

Ibn Miskawayh, Ahmad ibn Muhammad (c.940-1030)

Like so many of his contemporaries in the fourth and fifth centuries ah (tenth and eleventh centuries ad) Ibn Miskawayh was eclectic in philosophy, basing his approach upon the rich variety of Greek philosophy that had been translated into Arabic. Although he applied that philosophy to specifically Islamic problems, he rarely used religion to modify philosophy, and so came to be known as very much an Islamic humanist. He represents the tendency in Islamic philosophy to fit Islam into a wider system of rational practices common to all humanity.

Ibn Miskawayh's Neoplatonism has both a practical and a theoretical side. He provides rules for the preservation of moral health based on a view of the cultivation of character. These describe the ways in which the various parts of the soul can be brought together into harmony, so achieving happiness. It is the role of the moral philosopher to prescribe rules for moral health, just as the doctor prescribes rules for physical health. Moral health is based upon a combination of intellectual development and practical action.

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1. Metaphysics

Like so many of his philosophical contemporaries, Ahmad ibn Muhammad ibn Miskawayh, born in Rayy in Persia c.ah 320/ad 940, combined an active political career with an important philosophical role. A historian as well as a philosopher, he served as a Buwayhid official at Baghdad, Isfahan and Rayy. He was a member of the distinguished group of intellectuals including [al-Tawhidi](#) and [al-Sijistani](#). He died in ah 421/ad 1030. Although not an important figure on the creative side of Islamic philosophy, he is a very interesting adaptor of existing ideas, especially those arising out of the Neoplatonic tradition in the Islamic world (see [Neoplatonism in Islamic philosophy](#)).

Ibn Miskawayh wrote on a wide variety of topics, ranging from history to psychology and chemistry, but in philosophy his metaphysics seems to have been generally informed by a version of Neoplatonism. He avoids the problem of reconciling religion with philosophy by claiming that the Greek philosophers were in no doubt concerning the unity and existence of God. He goes so far as to suggest that Aristotle's identification of the creator with an unmoved mover is a powerful argument in favour of a creator acceptable to Islam, since the very distinct nature of such a being prevents our normal categories of description from making sense. Such a creator can only be described in terms of negative concepts, an interesting prefigurement of the tradition of the *via negativa* in philosophy. He has an unusual account of emanation, wherein the deity produces the active intellect, the soul and

the heavens without intermediaries, making one suspect that he did not have a firm grasp of the distinction between emanation and creation. The normal Neoplatonic account of emanation then current in Islamic philosophy used the notion of a scale of being that separates these different divine products far more radically. It is difficult to see how Ibn Miskawayh really reconciles metaphysical difficulties at this point.

2. Ethical writings

Ibn Miskawayh's work on ethics, however, is of a much higher order, and does show evidence of considerable conceptual complexity. In his [Taharat al-a'raq \(Purity of Dispositions\)](#), better known as [Tahdhib al-akhlaq \(Cultivation of Morals\)](#) - which is not to be confused by the work of the same name by Yahya [Ibn 'Adi](#) - he sets out to show how we might acquire the right dispositions to perform morally correct actions in an organized and systematic manner.

The basis of his argument is his account, adopted from [Plato](#), of the nature of the soul, which he sees as a self-subsisting entity or substance, in marked contrast to the Aristotelian notion (see [Soul, nature and immortality of the](#)). The soul distinguishes us from animals, from other human beings and from things, and it uses the body and the parts of the body to attempt to come into contact with more spiritual realms of being. The soul cannot be an accident (or property of the body) because it has the power to distinguish between accidents and essential concepts and is not limited to awareness of accidental things by the senses. Rather, it can apprehend a great variety of immaterial and abstract entities. If the soul were only an accident it could do none of these things, but could only perform in the limited way of the physical parts of the body. The soul is not an accident, and when we want to concentrate upon abstract issues the body is actually an obstruction that we must avoid if we are to make contact with intelligible reality. The soul, then, is an immortal and independent substance that controls the body. It has an essence opposite to that of the body, and so cannot die; it is involved in an eternal and circular motion, replicated by the organization of the heavens. This motion takes two directions, either upwards towards reason and the active intellect or downwards towards matter. Our happiness arises through upwards movement, our misfortunes through movement in the opposite direction.

Ibn Miskawayh's discussion of virtue combines Aristotelian with Platonic ideas (see [Virtue ethics](#)). Virtue is the perfection of the aspect of the soul (that is, human reason) that represents the essence of humanity and distinguishes it from lower forms of existence. Our virtue increases in so far as we develop and improve our ability to deliberate and apply reason to our lives. We should do this in accordance with the mean, the point most distant from two extremes, and justice results when we manage to achieve this. Ibn Miskawayh combines the Platonic division of virtues with an Aristotelian understanding of what virtue actually is, and adds to this the idea that the more these virtues can be treated as a unity, the better. This is

because, he argues, that unity is equivalent to perfection, while multiplicity is equivalent to a meaningless plurality of physical objects. This idea is not just based upon a Pythagorean aesthetic (see [Pythagoreanism](#)). Ibn Miskawayh argues further that the notion of justice when it deals with eternal and immaterial principles is a simple idea, while human justice by contrast is variable and depends upon the changing nature of particular states and communities. The law of the state is based upon the contingent features of the time, while the divine law specifies what is to be done everywhere and at every time.

Ibn Miskawayh uses the notion of friendship to distinguish between those relationships that are essentially transitory and variable (in particular those based upon pleasure) and those based upon the intellect, which are also pleasurable but not in a physical way. Our souls can recognize similarly perfected souls, and as a result enjoy intense intellectual delight. This is very different from the normal kind of friendship, in which people form relationships with each other because they want to get something out of it. Still, even those capable of the most perfect form of relationship have to involve themselves in the less perfect levels of friendship, since they must live in society if they are to achieve perfection, and so must satisfy at least some of the expectations of society (see [Friendship](#)). The highest form of happiness exists when we can abandon the requirements of this world and are able to receive the emanations flowing from above that will perfect our intellects and enable us to be illuminated by divine light. The eventual aim seems to be the throwing off of the trappings of our physical existence and following entirely spiritual aims in mystical contemplation of the deity.

3. Practical ethics and humanism

This mystical level of happiness seems to rank higher than mere intellectual perfection, yet Ibn Miskawayh is particularly interesting in the practical advice he gives on how to develop our ordinary capacity for virtue. He regards the cultivation of our moral health in a very Aristotelian way as akin to the cultivation of physical health, requiring measures to preserve our moral equilibrium (see [Aristotle §§23-6](#)). We ought to keep our emotions under control and carry out practices that help both to restrain us on particular occasions and also to develop personality traits that will maintain that level of restraint throughout our lives. To eradicate faults, we must investigate their ultimate causes and seek to replace these with more helpful alternatives. Take the fear of death, for example: this is a baseless fear, since the soul is immortal and cannot die. Our bodies will perish, but they must do so since we are contingent; to acknowledge that contingency and also to wish that we were not thus contingent is some sort of contradiction. If we are worried by the pain involved in dying, then it is the pain we fear, not death itself. Ibn Miskawayh argues, along with [al-Kindi \(§3\)](#) and the Cynics and Stoics who no doubt influenced him on this issue, that to reconcile ourselves to reality we have to understand the real nature of our feelings (see [Cynics](#); [Stoicism](#)). We have to use reason to work out what we should do and feel, since otherwise we are at the

mercy of our feelings and the varying influences that come to us from outside ourselves (see [Death](#)).

This emphasis upon the capacity of the human mind to use reason to help us determine what we should do and who we are has led the most distinguished commentator on Ibn Miskawayh, Mohammed Arkoun ([1970](#)), to call him a humanist and part of the general humanist movement of his time. It is certainly true that religion plays a small part in Ibn Miskawayh's writings, and when he does consider Islam he often gives its religious practices a rather instrumental rationale. [Al-Ghazali \(§2\)](#) was infuriated by Ibn Miskawayh's suggestion that the point of communal prayer is to base religion upon the natural gregariousness of human beings in society. This seemed to al-Ghazali to disparage the religious enterprise, since he argued that the significance of religious rituals is that they are specified by the religion, and there can be no other reason. Their rationale is that they are unreasonable. God indicates the huge gap that exists between him and us by setting us unpleasant and difficult tasks. For Ibn Miskawayh, the reason for the ritual is that it has a part to play in helping us adapt to religious life, using the dispositions that are natural to us, so that the rules and customs of religion are essentially reasonable. A whole range of authorities may be consulted to help us understand our religious duties concerning how we are to live and what we are to believe; some of these are Islamic, while others are not. Ibn Miskawayh seems on the whole to accord greater respect to Greek rather than specifically Islamic authorities.

Ibn Miskawayh's thought proved to be influential. His style, combining abstract thought with practical observations, is attractive and remained popular long after his death. Sometimes he merely presents aspects of 'wisdom' literature from previous cultures; sometimes he provides practical comments upon moral problems that are entirely unanalytical. At its best, however, his philosophy is highly analytical and maintains a high degree of coherence and consistency. The fact that he mixes together aspects of Plato, Aristotle, Pythagoras, Galen and other thinkers influenced by Greek philosophy is not an indication of cultural looting but rather a creative attempt at using these different approaches to cast light upon important issues.

Ibn Miskawayh shows how possible it is to combine a Platonic conception of the soul with an Aristotelian account of moral development. The idea of a still higher realm of being at which the soul comes into contact with divine reality is a perfectly feasible addition to the account he gives of social and intellectual life. He never imports the notion of revelation to resolve theoretical difficulties, and we have seen how his approach both annoyed and stimulated al-Ghazali. It is perhaps the combination in Ibn Miskawayh of elegance of style, practical relevance and philosophical rigour that prolonged his influence in the Islamic world.

See also: [Ethics in Islamic philosophy](#); [Neoplatonism in Islamic philosophy](#); [Soul in Islamic philosophy](#)

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List of works

Ibn Miskawayh (before 1030) *Tahdhib al-akhlaq (Cultivation of Morals)*, ed. C. Zurayk, Beirut: American University of Beirut Centennial Publications, 1966; trans. C. Zurayk, *The Refinement of Character*, Beirut: American University of Beirut, 1968. (A summary of Ibn Miskawayh's ethical system. This work is also known as *Taharat al-a'raq (Purity of Dispositions)*.)

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