

## ETHICAL THOUGHT IN ISLAMIC PHILOSOPHY: A STUDY OF GHAZALI AND MISKAWAYH

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### Abstract

This research explores the ethical thinking of two major figures in Islamic philosophy, namely Al-Ghazali and Miskawayh. Al-Ghazali, known for his Sufistic approach, emphasised the importance of a spiritual relationship with God as the basis for achieving a moral life and true happiness. Meanwhile, Miskawayh, who was influenced by Aristotelian thought, offered a more rational view by emphasising balance and the use of reason to form good character and achieve virtue. This study found that although the two had different approaches, both spiritual and rational, they complemented each other and made significant contributions to the development of ethics in the Islamic philosophical tradition.

**Keywords:** Ethical Thought, Islamic Philosophy, Ghazali, Miskawayh.

### Introduction

Ethics is one of the main branches of philosophy that remains relevant today because it deals directly with how humans should live and behave. Ethics is concerned with the system of values, moral principles, and rules of behaviour that determine what is considered good or bad, right or wrong in human actions. Ethics explores the moral standards prevailing in society and considers various perspectives on how people should act in various situations (Smith, 1983). Ethics not only focuses on the actions of individuals, but also considers the moral implications of those actions on others and the community as a whole. In practice, ethics helps guide human behaviour towards social harmony and respect for universal human values (Reisman, 2002).

In the context of Islamic philosophy, ethics has a significant position because it involves moral aspects that are closely related to Islamic teachings. The great figures in Islamic philosophy have made very important contributions in developing the concept of ethics, including Abu Hamid al-Ghazali (1058-1111) and Abu Ali Ahmad ibn Muhammad ibn Yaqub Miskawayh (932-1030) (Al-Akiti., 2013)

Abu Hamid al-Ghazali, a prominent scholar, theologian, and philosopher, is known for his work in combining sharia and tasawwuf. His thoughts on ethics cannot be separated from his views on purity of heart and true happiness that can only be achieved through closeness to God. Ghazali's works such as "Ihya' 'Ulum al-Din"

emphasise the importance of personal morality and spiritual virtues in living a good life (Zysow ., 2013)

On the other hand, Miskawayh was a philosopher who was heavily influenced by the Greek philosophical tradition, especially Aristotle. His work "Tahdhib al-Akhlaq" presented ethics from a more rational and systematic philosophical perspective. Miskawayh attempted to integrate ethical views from Greek philosophy with Islamic teachings, thus producing a unique synthesis in ethical thought (Winter, 2008) .

Although these two figures lived at different times and had different educational backgrounds, their contributions to ethics in Islamic philosophy are significant. This study is important to understand how each of them viewed ethics and how their views can be applied in the contemporary context. Furthermore, analysing the similarities and differences in their thoughts can provide a more comprehensive insight into the dynamics of ethics in the Islamic philosophical tradition (Ibn Miskawayh, n.d.) .

In the modern context, where ethical issues are becoming increasingly complex and are associated with various aspects of life, a deep understanding of classical ethical thought can be a solid foundation to face today's ethical challenges. Therefore, this research aims to examine and compare the ethical thoughts of Ghazali and Miskawayh, in order to make a valuable contribution to the development of ethics in Islamic philosophy as well as in global ethical discussions.

## **Research Methods**

The study in this research uses the literature method. The literature research method is an approach used to review and analyse information that has been published in various written sources, such as books, journals, articles, research reports, and other documents. The aim is to collect secondary data relevant to the research topic, understand the development of theory, identify gaps in existing knowledge, and build a strong theoretical foundation for further research (Hidayat, 2009) ; (Afiyanti, 2008) . Researchers using this method will conduct an in-depth study of the existing literature, compile a critical literature review, and synthesise findings from various sources to produce a comprehensive understanding of the field of study under study. This approach is very useful for formulating hypotheses, designing conceptual frameworks, and assessing the existence of empirical evidence that supports or rejects a theory (Syahrani ., 2020)

## **Results and Discussion**

### **Ghazali's Ethical Thought**

Abu Hamid al-Ghazali, a leading Muslim philosopher and theologian of the 11th century, developed many key concepts in the field of ethics that are still relevant today. Ghazali is known for his integrative approach, combining Islamic spiritual perspectives with Greek philosophy and broad moral thinking. One of his key concepts was the

importance of "intention" (niyyah). According to Ghazali, sincere and sincere intentions determine the morality of an action. Actions performed with good intentions are accepted by Allah, whereas the same actions with bad intentions have no moral value (Wisnovsky ., 2004)

In addition, Ghazali emphasised the concept of "akhlak" or noble character as the foundation of ethical behaviour. For Ghazali, the formation of good character is at the core of ethics and includes traits such as honesty, justice, patience and courage. He believed that through education and spiritual practice, individuals can develop these traits and reform themselves to achieve true happiness both in this world and in the hereafter. Ghazali highlighted the importance of introspection and self-discipline in the process of forming good morals (Fakhry, 2009) .

Ghazali also discussed the balance between the spiritual and material aspects of human life. According to him, ethics is not only concerned with man's relationship with others, but also with his relationship with God. He taught that to achieve this balance, one must harmonise his worldly life and spiritual life. Practices of worship such as prayer, zakat, fasting, and hajj are integrated into daily life as a form of ethical practice that focuses not only on the social dimension, but also on the religious dimension (Weiss, 2014) .

Finally, Ghazali taught the importance of "tawakal" or complete trust in Allah in all aspects of life. He believed that a high dependence on Allah and the belief that everything that happens is by His will helps people to remain calm and patient in the face of life's trials and challenges. Tawakal teaches the heart to sincerely accept God's decree and to do the best in every action while still leaving the final result to Him. Thus, Ghazali provides a comprehensive ethical foundation that includes the dimensions of intention, morals, life balance, and tawakal that are integrated in Islamic teachings.

### **Miskawayh's Ethical Thought**

Abu 'Ali Ahmad ibn Muhammad ibn Ya'qub Miskawayh, a Persian Muslim philosopher and historian who lived in the 10th and 11th centuries, made a major contribution to the field of ethics through his work "Tahdhib al-Akhlaq" ("Purification of Morals"). Miskawayh took inspiration from Greek philosophy, particularly from the works of Aristotle and Plato, and integrated these elements with Islamic teachings. One of the main concepts in ethics according to Miskawayh is the attainment of "happiness" (sa'adah). He views happiness as the highest goal of human life that can be achieved through the development of morals and virtues (McGinnis, 2010) .

Miskawayh strongly emphasised the importance of "noble character" (akhlak karimah) as the foundation of ethical behaviour. According to him, humans should endeavour to refine and purify their character so that it becomes a reflection of virtues such as justice, courage, wisdom and moderation. Miskawayh distinguishes between physical happiness and spiritual happiness, where the latter is considered higher and

more noble. By educating oneself and controlling excess passions and desires, one can achieve true spiritual happiness (Leaman, 2008).

Furthermore, Miskawayh also introduced the concept of "moral balance" which plays an important role in ethics. He believed that true virtue lies in the balance between opposite extremes. For example, courage is the balance between cowardice and stupidity, while justice is the balance between giving too little or too much right. Miskawayh also pointed to the importance of continuous education and practice in developing and maintaining this moral balance (Adams & Thompson, 2018).

Another important concept highlighted by Miskawayh is the relationship between ethics and society. He believed that individual ethics and personal virtue cannot be separated from social life. Humans are social beings living in society, and therefore, ethical actions must consider their impact on others. Miskawayh encouraged social co-operation and kindness towards fellow human beings, as he believed that social harmony and collective happiness are reflections of individual virtue. In his view, the establishment of a just and harmonious community depends on individuals possessing noble morals and behaving ethically (Griffel, 2009).

Through these thoughts, Miskawayh provides a profound ethical framework that emphasises not only on individual happiness and character, but also on moral balance and the importance of social interconnectedness in the development of ethical behaviour.

Following on from Miskawayh's ethical views, he also discusses the role of reason and science in the pursuit of virtue. According to him, reason is the gift that distinguishes humans from other creatures and is the primary tool for understanding and pursuing virtue. It leads to recognising right from wrong and cultivates knowledge as the basis for ethical action. In this context, the pursuit of knowledge and correct understanding is strongly emphasised by Miskawayh, because through knowledge one can understand his obligations and achieve true happiness (Burrell, 2001).

Furthermore, Miskawayh viewed self-control as an essential component of ethics. He recognised that humans have various drives and passions which, if not controlled, can hinder the attainment of virtue. Self-control involves striving to strike a balance between physical and spiritual needs, with the latter being given greater emphasis. For example, appetite should be regulated in such a way that it does not hinder intellectual and moral activity. Resistance to temptation and temperance in life are key principles taught by Miskawayh (Janssens, 2003).

In addition, moral education for the younger generation is also highly emphasised by Miskawayh. He argued that forming good character should start early. Education should teach virtues and how to integrate them in daily life. Through education, children can be trained to develop discipline, justice, and an empathetic attitude towards others, all of which are essential for a moral life (Netton., 1992)

Overall, Miskawayh's ethical thought emphasises that true happiness is obtained through the cultivation of virtue and noble character. His main concepts include the goal of happiness, moral balance, the relationship between the individual and society, the importance of reason and knowledge, self-control, and moral education. By combining the teachings of Greek philosophy with Islamic values, Miskawayh offers a comprehensive and harmonious view of ethical behaviour that focuses not only on individual purification, but also on the individual's contribution to social harmony and collective happiness.

### **Similarities and differences between Ghazali and Miskawayh's ethical thinking**

Al-Ghazali and Miskawayh's ethical thought are two significant contributions to the Islamic philosophical tradition, although there are notable similarities and differences between them. In general, both endeavour to relate Greek philosophy to Islamic teachings in order to build an ethical framework that is relevant to Muslims. However, their approaches, focus, and some of the basic concepts they espouse can be quite different from each other, reflecting the range and goals they seek to achieve (Rosenthal, 1970).

In terms of similarities, both Al-Ghazali and Miskawayh emphasise the importance of self-control and temperance as essential elements in achieving virtue and happiness. Both agree that worldly passions and urges must be managed wisely so as not to interfere with the attainment of moral virtue. They also agree on the importance of reason as a tool for understanding ethics and virtue in everyday life, although the role of reason is interpreted with different nuances by each philosopher (Burrell, 2001).

However, there is an important difference in their approach to the source of wisdom. Al-Ghazali tends to place more emphasis on the mystical and spiritual aspects of ethical life. In his view, mystical experience and direct contact with God are the keys to achieving the highest virtue and true understanding. In contrast, Miskawayh emphasises Aristotle's rational and balanced approach, where science and rational wisdom play a central role in understanding and applying ethics (Al-Miskawayh, 1992).

Furthermore, there is a difference in view of the relationship between the individual and society. Miskawayh focussed more on the importance of the individual's role in the community and social relations as the foundation for the development of virtue. He emphasised that individual happiness cannot be separated from collective well-being. Al-Ghazali, on the other hand, prioritised the individual's journey towards God, although he did not neglect the importance of contribution to society, but emphasised that the relationship with God defines one's ethical proximity (Hourani, 1985).

In the synthesis of ethical thought, Al-Ghazali and Miskawayh provide two complementary and authentic perspectives in the Islamic tradition. Both contributed greatly to the direction of ethical thought in the Islamic context, albeit from different

perspectives. Through their analyses of moral virtue, and the interaction between reason and spirituality, their work continues to inspire and inform the study of modern Islamic ethics and thought (Burrell, 2001).

Next, it is important to see how Al-Ghazali and Miskawayh's ethical thoughts are applied in the practical context of everyday life. Al-Ghazali, in his monumental work "Ihya' 'Ulum al-Din" (The Revival of the Religious Sciences), offers practical guidance covering various aspects from personal to social life, emphasising the importance of integrity and earnestness in worship as the path to virtue. Meanwhile, Miskawayh in his "Tahdhib al-Akhlaq" (Refinement of Character) focuses more on moral education and the nurturing process required to build responsible character, emphasising the need for a balance between the various drives within humans to achieve Virtue (Nasr, 2006).

Through a deeper study of their texts, it is clear that despite their different philosophical foundations, both Al-Ghazali and Miskawayh sought to address the ethical challenges of their times by offering insights that provide concrete guidance on how individuals can live well within the framework of Islamic ethics. These include wisdom in the face of moral challenges, the importance of sincere intention in action, as well as the need for discretion in passing moral judgement on others (Fakhry, 2009).

In order to emphasise the substantial differences between the two, it can be said that Al-Ghazali was more conservative and spiritual, seeing virtue as the result of a deep relationship with God and the earnest application of Islamic law. In this context, the attainment of wisdom and happiness is seen as a mystical path fraught with worldly sacrifices. In contrast, Miskawayh, as a philosopher influenced by Aristotle, sees virtue as the result of a rational balance between the various aspects of human life, both physical and spiritual, thus emphasising the importance of education and self-development through a systematic intellectual process (Osman, 2007).

In conclusion, the ethical thoughts of Al-Ghazali and Miskawayh offer two different yet complementary paths in the quest for virtue and happiness in life. Al-Ghazali offers a mystical path that demands an intense relationship with God and a deep adherence to religious teachings, while Miskawayh emphasises rational balance and the importance of social roles in shaping moral character. Despite their differences in approach, both made important contributions in shaping the ethical framework in the Islamic tradition, which remains relevant and inspiring to modern times.

## **Conclusion**

In the study of the ethical thought of Al-Ghazali and Miskawayh, we find two different yet complementary perspectives in the Islamic philosophical tradition. Al-Ghazali, with his Sufistic approach, emphasised the importance of a spiritual relationship with God as the path to achieving virtue and salvation. For him, ethics is about redirecting inner sins and improving the relationship with the Divine through worship

and introspection. This approach underlines the value of spirituality in everyday life and the role of deep religiosity to discipline the heart and mind in achieving true happiness.

In contrast, Miskawayh offers a more rational and philosophical perspective. Based on Aristotelian thought, he saw virtue as the result of a balance between the various aspects of human life, both physical and mental. Education, the formation of good character, and an active role in society were central to his view. Miskawayh emphasised the importance of using reason in regulating emotions and actions to achieve an ethical life. In conclusion, although Al-Ghazali and Miskawayh had different approaches, both spiritual and rational, both contributed significantly to the formation of a diverse and nuanced ethical framework in Islamic philosophy.

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