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Ethics as Likeness to God in Miskawayh

An Overlooked Tradition

Hans Daiber

Abstract

We have a fairly good knowledge of Miskawayh’s ethics and his sources. Still puzzling is his combination of Platonic, Aristotelian and Neoplatonic concepts. In single cases Miskawayh’s use of Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics* betrays Neoplatonizing interpretaments, perhaps due to Hellenistic commentaries. Why and how these interpretaments are introduced in Miskawayh’s ethics, is still unclear. The paper will focus on an overlooked tradition about the soul, which evolved to be the common basis for ethics from al-Kindī to Miskawayh. This tradition can be traced back to critical discussions about the soul by Alexandrian philosophers since the 3rd century. Porphyry’s pupil Iamblichus (d. 330 AD) seems to have played a remarkable role, also in the ethics of Miskawayh, as a comparison with Iamblichus’ commentary on the Pseudo-Pythagorean *Golden Verses* shows. This commentary is lost in the Greek original, but is available in an Arabic translation from the early 9th century.

We have a fairly clear idea of the diversity of Miskawayh’s (ca. 320/932 - 421/1030) sources in his *Tabgīb al-ablāq*.¹ His main work on ethics.² At first sight and as shown recently by scholars, Miskawayh’s concept is based mainly on a combination of Aristotelian and Platonic traditions. In addition, Neoplatonic commentaries are integrated, as well as central concepts of Fārābī’s *Perfect State*, including Fārābī’s epistemological idea of divine revelation to the prophet-ruler.³

What is Miskawayh’s motif to combine divergent sources and traditions in his *Tabgīb al-ablāq*? The answer requires a comparison with Fārābī’s *Perfect State*. Contrary to Miskawayh, Fārābī did not concentrate on ethics. His *Perfect State* is more interested in citizenship and rulership and their epistemological background.

Miskawayh’s ethics appears to be a supplement to Fārābī’s political philosophy and concentrates on the ethics of the individual. He quotes Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics* and adds comments taken from Greek-Hellenistic texts, partly ascribed to Porphyry (“and others”).⁴ Most important is a passage in Treatise III of Miskawayh’s *Tabgīb*, rendering Miskawayh’s opinion on the “spiritual virtue” leading to perfect happiness. It is followed by an excerpt on the “Virtues of the Soul” attributed to “the philosopher”.⁵

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³ See below, n. 49 and 50.
⁵ On this see below, n. 18.

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Both sections are preceded by a doxographical report about two groups of philosophers:

a) Pythagoras, Socrates, Plato and the like, who considered the virtues and happiness as belonging to the soul alone.

b) The Stoics and a group of the Naturalists, according to whom happiness of the soul alone is incomplete. Miskawayh took his doxographical information from a small text on the virtues of the soul, the Maqāla fi ʾitbāt faḍāʾil al-naʾfs, attributed to Plato. It criticizes those who prefer asceticism to wealth.

Miskawayh himself is convinced, that happiness only belongs to the soul. According to him, “bodily things” (al-ašyāʾ al-ǧusmāniyya) have a double function: who is still in the lower rank of the “bodily things” is “looking at” (yuṭāliʿ) the noble things, by “seeking for” (bāḥiṯan) them, “desiring” (muštāqan) them, “being driven to them” (muṭṭābīṭan bihā) and “pleased with” (muṯṭābīṭan bihā) them. And who in the rank of the “spiritual things” (al-ašyāʾ al-rūḥānīyya) remains simultaneously “looking at” the “lower things” (al-ašyāʾ al-daniyya), “by learning from them” (muʿtabiran bihā), “by reflecting on the signs of divine power and the evidences of perfect wisdom” (muqṭadiyan bihā), “by regulating” (nāẓiman) them, “by pouring out” (mufīḍan) goods (ḫayrāt) on them and “by leading them gradually to what is the best in accordance with their readiness (qubūl) and capacity (istiṭāʿa)”.

This statement is of crucial importance for a correct understanding of Miskawayh’s ethics. The starting point is the imperfection of man: “He has an abundant share of wisdom, and, by virtue of his spirituality, he stays among the higher beings (al-malaʾ al-ʿaʿla) from whom he gets the subtleties of wisdom and is illuminated (yastanīru) by the divine light (al-nūr al-ilāhī). And he seeks to add to his virtues in the measure of the attention (ʿināya) he gives to them and of the lack of hindrances from them”.

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6 Miskawayh, Tahḏīb, p. 80.1-7 and 13-17 Zurayk/translation pp. 72f. The passage reappears in an anonymous collection of philosophical excerpts from the 11th century, ms. Oxford, Marsh 539, see E. Wakelnig, A Philosophy Reader from the Circle of Miskawayh, Cambridge U.P., Cambridge 2014, p. 466 (Wakelnig does not mention Miskawayh’s source, which we discuss below, n. 8).


9 Miskawayh, Tahḏīb, p. 83.2f Zurayk/transl. pp. 75f. – Here and elsewhere we do not always follow the translation of Zurayk.


11 Miskawayh, Tahḏīb, p. 84.1-5 Zurayk/translation p. 76.

12 Miskawayh, Tahḏīb, p. 85.3-6 Zurayk/translation pp. 76f.
The “emanation (fāyd) of the light of the First One (al-auwād)” makes man free from pains and sorrows, of which someone in the first rank is not free. 13 Who belongs to the higher rank and has attained “the final and extreme happiness” (āḥir al-sāʾādāt wa-aqṣāhā) is only in need of the necessary things of his body “to which he is attached and from which he cannot be set free until his Creator so wills”. 14

Here, the text adds a most important statement, which is equally crucial for a better understanding of Miskawayh’s ethics: “(The person in the higher rank) longs to associate with his kindred and to meet the good spirits (al-arwāḥ al-ṭayyiḥa) and the angels who are approximate to him (al-malāʾika al-muqarrabūn)”. 15

Man’s “association with his kindred” (ṣubbat aškālihi) includes, as Miskawayh says elsewhere, 16 the task to teach those “who are akin or near to him and wish to learn from him (aḥabba l-iqtibās)”. This is an allusion to the Farabian-Aristotelian concept of man as political animal, ζῶον πολιτικόν, who requires his fellow human beings – also in the process of getting knowledge. 17

Miskawayh’s explanations receive a philosophical fundament in the following chapter, which is said to be an excerpt from a work entitled The Virtues of the Soul, attributed to “the philosopher” 18 and translated by Abū ʿUṯmān al-Dimašqī. This work cannot be identified.

According to this treatise, the lower rank of virtues is related to body and soul. Man’s conduct cannot be more than “moderation” (iʿtidād) 19 to an extent “rather nearer to what ought to be than to what ought not to be” (ilā mā yanbaġī aqrabu minhū ilā mā lā yanbaġī). 20 In the second rank “man directs his will (irāda) and efforts (muḥāwalāt) to the best improvement (salāḥ) of his soul and body”, with decreasing affection by worldly things and only insofar they are necessary. 21 There

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13 Miskawayh, Tahḏīb, p. 85.6-9 Zurayk/translation p. 77.
15 Miskawayh, Tahḏīb, p. 85.18-20 Zurayk/translation p. 77.
18 C.K. Zurayk in his edition and translation identified the “philosopher” (al-ḥakīm) with Aristotle and GEndress in Philosophy in the Islamic World I (above, n. 2), p. 337 speaks of Aristotle as “author of a Pseudo-Platonic-Peripatetic treatise on the ‘virtues of the soul’. In the anonymous collection of philosophical excerpts from the 11th century, ms. Oxford, Marsh 539, the first sentence of the Faddāʾil al-nafs appears, followed by a sentence from the Nicomachean Ethics, attributed to Plato: see Wakelniq, A Philosophy Reader from the Circle of Miskawayh (above, n. 6), p. 32. Closer to the truth is Shlomo Pines’ classification of the text as a Neoplatonic treatise: see S. Pines, “Un texte inconnu d’Aristote en version arabe”, in Id., Studies in Arabic Versions of Greek Texts and in Medieval Science, The Magnes Press - Brill, Jerusalem-Leiden 1986 (= The Collected Works of Shlomo Pines II), pp. 157-95 and Addenda et corrigenda, pp. 196-200, esp. 172-5 and 184-6 (referring to Porphyry, Plotinus, Iamblichus); pp. 178f. and 196-200 (Alexander of Aphrodisias, On Providence). I assume that the text on The Virtues of the Soul is part of the Neoplatonizing commentary on Aristotle’s Nicomachean Ethics, which has been tentatively ascribed by R.Walzer to Porphyry. See R. Walzer, “Porphyry and the Arabic Tradition”, in Porphyry, Fondation Hardt, Vandœuvres-Genève 1965 (Entretiens sur l’Antiquité Classique 12), pp. 275-99, esp. pp. 294-6. The Virtues of the Soul might have been written by Porphyry himself, as it shares with Porphyry the concept of philosophy as a way to God, contrary to the revolutionist concept of Porphyry’s student Iamblichus (see below, n. 77). In favour of this identification is the fact that the translator mentioned by Miskawayh, Abū ʿUṯmān al-Dimašqī, also translated Porphyry’s Isagoge (see Walzer, “Porphyry”, p. 278).
19 Miskawayh, Tahḏīb, p. 86.13, Zurayk/translation p. 78.
20 Miskawayh, Tahḏīb, p. 86.15f., Zurayk/translation p. 78.
21 Miskawayh, Tahḏīb, p. 86.19f., Zurayk/translation p. 78.
are many grades of virtues, as people differ 1) in their nature (ṭabāʾiʿ), 2) habits (ʿādāt), 3) degrees of science (ʿilm), knowledge (maʿrifah) and understanding (fahmah), 4) in their ambitions (humam) and 5) in their desires (šawq) and efforts (muʿānāt), finally possibly also in their fortunes (gudūd).

The highest degree is “the purely divine virtue” (al-faḍīla al-ilāhiyya al-maḥḍa), a rank “which is not accompanied by any longing” for future or past, remote or near things, by fear or desire. The “uppermost ranks of virtues” are determined by the “intellectual part” (al-ǧuzʿal-ʿaqlī) of man and enable man “to follow the example of the First Cause and to imitate Him and His activities” (tašabbuhū bi-l-ʿilla al-ūlā wa-qtidāʾuhū bihā wa-bi-afʿālihā).

Herewith man’s activities become “divine” (ilāhiyya) and “absolute good” (al-ḫayr al-maḥḍ) and as such “proceed from his inner and true self (lubābuhū wa-ḏātuhū l-ḥaqīqiyya), which is his divine reason (ʿaqluhū l-ilāhī) and his real essence (ḏātuhū bi-l-ḥaqīqa)”. In the final passage the author of the treatise on The Virtues of the Soul explains his concept of the resemblance of man’s actions to the actions of the “First Principle” (al-mabdaʾ al-awwal), the Creator in the final stage: Man’s and God’s actions are performed only “for this activity itself” (lā yaʿfalā muʿašrālā ṣafā wa-naqiya niṣṣib) and for “the divine intellect itself” (wa-ḏātuhū l-ḫayr l-maḥḍ). Herewith, man’s activity becomes the “absolute good and absolute wisdom” (bayr mahd wa-bikma mahdā). Accordingly, God’s activity is only “for the sake of His Own Self” (min aǧli ḏātihi) and God’s care of other things happens only as “a secondary purpose” (al-qasd al-ṯānī).

Equally, man’s actions for others are for “a secondary purpose”. The primary purpose is his own self (min aǧli ḏātihi) and the activity itself (min aǧli l-iʿli naisihi), i.e. “the virtue and the good themselves (li-nafsi l-faḍīlat wa-li-nafsi l-ḥayr)”. Activity as virtue is not for the sake of benefit, of preventing harm, of seeking authority or honour. The author of The Virtues of the Soul concludes: “This is the object of philosophy and the culmination of happiness” (fa-hāḏā huwa ġaraḍ al-falsafa wa-muntahā al-saʿāda).

It is “divine knowledge” (maʿrifah ilāhiyya) and “divine desire” (šawq ilāhi), which reach man, when he is free and purified (ṣafā, naqiya) from the “physical” (al-amr al-ṭabīʿī) and when in himself, in “his very essence” (naṣf ḏāṭib) – that is his “reason” (al-ʿaql) – “the divine things” (al-ʿulūm al-ilābiyya) take place in a manner “which is nobler, finer, more pronounced, more manifest to (reason) and more evident than (that of) the first propositions (al-qaḍāyā al-uwal) which are called the primary intellectual sciences (al-ʿulūm al-awāʾil al-ʿaqliyya)”. The passages quoted from The Virtues of the Soul do not speak of divine revelations to man and herewith differ from Iamblichus. They look like echoes and slight specifications of Plotinus’ discussions about virtue (Ennead I 2), happiness (Ennead I 5 and 7) and the soul (Ennead IV 8).
According to Plotinus, who follows here Plato, likeness to God is attained by being just and living in wisdom (Ennead I 2[19], 1). Man’s soul, with its civic virtues, attains likeness to God, through increasing purification from the passions of the body (Ennead I 2[19], 2) and devotion to the absolute Good, the intellectual principle, its knowledge and its wisdom (Ennead I 2[19], 4, 6 and 7). The virtue in the Supreme is its act and its essence, the virtue in man is a civic virtue and if man abandons his human life, he will get the life of the Gods (Ennead I 2[19], 6). Man’s soul, the individual soul, has appetite for the divine intellect, his source to which he is ascending (Ennead IV 8[6], 4, 5; VI 9[9], 11). It is neither a pneuma nor a body (Ennead IV 7[2], 4).

The mentioned ambivalence of Plotinus with regard to the soul results from Plotinus’ criticism of the Stoic concept of pneuma, of κρατικὸς δυνάμων, which became known to the Arabs since the 9th century through the adaptation of the Enneads in the Pseudo-Aristotelian Theology. It paved the way to the classification of the soul as something spiritual, as we find in Miskawayh. It is not detectable in the treatise The Virtues of the Soul, as quoted by Miskawayh: the quotation only speaks of “two beastly souls” which are the source of “imagination” (taḥayyul) and of the “sensible soul” (nafsūḥū al-hißiyya) of man. Their “vicissitudes” (dawāʾi) will disappear, when man’s activities – his “real essence” – become “divine” and his “divine reason”.

This is a transformation of the Platonic doctrine of the soul and its three parts ἐπιθυμητικόν, θυμοειδές and λογιστικόν into the Neoplatonic concept of the soul returning to its divine origin. However, the consequent classification of the soul as something spiritual does not exist – at least in Miskawayh’s excerpt from the treatise The Virtues of the Soul.

A forerunner of such a classification of the soul as something spiritual, appears to be Plotinus’ student Porphyry, who has introduced the doctrine of the pneuma in Neoplatonism. In his treatise De Regressu animae he expresses his conviction that only the “spiritual soul” (anima
spiritualis) can be purified and he introduced for the first time the concept of theurgy as a tool for the purification of this soul by using rituals. Porphyry has not yet fully developed this concept. This remained reserved to his student Iamblichus, who in his work De Mysteriis considered theurgy as a tool for the purification of the lower soul, of its leading up to the intelligible and to the divine powers. Here, he presupposes an “affinity” (ἐπιτηδειότης) between the beings and their divine cause.

This affinity between man and God is the prerequisite for the establishment of a relationship with the gods by exercising virtues, which Iamblichus called ‘theurgic virtues’. Ammonius and the Alexandrians instead speak of ὁμοίωσις θεῷ, “likeness to God”, and differ herewith from Plotinus, who considered the human virtues solely as a way to the perfection of man’s ethical-political life, but they do not make man godlike. Ammonius described philosophy as ‘likeness to God, as far as it is possible for man’.

The sketched positions and the culmination among Alexandrian philosophers of the 5th and 6th century AD turn out to be the starting point for the development of ethics in Islamic philosophy. Kindī (between 247/861 and 259/873) followed the Neoplatonic tradition of Plotinus – and also of Iamblichus – in his treatise On the Method of How to Dispel Sorrow. This is excerpted by Miskawayh and recommends man to dedicate himself to the intelligible world, to the absolute good and to turn away from the transitory world. Thus he can release the rational soul from the worldly pleasures. A philosophical foundation – possibly following the Neoplatonic tradition of the Vita Pythagorica as shaped by Porphyry and his student Iamblichus – has been developed by Kindī in his Discourse on the Soul. It explains, that the soul consists of three parts – as we found them in Miskawayh’s excerpt from the treatise on The Virtues of the Soul. It is eager to release itself from the body through ethical virtues and to return to its divine origin.
the realm of the intelligible world. Kindī does not offer a fully developed ethical doctrine, which is more than the “ascetic and intellectualist ethics”, that appears in Kindī’s *Treatise on the Sayings of Socrates.*

This remains reserved for two later philosophers, for Fārābī (d. 339/950 or 951) and for Miskawayh. Both philosophers have continued the Neoplatonic tradition, and insofar they share the common concept of happiness, which can be reached by the release of man’s soul from matter, by man’s virtuous acting and by his increasing knowledge. According to Miskawayh, this knowledge is most perfect in the “perfect man” (*insān kāmil*), who is either a “perfect philosopher” (*ḥakīm tāmm*) because of his “inspirations” (*al-ilhāmāt*) in the philosophical attempts made by him and through heavenly support in his “intellectual conceptions” (*al-ṭaṣawwurāt al-ʿaqliyya*), or he is a prophet supported (by God), who obtained divine “revelation” (*al-waḥy*) in varying grades, which exist in comparision with God. He will then become an intermediary between “the higher world” (*al-malaʾ al-aʿlā*) and “the lower world” (*al-malaʾ al-asfal*).

This formulation is a clear echo of a specification introduced by Fārābī, who had added the concept of prophecy as prerequisite of the philosopher. According to Fārābī, the ruler in the perfect state is a philosopher and a prophet, who – inspired by God and by assimilation to God, by emulating God’s rule – reigns on the city. In addition, Miskawayh and Fārābī mirror an accentuation in Iamblichus, who combined philosophy with theurgic revelation and herewith had modified his teacher Porphyry.

The Neoplatonic tradition, common in Fārābī and Miskawayh, appears to be mixed in Fārābī mainly with Platonic and Aristotelian ideas. Fārābī is concentrating on epistemology and the concept of knowledge, of learning and acquiring knowledge. We have only a small treatise on virtues attributed to Fārābī and based on Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*, with some Platonic elements. Miskawayh, however, is in fact more focussed on Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*, which he represents combined with Hellenistic, Neoplatonic interpretaments.

These Neoplatonic interpretaments gave Miskawayh’s ethics a specific shape. His *Tabḏīb al-ablaq* is not a book on political thought, containing rules for rulers and the ruled, like Fārābī’s

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51. See below, n. 77.
55. Cf. Endress, “Ancient Ethical Traditions for Islamic Society” (above, n. 2), pp. 322-6, and 337-44.
Mabadi’ arāʾ abl al-Madīna al-fādila. On the contrary, it is a book on virtues of the individual, who – as formulated by Miskawayh in a passage attributed to Aristotle – is provided with “wisdom” (al-ḥikma) and “intellect” (al-ʿaql) and should “aim with all his capacities (bi-ġamiʿ quwāhu) to live a divine life (ḥayāt ilāhiyya)”.56 This aim requires, as Miskawayh says in the footsteps of Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics,57 a “moderate amount of external goods” (al-qaṣd min al-ḥayrāt al-ḥārīqiyya).58

Miskawayh’s book Tahdīb al-ahlāq is not primarily addressed to the citizen, to rulers and the ruled. It is a guidebook on ethics for the individual, for training his character and teaching him the right behaviour towards his fellow human beings. Love, friendship and justice are for the benefit of the individual and are only means for attaining happiness and knowledge. Human virtues, however, are imperfect: Who has knowledge of real happiness and the real good, can endeavor (ġābd) to gain God’s favor (yataqarrabu ilaybi) and can try to obtain (yatlab) God’s pleasure (mardāt) as far as he is able (bi-qadr ṭaqatihi), so that “he resembles (yataqayyala) (God’s) acts to the extent of his capacity (istiṭṭāʾa)”62.

Miskawayh has modified Aristotle’s allusions to the “most divine element” in man,63 who must “strain every nerve to live in accordance with the best thing” in him,64 with a Neoplatonic tint. He says: “The love of wisdom, the devotion to the intellectual conception (al-tasawwur al-ʿaqli) and the use of divine notions (al-ārāʾ ilāhiyya) are characteristic of the divine part in man”.65 Therefore, he who has acquired virtues, has concern for divine virtues, and herewith he can “join the good spirits (al-arwāḥ al-ṭayyiba) and mingle (iḥtalata) with the angels which are close (to God) (al-malāʾika al-muqarrabūn)”.66 Here, Miskawayh adds, in a statement attributed to Aristotle, some information about the hierarchy existing between God, angels and those, “who seek to be like God” (al-mutaʾallihīn).67

This hierarchy reappears in a similar way and partly with identical terminology in a commentary on the Pseudo-Platonic Golden Verses, written by the Neoplatonist Iamblichus, which we have already mentioned earlier. Iamblichus distinguishes between God, “the angels who are close (to the Gods)” (al-malāʾika al-muqarrabūn)68 and the “godlike” (al-ilāhiyyūn), who are “souls,

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59 Cf. Miskawayh, Tahdīb, 5th discourse.
60 Cf. Miskawayh, Tahdīb, 4th discourse.
62 Miskawayh, Tahdīb, Zurayk p. 170, 4-7/translation p. 151.
65 Miskawayh, Tahdīb, Zurayk p. 168.18f./translation p. 150.
66 Miskawayh, Tahdīb, Zurayk p. 169.8f./translation p. 151.
68 The term “close (to God)” (al-muqarrabūn) corresponds to Greek συνεχής in Iamblichus’ De Mysteriis 16,20-2-8 on which cf. Nasemann, Theriurgie und Philosophie (above, n. 36), pp. 137f. It describes the closeness of the δαίμονες to God.
which assumed a human shape (ta’annasat)”, abandoned worldly pleasures and are looking for their “good” (masāliḥ). Iamblichus recommends a moderate acquisition of possessions, insofar as it is necessary and useful for man,70 who is “on the path of virtue” (sabil al-fadila) by “reflecting” (bi-šuġl al-fikr) on the paths leading to virtues, away from the “body” (al-badan). Everyone is obliged to tackle difficult situations and to endure trials as possibilities to learn, to find the right way and to avoid sensual “delights” (laḏḏāt), in accordance with his capacity.71 Perfect human virtues of man, whose soul participates in the divine being,72 pave the way to the divine virtue.73 The reasonable part of the soul urges the disobedient part to keep to the virtues and to become habituated to them. This is a process of “learning” (dars) leading to “education” (taharrūg), “experience” (tadarrub, ḥibra) and “patience” (ṣabr), also in dealing with others.74 Iamblichus understood philosophy as “conformity with the divine” (η πρὸς τὸν θεῖον ὁμολογία) and “knowledge of the gods” as perfect virtue, wisdom and happiness, making man “similar to gods”.75

Iamblichus’ concept of a similarity between man and God and of the existence of the divine soul in man is ultimately Platonic. It formulates the preconditions for man’s increasing knowledge of the divine and is a Platonic modification of the ancient Greek principle τὸ ὅμοιον τῷ ὁμοίῳ φίλον, like attracts like.76 This concept led Iamblichus – in contrast to his former teacher Porphyry and to his concept of philosophical contemplation as the only path to the gods – to the assumption of theurgic virtues as a way to receive theurgic revelations.77 The Alexandrians and Ammonius instead spoke of assimilation to God through virtues leading to the knowledge of God. Herewith, they deviate from Plotinus and follow the Neoplatonic tradition of Iamblichus. We found an echo in Kindī and above all in the ethics of Miskawayh. With some probability, Miskawayh knew the Golden Verses and the commentary by Iamblichus. This can explain that an anonymous Arabic philosophy reader from the circle of Miskawayh, compiled in the 11th century, contains excerpts from the Golden Verses (excluding Iamblichus’ commentary).78

It is interesting that the mentioned philosophical reader contains an extensive quotation from the encyclopaedia of the so-called “Sincere Brethren” (Rasāʾil Iḥwān al-Ṣafā). This encyclopaedia, written during the lifetime of Miskawayh, deserves our interest, as it shares with Miskawayh the Neoplatonic post-Plotinian and Iamblichian doctrine of the ascent and return of the soul to its...

72 Cf. Daiber, Neuplatonische Pythagorica, pp. 20f.
75 Cf. Daiber, Neuplatonische Pythagorica, pp. 30f.
divine origin through increasing knowledge, purification of the soul and improvement of the character. This requires friendship for mutual assistance. The parallels and differences between Miskawayh and the Rasāʾil Iḥwān aṣ-Ṣafāʾ deserve further investigation.

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