

Miskawayh's Psychology*

Peter Adamson



The influence of Greek Neoplatonism and Platonist interpretations of Aristotle on Arabic thought is especially pronounced in the area of psychology, by which I mean the ontology of soul, especially the human soul, and its relationship to the objects of its cognition. Hardly any philosophers writing in Arabic doubted, for instance, that the soul is immaterial and survives the death of the body (this in contrast to, and in spite of, atomistic accounts of the soul within the *kalām* tradition). A good example of the enthusiastic reception of Neoplatonist psychology can be found in the works of Abū 'Alī Aḥmad b. Muḥammad Miskawayh (d. AH 421/AD 1030), a polymath who is known for his work as both a historian and a philosopher.¹ Miskawayh was among the most overtly Neoplatonist figures of his time, comparable, for instance, to Ismā'īlī thinkers and al-'Āmirī. Like these authors, he makes extensive use of Neoplatonist materials produced in the circle of al-Kindī. The thought of Plotinus, as transmitted in the *Theology of Aristotle*, is an obvious touchstone for Miskawayh. And as we shall see below, he quotes al-Kindī himself. In this respect his works are very different from those of, for instance, the Baghdad school of Abū Bishr Mattā, al-Fārābī, and Yahyā b. 'Adī. These figures focus chiefly on expounding Aristotle, ignore al-Kindī (except in one instance to attack him),² and are much more influenced by the Aristotelian commentators than by Plotinus or Proclus. Still, it is clear that Miskawayh was aware of and influenced by the Baghdad school. In his *Fawz al-asghar* [*The Shorter Healing*, hereafter *Fawz*] Miskawayh singles out for special praise Ibn Suwār, a student of Ibn 'Adī's.³ And his best-known philosophical work, *Tahdhīb al-akhlāq* [*The Refinement of Character*, hereafter *Tahdhīb*], is deeply influenced by Aristotle's *Ethics*, though it adopts a Platonizing interpretation of Aristotle.⁴

Here, though, I shall be discussing certain philosophically interesting aspects of Miskawayh's psychology, aspects which show that he was aligned with the intellectual tra-

* I am very grateful to the Leverhulme Trust for its support during the period in which this paper was written. I am also grateful to Peter Pormann and Elvira Wakelnig for helpful discussion of the topics discussed here.

1. See generally M. Arkoun, *L'Humanisme arabe au IV^e/X^e siècle: Miskawayh, philosophe et historien*, Paris, 1982.

2. Namely Ibn 'Adī's refutation of al-Kindī's criticism of the Trinity: ed. and transl. in A. Périar, 'Un traité de Yahyā ben 'Adī: défense du dogme de la Trinité contre les objections d'al-Kindī', *Revue de l'orient chrétien*, 3rd ser., 22, 1920–1, pp. 3–21.

3. Miskawayh, *al-Fawz al-asghar: Le Petit Livre du salut*, ed. S. 'Udayma, transl. R. Arnaldez, Tunis and Carthage, 1987, §II.1. One might compare Miskawayh's position to that of al-Sijistānī, another highly Neoplatonic author, who is, however, reported to have himself studied with Ibn 'Adī.

4. Miskawayh, *Tahdhīb al-akhlāq*, ed. C. Zurayk, Beirut, 1966. English translation: Miskawayh, *The Refinement of Character*, transl. C. Zurayk, Beirut, 1968. Cited by Arabic page number and using Zurayk's translation, with occasional modifications.