BOOK REVIEW


Abū ‘Ali Aḥmad ibn Muḥammad Miskawayh’s monumental work entitled ‘TAHDHĪB AL-AKHĪAQ’ is a well-known text on Ethics, and its editions were brought out several times in Egypt and also in India in pre-partition days. Although al-Shaykh al-Raʾis Ibn Sina, his younger contemporary, never acknowledged his erudition and scholarship in the domain of philosophy, Miskawayh’s ‘TAHDHĪB AL-AKHĪAQ’ ever since its composition earned glorious tributes for the author from the scholars of the world. His magnus opus, ‘TAJĪRĪB AL-UMĀM’, ‘the Experiences of Nations’ is an invaluable source on the period of the Buwayhid. Prof. Margoliouth, editor of the work, opines in his preface to its English edition: “Although this chronicle is marked by some gross examples of carelessness, it is on the whole one of the most instructive in the Arabic language. For a considerable portion of it the author writes about persons whom he knew intimately, and institutions with which he was himself familiar”.

For a long time scholars felt the need of a critical edition of this valuable ethical treatise. Professor Constantine K. Zurayk is to be congratulated for his excellent critical edition of this very important text and also for the English translation. The students of Philosophy should also feel indebted to the American University of Beirut for including both of these works in its Centennial Publications.

The editor has thrown considerable light on the title of the book, and has, probably rightly, concluded that the proper title is probably كَتَابُ الطَّهَارَةِ فِي تَطْهِيرِ الْأَخْلَاقِ as has been traced in the various manuscripts at his disposal. That the actual name given by the author to his book is كتاب الطهارة is also understood from the المَسْكِينَةِ of the Muḥaqqiq Muḥammad ibn Ḥasan Naṣir al-Dīn al-Ṭūsī. In his introduction Muḥaqqiq Ṭūsī says, “In the court of Naṣir al-Dīn ‘Abd al-Rahīm b. Abī Maṣūr the Kitāb al-Tāharaṭ of Abū ‘Ali Aḥmad b. Muḥammad b. Yaqūb b. Miskawayh was mentioned, and that the author compiled it in ‘the refinement of character’ (تَطْهِيرِ الْأَخْلَاقِ)’. Ṭūsī also composed four Arabic couplets in praise of the book and its author. These verses including the following one have been quoted by the editor (pages and and):

وَوْسَعَ بِنْامِ الطَّهَارَةِ، قَاصِيًا بِهِ حَقَّ مَعَانِي وَلَا يَكُونُ مَا أَيَّنَا
‘And he (the author) has given it the name of ‘Purification’ by which he has fully explained its meaning without speaking a lie’.

Muḥaqqiq Ṭūsī’s statement conforms to the title found in two different places in the Aya Sofia manuscript (No. 1967) of Istanbul which was transcribed in 879/1474 كَتَابُ الطَّهَارَةِ فِي تَطْهِيرِ الْأَخْلَاقِ and كَتَابُ الطَّهَارَةِ لَا يَسْكَوِيْهُ فِي تَطْهِيرِ الْأَخْلَاقِ لَا يَسْكَوِيْهُ لَا يَسْكَوِيْهُ لَا يَسْكَوِيْهُ لَا يَسْكَوِيْهُ لَا يَسْكَوِيْهُ Lā yasḵūḵe, respectively—and also the title given at the end of the text (p. 222), That is, the title of the book is undoubtedly في تَطْهِيرِ الْأَخْلَاقِ and the expression that follows it (i.e. كَتَابُ الطَّهَارَةِ).
as well as the subject-matter which has been dealt with in the book. The work was afterwards popularly known as after its subject-matter. That the author himself would not use this title for his book is well-understood by the fact that of the Jacobite Yahya b. ‘Adi (d. 364) was well-known among the learned of the age, and because Miskawayh had already incorporated most of its contents into his own work.

The internal evidence to the title, “The Book on Purification” (side the Text p. 91/ the translation p. 82), as mentioned by the editor in his Introduction (text p. 80) may perhaps also mean only to refer to “the cleansing and purification (of the soul) from physical things and bodily desires”—the main object to be achieved through this science (side the text:)

All this is why I have also called this work “The Book on Purification” (as the Greek pronunciation in referring to)

The editor has used as many as six manuscripts, four preserved in Istanbul (Fatih 3511, Köprüli 767, Aya Sofia 1957, Fazil Ahmed 261 in Köprüli); one in Cairo (Dar al-Kutub al-Misriyyah 434), and one in the British Museum, London, 721 (or. 1561). Besides correcting the text, and giving punctuations, he has mentioned all omissions, additions and alterations in the critical apparatus, and has maintained uniformity in writing vowel and consonant letters. He has also supplied very useful sub-headings which explain the contents and help the readers immensely in comprehending the subject of the discourse at a glance.

The editor has traced in his notes some of the sources of the book. Miskawayh himself refers to the Greek works and philosophers—Plato, Aristotle, Hippocrates, Galen and Bryson. It will be worthwhile to mention here that there flourished a number of thinkers in Greece bearing the same name in different times, such as Galen, and Hippocrates. The editor has, perhaps conforming to Dr. R. Walzer’s view, changed (p. 80.2) into a name quite familiar to the Muslim scholars, disregarding the fact that Miskawayh is well acquainted with the thoughts of Socrates and has correctly referred to him in this text p. 156. It is also worth mentioning that Miskawayh is very near to the Greek pronunciation in referring to Aristotle (pp. 76, 82, 92, 96, 97, 98, 119, 156, 169, 170) and Socrates (pp. 156, 158). The question naturally arises why he should mention Socrates in this particular place (p. 80). Again, it is very unusual with Muslim thinkers to mention Socrates as their usual expression of this name being. With due respect to my revered teacher, Dr. R. Walzer (Greek into Arabic, p. 224, n. 3), and the editor, I beg to differ, and would not like to change (as contained in all manuscripts) into on p. 80, line 2. It is, however, clear that in the context does not refer to the first Hippocrates who preceded Socrates and may refer to.
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whose name is mentioned along with جالينوس in Arabic works on the history of Philosophy (see the manuscript of Muntakhab Šišān al-Ḥikmah by Abū Sulaimān al-Manṭiqī, Köprülü No. 902, Fol. 15 (14.b). In fact, most of the works referred to by our early authors (including early Muslim thinkers) have not reached us. For example, Aristotle's كتاب فضائل النفس (p. 86, 91) or كتاب الأخلاق (p. 97). Galen's كتاب تعرق البرم لعبوب نفسه (p. 189), الكتاب التشريع و كتاب بنام الأعضاء (p. 121), كتاب تزعم الأخلاق (p. 232), and كتاب الأخلاق (c.f. Ibn 'Uṣainī: Tahqūqī al-Aṭība, Cairo, 1300/1900, I, p. 101) and a host of others are not available to us. It is only by guess that on the basis of some sort of similarity in ideas and thoughts the scholars of this age try to build a systematic continuous history of the development of human thought.

In spite of the fact that the works of Abū 'Alī Miskawayh were usually in the hands of the people (c.f. Abū Sulaimān al-Manṭiqī, Muntakhab, op. cit., fol. 116: وله تصانيف كثيرة even their names are not correctly preserved, nor have all of them so far been traced. For instance, he often refers to كتاب ترتيب السعادات (pp. 15, 49, 91, 124) which is now identified by some scholars with كتاب السعادة ('Abd al-'Azīz 'Izzat: Ibn Miskawayh, Cairo, p. 135). Similarly, we are not sure about his الروض الأكبر (mentioned by al-Qīṭī, Tāriḵ al-Ḥukamā', p. 217) which is sometimes identified with Tahqīqī al-‘Abbālāq (c.f. A. ‘Azīz, Ibn Miskawayh, op. cit., pp. 134, 139). Again, nothing can be said with certainty of his الرسالة المحددة (Text, p. 39) which is perhaps rightly considered by the editor as identical with ترتيب السعادات (p. 227, last line). It is, however, very curious that Miskawayh should refer to his own work or works under different headings.

It will perhaps not be out of place to mention here that Miskawayh never mentions al-foliosī (c. 810-950 A.D.) as al-Mu'allim al-Thāni, nor does he anywhere refer to al-Fārābī's Taḥfīs al-Sa‘īdah or Ara‘ū Aḥī al-Madīnah al-Fāsilah. Among the Muslim thinkers who preceded him he mentions Abū Yūṣuf Ya‘qūb ibn Iṣḥāq al-Kindī (ca. 260/873) alone. Again, unlike his predecessors (such as al-Kindī and al-Fārābī) he sometimes quotes passages from the works of his contemporary (e.g. Arab. Text, p. 80/Trans. p. 81): These are the words of this philosopher [Aristotle], which I have quoted exactly. They come from the translation of Abū Uṯmān al-Dimashqī, (4th c./10th c.) as he quotes verses from the Qur’ān, and Ḥadīth. It is, therefore, presumed that he is faithful as well as careful in referring to Greek or Muslim sources with which he was admittedly better acquainted than we are today. It is, however, true that, as true followers of the Qur’ān, Muslim writers on Philosophy, and Miskawayh is no exception, were more concerned with the ideas “they wished to communicate than with listing their sources meticulously by naming the authors of late antiquity on whom they depended.”

As against the argument sometimes advanced in favour of his Shi‘ism (cf. ‘Abd al-‘Azīz ‘Izzat: Ibn Miskawayh, p. 83; Al-ʿAmili, Ayyūn al-Shī‘ah, Vol. X, p. 144; Arab. (Text Note 9 on 108, p. 232; Eng. Trans. No. 5 on 97, p. 203), it is to be noted that Miskawayh also refers to the First Caliph Abū Bakr al-Ṣiddīq (vide Trans. p. 162: Abū Bakr al-Ṣiddīq (may God be pleased with him!) was right when he said in one of his sermons: “Kings are the most wretched people in both this world and the next,” Arabic Text, p. 181). Again, while discussing the four grades of the wise and the learned people he
never mentions the infallible imāms. He simply enumerates, (1) the First station of the men of certitude (al-Muṣīn), (2) the second station of the men of good deeds (al-Muṣīn), (3) the third station of the righteous (al-Muṣīn), and (4) the fourth station of the victors (al-Fāʾizin) (vide Arabic text p. 123/trans. 109).

The editor has based his translation of the Arabic text on his own edition.

Professor Zurayk is to be congratulated for his excellent rendering and particularly for his ‘faithfulness to the original Arabic and concern for the correctness and clarity of the English style’. Besides a preface of 20 pages, notes and index, the translator has also added a very useful glossary of Arabic words used in philosophical and ethical works.

The beautiful get-up, excellent printing, and the graceful appearance of both the volumes are remarkable and, indeed, very attractive.

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