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A Meta-Ethical Inquiry into Ibn Miskawayh's Understanding of Morality

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Abstract. Ibn Miskawayh (d. 1030), who constructed one of the most original moral systems (*akhlāq*) in the history of Islamic philosophy, established virtue (*faḍīla*) on a metaphysical and rational basis rather than merely on practical value propositions. When the philosopher's thoughts, shaped around Tahdhib al-Akhlaq, are analyzed through the discipline of meta-ethics, which examines the nature of moral judgments in contemporary philosophy, the contribution of classical texts to modern debates becomes more evident. This approach opens a profound field of inquiry by focusing not only on “what” morality is, but also on “how” and “on what basis” it exists. Our study is built on a fourfold classification comprising semantic, ontological, epistemological, and psychological layers. At the semantic level, the conceptual boundaries of the terms “good (*khayr*)” and “felicity (*sa'āda*)” are delineated while preserving their connection to ontological origins. On the ontological plane, it is established that moral values correspond to an objective reality, deriving their source from God, who possesses absolute perfection. This situation makes Ibn Miskawayh's moral philosophy directly relatable to contemporary debates on moral realism. In our study, we examine the possibility of moral knowledge and the process of transforming this knowledge into action through the psychology of the soul (*nafs*). Ibn Miskawayh's perspective, which integrates individual moral maturity with social justice, confirms that morality is an objective truth rather than a subjective preference. Hence, re-reading classical Islamic moral theory through meta-ethical methods is significant, as it facilitates both an accurate contextualization of the historical heritage and the possibility of new contributions to the foundation of universal ethical principles.

Keywords: meta-ethics, virtue, objectivity, islamic philosophy

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Метаэтическое исследование понимания морали Ибн Мискавайхом

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Аннотация. Ибн Мискавейх (ум. 1030), создавший одну из самых оригинальных нравственных систем в истории исламской философии, обосновал добродетель на метафизической и рациональной основе, а не только на практических ценностных положениях. Когда идеи философа, сформированные вокруг «Тахзиб аль-ахляк», анализируются через призму метаэтики — дисциплины, исследующей природу моральных суждений в современной философии, — вклад классических текстов в современные дискуссии становится более очевидным. Такой подход открывает глубокое поле исследования, сосредотачиваясь не только на том, «что» такое мораль, но и на том, «как» и «на каком основании» она существует. Наше исследование построено на четырехчастной классификации, включающей семантический, онтологический, эпистемологический и психологический уровни. На семантическом уровне очерчиваются концептуальные границы понятий «добро» и «счастье» при сохранении их связи с онтологическими истоками. На онтологическом уровне устанавливается, что моральные ценности соответствуют объективной реальности и имеют своим источником Бога, обладающего абсолютным совершенством. Это обстоятельство позволяет напрямую соотнести нравственную философию Ибн Мискавейха с современными дебатами о моральном реализме. В нашем исследовании рассматриваются возможность морального знания и процесс преобразования этого знания в действие через психологию души (нафс). Перспектива Ибн Мискавейха, объединяющая индивидуальную нравственную зрелость с социальной справедливостью, подтверждает, что мораль является объективной истиной, а не субъективным предпочтением. Таким образом, переосмысление классической исламской нравственной теории с помощью методов метаэтики имеет важное значение, поскольку способствует как корректной контекстуализации исторического наследия, так и внесению нового вклада в обоснование универсальных этических принципов.

Ключевые слова: метаэтика, добродетель, объективность, исламская философия

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Introduction

Individuals enter the realm of morality (*akhlāq*) when they make moral judgments (*hukmakhlāqī*), evaluate specific actions as right or wrong, feel responsibility, or question their behavior on moral grounds. An individual's moral life consists of their judgments, beliefs, actions, and the emotions accompanying these actions. In this respect, morality is a fundamental domain through which the moral subject shapes their life by means of value judgments [1. P. x]; since every individual inevitably exists within life and is naturally in communication with others, they are, therefore, part of this domain.

When one begins to reflect on moral values and to ground and explain these beliefs, morality ceases to be merely a practical attitude and gains a theoretical dimension. Such theoretical efforts generally lead to the emergence of normative ethical theories such as utilitarianism, deontology, or hedonism [2]. Conversely, questioning what is actually being done when making a moral judgment—for instance, asking whether moral judgments provide knowledge or merely express emotions and attitudes—marks a transition into the field of meta-ethics. Meta-ethical inquiry is indispensable for two reasons: it is significant in its own right from a philosophical perspective, and it determines the methodology of normative ethics [3. P. 1].

Meta-ethics brings to the fore the most fundamental questions of moral philosophy, which are often taken for granted. The meaning, foundation, and mode of justification (*ta'līl*) of moral judgments lie at the heart of these questions. The uncertainty surrounding values and principles in the modern era has led individuals to seek more than the question “What should I do?” alone. It has simultaneously confronted the individual with the question, “What am I saying when I speak morally?” For a thinking person, questioning the meaning and the mode of validation of their own ethical judgments is an intellectual necessity [4. P. 173–174]. Meta-ethics makes the background of moral thought visible and invites the individual to understand the structure, limits, and possibilities of moral language by distancing them from ready-made assumptions. This evaluation is non-judgmental in a normative sense.

Therefore, meta-ethics precedes and underlies normative ethical discussions. For ethical thought to be consistent, the meaning of “right” must be clear, just as much as which principle is right. The fact that 20th-century analytical and linguistic philosophy treats ethics within the framework of linguistic analysis appears to be a

result of this necessity. Meta-ethics, rather than treating morality (*akhlāq*) as an abstract domain detached from human experience, makes it possible to consciously grasp the relationship between moral judgments (*aḥkām akhlāqiyya*) and human experience, reason, and language [5. P. 79]. This perception paves the way for understanding the human being and is more analytical.

The main subject of our study is to explain whether a meta-ethical inquiry is possible within the tradition of Islamic Philosophy, specifically in the context of Ibn Miskawayh. In the history of thought, Islamic philosophers have had a great impact on other civilizations. Therefore, the accumulation of the history of Islamic philosophy is vital for us. Especially, works in the context of morality have collectively contributed to humanity's development of a universal language. Figures such as al-Kindī, Abū Bakr al-Rāzī, al-Fārābī, Ibn Sīnā, and Ibn Miskawayh share a common purpose in this contribution.

Ibn Miskawayh (d. 1030), one of the 11th-century philosophers, holds a special position for the systematic structure and philosophical depth he brought to the field of morality. The primary characteristic that distinguishes him from previous moral discussions is that he does not reduce morality to mere practical advice or the mere repetition of religious texts. On the contrary, it is significant that he offers a comprehensive framework of thought aimed at grounding the nature of moral concepts, the meaning of virtue (*faḍīla*), and the value of human actions (*aḥkām insāniyya*). Thus, does Ibn Miskawayh's understanding of morality contain a ground that can be associated with modern meta-ethical questions, as it renders visible the conceptual and ontological assumptions behind normative suggestions? This study is organized to answer this inquiry. In this context, Ibn Miskawayh's theory of morality not only responds to the question "How should we live?", but also provides a suitable ground for a meta-ethical analysis, as it includes implicit answers [6. P. 144] aimed at revealing the foundations upon which moral judgments rely and how these judgments acquire meaning.

In this study, Ibn Miskawayh's ethical theory is addressed with the aim of neither defending nor criticizing its normative claims. Instead, the meta-ethical foundations of the philosopher's understanding of moral values (*qiyām akhlāqiyya*) and virtue, along with the ontological and epistemological assumptions underlying this understanding, have been systematically uncovered using a conceptual-analytical method. The focus of the study is to set aside the question "What to do?" and seek an answer to the question "What is the foundation of morality and how does this foundation function?" Thus, Ibn Miskawayh's moral teaching (*ta'līm akhlāqī*) is reinterpreted within a contemporary meta-ethical conceptual framework, thereby making the logical and philosophical underpinnings of moral values visible. First, let us reconsider the conceptual framework of the meta-ethical approach to establish the main lines of our study and to answer this inquiry.

1. The Conceptual Framework of the Meta-Ethical Approach

1.1. Definition of Meta-ethics

In its broadest sense, meta-ethics is a philosophical discipline that examines the nature of values and value judgments. Fundamental questions such as how moral language should be understood, the ontological status of moral properties (*ṣifāt akhlāqiyya*), and the possibility of moral knowledge (*ilmakhlāqī*) lie at the heart of meta-ethics [7. P. 1].

This approach, which addresses and interrogates the fundamental concepts of ethics at a philosophical level, is often referred to as “the philosophy of ethics” and is evaluated within a meta-ethical framework. Meta-ethics has established itself as an independent philosophical discipline, particularly since the 20th century. Although discussions of the nature of moral language, values, and norms arose in earlier periods, studies in moral philosophy in the modern era have acquired a more organized and systematic structure. With this development, ethical debates have largely been addressed under two main headings: meta-ethics and normative ethics [8. P. 320].

Studies conducted within the scope of normative ethics aim to critically and systematically examine answers to questions such as “What things are good or valuable?”, “What is the element that makes something valuable?”, “Which actions are right or wrong?” and “What criteria determine the rightness or wrongness of actions?” Moral concepts like goodness and rightness are used extensively in theories within this field. However, more fundamental questions -such as “What is the good?”, “What does moral rightness mean?”, “Do these concepts point to a specific property?” or “If such a property exists, what is its nature?” — are often not directly made a subject of discussion. Instead, certain assumptions regarding these questions are accepted either explicitly or implicitly [9. P. 5–7].

Meta-ethics steps in precisely at this point. It aims to address these assumptions underlying normative ethical discussions with a conscious, systematic, and analytical approach. For this reason, meta-ethics is frequently defined as “the philosophy of ethics” or “the field of inquiry into the foundations of ethics”. The primary problems of meta-ethics can be summarized under headings such as the meaning and logical status of moral terms and expressions; the reality and objectivity of moral properties; the ontological position of these properties and their relationship with non-moral properties; the possibility and nature of moral knowledge; and the relationship of moral judgments (*aḥkām akhlāqiyya*) and beliefs with action. Within this framework, meta-ethics offers a broad field of inquiry encompassing ontological, epistemological, semantic, and psychological issues related to the realm of morality [10. P. 1]. This approach of meta-ethics is crucial for understanding the multi-layered human being and producing solutions within their context.

1.2. The Distinction Between Meta-Ethics and Normative Ethics

Normative ethics attempts to determine which things are good or bad, which actions are right or wrong, and which are permissible or morally obligatory. In this direction, it aims to put forward the criteria and standards that make the distinction between good (*khayr*) and bad (*sharr*), or right and wrong, possible [3. P. 1]. The fundamental questions addressed by normative ethics are characterized as first-order questions because they are directly oriented toward moral evaluations.

Meta-ethics, on the other hand, is not an inquiry conducted within the moral domain, as is normative ethics. On the contrary, it is a form of inquiry that takes normativity as its subject matter and approaches it from the outside. While normative ethics seeks answers to questions such as “What is valuable?”, “What is good?” and “What are our moral responsibilities?” It often accepts the existence of fundamental concepts like value (*qīma*), duty (*ilzām*), and moral rightness (*ṣawāb akhlāqī*) without questioning them [11. P. 674].

Meta-ethics intervenes at this point by problematically questioning these assumptions. Questions like “What is value?”, “Do moral facts (*ḥaqā'iq akhlāqīyya*) really exist?” and “What does it mean to be good?” are at the center of this inquiry. In this respect, meta-ethics does not aim to determine what is morally right, but rather to understand the nature and structure of moral discourse in all its dimensions. Therefore, the questions addressed by meta-ethics are considered second-order questions.

The relationship between meta-ethics and normative ethics is often likened to the relationship between mathematics and the philosophy of mathematics. The question “How many even numbers are there between 5 and 15?” falls within the field of mathematics, whereas the question “What is a number?” belongs to the philosophy of mathematics. Similarly, while normative ethics deals with the content of moral judgments, meta-ethics reflects on the meaning, foundation, and status of these judgments [12. P. 9]. This analogy clearly demonstrates the difference in their respective levels of inquiry.

1.3. Historical Development of Meta-Ethics

As previously stated, meta-ethics refers to second-order philosophical inquiries into the meaning, truth value, and mode of justification of moral judgments. As a term and a distinct discipline, meta-ethics primarily emerged within the 20th-century analytical philosophy. Nevertheless, preliminary discussions of meta-ethical questions, such as the objectivity of morality, the possibility of moral knowledge, and the status of values, can be traced throughout the history of philosophy starting from Ancient Greece. The beginning of meta-ethics in the modern sense is mostly associated with G.E. Moore's *Principia Ethica* (1903). Moore argued that the concept of “good” cannot be reduced to natural properties, developing the critique of the “naturalistic fallacy,” and shifted the analysis of moral concepts to the meta-ethical plane [8. P. 319].

In the period following Moore, A.J. Ayer and C.L. Stevenson, influenced by logical positivism, advocated emotivism; they asserted that moral judgments do not claim factual truth but are rather expressions of feelings and attitudes [13; 14]. In the second half of the 20th century, meta-ethical discussions diversified and deepened. R.M. Hare developed the approach of universal prescriptivism, which emphasizes the prescriptive nature of moral language. In contrast, defenses of moral realism regained strength through figures such as G.E.M. Anscombe, Philippa Foot, and later Derek Parfit; the debate over whether moral truths have an objective basis became a central problem. During the same period, John Mackie mounted a powerful critique of realism by advancing the error theory, claiming that moral values are ontologically “queer” entities [15].

Current meta-ethical debates continue to be shaped around topics such as the realism — anti-realism divide, moral objectivity, normative reasons, moral knowledge, and the function of language [10]. In this sense, meta-ethics maintains its character as a research area that forms the conceptual and methodological foundation of moral philosophy.

1.4. The Level of Analysis in Meta-Ethics

The problem area of meta-ethics encompasses a broad framework of inquiry that covers different dimensions of moral thought. This field is generally shaped around metaphysical and ontological issues, epistemological problems, semantic analyses, moral psychology, moral phenomenology, and discussions regarding the method and nature of meta-ethics itself. Meta-ethics concerns itself with fundamental issues such as the reality and objectivity of moral facts, the possibility of moral knowledge, the meaning and truth value of moral terms, the motivational power of moral beliefs, and the experience of the moral subject [16. P. 95–96; 17. P. 215; 10. P. 2].

One way to grasp what meta-ethics is about is to ask five basic questions regarding morality: Where? What? Why? When? How? Each of these questions reveals important dimensions of meta-ethical research [18. P. 4–5]. It is useful to explain each of these questions respectively:

First, the source of morality is questioned. Does morality arise from a divine order (*al-niẓāmal-ilāhī*)? Do good and evil exist within the very structure of the universe? Or is morality a product of human efforts to live together and the search for mutual benefit? This question targets the ontological status of moral reality. Second, it is asked what moral judgments refer to. Do moral terms merely point to individual or social preferences? Or do they rely on a reality independent of subjective preferences, such as the commands of God or mind-independent moral properties? This inquiry concerns the meaning and reference of moral language. Third, the purpose of moral discourse is addressed. Is the aim merely to report a truth when moral judgments are voiced? Or are functions such as influencing the attitudes of others, directing behavior, or ensuring a common practical consensus also involved? This question sheds light on the motivational and practical

dimensions of morality. Fourth, it is questioned when moral reasoning (*istidlāl*) comes into play. Are moral choices essentially different from aesthetic or personal taste judgments? How are they distinguished from judgments based on prudence or self-interest? This argument aims to explain the unique quality of moral judgments. Finally, the question of how moral judgments are justified arises. How do we think we know moral truths? Do we reach these truths through direct intuition or through reasoning? Or is the very assumption that there are knowable moral facts problematic? These questions constitute the epistemological dimension of meta-ethics.

Since the era of Ancient Greece, moral philosophers have reflected upon these questions. Different answers have, over time, led to the emergence of different meta-ethical traditions. These traditions are generally shaped around two fundamental distinctions: cognitivist and non-cognitivist approaches, and realist and anti-realist views [10. P. 2–6].

These distinctions become clearer in three main areas of meta-ethical analysis. First, linguistic analysis examines the meaning of moral terms such as “good,” “right,” and “justice (*ʿadl*).” Cognitivist approaches treat moral expressions as propositions that have truth values. According to this view, the statement “John is bad” expresses a factual state. In contrast, non-cognitivist approaches argue that such expressions express emotional attitudes or evaluations. Second, non-linguistic analysis focuses on the psychological and social functions of morality. Realist approaches view moral values as a reality independent of human preferences. Anti-realist approaches interpret morality as a practice related to human needs, attitudes, and the maintenance of social order. Third, epistemological analysis questions how moral judgments are known. Cognitivist theories aim to provide a method for justifying moral truths. Non-cognitivist theories, asserting that moral expressions are not true or false in the classical sense, argue that one cannot speak of “knowledge” in this field [19. P. 2–3]. As a result of these inquiries, the meaning, foundations, and function of moral judgments can be understood holistically.

2. The Definition of Morality in Ibn Miskawayh

Having established the fundamental questions and problem areas of meta-ethics, we shall now consider how this framework can be applied to Ibn Miskawayh’s moral understanding, a prominent representative of classical Islamic thought. In this context, it is first necessary to focus on how Ibn Miskawayh defines morality.

Abu Ali Ibn Miskawayh centers the concept of *khuluq* (character/disposition) while defining the science of ethics. According to him, *khuluq* is a state established within the human soul (*nafs*) that inclines the individual toward specific actions without requiring any process of reflection or deliberation [20. P. 51]; or it is the state that enables the soul to manifest its actions spontaneously without deliberating [20. P. 168]. When this faculty, rooted in the soul, becomes the source of good actions, it is called a “good disposition”, and when it results in evil actions, it is

termed a “bad disposition”. In this definition, morality is understood as a permanent quality that constitutes human character rather than as transient behaviors [20. P. 25]. Consequently, morality points to the internal structure that makes actions possible, rather than to isolated acts.

One of the philosophical foundations of Ibn Miskawayh’s moral understanding is the premise that the human soul possesses a structure independent of matter. He cites the soul’s ability to accept different forms, its capacity to recognize and correct sensory errors, the unity of the intellect- intelligent -intellected (‘*aqil*– ‘*āqil*–*ma* ‘*qūl*), the superiority of intellectual pleasures over sensory ones, and the perception of universal concepts as evidence for this view. Furthermore, he advocates that the human being is a teachable and morally transformable entity. He states that if morality were considered immutable, reason, religious rulings, social order, and education would become meaningless. Within this framework, he categorizes virtues under four main headings: temperance (*iffat*), representing the self-control of the soul; courage (*shaja’ah*), meaning resilience in the face of fear and danger; wisdom (*hikmah*), as the faculty of distinguishing right from wrong; and justice (*adalah*), emphasizing its importance in maintaining balance in both individual and social relationships.

The foundations of Ibn Miskawayh’s moral understanding were largely shaped by Greek philosophy, particularly by Aristotle’s ethical thought. As emphasized earlier, the moral framework he developed was not limited to his own era but deeply influenced the moral understandings of subsequent Islamic philosophers. However, while drawing on Greek thought, Ibn Miskawayh adopted a selective approach; he excluded views incompatible with the fundamental principles of Islam and integrated ideas that posed no religious problems into his own system of thought. Upon examining Tahdhib al-Akhlaq, one observes extensive citations of Aristotle and Plato. Nevertheless, the work is not limited to philosophical sources; Ibn Miskawayh frequently cites the Prophet’s sayings to support his moral views. This indicates that he consciously synthesized philosophical heritage with Islamic references in his moral understanding. According to Ibn Miskawayh, the primary characteristic distinguishing humans from other beings is the possession of a rational soul (*al-naḥs al-nāṭiqā*). In this respect, while humans rise to a position similar to angels, they are also distinguished from animals and other species. According to the philosopher, a human can only reach a truly valuable and dignified level of existence when they use their intellectual faculties actively. Emphasizing that the human is a being endowed with will, Ibn Miskawayh argues that the individual has the power to choose among different aspects of the soul. The more an individual activates their rational soul, the closer they get to the truth and the genuine knowledge provided by divine revelation (*wahy*). Reason is like a light illuminating the human path; as one uses this light, they better comprehend both themselves and their purpose of existence. For him, living in harmony with one’s own essential essence is the highest state of felicity (*sa’āda*) achievable, and no superior happiness can be conceived beyond this [21. P. 50]. This implies that the

essential nature of the human is crucial because this essence determines what the individual is inclined toward, how they give meaning to life, and what truly satisfies them. When a person leads a life contrary to their essence, internal conflict and restlessness arise; no matter how successful or powerful they appear on the outside, they may feel as though something is missing. Conversely, when humans use their reason and conscience in harmony with their essence, they make more consistent decisions and live their lives not according to the expectations of others, but according to what they truly desire. Therefore, human essential nature stands as the most fundamental guide leading to authentic happiness.

According to Ibn Miskawayh, the attainment of human perfection depends on the correct and balanced use of the power of knowing (*al-quwwa al-‘ālima*) and the power of doing (*al-quwwa al-‘āmila*). Through the faculty of knowing, the human turns toward the sciences and seeks to understand the truth (*ḥaqq*); through the power of doing, they regulate their behavior and tend to place their actions within a moral framework. These two fundamental faculties are the primary elements shaping both the intellectual and practical life of the human. Ibn Miskawayh reminds us that some philosophers divided philosophy into two main fields — “theoretical” and “practical” — based on these two abilities and their functions. According to him, while humans deepen in knowledge through theoretical philosophy, they construct their behaviors on the basis of virtue through practical philosophy. One who gains competence in both fields reaches the highest human goal characterized as “perfect happiness” [22. P. 12]. In other words, for Ibn Miskawayh, human perfection (*kamāl*) is possible through the harmonious functioning of the power of knowing and the power of doing. While the correct use of reason in the theoretical realm enables the human to grasp the truth and the order of existence, virtue-based behaviors in the practical realm ensure the reflection of this knowledge onto moral life. Therefore, true maturity is realized not merely by possessing knowledge or performing right actions, but by integrating knowledge with virtuous behavior. According to Ibn Miskawayh, this unity represents the highest level of happiness and perfection a human can reach. Based on the philosopher’s views, the state of “wholeness” is essential for human nature. At this point, the individual feels not divided but rather completed, as the integrative aspect of knowing and practicing contributes to their well-being, namely, the construction of meaning. In short, it ensures internal consistency.

Ibn Miskawayh addresses the moral structure by dividing it into two primary sources: the first consists of inclinations arising from human temperament and innate characteristics, which he calls “natural morality” (*al-khuluq al-ṭabī‘ī*); the second is the morality acquired through education, habit, and conscious effort. According to him, moral behaviors initially emerge through a process of reflection and evaluation and, over time, through repetition and habit, become a permanent disposition. By nature, humans possess a structure that is well-suited to accepting morality; therefore, they are open to change, whether rapid or gradual, through education and counsel. The fundamental issue Ibn Miskawayh particularly wishes

to clarify is whether morality is changeable; for if morality were entirely determined by birth, moral education would lose its meaning. Within this framework, while he initially accepts natural morality as a given, he argues that moral characteristics not directly arising from temperament can be transformed through education and habit; however, at the end of his evaluation, he leans toward the Aristotelian approach, concluding that all aspects of morality can change over time [23. P. 205]. The philosopher's view demonstrates that moral principles are not dogmatic and can be developed at the individual level; this individual development, being effective at the social level as well, reveals that morality is a flexible and re-designable structure. Thus, moral education allows the individual to question values, develop their own understanding of morality, and consciously direct their behaviors, while contributing to the shaping of norms and values at the social level in a way that is just, inclusive, and open to innovation.

Ibn Miskawayh's moral understanding envisages that an individual can reach internal integrity and virtuous maturity by harmoniously using the faculties of reason and action. This approach demonstrates that morality is not static or dogmatic but can be developed through individual education. In the context of modern ethics and educational philosophy, this view shows parallels with Kohlberg's stages of moral development and J. Dewey's understanding of learning through experience and social progress. Just as in Ibn Miskawayh's method, Kohlberg emphasizes the individual's development of moral reasoning [23. P. 23–27], while Dewey underlines individual moral education for the re-evaluation of social norms [24. P. 7–20]. Thus, Ibn Miskawayh's classical approach, by establishing common ground with modern theories, demonstrates that morality is a dynamic and teachable process at both the individual and social levels; this also reveals that the accumulation of the Islamic philosophical tradition, even in the case of this philosopher alone, is undeniably significant.

3. Analysis of Ibn Miskawayh's Ethics Within the Framework of Meta-ethical Foundations

3.1. The Semantic Aspect of Ibn Miskawayh's Ethics

Semantic or linguistic meta-ethical approaches focus on examining what moral expressions say and what they refer to [25. P. 292]. Within this framework, the meanings of moral terms such as “good,” “right,” or “wrong” are interrogated. Among the fundamental questions are whether moral judgments report a fact or express an attitude or emotion. Similarly, whether moral concepts are definable or irreducible simple concepts lies at the heart of this field. Moore's discussion of the naturalistic fallacy [26. P. 37–58]¹ is one of the classic examples of such semantic

¹ Moore, in *Principia Ethica*, argues that “good” cannot be reduced to natural properties. The naturalistic fallacy shows the falsity of definitions such as “good = pleasure” or “good = utility.” To prove this, he employs the “open question argument”: the question “Is pleasure good?” still remains meaningful [26. P. 37–58].

problems. Taken together, these questions are oriented towards understanding the nature of moral language.

Ibn Miskawayh's understanding of ethics provides suitable content for these semantic inquiries. In explaining the concept of goodness, he takes Aristotle's conception of the good as his basis. Accordingly, goodness is the ultimate goal (*al-ghāya al-quṣwā*) toward which all beings strive. Happiness, for a being that reaches this goal, is both a state of goodness and a state of perfection. Therefore, happiness is considered a type of goodness. However, happiness does not possess a single and immutable essence for all people. According to Ibn Miskawayh, happiness takes different forms depending on an individual's orientation and level of perfection. In this respect, happiness possesses the quality of relative goodness, varying from person to person. Goodness, in contrast, expresses the ultimate target toward which humans strive and the final goal commonly accepted among people [20. P. 73].

In classifying goods, Ibn Miskawayh utilizes Aristotle's taxonomy. At the highest level of this classification are goods that are superior in essence and make the human being noble. Wisdom and intellect are included in this group. Virtues and beautiful actions dependent on the will (*irāda*) are considered concrete examples of such goods. In the second group are goods in potentiality, which have not yet become actualized but make the attainment of goodness possible; inclinations and desires fall under this category. The third type of goods consists of useful things that are not desirable in themselves but serve as instruments in reaching goodness [20. P. 74–76]. Goods are also distinguished based on whether they are ends or not. Some goods possess the quality of an end in themselves, while others do not. Goods that are ends are classified within themselves as "complete" and "incomplete". While happiness is accepted as a complete end, health and wealth are given as examples of incomplete ends. Activities such as medical treatment, learning, and physical education are instrumental goods that are not ends in themselves but lead to goodness. This distinction shows that the concept of "good" in Ibn Miskawayh is not univocal but carries different layers of meaning depending on context and function.

According to Ibn Miskawayh, people act with different motives when performing good deeds. Some do good simply because it is good, some seek to show off, and some aim to gain fame and reputation. Therefore, it is of great importance to correctly comprehend the values and degrees of goods. Only with this awareness can a human choose what is most superior for themselves. If goodness is performed not out of expectation of interest or pleasure but for the sake of goodness itself, this attitude moves away from animalistic tendencies and is associated with the divine aspect of the human. Such behavior grants the human a lasting and genuine pleasure [20. P. 139]. Behind this understanding of ethics lies Ibn Miskawayh's theory of the soul (*nafs*). According to him, while a body cannot assume another form once it has taken a specific form, the soul has a different structure. The soul can grasp multiple forms of knowledge simultaneously. It can perceive both the sensory and the intellectual / abstract forms. This situation shows that human knowledge cannot be reduced to mere sense perception.

Ibn Miskawayh grounds the fact that the soul is a non-material substance in detail in his work *Risāla fī'n-nafs wa'l-'akl*. In this context, he criticizes the Stoics for defining the human soul as a natural heat (pneuma) and argues that, although natural heat is a vital element, it lacks a foundational or constitutive nature. According to him, if natural heat were truly a life-giving principle, the heat found in inanimate objects would also have to grant them vitality, which is clearly impossible [27. P. 56–58]. For him, when the soul turns toward the intellect, it unites with its original principles and reaches salvation. When it turns toward matter, it becomes lost in multiplicity and fragmentation, leading to misery. In this framework, goods emerge as actions that are the product of conscious will and effort as the human strives toward their purpose of existence. Evils, on the other hand, are evaluated as attitudes that prevent the attainment of these goods due to the misuse of will, laziness, and indifference [21. P. 19]. Stating that the soul is a living, continuous, and immortal substance, Ibn Miskawayh asserts that it has a two-way field of movement: when the soul turns toward the intellect, it reaches salvation by uniting with its original principles; when it turns toward matter, it becomes lost within the multiplicity and fragmentation of the body, thus distancing itself from its essence and drifting into misery [28. P. 53–58].

Consequently, moral language in Ibn Miskawayh possesses an objective field of meaning grounded in the human's purpose of existence, the structure of the soul, and intellectual perfection. Here, Ibn Miskawayh explains that happiness and virtue do not depend on external success or the appreciation of others — that is, they are related to our conscious choices and internal motivations rather than external approval. Only when a human directs their soul in harmony with the intellect, and not just for the sake of goodness, can they lead a life that is consistent and at peace with themselves. In this case, if we are to speak of “true pleasure and satisfaction”, he explains that this experience will only manifest when we benefit from the human “state of internal integrity”.

3.2. *The Ontological Aspect of Ibn Miskawayh's Ethics*

Ontological meta-ethics interrogates whether moral values and facts truly exist. In this context, a fundamental problem arises: do good and evil possess a reality independent of the human mind? The question of whether moral properties have an objective counterpart in the external world determines the metaphysical ground of ethics. Therefore, ontological discussions are directly related to the issue of whether an objective understanding of morality is possible. Moral realism argues that good and evil are not merely mental constructs but possess an existence independent of human consciousness. In contrast, moral anti-realism holds that moral values lack an independent ontological reality. This distinction brings to the fore the question of whether morality consists solely of subjective evaluations or possesses an inherent dimension within the order of being [29. P. 14].

According to Ibn Miskawayh, the Necessary Being (*wājib al-wujūd*), situated at the apex of the realm of existence, is simultaneously the Absolute Good (*al-khayr al-muṭlaq*). The non-existence of the Necessary Being is inconceivable, for its

existence does not depend on any condition or external cause. Thus, the Necessary Being ontologically precedes all other beings and constitutes the primary source of goodness. Ibn Miskawayh defines God as the absolute being who is purely and absolutely good, goodness being an essential attribute of His essence. Within this framework, goodness is not a mental attribution but an inherent quality of existence itself. God's goodness is not a goodness realized for an external purpose or for other beings. Divine acts arise from conformity to God's essence itself. Ibn Miskawayh defines God as the Absolute Good in this context and states that God, who is purely good, is also the Necessary Being. Furthermore, accepting that God brought the active intellect, the soul, and the heavens into existence instantaneously, Ibn Miskawayh addresses existence in stages; in these stages, he argues that every being strives to attain perfection at its own ontological level and attempts to reach the most perfect state possible within a process of evolution (*takamul*) [30. P. 12].

According to Ibn Miskawayh, Allah is the first and primary goodness in the realm of existence; the source of goodness at the level of essential existence -that is, non-accidental- is Him alone. All beings, by their nature, turn toward this absolute goodness with a desire and orientation. All goods that possess divine qualities, such as eternity, immortality, and integrity, derive their source from Allah. For this reason, the acts of the Almighty God, the source of divine goods, are unique only to Him; His actions do not occur for beings outside His essence or due to an external purpose, but on the basis of conformity to His own essence. Consequently, God's acts cannot be reduced to secondary goals such as the governance of the order of existence of which we are a part; while this order is a result of the divine act, it is not its primary purpose [21. P. 84].

In this framework, Ibn Miskawayh's understanding of ethics is compatible with ontological realism, which holds that moral values have a reality independent of the human mind. Good and evil are treated as qualities inherent in the order of being, preceding individual preferences or social consensus. Thus, morality is grounded in metaphysics, beyond subjective attitudes.

Ibn Miskawayh's moral understanding rests on an ontological foundation and sees the source of morality in God, the Absolute Good and Necessary Being, who inherently embodies goodness in His essence at the summit of existence. God's goodness is not dependent on an external purpose; this indicates that goodness is an ontological quality and that moral values rely on universal and objective criteria. When a human realizes goodness solely for its own sake and directs their soul in harmony with reason, they perceive this absolute goodness and reflect it in their actions; therefore, while moral values are objective, their transformation into practice is possible through individual consciousness and will. When the soul turns toward reason (*'aql*), it unites with its original principles and reaches happiness; when it turns toward matter, it becomes lost within multiplicity and fragmentation and drifts into misery. Within this framework, while goodness is defined as virtuous actions arising from a person's conscious will and effort, evils are evaluated as attitudes that prevent the attainment of goodness as a result of the misuse of will, laziness, or indifference. Ibn Miskawayh thus establishes morality on both a

universal / ontological foundation and individual consciousness / will, demonstrating that human happiness and virtuous living fundamentally depend on the soul being directed in harmony with reason.

3.3. *The Epistemological Aspect of Ibn Miskawayh's Ethics*

Moral epistemology centers on whether we can possess knowledge in the realm of morality. If it is accepted that moral knowledge is possible, the scope of this knowledge and the ways of obtaining it are further interrogated. In this context, questions such as how moral truths can be known, the reliability of moral intuition, and whether moral knowledge is based on reason or experience form the basis of epistemological discussions. Similarly, whether moral disagreements pose a threat to the possibility of moral knowledge is a significant problem in this field. All these questions ultimately focus on the possibility of moral knowledge.

Ibn Miskawayh explains human perfection through two fundamental powers: the power of knowing (*al-quwwa al-‘ālima*) and the power of doing (*al-quwwa al-‘āmila*). This distinction is a classification also found in classical Islamic philosophy, particularly in Avicenna. According to Ibn Miskawayh, the power of knowing leads the human to truth and knowledge, while the power of doing ensures the transformation of this knowledge into action and life practice. The perfection of the power of knowing manifests in science (*‘ilm*), where what is at stake is correct, sound, and certain knowledge. A human reaching this level is protected from error and doubt in the field of belief. Thus, they obtain the opportunity to turn toward metaphysical knowledge, namely, divine science. Through divine science, the human recognizes God and turns toward Him. While explaining the relationship between these two perfections, Ibn Miskawayh characterizes theoretical perfection as “form” and practical perfection as “matter”. According to him, these two elements necessarily complete each other. Knowledge is a beginning, and action brings this beginning to completion. A completion without a beginning is impossible, and a beginning that is not completed remains meaningless [20. P. 44].

According to Ibn Miskawayh, the ultimate goal of philosophers is to perfect both the power of knowing and the power of doing together within the human. Through the acquisition of the power of knowing, true knowledge is attained, and this knowledge produces peace in a person's inner world. Such knowledge ultimately directs the human toward God. Nevertheless, Ibn Miskawayh, especially in his work *Tahdhīb al-Akhḷāq*, places more emphasis on the power of doing and treats it as a fundamental element of moral perfection. However, he clearly states that these two powers cannot be considered independent of each other. True perfection emerges when theoretical knowledge does not merely remain in the mind but transforms into action from the human soul; to the extent that knowledge is reflected in action, the human reaches moral excellence [31. P. 121–122].

According to Ibn Miskawayh, a human whose dispositions are neglected and not reformed through education remains at the level of childhood throughout their life. Such a person adopts a lifestyle driven by natural inclinations. In this case, the guidance of reason is abandoned; tendencies such as anger, indulgence in pleasure,

aggression, and excessive desire determine human behavior. This structure, devoid of moral education, prevents humans from reaching perfection and makes them dependent on the lower-level powers of the soul [20. P. 39]. Here, Ibn Miskawayh shows that without moral education, humans lead lives directed by natural inclinations. These natural inclinations- impulses like anger, indulgence in pleasure, aggression, and insatiable desire -determine our behaviors without the guidance of education and reason, preventing us from maturing within life. Consequently, this situation hinders us directly at the highest level of being human.

The perfection of the essence entrusted to the human requires the development of certain qualities. According to Ibn Miskawayh, intelligence, the ability for rapid comprehension, and a structure suitable for adopting virtues are the basic conditions of this process. When these qualities develop, sound faith (*īmān*) emerges. The human finds the opportunity to turn toward the truth that cannot be perceived by the senses. In this process, the science of logic is of particular importance. Logic is a fundamental tool that directs natural reason and the faculty of understanding toward the right path. Through logic, the human first grasps beings and their creative order. Subsequently, this knowledge deepens and turns toward metaphysics and divine sciences. The ultimate result of these sciences is to attain divine grace (*ḥayd*). A human who gains divine grace attains tranquility amid the troubles of nature and animalistic desires. Thus, they rise to a position where they can contemplate beings and have reached internal freedom and mental serenity [21. P. 69]. Within this framework, moral knowledge in Ibn Miskawayh appears not merely as a set of truths grasped theoretically, but as a holistic epistemological process obtained within the unity of reason, education, and action, carrying the human to perfection at both the levels of knowing and doing; thereby rendering visible the epistemological aspect of morality interrogated by meta-ethics.

3.4. The Psychological Directivity of Ibn Miskawayh's Ethics

At the center of moral psychology lies the question, “*Why should I be moral?*” Even if the existence of objective moral facts is accepted, it is debated whether there is a binding reason compelling the individual to comply with them. In this context, it is questioned whether moral rules possess a motivational power that directs humans toward action. The real issue is why being moral should be preferred over alternative goals, such as gaining power or pursuing self-interest. These discussions focus on whether the relationship between moral judgment and action is necessary. Within this framework, the question arises whether moral judgments move humans to act. The question arises as to whether judging something as “good” necessarily motivates the individual. It is interrogated whether moral judgments involve belief or desire. The question of whether the link between morality and motivation is necessary or conditional is addressed through the distinction between internalism and externalism.

According to Ibn Miskawayh, morality is a psychological faculty that enables the emergence of beautiful actions performed voluntarily and without compulsion.

In this approach, morality is understood as an inclination rooted in the human's inner world rather than an external command. Ibn Miskawayh emphasizes that moral characteristics are changeable. Humans possess a temperament that can be transformed through education and instruction. While natural events, such as a stone falling to the ground or fire rising upward, cannot be altered, the fact that moral qualities are changeable shows that they are not on the same plane as the laws of nature. According to Ibn Miskawayh, the existence of the human substance depends on Allah's will; however, the improvement and perfection of this substance have been left to the human. This understanding forms the psychological basis of moral responsibility. Humans are obliged to undertake their own moral development personally. This obligation removes moral conduct from being an external necessity and places it in a realm of internal motivation [20. P. 126].

In Islam, the human is primarily responsible to the highest authority, Allah; here, the individual must attain spiritual maturity by disciplining the soul (*nafs*), a fundamental necessity for ensuring social order. This situation is stated in the verses of the Holy Qur'an: "Indeed, Allah is with those who have faith and do righteous deeds" (Baqarah, 2:218). Ibn Miskawayh's general approach is also based on this Islamic foundation; he argues that only when a human realizes goodness solely for its own sake and directs their reason and soul in harmony can they reach true happiness and a virtuous life. Thus, morality is understood as both an ontological foundation based on God's absolute goodness and a process that comes to life through individual consciousness and action.

In Ibn Miskawayh, justice (*'adl*) is a central element of psychological integrity. Justice emerges through the harmonious unification of the other three fundamental virtues within the soul. This harmony is a state of balance achieved under the guidance of the faculty of discernment. A just person acts with moderation not only toward others but also toward their own soul. The compassion they show to others finds a counterpart in their own inner world. To the extent that they show compassion to others, they deserve to receive compassion in return [21. P. 24–25].

Ibn Miskawayh builds his understanding of existence upon the concepts of continuity and perfection. The permanence of a being depends on its reliance on an eternal foundation. Lasting blessings do not depart from humans due to the perfection they have attained. This perfection renders the human suitable for continuously receiving the divine grace (*fayḍ*) coming from God. The human who becomes open to this grace draws closer to God, and the obstacles between them are removed. This proximity makes possible the highest level of happiness [21. P. 45]. In this context, moral motivation in Ibn Miskawayh is grounded not in fear or the expectation of interest, but as an internal power nourished by the desire for the soul to attain perfection, to be balanced with justice, and to turn toward divine happiness. Within this framework, the principle of psychological directivity sought in meta-ethical discussions finds its counterpart in Ibn Miskawayh's understanding of ethics.

3.5. The Objectivity / Relativism Aspect of Ibn Miskawayh's Ethics

The question of whether morality is universal or relative is one of the most fundamental topics in meta-ethical discussions. Central to this debate are questions such as whether moral truths vary across cultures, whether universal moral principles are possible, and whether moral disagreements point toward relativism. These questions address whether morality is merely a product of social consensus or possesses validity that transcends the human sphere.

In Ibn Miskawayh's understanding of ethics, virtues are not merely qualities that remain within the individual's inner world. According to him, human virtues find their true meaning only when they become visible within society. Justice, above all, is a principle that an individual must internalize within their own existence. A person establishes justice first in their soul (*nafs*), then implements it in the family, the city, and the society. In this respect, justice acquires the character of a social norm nourished by human reason's experiences and knowledge. Thus, humans are social beings by nature. Morality gains meaning through the relationships humans establish with the world and with social life. Moral virtues emerge and develop not in an abstract and isolated individual existence, but on a social ground where people interact with one another. In this context, as accepted in Greek thought, social life is built upon fundamental virtues such as wisdom, temperance, courage, and justice. These virtues can only be practically lived and embodied within interpersonal relationships; it is not possible for them to fully manifest in those who lead a solitary life away from society [32. P. 28].

Ibn Miskawayh addresses the powers within the human at three fundamental levels: the appetitive soul (*al-nafs al-bahīmiyya*), the irascible soul (*al-nafs al-ghadabiyya*), and the rational soul (*al-nafs al-nāṭiqa*). These powers are evaluated not as corporeal but as faculties of the soul, and the substantial nature of the soul is particularly emphasized. The power that becomes dominant in a person determines their actual life. These powers of the soul are directly related to education. The rational soul is the most inclined to education by nature. The irascible soul is initially uneducated but is capable of accepting discipline (*riyāḍa*). The appetitive soul, however, is both uneducated and resistant to education. Ibn Miskawayh refers to Plato while explaining the educability of the rational soul, likening it to gold because of its softness and suitability for taking shape. He likens the appetitive soul to iron due to its hardness and rigidity. In this framework, the primary feature distinguishing humans from other beings is the possession of a rational soul. When a human uses this soul in a correct and balanced manner, they rise to the position of the most noble of beings, becoming eligible to receive the divine message and true knowledge [20. P. 49–56].

In Ibn Miskawayh's understanding of ethics, the fact that virtues manifest practically in social life does not mean that morality is relative. On the contrary, this social visibility is considered alongside the assumption that moral values possess an objective foundation based on the structure of the human soul and the functioning of reason. This objective ground is not limited to the human level; it is ultimately linked to the divine order. According to Ibn Miskawayh, God's acts

occur not in line with any external purpose or arbitrary will, but solely as a requirement of His own essence. This approach brings to the fore the classic meta-ethical question of whether the morally good is independent of God's commands or dependent upon them. However, Ibn Miskawayh adopts a stance that transcends this dichotomy. According to him, God is inherently good; therefore, His commands emerge in accordance with His own essence, which is good. Thus, neither is the divine will limited, nor can it be claimed that moral commands are arbitrary [33. P. 41–59]. Since God possesses absolute perfection, His acts and commands are necessarily good, orderly, and in accordance with wisdom (*hikma*). Consequently, while Ibn Miskawayh's moral understanding accepts the visibility of moral values in social life, it places these values on an objective ground that transcends relativism by ultimately grounding them in reason, the structure of the soul, and divine goodness.

Conclusion

A philosopher from the classical period can transcend the ages with their ideas and shed light on contemporary debates. This study is organized around the views of Ibn Miskawayh, who lived in the 11th century. Re-reading classical ethical texts is not merely a matter of historical curiosity; it is also crucial for contributing to contemporary moral theories by analyzing ethical concepts, values, and principles developed in the past within a meta-ethical context. From this perspective, Ibn Miskawayh's classic Islamic understanding of ethics is not limited to describing behaviors; by rendering the ontological and epistemological foundations of moral values visible, it provides an opportunity for a systematic meta-ethical evaluation of the nature and applicability of moral judgments. By associating the concept of morality with the internal structure of the human and the transformability of the self, the philosopher views morality as a dynamic process shaped by human will rather than a static structure; therefore, his understanding can open new horizons from a meta-ethical standpoint.

Ibn Miskawayh's understanding of ethics does not consist solely of principles that govern behavior, as is often the case in classical Islamic thought. He provides conceptual depth by linking morality to the human's internal structure and the transformability of the soul (*nafs*); thus, morality ceases to be a static mold and becomes a dynamic process shaped by human will. This approach reveals that the philosopher approached ethics from a perspective distinct from that of his contemporaries and that his thought can be situated beyond his era.

From a meta-ethical perspective, Ibn Miskawayh's moral theory enables systematic reflection on the meaning and foundation of moral judgments. Semantically, while the concepts of "good" and "happiness" express the human orientation through relative forms that vary according to individual perfection and ultimate purpose, "goodness" gains value not only through the consequences of an act but as a conscious choice — that is, being performed for the sake of goodness itself. For the philosopher, on the ontological plane, good and evil emerge as qualities inherent in the order of being, independent of the human mind, and are

embodied in the essence and acts of God, who is the source of absolute goodness. Epistemologically, moral knowledge is acquired through the unity of the powers of knowing and doing, via reason and education, and true perfection and moral excellence are reached when this knowledge is reflected in action. On the psychological and motivational level, morality functions as an internal inclination and a desire for perfection; it is realized through the human capacity to educate the soul and internalize justice. Regarding the dimension of objectivity, moral virtues become visible in social life; since their ultimate foundation lies in reason, the structure of the soul, and divine goodness, moral values rest on a metaphysical and objective ground that transcends relativism. In this framework, when Ibn Miskawayh's classical understanding of ethics is evaluated through a meta-ethical analysis, it reveals new and systematic perspectives on the foundations, functions, and applicability of moral concepts.

Our study demonstrates that questioning the function of moral language and the foundations of moral judgments is not merely a theoretical endeavor. Meta-ethical inquiries are functional tools for understanding human behavior, rethinking education, and strengthening social order. Ibn Miskawayh's moral understanding bridges individual internal perfection and social harmony, and when evaluated within a meta-ethical framework, it offers an applicable method for individual and social transformation beyond conceptual analysis. By revealing how moral judgments acquire meaning — rather than just what they deem right or wrong — this approach turns Ibn Miskawayh's classical texts into a guide for contemporary thought and practice.

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