

Friendship

Miskawayh and the Ethical Tradition

By
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“...people must love one another,
for each one finds his own perfection in someone else...”
- Miskawayh [d. 1030], *Tahdib al-Akhlaq*¹

Friendship is a natural consequence of living in a society. Early Muslim thinkers had written extensively on the notion of friendship and it had occupied one of the central concepts within the Muslim ethical tradition. In Ihya' 'Ulum al-Din, the celebrated Muslim thinker, Abu Hamid al-Ghazali [d. 1111] declared that “sociability is the fruit of a wholesome character; and isolation, the fruit of a bad character.”² Similarly, his predecessor, Ahmad ibn Muhammad Miskawayh wrote that man is imperfect and thus need the cooperation of others. To achieve this, “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.” (p. 14) Both al-Ghazali and Miskawayh were participants in the intellectual milieu of their time. While Miskawayh drew much influence from the Greek traditions, al-Ghazali adopted much of Miskawayh’s premises and clothed it with more traditional sources. Both were undoubtedly great ethicists of the Muslim world. In the following essay, I shall briefly describe Miskawayh’s notion of friendship and discuss its relevance to us today.

The Necessity of Friendship

What is friendship? According to Miskawayh, it is a kind of love (p. 125). It is more intimate than fellowship – which is a diffused form of love. In Miskawayh’s ethical system, *‘insan* (man) was derived from *‘uns* (fellowship), rather than *nisyan* (forgetfulness). The need for fellowship is thus a natural tendency in all humans (p. 127). Unlike the ascetics (*zuhd*) of his time, Miskawayh rejected the idea that man can attain perfection by himself or in seclusion from society. For how can he who does not mingle with other people and who does not live with them show any virtues like temperance, intrepidity, liberality or justice? (p. 25f) Virtues will only make sense if they are “manifested when one participates and lives with other people, and has dealings and various kinds of association with them.” (p. 26). Thus, ascetics and those who practice seclusion (*uzlah*) can never be temperate or just since such virtues will be non-existence in a social vacuum.

With recourse to a great number of people, man can achieve a good life and follow the right path. A good life, according to Miskawayh, is one that leads to happiness. (p. 69f) More importantly, Miskawayh recognized that happiness (*sa’adah*) is achievable on earth – for how can we not call one who performs good deeds, holds sound beliefs and serves his fellow men as ordained by God, as objectively happy? (p. 74) Happiness on earth is also a precondition for happiness in the Hereafter, for no one can have the second without passing through the first.³ In this aspect, Miskawayh departed from the Platonic system of man being trapped in his body; only to achieve happiness upon the soul’s release from the body. Miskawayh also rejected the ascetics’ claim that the only true happiness is the happiness in the Hereafter and that one must reject this world to achieve that eternal happiness.

Within this broad framework of Miskawayh’s understanding of human nature, Miskawayh posited the necessity of friendship for the sake of achieving good. He argued that the emergence of cities, family connections, brotherhoods, common sacrifices, and amusements which draw men together are possible by friendship. In fact, Miskawayh believes that public worship is encouraged by

law for the sake of promoting human fellowship. Religious law requires Muslims to meet every Friday, twice a year on feast-days and once in their lifetime to Mecca as part of the affinity to human fellowship (p. 127-8). It was for this reason that religion plays a unifying role for humanity. From fellowship, more intimate relationship is formed. This progression is called friendship.

Types of Friendship

To begin with, friendship, in its essence, is affection. Therefore, it does not take place among a large group. And similar to love, it can be divided along the lines of comparative durability. Friendship is either: (1) quick to develop and quick to dissolve, (2) quick to develop and slow to dissolve, (3) slow to develop and quick to dissolve, or (4) slow to develop and slow to dissolve. These divisions also depend on three human objectives: the *pleasant*, the *good* and the *useful*. The formation of friendships and its comparative durability depends on these three objectives or a combination of them. If a friendship is pursued for the sake of pleasure or indulging in pleasurable activities, then it is quick to develop and quick to dissolve once the activity ceases. On the other hand, a friendship that is pursued for the sake of a particular goodness or virtue will be quick to develop but more long-lasting. As for friendship that depends upon utility or usefulness of that acquaintance, it will be slow to develop (since trust is a factor) and yet quick to dissolve once the need for the acquaintance dissolves. A combination of the three objectives can lead to a friendship that is slow to develop and slow to dissolve, provided pursuit of goodness is included in such relationship. (p. 123-5; cf. Fakhry, 118-9)

Miskawayh believes that only friendship that is grounded in virtue is truly durable because good will always remains a virtue (p. 125). The mutual love of virtuous people is motivated by a common pursuit of what is good and seeking virtue; not external pleasure or any benefit (p. 130-1). Such friendship “exchange advice and agree to be just and equal in their desire of the good.” (p. 131) And if one understands the types of friendship that occurs in one’s life, then one can organize one’s life in a more rational manner, rather than arbitrarily. Unlike many medieval scholastic thinkers, Miskawayh affirms the dignity and centrality of man in God’s schema of creation. Quoting Aristotle, Miskawayh wrote: “Man’s aspirations should not be human, though he be a man, nor should he be satisfied with the aspirations of the animal which is destined to die, though he himself also may be so destined. He should rather aim with all his capacities to live a divine life; for though man is small in body, he is great by his wisdom and noble by his intellect.” (p. 152; cf. *Nicomachean Ethics*, Ch. 10f). It is this nobility in intellect that allows man to achieve “greater perfection in his humanity.” (p. 12)

Discrimination in Choice of Friends

Miskawayh gave some practical advice on how one should be discriminate in his or her choice of friends. It is necessary “lest we involve ourselves in the friendship of the deluders and the deceivers who picture themselves to us as virtuous and good.” (p. 142) One should in particular avoid the friendship of the ungrateful. An ungrateful person is characterized as someone who “seize the favor that is accorded to him as if it were his right or not trouble himself to express his thanks in words.” The act of being grateful is a divine act since God Himself promised to be grateful (by granting rewards) towards those who show gratitude to Him, even though He can dispense with their gratitude.

Another trait that one should be aware of is the inclination towards relaxation. This trait will lead towards inclination to pleasures, a contrast to friendship that seeks the good. A person who

enjoys excessive entertainment and play “will be too busy to help and console his friends and he will do his best to avoid recompensing benefit, or enduring toil, or getting involved in any favor entailing hardship” (p. 143). In seeking friends, one should also be aware of his or her love for authority and excess of praise; for “he who loves domination, authority, and excessive praise, will not be fair to you in his affection and will not be satisfied to get from you as much as he gives you.” Similarly, one should observe his or her prospective friend’s attitude towards wealth. Miskawayh observed that many companions showed love to one another and exchange gifts and advice until they come to dealings involving gold and silver; they will then “growl at one another like dogs and end up with all sorts of enmity”.

Yet, Miskawayh reminded us that while we look for virtue in our prospective friend, we must not pay close attention to small defects. Otherwise, we will remain without a friend. Rather, we must “overlook slight defects from the like of which no human being can be free” and to “consider the defect that you find in yourself and tolerate its equivalent in others.” (p. 143). Miskawayh recommends that we observe the way a person treats his or her parents, siblings and earlier friends, in order to know the character of a particular prospective friend (p. 142).

Duties towards One’s Friend

Once we identify our friends, we are obligated to fulfill certain functions. Miskawayh said that “when you gain a friend, you should pay much regard to him and do your utmost in looking after him.” (p. 144). One must not neglect to fulfill even a slight obligation whenever anything serious, or an accident, befalls him or her. One should also approach a friend with affability and be ready to share his joys and sorrows. The same affability, joy and cheerfulness should be shown towards “those whom you know to be the objects of his care and love, be they friends, children, subordinates, or attendants.” In addition, one should not withhold any knowledge, wealth or advantage that you may have, but deal with him generously. It is especially important with regards to knowledge. If one is learned in a subject or are distinguished by a certain culture, he should not withhold this accomplishment from his friend “lest he suspect that you desire to appropriate it exclusively and to keep it to yourself and away from him.” (p. 146). Knowledge will not diminish by sharing it with others. Instead, “it grows with spending, thrives on beneficence, and increases by being given and freely imparted.” (p. 147) As for those who are stingy in dispensing knowledge, Miskawayh castigated such bad behaviour as such: “His capital of knowledge may be small and he may thus be afraid lest it be exhausted or lest he come across something which he does not know and thus lose his distinction in the eyes of the ignorant; or he may derive some material gain from it and therefore be afraid lest this gain be reduced and his share of it diminished; or he may be envious, and whosoever is envious is far from all virtue, loving no one and loved by no one.” (p. 147). This may refer to those who are either stingy with their own knowledge or knowledge of others.

What then of a friend’s defects? How should one castigate one’s friend? According to Miskawayh, a loyal friend is one who is mindful of his friend’s defects. However, one should always rebuke a friend in a gentle manner and not rudely, lest “he turn into an enemy and become as averse to you as an opponent.” (p. 147). A friend should also avoid listening to slanderers: “For evil people mix with those who are good under the cloak of counselors and, while pretending to give them good advice, transmit to them in the course of interesting conversations stories about their friends in distorted and falsified form.” (p. 148). Such slanderers will only corrupt “affections [between friends] and disfigure their friendships until they come to hate one another.”

The Ethical/Intellectual Legacy of Miskawayh

What we had observed are only a section of Miskawayh's discourse on ethical principles of friendship. There were indeed much more that can be appropriated into current religious discourse – a project that is long overdue and neglected generally in the Muslim world. Much of the religious discourse we inherited today is either theological or legalistic in orientation. Any discussion on ethics, if any, is generally egoistic or atomistic. In many present day literatures on Islam, *adab*⁴ is reduced to pursuit of personal salvation to the neglect of actual involvement in the human conditions of society. The notion of *adab* is no longer on how one can lead an ethical life (or in philosophical term, the *good* life), but rather, how one can lead a 'pious' life. The notion of 'piety' (*waraq*) does not rest upon virtues like peace, tolerance, knowledge, justice and humility, as exemplified in Prophet Muhammad's life. Rather, emphasis of a 'good' and 'pious' person depends on his or her attachment to external symbolic gestures like dressing and mannerisms, strict adherence to elaborate rituals or allegiance (*assabiyah*) to particular in-groups.

Miskawayh had pointed a way towards divine-inspired, universal ethics. In particular, his discussion on friendship had paved the way for a more inclusive, humanistic outlook within the ethical strand of Islam. Is this not relevant as we grapple with an increasingly polarized and fragmented world that threatens to split humanity along racial, religious and nationalistic categories? Miskawayh had also enacted a tremendous influence upon later ethical philosophers like al-Ghazali, Nasir al-Din al-Tusi [d. 1274] and Jalal al-Din al-Dawwani [d. 1501], all of whom were illustrious in the ethical field after him. Though his critics had pointed out that Miskawayh had been influenced by the Greek rather than the Islamic traditions, how can one account for his many references to the Qur'an, traditions of the Prophet, sayings of Ali ibn Abi Talib and al-Hasan al-Basri, in addition to Arabic poetry?⁵ Miskawayh was merely living by the ethos of 'seeking wisdom wherever it comes from' and not to be ashamed of appreciating truth, "even if it comes from races distant and nations different from us."⁶ Such was the spirit and intellectual fervor in early Islamic history that had seen the rise of many great Muslim philosophers, scholars and scientists. The fatal compartmentalization of knowledge into this-worldly (*duniawi*) and otherworldly (*ukhrawi*) and 'Islamic' and 'Western' were to come later in the period of Muslim history.

Afterthought

Can we then continue to isolate the products of our intellectual historical legacy? Even as we try to alleviate ourselves from the effects of cultural, religious and intellectual alienation, we must be mindful of submitting to popular romanticism of past glories – itself a product of cultural and intellectual alienation. We must not affirm the past, as if everything in the past is perfect, for the sake of self-gratification. Any tradition has its shortcomings. We must therefore be discerning in our choice of traditions. Whichever way we choose, that tradition must help us to address the human conditions of our time. Only then can we be rooted in the present and progress, *with* Islam, into the vast potentials of the future.

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Further Readings: Abdurrahman Badawi, “*Miskawāli*” in M. M. Sharif (ed.), *A History of Muslim Philosophy, Vol. 1*. Delhi: Adam Publishers & Distributors, 2001; Constantine K. Zurayk (tr.), Ahmad ibn-Muhammad Miskawayh’s *Ṭabḍīb al-Akhlāq (The Refinement of Character)*. Beirut: American University of Beirut, 1968; Lenn E. Goodman, “*Friendship in Aristotle, Miskawayh and al-Ghazālī*” in Oliver Leaman, *Friendship East and West: Philosophical Perspectives*. Richmond: Curzon, 1996; Majid Fakhry, *Ethical Theories in Islam*. Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1991.

NOTES

¹ Ahmad ibn Muhammad Miskawayh was born in Rayy (Persia) in 936 CE. He was a courtier, historian, philosopher and physician, but best known today as one of the greatest and most influential Muslim ethical philosopher. As a thinker, Miskawayh belonged to the intellectual circle of his time, which includes scholars like al-Tawhidi [d. 1023] and al-Sijistani [d. 988]. The following discussion on friendship is taken from his *magnum opus*, *Ṭabḍīb al-Akhlāq*. For Miskawayh, the purpose for writing *Ṭabḍīb* 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 constrain or difficulty.” (p. 1) His main inspiration is the Qur’anic verse in *Surah al-Shams* 91:7-10: “By the soul and that which shaped it, and breathed into it its wickedness and impiety; he who keeps it pure prospers, and he who corrupts it fails!” Miskawayh called his endeavours in constructing an ethical system as ‘practical philosophy’. Unlike other branches of philosophy, which is largely speculative in nature, ethics can only find meaning in its ability to be translated in life. In fact, *Ṭabḍīb* was, in part, a product of Miskawayh’s own ethical search. Of *Ṭabḍīb*, he wrote: “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.” (p. 45-6)

² *Ihya*, 2.200. Cf. Goodman, 181.

³ Badawi, p. 476.

⁴ ‘*Adab*, in its narrowest sense means literature. It also connotes culture, manners - of which literature is supposed to be the prime vehicle. From ‘*adab*, we derive the word *ta’dīb* – meaning, education, discipline, refinement. (See Goodman, “*Humanism and Islamic Ethics*” in Brian Carr (ed.), *Morals and Society in Asian Philosophy*. Richmond: Curzon, 1996. pp. 4-5)

⁵ Badawi, p. 478.

⁶ The former is a hadith narrated by Abu Hurayrah: “Wisdom is the lost property of the believer, so wherever he finds it he has a better right to it.” (Tirmidzi); the latter is the word of Al-Kindi, the ‘first Muslim Philosopher’ (See Alfred L. Ivry, *Al-Kindi’s Metaphysics: A Translation of Ya’qub ibn Ishaq al-Kindi’s Treatise “On First Philosophy” (fi al-Falsafah al-Ula)*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1974.)