

Islamic Notion of Happiness (Al-Sa'ada): An Analysis of Miskawayh's Thought

MOHD. NASIR OMAR, AHMAD SUNAWARI LONG, ABDULL RAHMAN MAHMOOD & ZAIZUL AB RAHMAN¹

ABSTRACT

Miskawayh (d.1030), through his famous book on ethics, Tahdhib al-Akhlaq (The Refinement of Character), has separated ethics from other disciplines, offering a very thorough analytical system of Islamic ethics. His Tahdhib al-Akhlaq was thus occupying a prominent place in this particular branch of Islamic ethical literature. It is scarcely an exaggeration to say that most of the later works that deal with this subject such as those by al-Ghazali, al-Tusi and al-Dawwani, use it as their main authority and some of them are even based on it. Thus, the objective of this qualitative study, which applies conceptual content analysis method, is to make a critical analysis of such an influential works on ethics in Islam with the purpose of elucidating its views concerning happiness, as well as the ways by which man may achieve a noble state of character, so as to attain such a great goal. To this end, the present study confines itself to discussing the concept of happiness and to finding out the answer to those particular questions regarding its nature such are, what is meant by happiness, or what does happiness consist of? Why is happiness the end to be achieved by man and for which sake he was created? Is happiness attainable in this life or the next? Who is the happy man? and so forth. The result of this study shows that the thought of Aristotle and other philosophers enable Miskawayh to philosophise about moral happiness and how Islamic faiths brings about the development of that legacy.

Keywords: Al-sa'ada, eudaimonia, happiness, ethics (akhlaq), Miskawayh

Ibn Miskawayh, or simply Miskawayh, was born probably around the year 320/932 in al-Rayy (somewhere in the area of Teheran today), and died at an old age on the 9th of Safar 421/16th February 1030, though the question regarding his date of birth is still unresolved (Hajji Khalifa, 1835-1858). Margoliouth (Miskawayh, 1920-1921), gave it as provisionally fixed as 330/941 or a little earlier. 'Izzat (1946) tentatively fixes his birth date as 325/936, while Badawi (1963-1966) holds that it should be 320/932 if not earlier. The writers feel that Badawi's view is probably the most nearly correct because Miskawayh, in Badawi's argument, took over as secretary to the Buwayhids' vizier al-Muhallabi in 341/953, by which time he must have been around 19 to 21 years old to hold

¹ **Mohd. Nasir Omar***, Ph.D. (corresponding author). Retired Professor at the Centre of Theology and Philosophy Studies, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, 43600 BANGI, Selangor, Malayisa. Email: abunasir@ukm.edu.my; **Ahmad Sunawari Long**, Ph.D., Assoc. Prof. at the Centre of Theology and Philosophy Studies, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, 43600 BANGI, Selangor, Malayisa. Email: aslong@ukm.edu.my; **Abdull Rahman Mahmood**, Ph. D., Senior Lecturer at the Centre of Theology and Philosophy Studies, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, 43600 BANGI, Selangor, Malayisa. Email: abrm@ukm.edu.my; **Zaizul Ab Rahman**, Ph. D., Senior Lecturer at the Centre of Theology and Philosophy Studies, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, 43600 BANGI, Selangor, Malayisa. Email: zaizul@ukm.edu.my.

<https://doi.org/10.24035/ijit.19.2021.195>

such an important office. Moreover, Miskawayh's (1914,1916) own view that a boy of twenty years is decidedly young, might also persuade us that the date as suggested by Badawi is most likely to be accurate (Mohd Nasir Omar, 1994).

His full name is Abu 'Ali Ahmad Ibn Muhammad Ibn Ya'qub Miskawayh. He is also called Miskawayh, but wrongly known as *ibn* or *son* of Miskawayh. The title (*laqab*) "*Miskawayh*" ("*Maskawayh*" is also a well attested vocalisation) is his own and not that of his father or grandfather. This is supported by the fact that there are just a few of his biographers, mostly those belonging to the later generations, such as al-Shahrastani (1976), al-Bayhaqi (1935), and Hajji Khalifah (1835-1858), who assume that he was the son of Miskawayh (*Ibn Miskawayh*). In contrast to this, many of them including al-Tawhidi (1953), al-Tha'alibi (1934) and al-Sijistani (1979), who were closely associated with Miskawayh, and who may rightly be supposed to have correct information about his name, call him "*Abu 'Ali Miskawayh*" or simply "*Miskawayh*". Trusting their evidence we may safely maintain that "*Miskawayh*" was his personal title and that the form "*Abu 'Ali Miskawayh*" is his own name, and not that of his father or grandfather. Accordingly, we will refer hereafter to him as Miskawayh. (Mohd Nasir Omar, 2017).

Yaqut (1907-1926) states: "*wakana Miskawayh majusiyyan wa-aslama*" (Miskawayh was a Magian who was converted to Islam). But this statement cannot be correct. The Islamic names of his father, Muhammad, and grandfather Ya'qub, which have been given by Miskawayh himself everywhere in his writings, entirely rule out that assumption (Miskawayh, 1951; 1968; and 1983). However, it might be true that it was his father or grandfather who had actually converted to Islam from Magianism, as has been suggested by Badawi and Muhammad Yusuf Musa (1953).

That Miskawayh was a *Shi'i* is also evident. He not only served successive Buwayhid rulers, whose families were of Iranian origin and of *Shi'i* persuasion, but he was also familiar himself with the *Shi'i* traditions and quoted extensively from the sayings of 'Ali, in a section of his work entitled *Jawidan Khirad*. It was also perhaps because of Miskawayh being a *Shi'i*, that al-'Amili (1938) dedicated a considerable section of his work, *A'yan al-Shi'a*, to him. Miskawayh's views (1900), that the *imam* and the philosophers are, in many respects, similar to the prophet except that the latter is confirmed by God through obtaining revelation, might also indicate that he was a *Shi'i*. However, we have not found any clear evidence in Miskawayh's writings which could, in some way, reveal that he was proud to be a *Shi'i* or that he made an effort to disparage other Muslim sects, especially the *Sunni*. Yet his frequent references to several *Sunni* scholars including Abu Hanifa, al-Shafi'i, Abu Musa al-Ash'ari, Hasan al-Basri, and others, proved that he was not fanatically inclined towards any school of thought but instead took the stand of an open-minded scholar, who loved and appreciated knowledge and truth regardless of their sources. The same is also with regard to his reaction to Greek thought (Miskawayh, 1983; Mohd Nasir Omar, 2015).

Happiness: The Highest Goal of Ethics

The central problem of philosophical ethics is the problem of happiness (al-sa'ada). It is the greatest good, the good without any qualification, self-sufficient in nature, the good that is sought for itself, not for anything else. It is the greatest good, the completion of virtue, and the end of perfection, beyond which there is no end. Since happiness is widely accepted as the ultimate aim of human life (Aristotle, 1980; al-Farabi, 1985; and al-Ghazali, 1978), and since this aim can only be realised by the improvement of the human soul or through ethico-religious practices, ethics, then, consistently occupies a central place in Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Other subjects such as politics and economics are connected with ethics, basically, either in a supportive role or as its backgrounds.

Happiness, the highest goal of ethics, and for which the latter becomes the science par-excellence, has also turned out to be the ideal of almost all branches of science and is fundamental to many of these religious societies, especially in the medieval period. In politics, for instance, the ruler is not only accountable for the security of life and property of his subjects, but above all for the

attainment of their happiness (al-Farabi, 1983; Miskawayh, 1966). In Islam, as Rosenthal (1958:14) puts it: "The ruler combines political with spiritual authority; in Christianity the functions are divided between the emperor and the pope; in Judaism authority rests with the rabbis until the Messianic kingdom is established."

The term *al-sa'ada* (happiness) is definitely not Greek although the Aristotelian idea of *eudaimonia* (usually translated as happiness) may have influenced its development (Mohd Nasir Omar, 2003). It is derived from the *Qur'anic* words, *su'idu* (those who are blessed or made happy): "And those who are blessed shall be in the Garden: they will dwell therein for all the time that the heavens and the earth endure except as thy Lord willeth: a gift without break" (al-Qur'an, 11:108), and *sa'id* (happy one): "The day it arrives, no soul shall speak except by His leave: of those (gathered) some will be wretched and some will be blessed" (al-Qur'an, 11: 105). It is a wider concept than happiness that comprehends all aspects of life. That is why other *Qur'anic* terms which convey the significant meaning of *al-sa'ada*, such as *al-falah* (prosperity), *al-fawz* (success), *al-salama* (safety), *al-najah* (salvation), *al-ni'ma* (blessing), *al-rahma* (mercy) and their like are also used as synonyms of the term happiness. Yet the *Qur'anic* verse (32:17), which reads, "Now no person knows what delights of the eye are kept hidden (in reserve) for them - as a reward for their (good) deeds," is very often quoted in this connection, perhaps in order to give the concept of *al-sa'ada* a much more *Qur'anic* colour or to confirm the source of its derivation.

As for the development of Miskawayh's theory of happiness and how it can be achieved by man, it is undoubtedly influenced by Aristotle, though different in detail, and especially by his major works on ethics, such as the *Nicomachean Ethics*, *Magna Moralia*, *Eudemian Ethics* and others. Miskawayh (1917), for example, admits that Aristotle was the discoverer of the notion of happiness. Although it is still uncertain whether Aristotle's major works on ethics had been translated into Arabic or not by Miskawayh's time, nevertheless, we have clear evidence, that his *Magna Moralia*, *Ethica Nicomachea*, and *Eudemian Ethics* had reached the Arabic philosophers of the time. Perhaps, they were available either in Greek original, in Syriac or Arabic translation, or in commentaries such as those of Porphyry and Themistius, as well as in summaries like those of the *Nicomachean Ethics* by Nicolaus of Damascus (1st century A. D.), and by the Alexandrines (Arberry, 1955; Dunlop, 1962; Badawi, 1979, and Mohd Nasir Omar, 2018). Ibn al-Nadim (1872), who appears to have known most about the transmission of Greek sciences to the Arabs, especially during Miskawayh's time, tells us that Aristotle's *Ethics* (*Akhlaq*) which consists of twelve chapter, probably ten section of the *Ethica Nicomachea* and two sections of the *Magna Moralia*, had been translated by Ishaq Ibn Hunayn (d.911). It is very likely that this translation was made by Ishaq from Greek or Syriac into Arabic, since as a translator, he was mentioned by Ibn al-Nadim as being specialised in this particular respect.

In the *Tahdhib al-Akhlaq*, Aristotle's *Kitab al-Akhlaq*, and *Kitab Niqumakhiya*, are both cited by Miskawayh (1917) but still in their Arabic titles. Though it is plain that the latter title definitely referred to the *Ethica Nicomachea*, the former title, *Akhlaq*, which was adduced three times, could also comprise, as we have indicated above, parts of the *Magna Moralia*, in addition to the *Ethica Nicomachea*. For the Arabic title as such, and the work on which Porphyry wrote a commentary, was reported to have consisted of twelve chapters (Ibn al-Nadim 1872). Ten chapters without doubt belong to the *Nicomachean Ethics*, whereas the rest are of *Magna Moralia*. Some fragments of Porphyry's commentary on Aristotle's division of the good, cited successively by Miskawayh in the third discourse of the present *Tahdhib al-Akhlaq*, tend to confirm this suspicion, for they bear evident similarities to the related sections of both works of Aristotle under consideration (Mohd Nasir Omar, 2018).

Another ethical writing of Aristotle cited twice by Miskawayh (1966), in the *Tahdhib al-Akhlaq* is *Kitab Fada'il al-Nafs* (*The Virtue of the Soul*). This title, however, is not listed as the work of Aristotle by early Arabic sources. But *Kitab Fadl al-Nafs* which was ascribed by Ibn Abi Usaybi'a

(1982) to Aristotle may refer to the present Arabic version. Nor has this work come down to us either in a Greek or in an Arabic version. However, this precise reference made by Miskawayh to its Arabic translation prepared by his senior contemporary, Abu 'Uthman al-Dimashqi (died after 914), might suggest that he was not only familiar with the work, but also very careful in listing his sources when he wished to document his ideas. Yet, he still acknowledges frankly that he utilised Aristotle's works on ethics when writing his *Tahdhib al-Akhlaq*. Thus, he writes:

We shall now state what he (Aristotle) said and add to it what we have taken also from him in other sections so as to bring together what was mentioned by him in different places. We shall also, in the measure of our capacity, add what we have taken from the commentators of his works and the followers of his philosophy (Miskawayh 1968: 65).

As to how he used the writings of Aristotle, Miskawayh (1968) states that sometimes he quoted some extracts from them exactly. Sometimes he pieced together the various bits of Aristotle's scattered ideas. After comparing them with other studies by several schools of thought, he then formed his own independent conclusions on them. But in most cases, Miskawayh (1968: 82) insists: "We (only) state in this regard what we deem is right".

Happiness and the Happy Man

Following Aristotle (1980, 1985), Miskawayh (1968) also holds that happiness is the good (al-khayr). The good is that towards which all people aim, that is an end, complete in itself, for it is not subordinated to others, nor is it a means to others but good in itself. Other things which are useful to this end, such as health, wealth, learning, virtue and exercise are also called good. But, in contrast to happiness, the latter are not ends in themselves but are sought for the sake of something else, viz. happiness. They have definite essences and are objects which can be pursued and shared by all people; while the former, happiness, is a good that is relative to each individual. The happiness of one person is different from that of another. It has no distinctive essence of its own but lies in a particular completion of every existence, so that the happiness of man consists in the perfection of his reason or rational soul. Happiness, that being so, is not only the best, the end and the completion of the good, virtues and perfection, but must also be regarded as made up of these qualities. As Miskawayh (1968:71-72) puts it:

As for happiness, we said that it is a good. It is the completion and the ends of goods. Completion is that (end), which, once it is attained, we do not need anything else in addition. This is why we say that happiness is the best of goods, but in order to attain this completion, which is the ultimate end, we need other kinds of happiness, some of which are related to the body, while others are external to it.

Thus, some goods or some happiness, as Aristotle (1980; 1985) has said, belong to the soul – for example, knowledge, sciences, wisdom and the whole of philosophy; some to the body, for instance, beauty, health and a good disposition that realise the virtues and actions of the soul; and some are external to them, such as children, friends, wealth, honour and such like. Of these happiness in the soul is the best because it is pursued for its own sake, while other kinds are defective and are mainly sought for the sake of other things. But, so long as man is man, or so long as he contains within himself both soul and body, he will never reach the ideal unless he gains all aspects of happiness of the soul or the spiritual and the happiness of the body and external to it, or the practical. The former is with respect to the latter, Miskawayh (1968: 37) writes, "as form is to matter. Neither can be complete without the other, for knowledge is a beginning and action an end. A beginning without an end is wasted, while an end without a beginning is impossible".

As for the question of why happiness is the end of man, or why other qualities like virtue, pleasure, health and wealth are only regarded as a means to it, not an end in themselves, Miskawayh (1968) seems to have shared the view of Aristotle that all creatures, of which man is the noblest, are created with the same purpose, that is, to attain their ends in activity or function which is peculiar to each of them. Thus, if every existent has its proper function which is usually what it does and makes it what it is, then, the final good and the end of every existent must also lie in the proper performance of the function distinctive of its substance. The best of horses, for example, is the most agile to the will of its rider. But if it fails to perform the act which is distinctive of it as a horse, it loses its particular function and identity and therefore can be used as a cow or a donkey for carrying loads. Similarly, the best of men, on the other hand, is he who is most capable of bringing about the action appropriate to him as man or as a rational being, not that of any other creature. For instance, if he pursues a life of passion not of reason, he diminishes his human status to the beastly, for this action is more proper to animals than to man.

Therefore, happiness should also consist in a distinctive action proper to man as man and not shared by any other existents. This particular action is, according to Miskawayh (1968:13), identical with that of the rational soul through which man exercises his discernment and reflection. For he writes:

It has now become clear that the happiness of every existent consists in the complete and perfect performance of the actions which are distinctive of its own particular form, and that the happiness of man consists in the performance of his properly human actions in accordance with discernment and reflection (i.e., the rational soul).

Therefore, happiness alone is the real and the supreme good of man because it not only ends in itself but also distinguishes him from the rest of the universe. Other qualities such as wealth, virtue, health and pleasure are lacking this distinctive function and are still subordinated to happiness. Nevertheless, Miskawayh (1968) also considers that wealth, money and other goodness are also useful for living as well as for bringing philosophy and virtue to light. They are not however, ends in themselves but are still subservient to others. Each is no more than a means to be used by man in the pursuit of his philosophical life so that happiness can be within his reach. If al-Farabi (1961, 1983, 1985), Yahya (1978), and Aquinas (1963), all agree that money has no value of its own, but is desired because of the comfort and wealth which could be obtained by it, Miskawayh (1968), by comparison, believes that money also has its peculiar function and characteristic and that is as a silent establisher of justice. It evaluates many objects in terms of different values and prices so as to make business transactions in every human society workable, and to equalise the things that differ in this respect until equilibrium among them is practicable. It also establishes balances among people until they are able to communicate with one another in the proper way and just manner.

As to whether happiness is realisable in this world or the world to come, Miskawayh (1968) rejects the view he attributes to Pythagoras, Socrates, Plato and others, according to which, happiness belongs only to the soul and its faculties. When man unites all the virtues of his soul: wisdom, courage, temperance and justice, he attains complete happiness. But this state is possible for man only in the next world when the soul is free and separated from the body, and man is in need of neither the goods pertaining to his body such as beauty and health, nor external to it such as wealth, honour, children and friends. Miskawayh (1968) appears to contrast this opinion with the idea Aristotle and of the Stoics (Aristotle, 1980; Walzer, 1962; and Stace 1967), who both believed that the body is not a mere instrument of man but rather a part of him. Accordingly, the happiness of the soul will never be completed unless it is coupled with the happiness of the body and of what is external to it as well. Similarly, happiness therefore, is not only related to the body whereby man gains the various grades

of worldly happiness, but also to the soul whereby he attains the spiritual or the otherworldly part of it. They come to man one after another, but no one may arrive at the latter, without passing through the former. Happiness, then, is both physical and spiritual, worldly and otherworldly and it is, indeed possible to man in both conditions.

But as a Muslim, Miskawayh (1968; 1917) deviates from both Aristotle and the Stoics when he gives preference to the happiness of the next world. He refers to it as “the ultimate end”, “the extreme perfection” or “the absolute good”, in which man enjoys exclusively the same degree of happiness. If worldly happiness makes him perfect and happy but not absolutely perfect or happy, then the otherworldly, in contrast, provides him with both accounts. He is now in no need of what is physical but begins to imitate the actions of his Creator, i.e. God. So all his activities become divine, for they proceed simply from the divine part of his real essence and God’s deputy in him, that is his reason, while the aim of that activity also turns into the activity itself for the “absolute good” is the good that is desired for itself and not for anything else. That is, says Miskawayh (1968), “the object of philosophy and the culmination of happiness”.

But unlike his follower, Imam al-Ghazali (1978; Quasem, 1975; and ‘Umaruddin 1970), who goes so far as to describe the nature of this otherworldly happiness as consisting in “continuity without end, joy without sorrow, knowledge without ignorance, richness without poverty, perfection without deficiency, and fame without shame”, Miskawayh refuses to define the essential character of such an ideal, because he thinks that it is just impossible for man to utter it in words, though he might himself experience it. His argument (1947:149), runs as follows:

We have explained happiness in detail, but the truth is that we cannot in any way know perfectly the nature of that happiness, only being able to indicate it remotely and understand or explain by symbols. For the conditions of that (other) world are infinitely different from the conditions and customary usages of this. God himself in His holy word has said about those conditions and delights, “No soul knows what is reserved for them of cheerfulness for the eyes” (Sura xxxii, 17), and the Messenger of Allah said, “There will be blessing which neither the eyes have seen nor the ears heard, neither has the thought entered into the heart of man.

What sort of man is called the perfect and happy one? Miskawayh (1968; 1917), sees him as one who attains the perfection of his existence while accomplishing his happiness. But, happiness itself is a relative good that is varied according to its seeker, and such also is his theory of the happy man. Some are happy, he says, by being provided with a reasonable amount of external goods, and performing their virtue accordingly; some are forced to observe the religious law or to follow the philosophical instruction whereby they become complete; others become perfect and happy by nature because God has favoured them to be so; while still others have to strive hard towards this ideal by acquiring the whole range of philosophical sciences until they reach the rank of the philosophers, whereupon their knowledge becomes correct, their insight true and their actions right. This last rank is, according to Miskawayh, the most genuine and the most complete of all ranks of the happy men, for it lies within man’s reach, while others are external to him and are due to outside causes. Thus, both the philosopher and ordinary man can be happy, but they will be happy in many ways and various conditions depending upon the different causes that make them so.

As happiness comprises both the physical and the spiritual, the worldly and the otherworldly, Miskawayh (1968:75-76), sees that the happy one is he who is also in neither one of these two states. He writes:

The happy man, therefore, is in one of two ranks: either he is in the rank of the bodily things, while, at the same time, regarding noble things, looking for them, desiring them, directing his efforts towards them, and rejoicing in them; or else he is in the rank of the spiritual things, attached to their higher states and happy in them, while at the same time, observing the lower things, learning from them, reflecting on the signs of divine power and the evidence of

consummate wisdom (in them), following their example, regulating them, pouring out goods on them, and leading them gradually to what is better and better to the extent of their readiness and according to their capacity.

Although he who is in the rank of the former, bodily happiness, is happy, he is not yet completely so, nor absolutely perfect, and therefore, he is subject to pains and sorrows for he still attaches himself actively to the lower or sensual world. While the one who is in the rank of the latter, the spiritual, is completely happy, free from suffering and sorrow, since he arrives at this highest rank after passing through the first. Or to put it another way, the truly happy and perfect man, as seen by Miskawayh (1968; 1917), is he who gains both parts of happiness, namely, bodily and spiritual, practical and theoretical. This is the highest degree of perfection man is capable of. It is a great gift of God, in which he shares the rank of the angels and attains "extreme happiness" (al-sa'ada al-quswa). This particular man, Miskawayh continues, is either a prophet or a philosopher. The former is confirmed by God through obtaining His revelation (wahy); whereas the latter is he who obeys God and who confirms His revelation, primarily by the aid of his tremendous intellectual powers.

In *Kitab al-Sa'ada*, Miskawayh (1917), reveals the marks of this ideal man as the one who is always in the state of having sufficient energy, optimism and confidence, fortitude, equanimity, non-conformity or independence and self-contentment. In the *Wasiyya* (quoted by al-Tawhidi, 1929), he is counted among God's successful servants and His faithful worshippers, who does not incur any fear nor suffer any grief, and who receives God's endless grace. In *al-Fawz al-Asghar* (1947), he is portrayed as the one who may see God; while in the *Tahdhib al-Akhlaq* (1968), he is mentioned as he who enjoys almost all of the above attributes, getting himself near to God, and has great potential for becoming one of those who are in the rank of union with Him. On one occasion, to cite an example, Miskawayh (1968:37-38), specifies:

If you attain this rank, you will become a world by yourself and you will deserve to be called a "small world" ('alam al-saghir). For then the form of all existents will have been present in you and you will have become, in a way, identical with them. By your actions you will have arranged them in order in the measure of your capacity, and you will thus become, with respect to them, a deputy of thy Lord, the Creator of all things. You will not err in them or deviate from His original and wise order, and you will then constitute a complete world. The complete existent is the everlasting one, and the everlasting is the eternally enduring. Thus, you will not miss anything from the abiding bliss, since your perfection will have made you ready to receive the divine emanation forever and always and you will have come so near to God that no veil should then separate you from Him.

To sum up, Miskawayh's idea of the perfectly happy man is neither passive nor unconcerned with society, nor even the solitary life of the ascetics. In his ideal man the Neo-Platonic indifference to society is replaced by a most active and wholehearted Muslim obedience to God and His prophets. The ideal man strives hard to meet the demands of the Islamic law (Shari'a) by improving the condition of his own self, his family, and of his community at large. At the same time, and intellectually, he becomes proficient in all branches of science and philosophy, ranging from logic to metaphysics, so that he actualises the Islamic human ideal of active social life. He is never remote from the political and social realities of his society, but actively engaged in them as one who consciously places his perfection, seen in both his moral and intellectual powers at the practical service of his community. Thus, in this way, he fulfils the noble task that every man is bound to try to achieve, which is the realisation of the vicegerency (khilafa) of God in this earth.

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