of each of the large members is other than the action of the other, yet the parts of each of these large members mutually assist one another in their different actions for perfecting the purpose of that large member. Then, when the different purposes of the large members are mutually perfected, there comes together from them and from their different actions assistance for perfecting the purpose of the whole body.⁴⁴⁴

In short, to appropriate Sartre's term *intersubjectivity*, I believe when Miskawayh says happiness is *realized* through friends, what he means is that we become aware of our own reality and grasp it more fully only in the company of (and when thinking about) others. Furthermore, we depend on community and community depends on us to educate one another to preserve the virtue of the soul. A community, like a person, possesses a soul that occasionally needs purged of its vices.

As for the virtues themselves, they are not achieved by us until we have cleansed

⁴⁴² Miskawayh, *Tahdhib al-Akhlak*, 5th disc., 135:5.

⁴⁴³ Miskawayh, *Tahdhib al-Akhlak*, 5th disc., 155:5.

⁴⁴⁴ Al-Farabi, *Al-Farabi: The Political Writings*, trans. and annotated by Charles E. Butterworth, (New York: Cornell University Press, 2001), 23–24.

our souls of the vices which are their opposites—by which I mean the soul’s wicked bodily passions and their vile beastly lusts. . . Moreover, when man has satisfied his want of food, drink, and other bodily desires, if he is offered to continue to seek them—as one continues to seek the virtues—he will refuse and shun such a course. He will realize the vileness of those who pursue them, especially when they can do without them or be satisfied with some measure of them, and will go further to dislike and reproach such people and even try to reform and educate them.⁴⁴⁵

Education for both a person and community involve three faculties of the soul, namely, temperament, habit, and discipline. These faculties, Miskawayh claims, must be shared in community because one cannot attain perfection by himself. Miskawayh reiterates Aristotle on this point, “Man is a civic being by nature.”⁴⁴⁶ These three faculties of either the personal or communal soul aim at the highest good. Thus, Miskawayh can find support in Aristotle that a community is like a person whose soul aims for the highest good.

Every state is a community of some kind, and every community is established with a view to some good; for everyone always acts in order to obtain that which they think good. But, if all communities aim at some good, the state or political community, which is the highest of all, and which embraces all the rest, aims at some good in a greater degree than any other, and at the highest good.⁴⁴⁷

Note that Al-Farabi echoes this Aristotelian notion as well.

The city may be necessary and may be virtuous. The necessary city is the one whose parts mutually assist one another in obtaining only what is necessary for a human being’s constitution, subsistence, and preservation of life. The virtuous city is the one whose inhabitants mutually assist one another in obtaining the best things for a human being’s existence, constitution, subsistence, and preservation of life.⁴⁴⁸

Miskawayh on Character

What exactly does Miskawayh mean by *character*? He takes up this issue in his second discourse in his *Tahdhib al-Aklaq*. Character, he argues, is a state of the soul which causes the soul to

⁴⁴⁵ Miskawayh, *Tahdhib al-Aklaq*, 1st disc., 10:10, 10:15.

⁴⁴⁶ Miskawayh, *Tahdhib al-Aklaq*, 1st disc., 29:5.

⁴⁴⁷ Aristotle, *Politics*, bk.1, 1252a1–5.

⁴⁴⁸ *Al-Farabi: The Political Writings*, 25.

perform its various actions “without thought or deliberation.”⁴⁴⁹ According to Miskawayh, there are two sides to character—one natural and the other acquired.

Everyone possesses temperament. Temperament constitutes the natural side of character. We probably would think of this aspect of character as one’s personality today. In fact, the examples Miskawayh cites tend to support this notion. Some people have personality traits that make them more susceptible to over-reacting with respect to anger or fear, for example.

One kind is natural and originates in the temperament, as in the man whom the least thing moves to anger or who is aroused for the least cause, or in the man who is cowardly in the face of the most trifling incident—who is afraid of a noise which strikes his ear or is terrified by bad news which he hears . . .

He goes on, but his point is well taken. We are born pre-wired, so to speak, with certain personality traits. Miskawayh does not specify how we acquire these particular traits to begin with, so I am proposing that that is what he most likely had in mind when he used the term *temperament*. In other words, our temperament is a fundamental component of who we are as human beings.

The other side of character is more malleable and is acquired through training and education. We might think of this today as a kind of self-help whereby we can actually modify unhealthy or dangerous behavioral patterns through self-training and habit. That is, Miskawayh believed that we can practice being good. It is this second aspect of character that fertilized the soil of philosophical thought concerning character.

⁴⁴⁹ Miskawayh, *Tahdhib al-Akhlak*, 2st disc., 31:1.

Miskawayh illustrates this by surveying the philosophical landscape to look for markers left behind by earlier philosophers. He begins with the Stoics and points out how the Stoics believed that human beings are born (or created) good. Because human beings are social creature by nature as we have already established, they begin to mingle with one another. But Miskawayh has an issue with this position on which he will elaborate later.

The Stoics believed that all men are created good by nature. . . They also believed that however, some men are extremely bad by nature.⁴⁵⁰

As pointed out, the Stoics, for example, held that people are born good by nature. The company they keep, however, can negatively influence and thereby corrupt an otherwise good character. In other words, people become evil by associating and keeping company with evil people.

but they also become bad as a result of their association with evil people, and as a result of their inclination to wicked passions which cannot be tamed by discipline and are thus indulged in and then sought in every way with no distinction between the good and the bad among them.⁴⁵¹

Yet there are also other philosophers preceding the Stoics who adamantly believed that human beings are bad by nature because of nothing more than their origination—namely from mud.

Others, who came before the Stoics maintained that men are created out of the basest mud, which is the filth of the earth, and that they are thus bad by nature but may become good as a result of discipline and instruction.⁴⁵²

He even goes on to cite Galen who stated that some people are good by nature, some bad by nature, and some fall in between.⁴⁵³ Miskawayh summarizes Galen's position and concludes that just because one might be good by nature does not necessarily rule out the possibility that in this

⁴⁵⁰ Miskawayh, *Tahdhib al-Aklat*, 2nd disc., 32:5–10.

⁴⁵¹ Miskawayh, *Tahdhib al-Aklat*, 2nd disc., 32:5.

⁴⁵² Miskawayh, *Tahdhib al-Aklat*, 2nd disc., 32:10.

⁴⁵³ Miskawayh, *Tahdhib al-Aklat*, 2nd disc., 32:15; See also Ibn al-Nadim (d. 995), bibliographer, who cites three works by Galen (*al-Fihrist*, ed. Flugel, 2 vols., Leipzig, 1871–72, vol. 1, p. 291).

good person there resides a faculty with a desire to do evil, especially if one learns to do evil on his own.

In short, one can have both good and bad aspects to character, and sometimes the bad dominates the good.⁴⁵⁴ Likewise, Galen argued that the same argument applies to those who are bad by nature. They either learn good from themselves or from others. Galen believed, according to Miskawayh, that there are more bad people than good people.⁴⁵⁵

Miskawayh then turns his attention to Aristotle. Aristotle believed that bad people can become good through discipline. In other words, we *are* what we do.⁴⁵⁶ Because Aristotle takes into consideration the fact that people are different, with different natures, Miskawayh believes that Aristotle's point here—namely, we are what we do—is not absolute. After all, some people respond to discipline and become virtuous rapidly, while others do not. Miskawayh then provides us the following syllogism of Aristotle's argument.

- Every character is subject to change.
- Nothing which is subject to change is natural.
- Therefore, no single character is natural.⁴⁵⁷

For Miskawayh, this is a sound proof. The two premises are true thus producing a true conclusion. Premise one is true through observation.

It is clear from actual observation, from the evidence we have drawn regarding

⁴⁵⁴Miskawayh, *Tahdhib al-Aklat*, 2st disc., 33:5.

⁴⁵⁵ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1109a25–30, “. . . so, too, anyone can get angry—that is easy—or give or spend money; but to do this to the right person, to the right extent, at the right time, with the right aim, and in the right way, that is not for everyone, nor is it easy; that is why goodness is both rare and laudable and noble.”

⁴⁵⁶ See Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1103a15–20, “Excellence, then, being of two kinds, intellectual and moral, intellectual excellence in the main owes both its birth and its growth to teaching (for which reason it requires experience and time), while moral excellence comes about as a result of habit, whence also its name is one that is formed by a slight variation from the word ‘habit’. From this it is plain that none of the moral excellences arises in us by nature; for nothing that exists by nature can form a habit contrary to its nature.”

⁴⁵⁷ Miskawayh, *Tahdhib al-Aklat*, 2st disc., 34:1–5.

necessity of discipline, its usefulness, and its influence on youths and boys, and from the right laws by which God (mighty and exalted is He!) guides His creatures.⁴⁵⁸

Premise two is true since something that by its own nature behaves in one way can be trained to behave in a way unnatural to its nature.⁴⁵⁹ Miskawayh agrees with Aristotle on this point as he interprets the second premise.

For we never seek to change anything which is natural. Nobody wants to change the movement of fire which rises upwards by training it to go downwards, nor to train the stone to move upwards and thus change its natural movement which is downwards. Even should one want to do it, it would not be within his power to change any of this or its like, i.e., the things which are natural.

Miskawayh's position lies somewhere between that of Galen and Aristotle. He argues that people stretch across a wide spectrum with respect to their ability to adopt good traits. It is easier for some and harder for others.

As you observe the character of boys and their receptivity, or their aversion to character improvement, and as you see the impudence of some and the bashfulness of others, and what they show of generosity or stinginess, of kindness or cruelty, of envy or its opposite, and of other varying traits, you will realize therefrom the grades into which men fall with respect to their readiness to acquire good character.⁴⁶⁰

The acquisition of good character is the primary function of character training. Character training in itself is an *excellent* art because it is concerned with the betterment of man *qua* man. Furthermore, though God created man, it is man's job to better himself.

What we should now know is that the existence of the human substance is due to the power of its Maker and Creator (blessed and sanctified is His name!), but that the betterment of this substance is entrusted to man and depends upon his will.

⁴⁵⁸ Miskawayh, *Tahdhib al-Akhlak*, 2nd disc., 34:5.

⁴⁵⁹ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1103a23.

⁴⁶⁰ Miskawayh, *Tahdhib al-Akhlak*, 2nd disc., 35:5–10.

Good character training leads to perfection, and perfection in turn leads to happiness. By perfection, Miskawayh means that one has mastered two faculties—one cognitive, the other practical. “When a man masters both parts, he gains complete happiness.”⁴⁶¹

As he did with character, Miskawayh considers the ideas of earlier philosophers, particularly the Stoics, on the nature of happiness. Sharif suggests that Miskawayh’s own conception of happiness is perhaps itself derivative in part from Porphyry’s commentary.⁴⁶² Miskawayh, however, went farther than Aristotle. That is, Miskawayh incorporates a spiritual component to his definition of happiness. He agrees with Aristotle that happiness is more than identifying pleasure with happiness. The masses, as Aristotle says, think of happiness this way which makes them no better than “beasts”.⁴⁶³

Some people have thought that man’s perfection and his end consist in sensual pleasures and that the latter constitute the *summum bonum* and the extreme happiness. They have also thought that all the other faculties of man have been created in him only for the sake of these pleasures and their attainment, and that the noble soul, which we have called rational, has been granted him for no other reason. . . . This is the opinion of the masses, the common mob, and the ignorant and degraded people.⁴⁶⁴

The Stoics associated happiness with what Epictetus called *right living*. According to Epictetus, happiness is more than just *mere living*, it is *right living*.⁴⁶⁵ For Miskawayh, right living means accepting the virtuous over carnal or material pleasures. He considers this view of the masses to be stupid. However, each person has it within himself to overcome this notion of happiness with the aid of the noble and discerning faculty that resides in us all.

⁴⁶¹ Miskawayh, *Tahdhib al-Aklat*, 2st disc., 39:20.

⁴⁶² Sharif, *A History of Muslim Philosophy*, 476. Porphyry used the following Aristotelian classifications: health, wealth, fame and honor, success, and good thinking.

⁴⁶³ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1095b13–1096a11.

⁴⁶⁴ Miskawayh, *Tahdhib al-Aklat*, 2st disc., 42:10–43:5.

⁴⁶⁵ See Epictetus, “Discourses of Epictetus,” in *The Stoic and Epicurean Philosophers*, (New York: Random House, 1940), 232.

although they hold such stupid and foolish views as you see, the other faculty that is in them, i.e., the noble and discerning faculty, is still able in spite of its weakness, to make them appreciate the virtue of the virtuous so that they are obliged to honor and extol them.⁴⁶⁶

Marcus Aurelius likewise suggested that any person would be hard pressed to find anything better in human life than justice, truth, temperance, and fortitude.⁴⁶⁷ According to Miskawayh, these virtues would help man to climb the ladder of perfection until he nears the realm of the angels. He believed that there are two types of happy people in the world. The first group seeks pleasure in bodily things, thereby relegating them to a lower state of existence, whereas the other rank takes delight in spiritual things or nobler virtues. Those on the lower realm admire and envy those on the higher realm, while those on the higher realm learn from those in the lower realm. In other words, everyone has the capacity to better himself, and there is no excuse for one to remain in the lower realm and be satisfied with that state of living.

They [the animals], on the other hand, achieve their own perfections. Thus, if they are denied the human goods and deprived of the opportunity of being in the vicinity of the good spirits and of admission into the Paradise promised to those who fear God, they may be excused, but man is inexcusable. The former are like the blind man who deviates from the road and falls into a well; he is to be pitied, and not blamed. The latter is like a person who is able to see, but who nevertheless deviates and ends by falling into a well; he is to be detested and blamed, and not pitied.⁴⁶⁸

Miskawayh's point is clear. One can find real happiness in his physical life by pursuing wisdom. One can have both physical and spiritual happiness; however, one has to acquire the first before moving on to the second. Though higher and nobler, divine happiness still depends on worldly happiness lest divine happiness remain hidden.⁴⁶⁹

⁴⁶⁶ Miskawayh, *Tahdhib al-Aklat*, 2st disc., 46:1–4.

⁴⁶⁷ See Marcus Aurelius, "The Meditations of Marcus Aurelius," in *The Stoic and Epicurean Philosophers*, 504, no. 6.

⁴⁶⁸ Miskawayh, *Tahdhib al-Aklat*, 2st disc., 84:10–15.

⁴⁶⁹ See Sharif, *A History of Muslim Philosophy*, 476.

Happiness is the perfection of intelligent natures, and consists in the exercise of intelligence, which takes in everything. So God is happiness itself. According to our ways of thinking, we must think God's happy state as presupposed by the act of will which reposes in it; so we identify it with an act of mind. The object of this act is always God, and in this sense everyone's happiness is God.⁴⁷⁰

In his fourth chapter, Miskawayh deals primarily with the concept of justice. Basically, justice means playing on a level playing field. For instance, even though animals like elephants and lions are confident in their strength, they are really not courageous because they are like an “armed person attacking an unarmed person.”⁴⁷¹

However, the courageous man does not find any pleasure at the start of his undertakings—for these are harmful to him—but rather in their consequences. These consequences last all during his life and even after his death, especially if he defends his religion, his true beliefs in the unity of God (mighty and exalted is He!), and the Law which represents God's guidance and his just way, in which lie mankind's interests in this world and the next.⁴⁷²

Essentially, Miskawayh is following Aristotle's *Nichomachean Ethics*.⁴⁷³

In the last two chapters, Miskawayh deals with love/friendship and the health of the soul respectively. With love, according to Miskawayh, four situations are possible.

1. Love that is established quickly dissolves quickly
2. Love that is established quickly but dissolves slowly
3. Love that is established slowly but dissolves quickly
4. Love that is established slowly but dissolves slowly⁴⁷⁴

Miskawayh explains that these divisions are necessary because of the ends at which people aim—of which there exist four: pleasure, the good, the useful, and their composite.⁴⁷⁵ Each one

⁴⁷⁰ Thomas Aquinas. *Summa Theologiae: A Concise Translation*, ed. by Timothy McDermott, (Chicago: Christian Classics, 1989), 26:2–5, p. 61.

⁴⁷¹ Miskawayh, *Tahdhib al-Aklat*, 4th discourse, 107:10.

⁴⁷² Miskawayh, *Tahdhib al-Aklat*, 4th discourse, 107:15–20.

⁴⁷³ See Aristotle, *Nichomachean Ethics*, “Courage”: Bk. III A, chapters 6–9; “Temperance”: Bk. III, chapters 10–12; “Justice”: Bk. V H, I–II; “Wisdom”: Bk. VI. See also Sharif, *A History of Muslim Philosophy*, 476.

⁴⁷⁴ Miskawayh, *Tahdhib al-Aklat*, 5th discourse, 135:10.

⁴⁷⁵ Miskawayh, *Tahdhib al-Aklat*, 5th discourse, 136:1–4. See also Aristotle, *Nichomachean Ethics*, 1155b16–21, “The kinds of friendship may perhaps be cleared up if we first come to know the object of love. For not everything seems to be loved but only the lovable, and this is good, pleasant, or useful, so that it is the good and the pleasant

of these (i.e., pleasure, good, useful, and composite) aligns with their respective counterpart—pleasure with number one, the good with number two, and so forth. Miskawayh then goes on to weave this into a discussion about the nature of friendship and the different types of friendships that exist.

Friendship is a kind of love, but it denotes something more particular than love. It is affection in its very essence, and it does not take place among a large group, as is the case with love. Passionate love is the excess of love, and is more particular than affection because it takes place between two persons only. It is not motivated by either the useful or that which is composed of the useful and something else, but occurs in the case of the lover of pleasure to excess or the lover of the good to excess. The former, namely pleasure, is blameworthy; the latter, namely the good, is laudable.⁴⁷⁶

The first kind of friendship is that among the young. Passion seems to govern these. Such friendships are fleeting. The second type of friendship, according to Miskawayh is that among old people. These friendships are a *quid pro quo* sort of friendship. This sort of friendship will

that are loveable as ends. See also Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1104b30–35, “There being three objects of choice and three of avoidance, the noble, the advantageous, the pleasant, and their contraries, the base, the injurious, the painful, about all of these the good man tends to go right and the bad man to go wrong, and especially about pleasure; for even the noble and the advantageous appear pleasant. Again, it has grown up with us all from our infancy; this is why it is difficult to rub off this passion, engrained as it is in our life. And we measure even our actions, some of us more and others less, by pleasure and pain.” See also Epictetus, “Discourses of Epictetus,” in *The Stoic and Epicurean Philosophers*, Bk. III, chap. 19, p. 320, “Make up your mind at last to please your true self, make up your mind to appear noble to God; set your desires on becoming pure in the presence of your pure self and God. . . Go to Socrates and see him reclining with Alcibiades and making light of his beauty. Consider what a victory, what an Olympic triumph, he won over himself—and knew it—what place he thus achieved among the followers of Heracles!”

⁴⁷⁶ Miskawayh, *Tahdhib al-Akhlak*, 5th discourse, 137:10–15. See also Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1158a10–15, “One cannot be a friend to many people in the sense of friendship of the complete type with them, just as one cannot be in love with many people at once (for love is a sort of excess, and it is the nature of such only to be felt towards one person); and it is not easy for many people at the same time to please the same person very greatly, or perhaps even to be good for him. One must, too, acquire some experience of the other person and become familiar with him, and that is very hard. But with a view to utility or pleasure it is possible that many people should please one; for many people are useful or pleasant, and these services take little time.” See also Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1171a10–15, “Presumably, then, it is well not to seek to have as many friends as possible, but as many as are enough for the purpose of living together; for it would seem actually impossible to be a great friend to many people. This is why one cannot love several people; love tends to be a sort of excess of friendship, and that can only be felt towards one person; therefore great friendship too can only be felt towards a few people. This seems to be confirmed in practice; for we do not find many people who are friends in the comradely way of friendship, and the famous friendships of this sort are always between two people.”

last as long as both participants find the relationship beneficial. Finally, there that virtuous friendship that virtuous people share.

Friendship among virtuous people is for the sake of the good and is caused by the good. Since the good is something stable and has an unchangeable essence, the affections of those who are bound by such friendship are lasting and unchangeable.⁴⁷⁷

Miskawayh's history, the *Tajarib*, highlights the importance of friendship among virtuous people because such friendships not only strengthen armies but also communities. With the acumen of a philosopher, Miskawayh peers through historical events in order to reach what Siddiqi calls their "hidden motives".⁴⁷⁸ In other words, through history, Miskawayh provides us the *moral* of a particular historical event.

History represents the canvas on which Miskawayh sketched out his moral philosophy *in situ* and illustrated why man, as a social animal, requires the help of others to work to build a society and develop good etiquette. Basically, Miskawayh believed that history is a lesson in morality about people mixing with other people and the consequences thereof. We need to develop friendship with one another in order to develop tolerance, generosity, and justice, for example.⁴⁷⁹

It follows necessarily that man's complete human happiness is realized through his friends; and whoever finds his completion through others cannot possibly attain his full happiness in solitude and seclusion. The happy man, therefore, is he who wins friends and endeavors to distribute goods generously among them in order that he may attain with them what he cannot attain himself, and so that he may find pleasure in them all the days of his life and they also may find pleasure in him.⁴⁸⁰

⁴⁷⁷ Miskawayh, *Tahdhib al-Aklat*, 5th disc., 138:5.

⁴⁷⁸ B.H. Siddiqi, "Ibn Miskawaih's Theory of History," *Iqbal*, vol. 12 (January 1963), 74.

⁴⁷⁹ See Badruddin Bhat, "Miskawayh on Society and Government," *Islamic Studies*, vol. 24, issue 1 (January 1985), 29.

⁴⁸⁰ Miskawayh, *Tahdhib al-Aklat*, 5th disc., 155:5-10.

Conclusion

Essentially, regarding character, Miskawayh lists various philosophical opinions including his own: (1) Human nature can never be changed (Greek) ; (2) People are born good but become bad by the company they keep (Stoic); (3) People are born bad but become good through education; (4) There are three types of people—some good by nature, some bad by nature, and some intermediate between good and bad natures (Galen); (5) Human existence depends on God's will, but the amelioration of human existence depends on humanity's will (Miskawayh).⁴⁸¹ This issue is critical to my interpretation because it underscores the need for community, our constant need for the transcendental, and our awareness of the human condition.

Community, the transcendent, and an awareness of the human condition are themes that I believe give Miskawayh's moral philosophy an existentialist humanistic flavor. Miskawayh's moral philosophy and even his history speak to the fact that as human beings, we are not self-sufficient and thus must relate not only to one another but also to a transcendence—in this case, God. As human beings, Miskawayh believed that through historical conditioning, we develop a *relational* nature to other human beings that when realized, enhances us, enables us to see beyond and through ourselves, and ultimately helps us to negate our egos by realizing that we are nothing without each other.

In a manner of speaking, we become magnetized by the solidity of community and are thus drawn to each other through mutual friendship. I believe that the following line from Louis

⁴⁸¹ Sharif, *A History of Muslim Philosophy*, 475.

Gluck's poem "Mirror Image," nicely captures the spirit of Miskawayh's moral philosophy. ". . . once you can't love another human being, you have no place in the world."⁴⁸²

⁴⁸² Louise Gluck, "Mirror Images," in *Poems 1962–2012*, (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2012), 237.

Chapter 10: *Adab* and the *Belles-Lettres* Tradition

A Brief Historical Background

The Persian literary tradition not only helped shape and influence *adab* in the medieval Islamic cultural milieu but also fought to hold on to its distinctly Persian identity in spite of Arab conquests. Nishapur, in northern Iran, was one such place where this literary tradition thrived. From the perspective of places like Baghdad, for instance, Nishapur was viewed as a region rigid in its ways as it flexed its muscles to assert its own political and cultural autonomy.⁴⁸³ However, the lower classes of Central Asia were resentful of their Nishapur rulers and those associated with these rulers because the lower classes felt that their Nishapur rulers were pandering to their Arab overlords and neglecting their own cultural heritage.⁴⁸⁴

This volatile situation erupted in the 850s in the form of civil unrest, not necessarily in Nishapur proper, but in Sistan, a rather remote area to the south and east of Nishapur.⁴⁸⁵ The effects of this populist uprising would trickle down to Khurasan and other regions of central Iran and central Asia and eventually land at the doorstep to threaten the caliphate itself.⁴⁸⁶ The ramifications of this uprising would have both an immediate and long-term impact on Persianate Central Asia proper and would ultimately serve as the backdrop for Abolqasem Ferdowsi's epic, the *Shahnameh*.⁴⁸⁷

⁴⁸³ S. Frederick Starr, *Lost Enlightenment: Central Asia's Golden Age from the Arab Conquest to Tamerlane*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), 210.

⁴⁸⁴ Starr, *Lost Enlightenment*, 210.

⁴⁸⁵ Starr, *Lost Enlightenment*, 210.

⁴⁸⁶ Starr, *Lost Enlightenment*, 210.

⁴⁸⁷ Starr, *Lost Enlightenment*, 210.

Iranians, like the ancient Greeks, cherished their courageous heroes (i.e., *jawanmard*, young man, *jawanmardi*, manliness) who would come to serve as models embodying all the noble virtues of manhood such as courage, honesty, hospitality and generosity.⁴⁸⁸ Taste and cultivation played important roles as well. The gentleman, for example, can quote poetry appropriately and is broadly knowledgeable. As Hodgson noted, various studies contributed to *adab* culture: literary studies, Sharia, history, geography, and famous tales and maxims to which allusions might be made.⁴⁸⁹ Furthermore, interacting and mixing with other people by living in a society enables one to perfect within himself those cardinal values of tolerance, forbearance, generosity and justice.⁴⁹⁰ This is the Perso-Arab tradition. This is Miskawayh's tradition.

Assimilation

The *adab*-humanists of mediaeval Islam had developed a sophisticated pedagogical *humanitas* rivaling that of the European Renaissance. This program comprised various *amali* (i.e., history, and moral philosophy.)⁴⁹¹ This development of *ars dictaminis* was a cultural development originating in Islam which would soon after appear in the West around 1100 A.D.⁴⁹² Generally, an *ars dictaminis* curriculum would involve something along the order of grammar, rhythmic and metrical poetry, rhetoric and oratory, epistolography, writing formal legal documents and studying elementary principles of law.⁴⁹³ As Makdisi notes, the point of *ars dictaminis* is twofold: First, *ars dictaminis* means the art of composition, not dictation; and, second, *ars*

⁴⁸⁸ Arley Loewen, "Proper Conduct (*Adab*) is Everything: *The Futuwwat-namah-i Sultani of Husayn Va'iz-i Kashifi*," *Iranian Studies*, vol. 36, no. 4 (December 2003), 543.

⁴⁸⁹ Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam*, vol. 1, 453.

⁴⁹⁰ Bhat, Badruddin, "Miskawayh on Society and Government," *Islamic Studies*, vol. 24, no. 1 (1985), 29.

⁴⁹¹ George Makdisi, "*Ars Dictaminis* in Classical Islam and the Christian Latin West," 300.

⁴⁹² Makdisi, "*Ars Dictaminis*," 303.

⁴⁹³ Makdisi, "*Ars Dictaminis*," 298.

dictaminis primarily deals with letter writing.⁴⁹⁴ Furthermore, letter writing and composition are obviously interdependent.

Letters were dictated from early times. That dictation could come to mean composition is no cause for surprise: when one dictates, one is in fact composing. But *ars dictaminis* came to mean the art of composition, specifically the epistolary art even though the manuals continued to define the art as consisting of other subjects.⁴⁹⁵

Ibn Khaldun on the Islamic Literary Tradition—*Adab*

Ibn Khaldun, a fourteenth century historian living in Northern Africa noted that most Muslim scholars have been non-Arabs in the fields of religious studies or the sciences.⁴⁹⁶

Thus, the founders of grammar were Sibawayh and, after him, al-Farisi and az-Zajjaj. All of them were of non-Arab (Persian) descent. They were brought up in the Arabic language and acquired the knowledge of it through their upbringing and through contact with Arabs. They invented the rules of (grammar) and made (grammar) into a discipline (in its own right) for later (generations to use). . . . The intellectual sciences, as well, made their appearance in Islam only after scholars and authors had become a distinct group of people and all scholarship had become a craft. (The intellectual sciences) were then the special preserve of non-Arabs, left alone by the Arabs, who did not cultivate them. They were cultivated only by Arabicized non-Arabs (Persians) as was the case with all the crafts as we stated at the beginning.⁴⁹⁷

Ibn Khaldun cites a couple of reasons for this. First, in the beginning of Islam, “sciences” or “crafts” did not exist. This, in part, was because of the desert environment and what he calls the *desert attitude*.⁴⁹⁸ The second reason is similar in that it also has to do with the physical

⁴⁹⁴ Makdisi, “*Ars Dictaminis*”, 298.

⁴⁹⁵ Makdisi, “*Ars Dictaminis*”, 298.

⁴⁹⁶ Ibn Khaldun, *Muqaddimah*, trans. by Franz Rosenthal, (New York: Pantheon Books, 1958, vol. 3, 311, “It is a remarkable fact that, with few exceptions, most Muslim scholars both in the religious and in the intellectual sciences have been non-Arabs. When a scholar is of Arab origin, he is non-Arab in language and upbringing and has non-Arab teachers. This is so in spite of the fact that Islam is an Arabic religion, and its founder was an Arab.”

⁴⁹⁷ Ibn Khaldun, *Muqaddimah*, vol. 3, 311–314.

⁴⁹⁸ Ibn Khaldun, *Muqaddimah*, vol. 3, 311.

environment, namely, that the types of studies a culture develops has to do with whether or not it is a sedentary culture.

Thus the sciences came to belong to sedentary culture, and the Arabs were not familiar with them or with their cultivation. Now, the (only) sedentary people at the time were non-Arabs and, what amounts to the same thing, the clients and sedentary people who followed non-Arabs at that time in all matters of sedentary culture, including crafts and professions. They were most versed in those things, because sedentary culture had been firmly rooted among them from the tie of the Persian Empire.⁴⁹⁹

Consider the following from an unknown Persian poet,

Truly man is distinguished only by religion, and piety cannot be abandoned on account of racial reasons. Islam exalted the Persian Salman, polytheism humiliated the noble Abu Lahab.⁵⁰⁰

Though the Persian contribution to Islam is, indeed, significant, the Persians did not try to confine Islam into some type of national or racial framework.⁵⁰¹ Rather, the Persians viewed Islam as universal. With Islam as the backdrop, Islamic learning in all fields (e.g., astronomy, astrology, mathematics, and medicine) thrived in the eastern caliphate primarily because Baghdad was the center of learning and scholarship even though most of the scholars who engaged in this activity came from eastern Iran where a second center of learning was beginning to get off the ground.⁵⁰² Thus, a *Baghdad–Khurasan axis* evolved in two areas, namely the military which established the ‘Abbasid regime thereby putting al-Ma'mun in power and in learning and scholarship.⁵⁰³ In his book, *The Golden Age of Persia*, Richard Frye rightfully comments,

It seems clear that the manpower, or brainpower, for the ‘Abbasid flowering

⁴⁹⁹ Ibn Khaldun, *Muqaddimah*, vol. 3, 313.

⁵⁰⁰ See (as quoted from) A. Bausani, “Religion in the Seljuq Period,” in the *Cambridge History of Iran* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968), vol. 5, 285.

⁵⁰¹ Richard N. Frye, *The Golden Age of Persia: The Arabs in the East*, (New York: Harper & Row, 1975), 155.

⁵⁰² Frye, *The Golden Age of Persia*, 165.

⁵⁰³ Frye, *The Golden Age of Persia*, 165.

came from Khurasan, and not from western Iran, Arabia, Syria, or elsewhere. . . . the savants of Jundisabur were primarily Persians. One can suggest, simply by the use of statistics, that the Baghdad–Khursasan axis really existed, because of the reservoir of learned men of Buddhism, Manichaeism, Nestorianism, plus the economic well-being of an area grown rich by the utilization of the great opportunities for trade and commerce offered by an enormous caliphate.⁵⁰⁴

From this thoroughly Islamic culture developed a literary tradition elegant and eclectic on the one hand yet practical and relevant on the other.⁵⁰⁵ This literary tradition mirrored Iranian society which traditionally held the notion of the courageous hero or champion (*jawanmardi*—manliness) in high esteem since this individual possessed those virtues of courage, honesty, hospitality, and generosity.⁵⁰⁶ Let us now consider a couple of Persian literary examples—the *Shanameh* and the *Qabus Nama*—to witness firsthand the grandeur, depth, and wisdom that came to symbolize and to some extent immortalize a culture.

***Shah–nameh*—The Persian Book of Kings**

The national epic of Iran, namely the *Shah–nameh*, composed around the late 10th to the early 11th century by Ferdowsi, features the heroic character who embodies these noble virtues.⁵⁰⁷ The following dialogue between the hero, Rostam, and his father, Zal, shows how at an early age Rostam already began to exhibit these virtues.

Zal said to Rostam, “You have grown so tall, your cypress body towers above

⁵⁰⁴ Frye, *The Golden Age of Persia*, 165.

⁵⁰⁵ See Alessandro Bausani’s essay, “Muhammad or Darius? The Elements and Basis of Iranian Culture,” in *Islam and Cultural Change in the Middle Ages*, ed. by Speros Vryonis (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1975), 44, “There is a persistent motif that reached as far as Firdausi’s *Shahnama* [sic], according to which the art of writing is an invention of demonic powers. According to a Sasanian tradition also preserved in the *Shahnama*, one of the first mythical kings of mankind, Tahmuras, succeeds, after a hard struggle, to enchain the demons (*dev*) and is therefore called *devband*, ‘demon binder.’ The *devs* ask for pardon and promise, if spared, to teach him a new art, the art of writing, and not only one kind of script but thirty.”

⁵⁰⁶ Arley Loewen, “Proper Conduct (*Adab*) Is Everything: The Futuwwat–namah–i Sultani of Husayn Va‘iz–i Kashifi,” *Iranian Studies*, vol. 36, no. 4 (December 2003), 543.

⁵⁰⁷ Abolqasem Ferdowsi, *Shahnameh: The Persian Book of Kings*, trans. by Dick Davis, (New York: Penguin Group, 2006). See also G. Richter, who in his article—“Medieval Arabic Historiography,” *Islamic Culture*, vol. 34, no. 1 (January 1960), 146, note 5—posits that the *Shahnameh* was possibly first composed by Dihqan Danishwar during the reign of Yazdjird III (ca. 632–651) and was then titled *Shahnama Danishwar Pahlawi*.

us all. The work that lies ahead of us will keep our restless spirits from their food and sleep; You're still a boy, not old enough to fight, your heart still looks for pleasure and delight, your mouth still smells of milk, how can I ask you to take on this seasoned warrior's task, to fight with lion warriors, and beat them back until they scatter in defeat? What do you say to this? What will you do? May health and greatness always partner you!" And Rostam answered Zal: "Pleasure and wine, feasting and rest, are no concern of mine—Hard-pressed in war, or on the battlefield, with God to aid me, I shall never yield. I need to capture with my noose a horse of mountain size and weight, of mammoth force, I need a crag-like mace if I'm to stand against Turan, defending Persia's land. I'll crush their heads with this tremendous mace and none shall dare oppose me face to face—its weight will break an elephant, one blow from it will make a bloody river flow."⁵⁰⁸

The *Shahnameh* begins with the beginning of the world and ends with the 7th century Arab conquest of the Persian Empire.⁵⁰⁹ This conquest came as such a shock to the Persians that some feared the Persian Empire would merely disappear, swallowed up and subsumed by the Caliphate.⁵¹⁰ The situation for the Persians did not much improve after this. Revolts sprang up in places like Fars, and the Arabs had their hands full dealing with civil unrest in the smaller towns.⁵¹¹ The Umayyads had little regard for Persian traditions and cultures and even treated converts as second-class citizens.⁵¹² The Abbasids, however, seemed more sympathetic to the Persians and their culture. When the Abbasids relocated the capital to Baghdad, this signaled to

⁵⁰⁸ Abolqasem Ferdowsi, *Shahnameh: The Persian Book of Kings*, 131.

⁵⁰⁹Note that in the beginning of the poem, King Hushang discovers fire. This is important because all ancient religions worshipped fire to some extent. Fire played a key role metaphysically, literally, and figuratively as the center of spiritual life—a divine gift, so to speak to humanity. Consider the following from the *Shahnameh*, 4, "One day the king was riding toward the mountains with a group of companions when something long, and black suddenly appeared. Its two eyes were like bowls of blood affixed to its head, and smoke billowed from its mouth, darkening the world. Hushang considered carefully, then grasped a rock and flung it with all his royal strength at the beast, which flickered aside, so that the rock struck against stony ground and shattered. From the collision of the two stones a spark leaped out, and the rock's heart glowed with fire. The snake was not killed, but the fiery nature of flint was discovered, so that whenever anyone struck it with iron, sparks flashed forth. Hushang gave thanks to God that he had given this gift of fire, and from that time forth men prayed toward fire. When night came Hushang and his companions made a mountain of fire and circumambulated it. They had a feast that night, and drank wine. The feast was named "Sadeh" and is Hushang's legacy to us."

⁵¹⁰See introduction to the *Shahnameh: The Persian Book of Kings*, trans. by Dick Davis, 27.

⁵¹¹ See introduction to the *Shahnameh: The Persian Book of Kings*, trans. by Dick Davis, 27.

⁵¹² See introduction to the *Shahnameh: The Persian Book of Kings*, trans. by Dick Davis, 27.

the Persians the Arab triumph over the Sasanians and what Davis calls, “the more Persian-oriented direction that came to be taken by the caliphate.”⁵¹³

This poem contains well over fifty thousand couplets thereby making it possibly one of the longest poems ever written.⁵¹⁴ Moreover, the Persians’ dislike of the Arabs is apparent throughout the poem itself.⁵¹⁵ On one level, one can read this poem as a moral treatise on those virtues and right conduct (*adab*) befitting a hero.⁵¹⁶ However, on another level, one can read this poem as a political treatise symbolizing Iranian cultural resistance against three hundred years of Arab rule, a way to preserve and define Iranian identity.⁵¹⁷

Literature, then, represents the circulatory system for any culture. It touches and shapes society, human life, and history.⁵¹⁸ Considering the following passage from *Shanameh* that elegantly conveys the passion, sorrow, and angst of not only a fallen hero, but also a fallen people. This scene deals with Rostam, the story’s hero, who mortally wounds another important heroic figure of the story, Sohrab. Where Rostam is older and seasoned, Sohrad is younger and more of a risk taker.

⁵¹³ See introduction to the *Shahnameh: The Persian Book of Kings*, trans. by Dick Davis, 27.

⁵¹⁴ See *The Teller of Tales: Stories from Ferdowsi’s Shahnameh*, trans. by Richard Jeffrey Newman, (New York: Junction Press, 2011), 9.

⁵¹⁵ See Albrecht Noth, *The Early Arabic Historical Tradition: A Source-Critical Study*, trans. by Michael Bonner, 2nd ed., (Princeton, N.J.: The Darwin Press, Inc., 1994), 157, note 59.

⁵¹⁶ See Arley Loewen, “Proper Conduct (*Adab*) is Everything: The *Futuwwat-namah-i Sultani* of Husayn Va‘iz-I Kashifi,” *Iranian Studies*, vol. 36, no. 4 (December 2003), 543, “In the Perso-Islamic culture, a synthesis of ancient Persian and Arabo-Islamic ideals, the ethic of piety towards God, which was influenced by the increasing dominance of Sufism, shaped a second model of heroism.”

⁵¹⁷ See *The Teller of Tales: Stories from Ferdowsi’s Shahnameh*, 11; See also Dick Davis, *Epic & Sedition: The Case of Ferdowsi’s Shahnameh*, (Washington, D.C.: Mage Publishers, 2006). For an interesting discussion of Islamic Persian literary culture and influence in India, see Iqtidar Hussain Siddiqui, “The Intellectual and Religious Dimensions of the Islamic Persian Literary Culture in India during the Thirteenth Century,” *Intellectual Discourse*, vol. 8, no. 1 (2000): 69–80.

⁵¹⁸ See Michael Allan, “How *Adab* Became Literary: Formalism, Orientalism and the Institutions of World Literature,” *Journal of Arabic Literature*, vol. 43 (2012), 172.

“I brought this on myself, this is for me,
 And Fate has merely handed you the key:
 To my brief life: not you but heaven’s vault—
 Which raised me and then killed me—is a fault.
 Love for my father led me here to die.
 My mother gave me signs to know him by,
 And you could be a fish within the sea,
 Or pitch black, lost in night’s obscurity,
 Or be a star in heaven’s endless space,
 Or vanish from the earth and leave no trace,
 But still my father, when he knows I’m dead,
 Will bring down condign vengeance on your head,
 One from this noble band will take this sign
 To Rostam’s hands, and tell him it was mine,
 And say I sought him always, far and wide,
 And that, at last, in seeking him, I died.”⁵¹⁹

***Qabus Nama*—A Mirror for Princes**

Another major Persian work written around 1080, the *Qabus Nama* concerns itself with proper conduct in various situations. The author, Kai Ka’us ibn Iskandar ibn Qabus ibn Washmgir, wrote the book for his son who would also be his successor as a kind of a manual on how to avoid trouble, minimize risk, and reduce stress. As the translator of this text notes, Reuben Levy, “In essence it combines the functions of popular educator, manual of political conduct and text book of ethics, with expediency as its motto.”⁵²⁰

In the preface of the *Qabus Nama*, the father tells his son that he has wisdom to pass along that would help his son avoid the “crushing hand of fate.” Because his time is limited as an old man, he instructs his son to pay close attention to heed his words carefully. This is an example of wisdom traveling through time, being passed from one generation to the next.

Know, my son, that I have become old and that feebleness has taken possession of me: from my hair I see, as it were written in my appearance,

⁵¹⁹*Shahnameh*, trans, by Dick Davis, 209.

⁵²⁰ *Qabus Nama*, trans. by Reuben Levy, introduction, ix.

the proclamation of my dismissal from life. Seek as he may no man's hand can annul it. Therefore, my son, since I find my name in the company of them that are about to pass away, I deem it fitting, before the intimation of my dismissal arrives, to record in writing my views on showing a proper indifference to destiny's decrees and on the advantages to be acquired from possessing a good repute. I impart this to you out of paternal affection, so that before you are crushed by the hand of fate you may read these words of mine with an understanding eye, and benefitting from my counsel, gain repute which shall be good both in this world and the next.⁵²¹

Adab, as I mentioned earlier, not only represents a specific kind of literary genre and proper code of conduct, but also it is something that must be practiced at all times, especially from an early age for those born of nobility.⁵²² The socio-ethical and literary concepts of *adab* merged around the 9th century, producing books of a didactic and encyclopedic nature exhibiting more than just narrative of rules and guidelines.⁵²³

The Abbasid formula for *adab* literature, for example, typically incorporated verse, prose, anecdotes or aphorisms from political, ethical, and religious thought.⁵²⁴ Consider the following example from the *Qabus Nama* in the section on Romance and how to avoid temptation and

⁵²¹ *Qabus Nama*, trans. by Reuben Levy, 1.

⁵²² See “*Adab* i. *adab* in Iran,” in *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, online at <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/adab-i-iran>, for a fuller discussion.

⁵²³ “Abasid Belles-Lettres,” ed. by Julia Ashtiany et al., in *The Cambridge History of Arabic Literature*, (New York: Cambridge, 1990), 26–27.

⁵²⁴ “Abasid Belles-Lettres,” 28.

resist passion.⁵²⁵ It draws on a body of commonly established nomenclature and hierarchy of virtues in Islamic morality whose roots extend even to Aristotle's ethical works.⁵²⁶

During the time of my grandfather, Shama al-Ma'ali, it was reported that a merchant at Bukhara possessed a slave valued at two thousand dinars. Ahmad son of Sa'd brought the matter to the prince's attention, say, "It would be fitting for us to send someone to buy that slave," and the prince replied that he, Ahmad, should go. On arrival at Bukhara, he saw the slave-dealer and, the slave being produced, he made the purchase for the price of twelve hundred dinars. The slave was brought to Gurgan and inspected by amir, who appointed him to the office of towel-holder. When Amir washed his hands, the slave held out the towel on which he dried them. Some time passed; then, one day, when the Amir had washed his hands and the youth was handing him the towel, as he was rubbing them his glance fell on him. The sight pleased him and he handed back the towel. However, some time later the Amir said to Abu'l-'Abbas 'Alim, "I have given this slave his freedom and granted him such-and-such a village. I wish you to know this. Write title-deeds for him and ask the hand of a chieftain's daughter from the Town for him in marriage. Instruct him, also, that he is to remain at home Until his beard is grown and let him then present himself before me."⁵²⁷

As I mentioned earlier, these types of books take a didactic approach and are characteristic of various kinds of miscellanies. The following excerpt from the *Qabus Nama* gives a sort of job description for the secretary and also draws on historical anecdote to illustrate the point of how important the job of secretary really is and the proper conduct associated with such a position.⁵²⁸

⁵²⁵ See also Arley Loewen, "Proper Conduct (*Adab*) is Everything: The *Futuwwat-namah-i Sultani* of Husayn Va'iz-I Kashifi," *Iranian Studies*, vol. 36, no. 4 (December 2003), 552–553, "The metaphor frequently used to depict the struggle against the *nafs* was that of physical battle. Just as a real young man (*fata*) had to make every effort to be physically fit, the goal of *futuwwat* was to be spiritually and ethically fit. A real *fata* ideally possessed a beautiful body, a model of symmetry and harmony. Similarly, the spiritual *fata* was one who had not only overpowered his *nafs*, but who demonstrated this through his noble character traits after he achieved self-realization, meaning that he perfectly understood the ultimate reality of life. . . . It is precisely because of the emphasis on detachment and control of one's passions that the Sufi masters of Kashifi's day [c. 16th cent.] became so preoccupied with the distinction between outward form and inward meaning, and the need to harmonize the two. . . . While inwardly free from material attachment, the spiritual champion had to maintain commitment to society and be honorable with people, i.e., through proper external conduct."

⁵²⁶ Marinós Sariyannis, "The Princely Virtues as Presented in Ottoman Political and Moral Literature," *Turica*, 43 (2011), 122.

⁵²⁷ *Qabus Nama*, trans. by Reuben Levy, 73–74.

⁵²⁸ See Arley Loewen, "Proper Conduct (*Adab*) is Everything: The *Futuwwat-namah-i Sultani* of Husayn Va'iz-I Kashifi," 546, "Many professions had their own treatises (*rasa'il*) which contained the esoteric lore and moral code of behavior relating to them. Loewen recommends comparing the following example, 546, note 11: See the

If you become a secretary, you must have a command of words and a good knowledge of script. You should not make a habit of extravagance in your phraseology, but must constantly practice writing to acquire proficiency. . . Adorn your own letters with quotations, proverbs, Koranic verses and traditions of the Prophet; and if a letter is to be in Persian, do not write it in pure Persian, because that would be unacceptable, more especially in dialectal Persian, which is unfamiliar and should never in any circumstances be written. It is generally known how the formal turns of expression used in Arabic letters should be employed. In such letters, rhymed prose is a sign of talent and is regarded with great favour as an agreeable feature, whereas it is disapproved in letters written in Persian, and much better omitted. Let all the language you use be elevated, metaphorical, mellifluous and terse. It behooves the secretary to be quick of perception, familiar with the mysteries of the secretarial art and capable of appreciating the significance of allusions.⁵²⁹

The point of works such as the *Shanameh* or the *Qabus Nama* is quite simple. One must be both spiritually and physically in shape.⁵³⁰ Namely, depending on the specific period and the author's background, courtly virtues can take on various degrees of meaning.⁵³¹

Futuwwat-namah-yi chitsazan (makers of calico textiles) in RJ (*Rasa 'il-I tamil bar hafnamaht Futuwwat*), 225–39. M. Gavrilov published in Russian translation a collection of such Persian treatises—see M. Gavrilov, “O remeslennykh tsekkakh Srednei Azii I ikh statutakh-risolia” [On crafts guilds in Central Asia and their statutes/*risala*], *Izvestiia Sredneaziatskogo komiteta po delam muzeev I okhrany pamiatnikov stariny, iskusstva I prirody* (Tashkent, 1928), 3: 223–41.

⁵²⁹ *Qabus Nama*, trans. by Reuben Levy, 201–202.

⁵³⁰ See Arley Loewen, “Proper Conduct (*Adab*) is Everything: The *Futuwwat-namah-i Sultani* of Husayn Va‘iz-I Kashifi,” 552, the battle between the soul (*nafs*) and the flesh.

⁵³¹ See Marinos Sariyannis, “The Princely Virtues as Presented in Ottoman Political and Moral Literature,” who discusses a similar topic concerning the “shifting content of the ‘princely virtues’,” with respect to the Ottomans.

Chapter 11: Miskawayh and Existentialist Humanism

As I mentioned earlier, humanism in general—and Islamic humanism in particular—confronts the Socratic question of how one should live. This question lurks in the background of existentialism as well. Perhaps, however, the existential question is more fundamental because it forces one to consider the *meaning* of his life. Regardless of whether one is religiously motivated or not when confronting such a question, as an individual, one still adamantly believes at some level in the uniqueness of the human being, human freedom, and transcendence.⁵³² In other words, we have to reach beyond ourselves in spite of our personal circumstances and proclaim that we are, indeed, *in* the world but not necessarily *of* the world.⁵³³

Humanism and Existentialism can work together as a kind of existentialist humanism to help one understand more fully and more richly the nature of one's own subjectivity by grasping or considering the reality of others.⁵³⁴ This is what Sartre refers to as *intersubjectivity*.⁵³⁵

Furthermore, regarding transcendence, humanity needs the transcendental as both Christianity and Islam argue.⁵³⁶ After all, transcendentalism is our appeal to a higher level of being where, as Gabriel Marcel explained, we find grace, mercy, and charity.⁵³⁷

⁵³² David E. Roberts, *Existentialism and Religious Belief*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1957), 45.

⁵³³ See *Romans*, 12:2, "Do not conform yourselves to this age but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and pleasing and perfect." See also John, 17:14–16, "I gave them your word, and the world hated them, because they do not belong to the world any more than I belong to the world. I do not ask that you take them out of the world but that you keep them from the evil one. They do not belong to the world any more than I belong to the world."

⁵³⁴ See Sartre, *Existentialism is a Humanism*, 41–42, "The other is essential to my existence, as well as to the knowledge I have of myself. Under these conditions, my intimate discovery of myself is at the same time a revelation of the other as a freedom that confronts my own and that cannot think or will without doing so for or against me."

⁵³⁵ See Sartre, *Existentialism is a Humanism*, 42, "We are thus immediately thrust into a world that we may call 'intersubjectivity.' It is in this world that man decides what he is and what others are."

⁵³⁶ See also *Romans*, 13:1, "Let every person be subordinate to the higher authorities, for there is no authority except from God, and that that exist have been established by God."

⁵³⁷ Gabriel Marcel, "Critique of Contemporary Culture," in *A Gabriel Marcel Reader*, (South Bend, Ind.: St. Augustine's Press, 2011), 115. See also Sartre, *Existentialism is a Humanism*, 52. Here, Sartre argues against that definition of humanism supporting a concept of transcendence claiming that humanity is always outside itself and

I propose that existentialist humanism, intersubjectivity, and transcendence comprise the bedrock of Miskawayh's civic humanism. His concept of civic humanism belongs to a reality that is a state of being rather than a constant process. It is here, within this very reality, a reality of *being*, where he believed that we perfect our *techne biou*—our art of life—and refine our understanding of God rather than making gods of one another.⁵³⁸

In this chapter, I discuss how Miskawayh's three seminal works—*al-Fauz al-Asghar*, *Tajarib al-Umam*, and *Tahdhib al-Aklaq*—form a type of Islamic existential philosophy when read *in toto*. Each one of these works illustrates a particular Sartrean existentialist property: his work on metaphysics, *al-Fauz al-Asghar*, represents the materializing of *self* in the world; his work on history, *Tajarib al-Umam*, illustrates the encountering of *self* in the world; and, his work on ethics, *Tahdhib al-Aklaq*, shows the defining of *self* in the world.⁵³⁹ As I mentioned earlier, by reading these texts in this way, I believe it becomes more apparent how intersubjectivity and transcendence play a crucial role in linking these works together.

Finally, I posit that these works are more than just examples of *adab*. They represent Miskawayh's response to what was going on around him and an attempt to make us more aware of the struggles we each undergo in understanding for ourselves the universal condition.

Miskawayh's three works introduce us to an Islamic existentialist humanism wherein Miskawayh strives to make us more conscious of the urgency in how to live our lives and how

exists by pursuing the transcendent. Sartre asserts that the only universe that exists is the human one, what he calls, "the universe of human subjectivity." Likewise, he argues against the other definition of humanism that defines humanity as an end and a "supreme value." The reason he disagrees with this definition is because humanity is always changing.

⁵³⁸ See Nussbaum, *Therapy of Desire*, 142, "People are more willing to give up God or gods than to stop making gods of one another."

⁵³⁹ See Sartre, *Existentialism is a Humanism*, 41–42.

we can find the truth both within ourselves and in community—a truth which enveloped us from the moment of our creation.⁵⁴⁰

Existentialist Humanism

Mediaeval Arab-Islamic and Iranian-Islamic humanism was what Gardet referred to as a “palace humanism,” of the royal courts, of the privileged urban elite and a humanism that took on “supercilious attitudes towards the Islamic religious sciences.”⁵⁴¹ However, there also loomed in the foreground another kind of humanism, namely an Islamic humanism with closer ties to religion than its European Renaissance counterpart.⁵⁴² This particular Islamic humanism with its connections to religion gave rise to an Islamic religious existentialism which sought to bring out and accentuate life’s meaning and purpose, namely life’s value, contrary to Western existentialists such as Sartre, for example, who saw life as meaningless.⁵⁴³

The discursive exchanges between Islamic humanism and religion in addition to the different levels of encounter and rejection existing between these competing systems entice us to explore more deeply the dialogue in which Islamic humanism and religion engage—a dialogue with one fundamental shared objective, namely, the search for life’s meaning.⁵⁴⁴ Consider Sartre’s claim that one needs the mediation of the other in order to form more clearly an understanding and realization of the truth concerning oneself.⁵⁴⁵ When one grasps this truth, then inevitably one

⁵⁴⁰ See *Cambridge Companion to Existentialism*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 322–325.

⁵⁴¹ L. Gardet, “Towards a renewal of Islamic Humanism,” *Islamic Studies*, vol. 1, issue 4 (1962), 27.

⁵⁴² L. Gardet, “Towards a renewal of Islamic Humanism,” 28.

⁵⁴³ Bayraktar Bayrakli, “Existentialism in the Islamic and Western Educational Philosophies,” *Hambard Islamicus*, vol 19, issue 1 (January 1996), 6.

⁵⁴⁴ See Mohammed Arkoun, “The Struggle for humanism in Islamic contexts,” *Journal of Levantine Studies*, vol. 1, issue 1 (January 2011), 154 wherein Arkoun talks about how the works of Abu Hayyan al-Tawhidi influenced him.

⁵⁴⁵ Sartre, *Existentialism is a Humanism*, 41–42.

becomes more aware of (or conscious) of who he is and likewise more responsible not only for just himself but for all humanity.⁵⁴⁶

Now, I plug into Sartre's argument Islamic humanism and Islamic religion and arrive at something interesting. Islamic humanism needs the mediation of Islamic religion in order to understand, legitimize, and establish itself. This actualization of Islamic humanism's awareness of its own truth and responsibility to humanity gives Islamic humanism a new attribute, that is, an existential attribute linking transcendence as the constitutive element of humanity with subjectivity, thereby allowing humanity to rediscover itself.⁵⁴⁷

In other words, both worlds mattered to Muslims, the "now" and the "hereafter", and Islamic existentialist humanism viewed humanity as the symbol of existence, the new operative dictum in an ever evolving Islamic philosophical cosmology.⁵⁴⁸ Historically, most socio-cultural traditions encouraged and maintained a dialectic between the old and the new, between the orthodox and innovating ideas, and Islam was no different.⁵⁴⁹ Ultimately, Islam provided fertile ground for an Islamic existentialist humanism wherein humanity does not *become* or *replace* God but rather comes to symbolize the representative of God, God's vice-gerent on Earth (*Kalifat-ullah*), who sees the essence of the universe as a single being.

⁵⁴⁶ Sartre, *Existentialism is a Humanism*, 41–42.

⁵⁴⁷ See Sartre, *Existentialism is a Humanism*, 53. Here, I appropriate Sartre's language to help clarify my point on how I think general Islamic humanism evolved into a kind of existential humanism and spiritual transcendence with human subjectivity.

⁵⁴⁸ Aryn B. Sajoo, "The Islamic Ethos and the Spirit of Humanism," *International Journal of Politics, Culture and Society*, vol. 8, no. 4 (1993), 584.

⁵⁴⁹ Aryn B. Sajoo, "The Islamic Ethos and the Spirit of Humanism," 592.

In his metaphysics, history, and ethics, Miskawayh developed what I call a meta-discourse of praxis whose structure generally and organizationally resembles the standard version of Kierkegaard's three stages of life through which a person passes to discover and become a true self—aesthetic, ethical, and religious. Miskawayh took the third stage, namely the religious, for granted and focused primarily on the first two.⁵⁵⁰

More broadly, I propose that one could even use Kierkegaard's standard three stages as a template upon which to study the emerging patterns in the evolutionary development of Islamic society itself as it strove to attain a religious identity by moving from the aesthetic to the ethical stages respectively. Let us look briefly at the route Islam took to fulfill itself in these three stages. This will provide us with an historical context in which to situate Miskawayh. First, we consider Islam's struggle to emerge from the aesthetic stage as it wrestled with negotiating Qur'anic ideals concerning egalitarianism, piety, and early *Jahili* values. Then we will review briefly the Graeco-Islamic philosophical tradition—particularly metaphysics—that propelled Islamic society into the ethical and religious stages.

Islam's Struggle—The Aesthetic Period

I see the aesthetic stage—to borrow the popular view of the first of the three Kierkegaardian stages—as Islamic society trying to negotiate the tension between Qur'anic ideals of egalitarianism and piety and those *Jahili* values of kinship, honor and tribal loyalty. I believe this serves as a good example representing the struggle with which one (either a person or a state) wrestles to move from one stage to the next. Second, I examine how these processes of

⁵⁵⁰ I find it interesting that for Kierkegaard, few people ever reached the third stage. So, he could not take the religious stage for granted.

negotiation manifested themselves in the formative period of Islam. In part two, I discuss those social, cultural, and ethical issues that were at stake here. My point is that sometimes it is never easy or tidy going from one stage to the other. If the religious stage is our ultimate goal, then there are no shortcuts to holiness.

In early Islamic society, there existed a tension between Qur'anic ideals of egalitarianism and piety on the one hand and Jahili values of kinship, honor, and tribal loyalty on the other. The processes of negotiating this tension were intricately complicated and manifested themselves in a variety of ways during the formative period of Islam. Of these processes of negotiation, I focus on the issue of leadership, particularly with respect to questions of succession.

Not surprisingly, a strain arose between pious egalitarianism and ancient hierarchical privilege. I agree with Afsaruddin on this point that the "Quran's insistence on individual righteousness and moral excellence" undoubtedly made a strong and lasting impression on early Muslims. For these early Muslims themselves were wrestling with the pre-Islamic valorization of lineage and tribal affiliation. One finds textual support for this in Qur'anic verses 26:88–89, 2:124 *et al.* wherein merit earned through personal piety ranked higher than merit through lineage, for instance.

Next, the pre-Islamic notions of *hasab* and *nasab* came under scrutiny. That is, Muslims interpreted the Qur'an as emphasizing one's merits earned through deeds and accomplishments. It is understandable, then, why *hasab* (total of ancestors' achievements) and *nasab* (one's lineage) no longer carried influence. This undoubtedly caused a strain between pious

egalitarianism and ancient hierarchical privilege. According to Marlowe, beginning in the 8th century, socio–political developments further modified this early egalitarian Islamic spirit by stripping away that Islamic vision of its “social utopian goals and their subversive implications.”⁵⁵¹

Ultimately, it seems to me that a primary manifestation of this negotiation between Qur’anic egalitarianism and *Jahili* values was the tension, hinted at above, between one’s accrual of excellence by way of a blood relationship to the Prophet and through individual exertion and performance of meritorious deeds. For al-Jahiz, any plea to “blood relationship” is problematic because it promotes an objectionable pride in one’s lineage which in itself contravenes the Islamic spirit of egalitarianism.

In other words, if one appeals to his lineage, then he might use this to absolve him from any lack of particular knowledge and deed. Furthermore, al-Jahiz emphasizes that the concept of imam categorically restricts succession of the prophets who are pious—thus discounting the relevance of lineage. He argued only the most morally excellent have a right to lead. This is demonstrated in Muhammad’s delegating authority to Abu Bakr thereby attesting to Abu Bakr’s leadership skills.

It seems that propinquity to the Prophet was a mark of great moral excellence, as Afsaruddin and others have noted.⁵⁵² Where egalitarians tried to expand this definition, others tried to

⁵⁵¹ See Louise Marlowe, *Hierarchy and Egalitarianism in Islamic Thought*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

⁵⁵² See Asma Afsaruddin, *The First Muslims: History and Memory*, (Oxford: OneWorld, 2008).

circumscribe it. This is important, as Afsaruddin points out, because it is a question of moral excellence and of legitimate leadership. Here, I present Afsaruddin's explanation. If one considers *fada'il* literature, for example, one discovers that 'Ali's youth and lack of worldly experience counted against him when compared to Abu Bakr's seniority and greater worldly knowledge and experience.

This distinction factored heavily in the early debates of succession. In fact, one can cite Qur'anic support for Abu Bakr's candidacy in those verses highlighting personal piety over kinship. Personal piety is knowledge of religious precepts accompanied by the wisdom to carry them out. Yet, as Afsaruddin points out, Abu Bakr's election actually followed tradition. That is, without any prophetic directives, Muslims turned to their "deeply ingrained Arab customs" for electing a leader.

To illustrate, consider Abu Bakr's election. Technically speaking, his election followed the traditionally honored custom of how a tribal leader was selected, based on such criteria as age, superior knowledge, genealogical knowledge, personal qualities and high social standing. Based on this, some may have considered Abu Bakr's election as a recourse to *Jahili* customs and therefore repugnant. As Afsaruddin again points out, the codification of piety as the principle of social and religio-political organization centers around religious piety and its legitimizing function in the early Muslim polity. One could understand how this might make the nobility nervous because now Muslim converts from undistinguished and unremarkable backgrounds could feel empowered because of the Islamic egalitarianism that called into question those traditional notions of leadership based on ethnicity and lineage.

Afsaruddin points out that after Muhammad's death, there were two competing pietistic and egalitarian views of leadership of the Muslim polity. First, there existed an egalitarian Qur'anic vision of political and social stewardship based on one's "greater moral excellence" and valorization of certain ideals. Second, there was a more radical egalitarianism premised on Qur'anic injunctions favoring personal piety and the "commission of morally superior deeds above other considerations for a just society."

As Muslims diligently tried to work their way through this tension, they soon discovered that crucial social, cultural, and ethical issues were at stake. First, with respect to social issues, during the 8th and 9th centuries, many social changes were taking place. For example, as Marlow notes, there was increasing ethnic and social diversity of Muslim communities in the main urban centers.⁵⁵³ Additionally, there was the emergence of new and more internally diverse elites, both military and civil. Second, with respect to cultural issues, in the 8th century, there was less emphasis placed on tribal identities. Also, Marlow points out that a trend was beginning to form against the conflation of ethnic and social status. Third, with respect to ethical issues, there existed the issue of social discontent.

This social discontent had its chief support from the poor and peasants—not to mention the fact that social grievances from various other displaced groups also played a major role. Here, in the insurrectionary movements of the late Umayyad and early Abbasid periods, one finds egalitarianism front and center. In this historical context, according to Marlow, egalitarian

⁵⁵³ See Louise Marlow, *Hierarchy and Egalitarianism in Islamic Thought*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

vocabulary quickly became associated with issues of moral rectitude, and potential political opposition was thereafter used in new and interesting ways. Marlow cites the example of Arab Muslims who employed this vocabulary to assert their ethical claim for full inclusion in the circles of the powerful.

Islamic egalitarianism brought with it one fundamental social change, namely, a redefining of nobility. Surah 49:13, “The most noble of you in the sight of God is the most pious.” This is the Qur’anic formula of nobility and piety. This was to remind rulers, in particular, that they would one day face God alone. Embedded in surah 49:13 are issues of pre–eminence and ethnic/social interpretations of egalitarianism. What ensued was a struggle over cultural orientation.

One cannot talk of cultural orientation without referring first to *shu’ubiyah*. This was a response by non–Arab Muslims to the privileged states of Arabs within the *ummah*. Also, it was a response by Persian Muslims to the growing Arabization of Islam in the 9th and 10th centuries. This was a matter of preserving Persian culture and identity. They passed themselves off as egalitarians because of their adoption of the new standard equation of nobility with piety, viz., 49:13. Not surprisingly, this produced a cultural antipathy between Iranians (and non–Arabs) and Arabs. Al–Jahiz, for example, had an antipathy towards secretaries and yet saw merchants of his time as a perpetuation of the egalitarian ideal.

In short, what was at stake was identity, that is, ethnic, social, and cultural identity. For the initial phase of the conquests brought with it a radical social change among Arabs. Consequently, in the aftermath of the conquests, Arabs witnessed differences in status among themselves. For

example, not everyone shared in the power and newly acquired wealth of these conquests. Furthermore, during the early Umayyad period, these perceived increased inequalities greatly escalated the tension. Kinship was established as the main criterion for appointments, and tribal leaders now acted as intermediaries in the official power structure.

Even Muslim philosophers had something to say on the issue. I am speaking of hierarchy. Muslim philosophers proposed a social/political hierarchy among men based on intellectual and spiritual aptitude. To accomplish this, they stressed that there must exist a kind of mutual cooperation for the survival of society. For it was this necessity of cooperation that led to the formation of communities whereby each person was responsible for the provisions of a single common need. One's place in a community, for example, was determined by one's particular natural disposition. Some believed, in fact, that social stratification was divinely ordained. This is to say that God has determined the various occupations that people should adopt.

The Ethical & Religious: Islam's Philosophical Bridge

Islamic philosophy incorporates multi-dimensional aspects that all work together to create a philosophical system that pumps an intellectual energy and life throughout the entire Islamic social structure. Beginning in the 10th century, I propose that Islamic society entered the second and third of the Kierkegaardian stages—namely the ethical and religious. For Islamic social structure is unique because there are various layers through which one has to dig in order to arrive at the right depth.

Just as one has to dig to great depths to retrieve coal in coal mines, for example, so too one has to dig through the many “mines” that underpin that vast landscape of Islamic social structure in order to retrieve those precious bits of intellectual coal that will fuel Islamic society. For the most part, aesthetic mines, ethical mines, and religious mines all require that one dig with ideas. Undoubtedly, as history has shown, ideas can dig deep through the cold bedrock of any fundamentalism or parochialism upon which a society may rest, even mediaeval Islamic society. Oddly enough, such a society rarely ever suspects or even notices this burrowing that inevitably changes its very fabric. Yet, over time, all these have come together in interesting ways thereby adding depth, texture, color, and richness to this intellectual fabric in which the mediaeval Islamic milieu wrapped itself.

Philosophy in a Multi-Dimensional Islamic Context

Where Western philosophy looks for infinity inward, Islamic philosophy looks outward and asks, “Is there infinity outside ourselves?” For the Islamic philosopher, the human consciousness can serve as the compass of the unknown because it begins from a premise of certainty—unlike Western philosophy which presumes that the human conscience begins from a premise of doubt. Looking for infinity outward requires that Islamic philosophy be multi-dimensional because each dimension of Islam represents an important facet of Islamic philosophy itself. For only through a union of these parts is the unity of the whole revealed. Thus, one cannot properly understand the role of philosophy in Islam by only studying one dimension of Islam. Furthermore, this multi-dimensional aspect of Islam enables Islamic philosophy to look outside the human agent for an infinity wherein resides Divinity, revelation, and the Divine Intellect.

Three fundamental dimensions of Islam interconnect thereby forming a network which in turn gives rise to three aspects of Islam—namely, the Law, the Path, and the Truth. The Law (*al-Shariah*), the Path (*al-tariqah*), and the Truth (*al-al-haqiqah*) orbit around Islam whose strong gravitational pull shapes, controls, and influences the destinies of each. But just as orbiting moons affect their parent planet, so too do these three moons of Islam pull and tug on it as well. In essence, this is a symbiotic relationship whereby they all exist in a kind of isochronal majesty. These orbiting satellites—the Law, the Path, and the Truth—cling to Islam with an umbilicus made from faith (*al-ihsan*), submission (*al-islam*), and virtue (*al-iman*). This umbilicus we refer to as the *aspects* of Islam as revealed to humanity by Divine consent.

Philosophy exists on either one of two levels depending on the context—secular humanism (i.e., characteristic of Western philosophy) and divine transcendence (i.e., characteristic of Islamic philosophy). Where the belief is that knowledge is acquired via the rational and sensuous faculties to the exclusion of prophecy including divine intellect, we will be hard pressed to find any analog of this sort of philosophy manifesting itself in Islam. Second, if we think of philosophy as a traditional philosophy based instead on certainty instead of doubt (as is typical of Western philosophy), and a philosophy wherein the Divine Intellect illuminates the mind of a human being, then we do indeed have an Islamic philosophy concerned with religion, logic, and the natural sciences. To mediaeval Islamic philosophers, then, traditional philosophy served always as the medium through which the truths of revelation are revealed and discussed with rational and intellectual discourse.

Unfolding of the Religious

Around 641 A.D., the Arabs captured Alexandria in Egypt which had been the cultural center of the Ancient world. With this capture, the Arabs soon came into contact with the cultures of Greece and the Middle East. This important seizing of Alexandria will set the stage for the influx of Ancient Greek philosophical thought into early and mediaeval Islamic theology. Let us begin first with a look at those pressing theological issues with which early Islam wrestled in the 7th and 8th centuries. Then, we will examine briefly those specific elements of Ancient Greek philosophy that would inevitably shape mediaeval Islamic philosophy and theology.

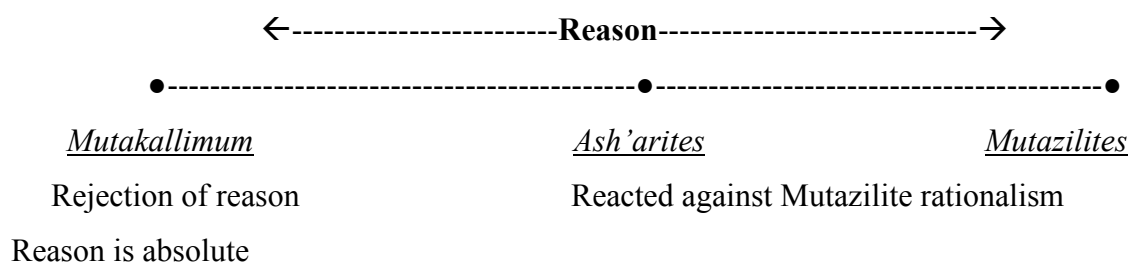
Ever since Islam's inception as a major world religion in 622, Muslim theologians wrestled with two complicated theological points around which mediaeval and contemporary Islam still revolve, namely, free will and predestination. Often referred to as a theological rationalist movement, the Mutazilite movement represents the first articulate theological movement in Islam. The Mutazilites took up two theological theses—divine justice and divine unity.⁵⁵⁴

Recall that Islamic theology and law combine both spiritual and secular aspects of life. Islamic theology originated from a series of problems arising from conditions both religious and political in nature. Hence, Islam comprised elements of philosophy (i.e., reason) and theology (i.e., revealed truth). As Muslim philosophers saw it, reason can discover revealed knowledge and the freedom of humanity, for example. Reason, then, came to be viewed as a tool—not a tool to

⁵⁵⁴ From these, they developed four fundamental theological principles: God's justice and unity, God's immutable rewards and punishments, God's commanding the right, and God prohibiting the wrong.

replace Islamic theological doctrine and revealed knowledge, but rather a tool used for organizing revealed knowledge in a way more accessible to the human intellect.⁵⁵⁵

Consider the following diagram which summarizes the basic position of each group with respect to their stance regarding *reason*. Remember that reason plays an important philosophical role in its interpretation of the understanding of God's will as manifested in His revelation.



For the Mutazilites, the notions of right or wrong were intrinsic qualities of human actions and behavior. Note that this was the opposite of the Ash'arites who claimed that God is not at all obligated, so whatever He commands is by definition *right*, or whatever He prohibits is by definition *wrong*. According to Mutazilite theological interpretation, God would punish or reward people according to their merits or demerits. Moreover, they (i.e., Mutazilites) wholeheartedly rejected the concept of intercession. This makes sense since they believed that human beings are capable of both *willing* and *doing*. That is, we are responsible for the choices we make, and thus we are held accountable for those choices.

⁵⁵⁵ See John Walbridge. *God and Logic in Islam: The Caliphate of Reason*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

Choices have consequences, and our salvation or damnation rests on the consequences of those choices. Those choices that lead to consequences that contravene God's will *damn* us, whereas those choices that through the benefit of revelation preserve our moral insights will gain us *salvation*. In short, the Mutazilites are speaking of humanity's reclamation. Additionally, the Mutazilites took issue with the Ash'arites claim that nothing happens in the universe without God's direct intervention since God is the sole Agent in the universe. The reason for this is quite simple because the Mutazilites were merely trying to relieve God of being responsible for evil in the world, thereby safeguarding His justice.

Now, by increasing magnification on specific Mutazilite theological tenets, we will see shadows of Ancient Greek philosophy. To begin, Mutazilites argued that God's *attributes* (i.e., God's *accidents*) are inseparable from God's *essence*. This philosophical claim, therefore, preserves God's unity. They divided God's attributes into two groups—essential and active.

Miskawayh and the Ethico-Religious

As I mentioned earlier, Miskawayh combined elements of Platonic idealism, Aristotelian ethics, and Islamic *adab* to create an existentialist Islamic humanism that rests on an ethical system that emphasizes reason as a tool to help us determine not only what we should do but also to help us better understand who we are. I believe that he best illustrates this in what I consider to be his three major works on metaphysics (*al-Fauz al-Asghar*), on history (*Tajarib al-Umam*), and on ethics (*Tahdhib al-Akhlaq*).

I am not suggesting that Miskawayh is necessarily an existentialist, but I do believe that his philosophy prefigures existentialism. Miskawayh was living during troubled times in which

corruption was rampant in government, religious fundamentalism was trying to gain a foothold, and materialism was on the rise. These particular factors drew Miskawayh's attention to those common themes often found in existential philosophies, namely, angst, boredom, and despair, for example.

Miskawayh's primary works on metaphysics, history, and ethics touch on these existential themes peripherally in terms of the human individual because through the individual, metaphysical, historical, and moral importance is drawn: (1) how one comes to be in the world; (2) encountering others in the world; and (3) defining oneself self in the world.⁵⁵⁶

I already mentioned how Islam struggled through the aesthetic, ethical, and religious stages into order to develop into a true self—in this case, Islam as a living, vibrant entity with a history, a moral code, and a religious *telos*. On a smaller scale, Miskawayh constructs the same kind of template for an individual person—that is, an individual self. Recall that in the second part of *al-Fauz al-Asghar*, Miskawayh affirms the commonly held view that a human being possesses a soul that is immaterial with two specific faculties to sense and interpret its own reality.⁵⁵⁷ The human being comes to understand his place in the metaphysical scheme by never losing sight of his cause, namely God.

Next, the human being is situated in a historical context. That is, he is a *self* among other *selves* in a linear and organic unfolding of cosmic time. In human history, the *self* in interaction with other *selves* experiences a kind of freedom of release and a tension of purpose simultaneously.

⁵⁵⁶ See Sartre, *Existentialism is a Humanism*, 42.

⁵⁵⁷ See Sharif, *A History of Muslim Philosophy*, vol. 1, 473.

The historical subject will then optimally feel a symphony of triumph through basic consciousness and transcendence. At this moment, he becomes aware of his potential value as a spiritual self with others in community, the individual himself remains subordinate to the larger community, his link to history. It is through community that a sense of awareness of history emerges for the individual thereby knitting individual and community together even more tightly.

In his *Tajarib al-Umam*, Miskawayh shows this entanglement of the individual with community and how both contribute to history's moral and rational unfolding. By slowly untangling individual from community, Miskawayh unearths for us a fundamental existential truth, namely, that each of us is only free to the extent that others are free. Angst, boredom, and despair limit our freedom and even compromise our integrity as spiritual beings, as Miskawayh so often alludes to throughout his *Tajarib*.

History serves as the canvas upon which the human being—a composite of body and soul—emerges and exists in time as an historical being with a pre-determined destiny set according to God's plan. Here, in his *Tajarib*, Miskawayh brings together history and ethics intimately through real life examples to supplement his ethics, *Tahdhib al-Akhlaq*, and to serve as illustrations for those theoretical moral traits he outlines in his ethics.⁵⁵⁸ Recall that Miskawayh was more concerned with motives underlying events than with the events themselves. Moreover,

⁵⁵⁸ Khan, "Ethics According to the *Tajarib al-Umam* of Miskawayh," 2. Khan explains in his article that history served three purposes for Miskawayh: (1) as a moral compass, (2) as a record of important men, great nations, and important events, and (3) as a serious discipline not meant for entertainment or fairy tales.

Miskawayh emphasized the fact that history offers us a place to turn to enrich ourselves morally so that we might be more conscious of our moral obligations and of efficiency.⁵⁵⁹

As an inheritor of the Iranian tradition of wisdom-literature and the ethico-political ideas of the Greek philosophers, Miskawayh undoubtedly considered historical situations from a different perspective, nay, on a different level whereby groups of facts unique to a specific period link moral features.⁵⁶⁰ This means that Miskawayh thought of history as a kind of moral compass, a special kind of tool, for judging the behaviors of men from a moral perspective.

From an Islamic humanist perspective, history is a form of *adab* because it enlightens and educates. However, there is more to history than facts or good literature as we learned from Miskawayh's *Tajarib al-Umam*. I am suggesting that Miskawayh's notion of humanism is not only a matter of education but also incorporates within itself an existential sense.

His work on history, for example, takes the subject of history one step further by relating it to transcendence to reiterate the point that as human beings, we are responsible for the choices we make. History when combined with ethics teaches us that the choices we make have moral implications and affects—for better or worse—the universal human condition. This, I argue, gives Miskawayh's work an existential element—an element unique to his brand of mediaeval Islamic historiography.

⁵⁵⁹ Khan, "Ethics and History According to the *Tajarib al-Umam* of Miskawaih," 3.

⁵⁶⁰ Khan, "Ethics and History According to the *Tajarib al-Umam* of Miskawaih," 3.

In *Existentialism is a Humanism*, Sartre makes the point that humanism and existentialism share a common denominator, namely, choice. We are condemned to be free because we as individuals are responsible for our own choices, and our choices influence and shape the universal human condition.⁵⁶¹ Likewise, I believe, Miskawayh makes the same point in his *Tajarib*. History is both a subject of study of the past and a study of morality. Essentially, history is really nothing more than a study of the human condition. Moreover, history is a stage on which all human passions are acted out—greed, love, envy, materialism, and a quest for power. Men choose to act on these passions when they “let loose with a mortal violence ceaselessly compromising without the victory of the good, acting against the will of the sages.”⁵⁶²

Miskawayh and Sartre and the Existential Humanist

According to Sartre, existentialism’s fundamental aim involves exploring the link between the nature of the absolute character of free commitment and what he calls the “relativity of the cultural ensemble” resulting from choice.⁵⁶³ Again, I believe that Miskawayh had a similar aim in mind with his three primary works. In his *Tahdhib*, Miskawayh’s primary purpose is to explore the nature of human character and how to refine it.⁵⁶⁴ He believes that two types of human character exist: (1) natural and originating in our temperament and (2) acquired by habit and self-training.⁵⁶⁵ Moreover, character is a *state* of the soul causing the soul to act “without thought or deliberation.”⁵⁶⁶

⁵⁶¹ Sartre, *Existentialism is a Humanism*, 29.

⁵⁶² Khan, “Ethics and History According to the *Tajarib al-Umam* of Miskawaih,” 7.

⁵⁶³ Sartre, *Existentialism is a Humanism*, 43.

⁵⁶⁴ See Miskawayh, *Tahdhib al-Aklat*, 2nd discourse.

⁵⁶⁵ Miskawayh, *Tahdhib al-Aklat*, 2nd discourse, 31:5.

⁵⁶⁶ Miskawayh, *Tahdhib al-Aklat*, 2nd discourse, 31:5.

Recall that Miskawayh has already explored the nature of the soul in his work on metaphysics, *al-Fauz al-Aghar*. He established that the soul is not a body, an accident, nor a disposition but rather a substance subsiding *per se* and immortal.⁵⁶⁷ Thus, metaphysically speaking, my character is intimately tied to my soul. In Miskawayh's context, this relationship constitutes my *absolute character*, to borrow Sartre's language. Yet my absolute character can be refined, so to speak, for the purposes of not only being a better person but also becoming more conscious of the person I really am and that to some extent I am responsible for my own existence. On this point, I think that Sartre and Miskawayh would agree that we are what we make ourselves, and this is the essence of subjectivity and the first principle of existentialism itself.⁵⁶⁸

Sartre makes the claim that we cannot transcend human subjectivity.⁵⁶⁹ Here, Miskawayh would part company with Sartre. According to Sartre, humanity could get along just fine without God. In fact, he argues, whether God exists or not has no bearing on humanity's progress.⁵⁷⁰

Existentialism is not so much an atheism in the sense that it would exhaust itself attempting to demonstrate the nonexistence of God; rather, it affirms that even if God were to exist, it would make no difference—that is our point of view. It is not that we believe that God exists, but we think that the real problem is not one of his existence; what man needs is to rediscover himself and to comprehend that nothing can save him from himself, not even valid proof of the existence of God.⁵⁷¹

In short, for Sartre, existentialism is a humanism because humanity itself is a means to its own end. That is, existentialism not only makes human life possible, according to Sartre, but also

⁵⁶⁷ Miskawayh, *al-Fauz al-Aghar*, part 1, vol. 1, 118. "And because our primary aim and the scriptural creed, i.e., judgment and the hereafter, and other religious doctrines, cannot possibly be established without proof that the Soul exists, and that it is manifestly not a body, nor an accident, nor a disposition but a substance subsiding *per se* and free from death and mortality. . ."

⁵⁶⁸ See Sartre, *Existentialism is a Humanism*, 22.

⁵⁶⁹ See Sartre, *Existentialism is a Humanism*, 22.

⁵⁷⁰ See Sartre, *Existentialism is a Humanism*, 53.

⁵⁷¹ See Sartre, *Existentialism is a Humanism*, 53–54.

every truth and action suggests human subjectivity and human choice.⁵⁷² Likewise, human subjectivity and choice are themselves necessary ingredients in humanism whereby existentialism and humanism work together to construct what Nussbaum refers to as a *radical norm of true human flourishing*.⁵⁷³ For Sartre, then, this radical norm culminates in the universal human condition, namely, what it means to be *in the world, work in the world, live out one's life among others*, and finally *die in the world*.⁵⁷⁴ In this cartography of human existence, there is no real need or place for God. A life unlived is a life without meaning, Sartre believes. For him, the only universe that exists is the human one, that is, the universe of human subjectivity.⁵⁷⁵

For Miskawayh, the opposite is true. There can be no universe except a God-centered universe, a virtuous universe whereby virtue promises happiness, peace, and a relationship with divinity. As Miskawayh alluded to indirectly in his ethics, to move towards refining one's character is none other than a move towards virtue itself. On this point, one hears the echo of Epictetus.

And if this is the promise that virtue makes to us—the promise to produce happiness and peace and calm, surely progress toward virtue is progress toward each of these. For to whatever end the perfection of a thing leads, to that end is progress an approach.⁵⁷⁶

Where Sartre argues that humanity cannot transcend itself (i.e., human subjectivity), Miskawayh would most likely counter by stating that it depends on how we think about transcendence.

Transcendence is an actual reaching beyond human subjectivity toward an intersubjective nature of existence that he would refer to as God. I posit that Miskawayh's understanding of transcendence in this way prefigures Gabriel Marcel who concluded that such transcendence

⁵⁷² Sartre, *Existentialism is a Humanism*, 18.

⁵⁷³ Nussbaum, *The Therapy of Desire*, 32.

⁵⁷⁴ Sartre, *Existentialism is a Humanism*, 42.

⁵⁷⁵ Sartre, *Existentialism is a Humanism*, 52.

⁵⁷⁶ Epictetus, "Discourses of Epictetus," in *The Stoic and Epicurean Philosophers*, 230.

inevitably leads one to an affirmation of God.⁵⁷⁷ Contrary to Sartre, both Miskawayh and Marcel would claim that transcendence in fact has its own existence apart from any one individual. In other words, one's experience of transcendence can be either external or internal. In other words, there is a bigger picture to consider. Consider surah 41:53 in the Qur'an, "We will show them Our signs in the horizons and within themselves until it becomes clear to them it is the truth."

What we have to do is to proclaim that we do *not* belong entirely to the world of objects to which men are seeking to assimilate us, in which they are straining to imprison us. To put it very concretely indeed, we have to proclaim that this life of ours, which it has now become technically possible to make into a hideous and grimacing parody of all our dreams, may in reality be only the most insignificant aspect of a grand process unfolding itself far beyond the boundaries of the visible world.⁵⁷⁸

This bigger picture, I offer, also anticipates the importance of the role of transcendence in Islamic mysticism in general, and in Miskawayh's works in particular as I discussed above. Yet transcendence in the mystical sense requires a striving toward divinity which motivates the individual to transcend his own subjectivity, an intra-personal subjectivity integrating both the conscious and the spiritual. An Islamic mystic would argue that we are in constant need of transcendence because this is perhaps the primary way we comprehend a reality of ourselves and others by contemplating and transcending to the reality of God.⁵⁷⁹ This is why Miskawayh's understanding of transcendence is important because it anticipates the main ingredients found in the mystical tradition of Islam. I believe that this is a reasonable claim because medieval Islamic philosophers to some extent are members of the same spiritual family as the Sufis because both are seeking the attainment of ultimate knowledge.⁵⁸⁰

⁵⁷⁷ Gabriel Marcel, *A Gabriel Marcel Reader*, 6.

⁵⁷⁸ Gabriel Marcel, *A Gabriel Marcel Reader*, 115.

⁵⁷⁹ Bayrakli, Bayraktar. "Existentialism in the Islamic and Western Educational Philosophies." *Hamdard Islamicus*, issue 1 (January 1996), 8–16.

⁵⁸⁰ Seyyed Hossein Nasr, "Introduction to the Mystical Tradition," in *History of Islamic Philosophy*, 367.

It did not take too long before the intellect (*al-‘aql*) of the philosophers became identified with the *ruh al-qudus*, the Holy Spirit and the angels of the religious universe with the intelligences of the philosophers. Nor must one forget that some Sufis were given the title of *Ibn Aflatun*, literally the son of Plato.⁵⁸¹

I contend that if we read what I consider to be Miskawayh’s three primary works more closely, we will discover that Miskawayh is introducing us to deeper cosmological and ethical realities that went a long way to fertilize the soil for a developing Islamic mysticism which would thrive for centuries thereafter. Sufism, for example, teaches us how to recognize the *Real* and how to bring alive into the world the potentialities of the noetic faculty that we each possess.⁵⁸² I am suggesting that Miskawayh had a rapport with a certain dimension of Islamic esotericism that stemmed not only from his Persian heritage but also from his experience with Greek philosophy, alchemy, and dabbling in astrology.

By Miskawayh’s time, the pervading *ethos* was Islamic and the operating dictum reflected the evolving Islamic humanistic outlook, namely, that man is the symbol of existence.⁵⁸³ Rather than focus entirely on the hereafter as did the Christians around this same time (i.e., ca. 10th cent. on), Muslims sought a more balanced perspective, teaching that both worlds actually mattered.⁵⁸⁴ In this environment, it is not surprising that *adab* flourished. As he matured into an historian and philosopher, Miskawayh would soon align his work with the tides of mysticism, esotericism, and humanistic philosophy that all worked together to help one transcend his own subjectivity in favor of that of the divine. Miskawayh’s attitude that moral philosophy also contains a spiritual

⁵⁸¹ Seyyed Hossein Nasr, “Introduction to the Mystical Tradition,” in *History of Islamic Philosophy*, 367–368.

⁵⁸² Seyyed Hossein Nasr, “Introduction to the Mystical Tradition,” in *History of Islamic Philosophy*, 367–368.

⁵⁸³ Aryn B. Sajoo, “The Islamic Ethos and the Spirit of Humanism,” *International Journal of Politics, Culture and Society*, vol. 8, no. 4 (1995), 584. “Man is the symbol of existence”—*Al-insane ramz al-wujud*.

⁵⁸⁴ Aryn B. Sajoo, “The Islamic Ethos and the Spirit of Humanism,” 584.

and existential sense above the literary–historical snakes its way throughout his three primary works.

Miskawayh and His Times—A Critical Response

Up to this point, I have considered Miskawayh in the context of the larger Islamic philosophical tradition and suggested that his three major works ask the same types of questions and exhibit characteristics common to existentialism. Additionally, I propose that Miskawayh’s three major works on metaphysics, history, and ethics represent his responses to what he was witnessing during his life.

For example, I believe that Miskawayh is responding to the *Isma‘ilis* in his work on metaphysics, *al–Fauz al–Asghar*. The Isma‘ili movement, a branch of Shi’a, began sometime around the middle of the 9th century. The Isma‘ilis frowned on philosophy because of philosophy’s inappropriate use of intellect, namely, in trying to understand and know God. They believed that the intellect should be used in service of exegesis in its quest for truth.⁵⁸⁵

In response to the Isma‘ili claim that God is utterly unknowable and no physical or mental notions we may use to describe God can fully or adequately explain God, Miskawayh dedicates the first part of his metaphysics to a discussion about God.⁵⁸⁶

In this method the negation and inapplicability of ideas to the Holy Essence has to be established, e.g., that God is not a body, not moved, not manifold, not created, or that it is possible that the chain of causes in the universe should not end at a single cause. Thus it is proved that for the explanation of divine things the most fitting is negative proof.⁵⁸⁷

⁵⁸⁵Nasr, *History of Islamic Philosophy*, 144.

⁵⁸⁶ *Cambridge Companion to Arabic Philosophy*, 85.

⁵⁸⁷Miskawayh, *al–Fauz al–Asghar in Islam and Christian Theology*, part 1, vol. 1, 112.

For Miskawayh, starting his metaphysics with God only made sense because God is the source of creation and the aim of transcendence. In other words, God must be knowable so that we can transcend our own human subjectivity into that of the divine.

Miskawayh's *Tajarib al-Umam* on one level was a response to the moral corruption and decay of the state and its leaders. During the Abbasid period, though patrons of the sciences and scholarship, the Barmakids, a powerful Persian family in Baghdad at the time, themselves fell victim to corruption, and became distracted by power.⁵⁸⁸ Marshall Hodgson referred to the Barmakids as, "the big spenders of Baghdad."⁵⁸⁹

During Miskawayh's time, the substructure of the Abbasid caliphate began to develop cracks in its foundation and weaken. The centralized government was on a decline, and new military warlords and administrative elites began to carve out niches for themselves. As I mentioned earlier, the cancer of social and economic decay had begun to infect society morally and spiritually. Despite scientific and intellectual achievements of the 10th and 11th centuries, moral and political crises continued to erode any type of Islamic social reform. For Miskawayh, then, history became a mode of criticism whose form largely derived from moral and political philosophy sprinkled throughout adab literature and the intelligentsia of the 10th century.⁵⁹⁰

Finally, Miskawayh's *Tahdhib al-Aklat* is his response to secular humanism. That is to say that there were two dimensions to Islamic humanism—one religious, the other cultural.⁵⁹¹ At stake

⁵⁸⁸ S. Frederick Starr, *Lost Enlightenment*, 139.

⁵⁸⁹ Marshall G. S. Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam: Conscience and History in a World Civilization*, vol. 1, 294–295.

⁵⁹⁰ Khan, "Ethics and History According to the *Tajarib al-Umam of Miskawaih*," 9.

⁵⁹¹ Kraemer, "Humanism in the Renaissance of Islam," 146.

for Miskawayh is the human condition. We must rise above the secular and seek the divine. On this point, Miskawayh turns to Aristotle for support.

But we must not follow those who advise us, being men, to think of human things, and, being mortal, of mortal things, but must, so far as we can, make ourselves immortal, and strain every nerve to live in accordance with the best thing in us; for even if it be small in bulk.⁵⁹²

Miskawayh and Sartre, in the end, I believe, would agree that humanity needs to rediscover itself. However, some like Sartre, believe that nothing can save humanity from itself. Miskawayh is perhaps more hopeful. Through community and friendly association, humanity has it within itself to better itself because it is social by nature. With God's help, humanity can transcend itself to encounter God more intimately and communally. As Miskawayh says, God already instilled within each of us the gift or blessing to do so.

⁵⁹² Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, X, 1177b31.

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John Peter Radez, Ph.D.

Education

- Ph.D.** Islamic Philosophy, Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana, April 2015
(dissertation received high pass)
Dissertation title: *Le Vie est Plus Belle que les Idees: Existentialism, Intersubjectivity, and Transcendence in the Unified Civic Humanism of Abu 'Ali Ahmad ibn Muhammad ibn Yaq'ub ibn Miskawayh.*
- M.A.** Philosophy, Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana, 2014
- M.A.** Theology, Christian Theological Seminary, Indianapolis, Indiana, 2002
- M.A.** Library and Information Science, Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana, 1991
- B.A.** Latin and Greek, Wabash College, Crawfordsville, Indiana, 1989

Languages: Latin, Greek, Hebrew, Arabic, intermediate German and French

Employment

- 2010–present Instructor, University of Southern Indiana, Evansville, Indiana
- 2013–2014 Assistant Instructor, Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana
- 2011–2012 Instructor, Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana
- 2011–2012 Instructor, University of Evansville, Evansville, Indiana
- 2008–2009 Assistant Instructor, Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana
- 2005–2007 Undergraduate Advisor, Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana

Courses Taught

University of Southern Indiana

Online Courses

- World Humanities* Hum211/212
Topics in art and literature from pre-history to the present.
(Fall 2011–Fall2014) undergrad.
- Introduction to Ethics* Phil 201
Topics in normative, practical and applied ethics.
(Fall 2010 to Spring 2015) undergrad

Hybrid Courses (traditional courses with online components)

- World Humanities* Hum211/212
Topics in art and literature from pre-history to the present.
(Fall 2011–Fall2014) undergrad.
- Philosophy of Love* PHIL361/GNDR449
Topics in classical, medieval, and contemporary sources,
both literary and philosophical, on the philosophy of love,
cross-listed with Gender Studies
(Spring 2015) undergrad
- Queer Theory* PHIL361/ GNDR449
Topics in Queer Theory and feminist studies

cross-listed with Gender Studies
(Fall 2012) undergrad/graduate

Islamic Philosophy PHIL361
Topics in Islamic philosophy.
(Fall 2013) undergrad

Introduction to Philosophy PHIL200
Topics in ancient, medieval, modern, and contemporary philosophy.
(Fall 2013, Fall 2014) undergrad

Introduction to Ethics Phil 201
Topics in normative, practical and applied ethics.
(Fall 2010 to Spring 2015) undergrad

Indiana University, Bloomington

Hybrid Courses (traditional courses with online components)

War in the Middle East C104
Topics in conflicts in the Middle East.
(Spring 2014) undergrad

Islamic Civilization N265
Topics in Islam and Islamic culture.
(Fall 2011) undergrad

Islamic Philosophy N365
Topics in Medieval Islamic philosophy.
(Spring 2012) undergrad

Religion, Ethics, and Public Life R170
Topics in moral reasoning.
(Fall 2008) undergrad

University of Evansville

Hybrid Courses (traditional courses with online components)

Freshmen Year Seminar PHIL110/120
Topics in Queer Theory. [Intensive Writing Course]
(Fall 2011, Spring 2012) undergrad

Introduction to Ethics PHIL100
Topics in theoretical, practical and applied ethics
(Fall 2011) undergrad

Teaching Interests

World Cultures and Religions

Non-Western Political Thought

Bioethics

Philosophy of Religion

Ancient Greek and Roman Philosophy

Social and Political Philosophy

Literary Studies
Classical Moral Philosophy
Feminist Philosophy
Comparative Philosophy

Honors/Awards

Awarded Foundation Award for Teaching Excellence, University of Southern Indiana, 2014
Awarded Graduate Area Medieval Studies Certification, Indiana University, 2014
Nominated for the McRobbie Fellowship in Medieval History, Indiana University, 2013
Awarded Teaching Scholarship, Indiana University, 2012, 2013, 2014
Graduated *Summa Cum Laude*, Christian Theological Seminary, 2002
Award for Academic Excellence, Christian Theological Seminary, 2002
Honorary Member, *Phi Sigma Iota*, International Foreign Language Society, 1987

Professional Affiliations

American Catholic Philosophical Association
International Society for Neoplatonic Studies
Middle East Studies Association
American Philosophical Society

PUBLICATIONS

Articles

“Mediaeval Islamic Humanism,” *Encyclopedia of Islam* (Online), pending.

Books

Rescuing Augustine and Bonaventure from the Averroists, pending.

CONFERENCE PAPERS PRESENTED

Invited and/or Refereed Nationally and Internationally

2014

“Living Life: Ibn Miskawayh and the Socratic Question,” invited paper, Mapping the Landscapes of Islamic Cultures, Center for the Study of the Middle East, Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana, October 17, 2014.

2007

“Codifying an Ethos of Social Justice *qua* Community,” invited paper, Hawaiian International Conference for the Humanities, Honolulu, Hawaii, January, 2007.

2006

“Rescuing Augustine and Bonaventure from the Averroists,” invited paper, Hawaiian International Conference for the Humanities, Honolulu, Hawaii, January 2006.

2004

“Peter John Olivi’s *Cognoscendo Dei*, invited paper, 16th Annual Medieval Symposium,
Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana, November 2004.

References

Dr. John Walbridge, Doctoral Advisor
Department of Near Eastern Languages and Cultures
Indiana University
Bloomington, IN 47405
(812) 855–8689, jwalbrid@indiana.edu

Dr. Rocco Gennaro, Chair of the Philosophy Dept.
College of Liberal Arts
University of Southern Indiana
Evansville, IN 47712
(812) 464–1744, rjgennaro@usi.edu

Dr. Michael Aakhus, Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences
College of Liberal Arts
University of Southern Indiana
Evansville, IN 47712
(812) 464-1853, maakhus@usi.edu

Dr. Allen Helmstetter, Director of Humanities
College of Liberal Arts
University of Southern Indiana
Evansville, IN 47712
(812) 465-1223, ahelmstett@usi.edu