



# ETHICS AND VALUES IN CLASSICAL ISLAMIC THOUGHT

The Arab Moral Mentality

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**W**e know that the Islamic philosophers have not left us any books specifically devoted to ethics, although all of them have included their views on the subject in their writings, as well as theories on a wide range of other topics such as the natural and metaphysical sciences. The only exception is Miskawaih, whose *Tahdhib al Akhlaq wa Tathir al A'raq* (*The Book on Refinement of Conduct*) is the most comprehensive study available on the subject of ethics.

This has led some people to claim that Islamic thought is devoid of ethical schools. We reject this because it completely ignores the fact that times change along with the demands of daily life in an environment, which, in those days, had to cope with numerous political and social problems that required an ethical approach. Moreover, what distinguished Islamic civilisation from other civilisations was the fact that its central feature was ethics. Of all the disciplines, ethics by their very nature, are the closest to religion; in the

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Book and the Sunnah faith is intimately associated with good deeds, which demonstrates the close link between them and proves the inseparable relationship between faith and ethics.

What I should like to point out here is that studies on ethics are a vital element in Islamic philosophy, even though the early philosophers were influenced by Ancient Greece or combined their ideas with theories on nature and metaphysics from other sources. These influences do not invalidate them or lessen their importance. Quite the opposite. They endow them with greater force and depth.

*Khuluq* (moral constitution), in the sense of nature, disposition, magnanimity and religion, is a term that specifically describes a person's inner character, which is his *nafs* (lower soul/psyche). First and foremost, the moral constitution indicates the natural characteristics a person is born with. Secondly, it demonstrates the qualities he has acquired that have become habitual features of his conduct, such as acts of piety, to the extent that they have become quasi-natural characteristics or 'second nature' to him. Thirdly, ethics have two dimensions – internal and psychological, and external and behavioural.

Behaviour only becomes a component of a person's moral constitution if it becomes part of his nature, that is to say, if it becomes so deeply engrained in his psyche that it causes him to act in a particular way without any difficulty or mental discomfort. If it is not deeply engrained in the psyche it cannot be classed as an element of the moral constitution; examples of this could be an occasional outburst of anger from a person who is normally forbearing, or a sin committed by someone who is pious and god-fearing. Equally, a trait or an act committed by a person who feels uncomfortable with it would not be classed as an element of his moral constitution, but rather as something which does not come naturally to him, for example, when a coward shows courage or a miser acts generously in certain situations, because such acts are difficult for the coward and the miser to perform and have been forced upon them by certain specific circumstances.

This means that behaviour or actions are only elements of the moral constitution if they are habitual to the person who engages in them and



are part of his nature. Some people have understood ‘moral constitution’ to mean ‘a habit of the will’, ie. if the will becomes used to something, that something becomes a habit and the habit is called moral constitution. If the will has acquired the habit of giving, that habit is called a ‘generous constitution’. Others define it as ‘the constant domination of a tendency over a person, so that a generous man is someone whose dominant tendency is to give; this tendency arises whenever the circumstances conducive to it arise, except in rare cases.’

Islamic philosophers defined ethics in numerous different ways. Miskawaih says they are ‘a state of mind which is conducive to actions performed unthinkingly and without premeditation; this condition may be divided into two classes: what is natural and an inbuilt part of the disposition, and what is acquired through habit and training.’ Imam al Ghazali says, ‘Moral constitution is a condition ingrained in the mind which enables actions to be performed with ease and without the need for thought and deliberation. If it is a condition which leads to good actions that are intellectually and legally laudable, it is called a good moral disposition, and if it leads to disagreeable actions it is called a bad moral disposition.’

We may understand from al Ghazali’s definition that the word ‘*khuluq*’ covers both a good moral constitution and a bad moral constitution. Therefore, if we wish to distinguish between the two, we need to define them as such. Good *khuluq* produces a clean, pure heart; if the heart is cleansed and purified, it will cause the light within it to glow brighter and the breast to expand; this is the greatest reward and will enable it to understand the secrets of the *deen* (religion), while opening the road to salvation, harmony and mutual goodwill and regulating a person’s life in a proper manner. Allah, Glory be to Him, the Most High, praised His Prophet (PBUH) for possessing this quality, when He said, ‘And thou (standest) on an exalted standard of character.’ The Prophet (PBUH) himself said, ‘The heaviest thing placed on the scales is good *khuluq*.’ Good morals are the open gates from the heart to the bounties of Paradise and nearness to Allah the Most Merciful. A person who is so described may be compared to the angels and said to be close to them; the angels are close to Allah and one who is ‘close to the close is close’.



Bad morals are manifested in evil deeds produced by a condition that is rejected as intellectually and legally repugnant; such deeds are poisons that kill the person who perpetrates them and it is impossible for him to live a proper life while they are present in him. 'Bad morals are a disease of the heart and ailments of the *nafs*, because they are in the same category as poisons.'

Here we should make it clear that behaviour is not exactly *khuluq*, because *khuluq* is a quality that exists in a person's inner psyche, while behaviour is an outward and visible phenomenon. Behaviour is an indicator of the *khuluq* and its visible manifestation. If we see a person who is constantly giving in circumstances that are similar to each other, this is evidence and a visible expression of the existence of a generous *khuluq*.

Al Farabi, as a philosopher who loved and promoted the quality of virtue and hated evil, believes that man is naturally disposed for the force of his *nafs* to find it easier to move in the direction of doing a good deed than to move towards doing a deed that is contrary to that. Man has a natural inclination to doing good or evil deeds, but he finds it easier to do good than to do what is contrary to it. Man has an innate tendency and willingness to do good or evil deeds; despite this, however, he is capable of acting contrary to his natural inclinations, because his nature or willingness, whether towards good or evil, may in some cases be capable of changing or disappearing altogether, with the result that the *nafs* is able to replace it with dispositions that are contrary to it. In other cases it may be damaged, weakened or diminished without disappearing altogether, while in yet other cases it may decline and change without diminishing its force.

The same applies to moral dispositions. They may also be divided into these categories; in such cases change is a result of habit. Habit is the only way a person can bring about this change, ie. by performing a single act repeatedly and frequently over a long period so that it cannot fade from his mind. Moral dispositions are not immutable or impossible to eliminate; it is true that it is hard to eliminate a character trait, but it is not out of the question. Every moral disposition, if considered in categorical terms, will be seen to be changeable, even if this should be difficult to achieve; there is no disposition that cannot be changed.



Of all creatures man is the only one who seeks to acquire a praiseworthy moral character and to do good deeds. He alone acts with deliberation, and the better his powers of discrimination, reflection and choice, the more complete he is as a human being.

However, if his actions fall short of what he was endowed by nature to perform – I mean, if his actions and the premeditation that led to them are ‘incomplete’ – then he should be demoted from his status as a human being and assigned the status of an animal.

Yet if his actions are as they were framed when he premeditated them – by this I mean evil actions resulting from defective deliberation and a failure to carry them out because of bestial lusts and desires or a strong inclination towards sensual things that distract him from purifying his *nafs* (and from achieving that higher spiritual state and true happiness referred to by Allah the Most High when He said, ‘Now no person knows what delights of the eye are kept hidden for them’, and bringing him close to the Lord of the Worlds in everlasting delights that endure, which the eye has not seen and the ear has not heard, and which has not entered the human heart) – then in such a case he will earn the odium of his Creator, Glory be to Him. Punishment is likely to be hastened upon him and he will be exiled from his fellow men and his homeland.

Man, of all creatures, is not able to live a full life without the help of others. Man by nature is a social being and for his happiness as a human being to be complete he needs to live in a community where there are numerous other people around him. Every person, by nature and through necessity, needs others, so he is compelled to live with them in amity and feel genuine affection for them because it is they who make him a complete person and a complete human being. He, too, contributes to making them complete human beings.

Miskawaih rejects the position of those who see virtue in asceticism and isolating oneself from other people by living in mountain caves, building hermits’ grottos or wandering from place to place. In his view such people earn none of the benefits of human virtues, because a person who does not mix with others and live with them in a community



displays nothing in the way of abstinence, providing succour for others, or generosity or justice. Instead, the powers and faculties with which he has been endowed are invalid because they do not have to deal with psychological forces and desires.

Whenever a person has a taste for an undesirable sensual pleasure and overindulges in it to the point of falling strongly under its influence, he grows to like everything that is reprehensible. He makes light of things that to others would be grave and serious matters and fails to sense that there is anything wrong in them until wisdom makes him recognise them for what they are.

Moral virtues exist so that members of the human race can interact and live with each other, and mankind is unable to exist without them. Justice is necessary to ensure that people deal with each other in a proper manner and to prevent injustice, which vitiates interaction between them. Abstinence exists to control the baser physical pleasures and protect the *nafs* and the body from major sins. Courage is a virtue because a person is required to embark upon certain highly dangerous undertakings from time to time and he must not allow himself to run away from them.

If a person isolates himself from his fellow men and lives as a hermit in mountains or caves, this means he has abdicated all the moral virtues and chosen solitude rather than life in a community. He can thus be described as either dead or a lump of inorganic matter.

So virtues only appear within the context of society and cannot be found in the secluded life of a solitary monk. It is true that a monk may be ascetic and religious, but his actions cannot be described as ethical when he is on his own, since it is a condition that ethics can only exist when there is interaction between people. A proper understanding of the Sharia shows that love for one human being by another is the basis of an ethical system. It is not possible to imagine a society without love between its members, a society in which there is satisfaction that that its resources are divided up equally between the people who comprise it. Indeed, an equal distribution of resources is a major factor in maintaining the virtue of love between all individuals.



So the prime condition for the existence of virtue is that there should be a community, because man is a social animal and cannot be a complete person and exercise his various functions and virtues unless he is part of a community. Virtues are not virtues in themselves; they only exist if the person endowed with them is in contact with his fellow man, ie. after their effects have reached those around him or society as a whole. Generosity, courage and abstinence, for example, can only become apparent through interaction between the different members of the community; it is this interaction that brings out people's true characters and virtues or vices. A social context is a basic condition for the existence of virtue or vice.

Al Farabi seeks to harmonise the interests of the individual and the interests of society as a whole by linking individual happiness to collective happiness, to an extent, thereby making it clear that there is no conflict between self interest and behaviour conducive to the public good, but rather that the individual feels personally motivated towards improving the welfare of society.

It is possible to find happiness in every community. A city in which the community aims to promote cooperation in working for those things, which are conducive to genuine happiness, is a Virtuous City, while a community whose members cooperate to promote happiness is a Virtuous Community, and a nation whose cities all cooperate in the interests of happiness is a Virtuous Nation. The same rule applies in the case of a Virtuous World, in which the different nations work together to promote happiness.

Religion is an exercise in training the *nafs* to serve itself for the sake of others. Miskawaih says, 'To this end, it is necessary for people to love each other, because everyone sees his own perfection in others. If this were not the case, it would not lead to happiness. So everyone is like an organ of the body, and a person enjoys well-being when his bodily organs are complete.'

This illustrates one of the most distinctive features of Islam, characterised by mutual affection and a sense of brotherhood between Believers. People by nature lack certain qualities in themselves, so they are compelled to make up for them. No individual can make up for his deficiency on his own, so the only option is for people to behave benignly



towards each other, since every person sees others – or another person – as possessing those qualities that he needs in order to make himself a complete human being, and without which he would not be able to attain happiness. Thus, the individual is like an organ of the body, and a person enjoys wellbeing when his bodily organs are complete. Individuals therefore need to come together and ‘coalesce’ so that they become like a single person whose organs are all working in concert and benefiting him.

Resources are plentiful and the *nafs* has many faculties, though they are not all available for a single person alone to make use of them; this means that they can only be operated and exploited properly by a large group of individuals working together simultaneously to attain that communal happiness which makes every single one of them a complete human being.

A person cannot possess a natural disposition to virtue or vice from the very beginning of his being endowed with instincts, just as he cannot possess a natural disposition to be a weaver or a writer. However, he can possess a natural disposition that is conducive to virtuous or base acts, in the sense that such acts are easier for him to do than others. Hence, from the very beginning he will be inclined to do what is naturally easier for him if he does not receive an external stimulus motivating him to do the opposite. At the same time, that natural inclination cannot be described as virtue, just as a natural inclination for industry cannot be described as industry. However, when there is a natural inclination to perform virtuous acts and those acts are repeated and become a habit until the *nafs* acquires a faculty that is conducive to the performance of those acts, then the faculty that enables those acts to be performed is called virtue. An innate condition alone is not called a virtue or a defect, even if a particular kind of action happens to be performed in connection with it. The innate condition is not describable in any such terms; it is the habitual practice that causes a person to be praised or censured; in the other situation a person is neither praised nor blamed.

Everyone who grows up with a particular character trait and strengthens it so that it becomes dominant in his *nafs* will find it difficult to eradicate



that trait, though not impossible. When the *nafs* acquires new character traits by ‘artificial’ means, if those new traits become habitual they also become second nature. Moral characteristics can thus be displaced or altered, while new ones become ‘natural’ through habit and repetition.

Moral virtues and vices occur and become established in the *nafs* through repetition and habit, while the faculty that enables that habit to take root is described as virtue.

If ethical behaviour is not susceptible to change, as some people maintain, this would mean that advice and disciplinary measures are useless. However, the Prophet (PBUH) tells us ‘improve your ethics’, a statement that means a person’s behavioural traits can be changed, the truth of which is also clearly apparent if we observe how a recalcitrant wild beast can be tamed. We may, therefore, justly conclude that if animals can change their behaviour despite not having freedom of choice over their actions, then man, who has been endowed with intelligence, is more capable of doing so. Hence the Noble Hadith: ‘I have been sent to perfect nobility of moral character.’

Moral character is subject to change, though people vary in the readiness with which they accept that change. Some are quick to do so, while others are slow. The difference may be attributed to two causes.

Firstly, the ‘older’ the instinct, the more difficult it is to change it; for example, anger and pride are qualities that exist in man, but appetites and desires are harder to change because they are ‘older’. Al Ghazali believes that appetites and desires are formed in a young boy from the moment he is first endowed with instincts. Then from the age of seven he acquires the trait of anger, then after that the ability to discriminate.

Secondly, moral character can be easily changed through repetition, and provided that we are determined to change it and believe that such a change would be good and desirable. This means that if we accustom ourselves to doing a particular thing, habituation and repetition of it will cause us to change from one condition to another. The process will be further helped along if we believe that the required change is desirable,



because if a person believes that something is important in his life and dedicates himself to achieving it, he will succeed in doing so.

Al Ghazali divides people on the wrong path into four classes, each one of which is harder to change than the one before it. For example, Class One is easier to treat than Class Two, Class Two is easier than Class Three, etc.

- **Class One:** A person who is heedless and negligent and makes no distinction between right and wrong or beautiful and ugly, but remains by nature devoid of all beliefs. This is the easiest class to treat. Such a person only needs a teacher or a guide or self-motivation; these will induce him to work on improving his moral character in the shortest possible time.
- **Class Two:** A person who knows that ugliness is ugly but is not accustomed to doing good. His bad deeds appear alluring in his eyes and he is a willing prey to his appetites and desires. A person in this class is harder to treat than somebody in Class One, but he is treatable. He knows that he is remiss in what he does and that he needs to eradicate the turpitude he has become accustomed to, and that after he has done so he must accustom himself to good and worthy things. Such a person is susceptible to spiritual exercise if he really sets his mind to it and is the recipient of Divine assistance.
- **Class Three:** A person who believes that the ugly is morally desirable, and that it is right and beautiful, and has been brought up to regard it as such. It is almost impossible to treat such a person and there is no hope of reforming him except in rare cases because the factors that have led him astray are so many and so great.
- **Class Four:** A person who believes that there is virtue in extreme wrongdoing and corrupting people's minds and souls, and in striving to that end. In doing so he believes he is improving his own worth and standing. This is the most difficult class to treat.

Al Ghazali gives a name to each of these four classes. The first class he calls Ignorant, the second Ignorant and Astray, the third Ignorant, Astray and Wanton and the fourth Ignorant, Astray, Wanton and Evil. The first and



second classes can be guided, either by a sheikh or through self-motivation, however, the third and fourth are not susceptible to guidance.

So the issue of changing the moral character is an important element of moral philosophy and without it an appeal to ethical values will be meaningless to the point that any possibility of reform will be out of the question. It is hard to believe that morals cannot be changed; moreover, such an assertion would lead to a collapse of values to the extent that it would be meaningless to maintain that there are such things as ethical principles, reformers and moralists.

People need to be familiar with virtues in practice so that they themselves can become accustomed to practising them. There are two ways to achieve this:

1. Verbally, by using persuasive, emotive and other language that establishes virtuous deeds and faculties in the *nafs* so that its resolve can be awakened to perform such actions voluntarily.
2. By coercion. This approach should be used with recalcitrant members of cities and nations who cannot be induced to follow the straight path voluntarily or through verbal persuasion.

If we are asked what deeds should be instilled in the *nafs* and which deeds we should be trained to do through habit, our reply will be ‘moderate, middle-of-the-road deeds’, since all extremes are evil. ‘Moderate actions’ are conducive to good moral character.

The virtue of a good moral character, then, is based on moderation, ie. the path between excess and deficiency, both of which are vices. For example, moderate abstinence is the middle course between excessive appetite, or gluttony, and insensitivity to pleasure. Generosity is the middle course between niggardliness and prodigality. Courage is the middle course between recklessness and cowardice. Forbearance is the middle course between excessive anger and never becoming angry at all, while diffidence is the middle course between brazenness and timidity. A display of affection is the middle course between overt dislike and flattery. The same is true of all the other virtues.



There are two categories of middle courses. One is 'average in itself', while the other is 'average in relation to other factors'. 'Average in itself' includes, for example, number six falling in the middle between two and ten – numbers that are invariable. This is called the arithmetical average. However, 'average in relation to other factors' is the 'moral average' or 'moral middle course', which is variable in that it is 'more' or 'less' at various times and in various situations; for example, there is a difference between the moderate nutritional intake of a small boy and the moderate intake of an adult, the variation depending on the respective sizes of their bodies. Similarly, actions where ethics are concerned should be 'quantified' with respect to their volume, number and manner ('strong' or 'weak') in relation to the person performing them, the people by whom and towards whom the action is being carried out, and the time and place concerned. Take anger, for example. The yardstick for a moderate degree of anger would be determined by the state of the person towards whom the anger is directed, the cause of the anger and the time and place in which it occurs. The same would apply to beatings and punishments. The number of strokes and the manner in which they are administered would depend on the person doing the beating and the person receiving it, as well as the offence for which the punishment is being meted out and the implement used to administer the beating. The same rule should apply to all other actions.

Miskawaih says, 'Let it be known that every virtue has two extremes which can be specified, while the middle courses between them are so numerous as to be unlimited and impossible to specify. However, there is only one true middle course and that we have called virtue.'

The counterpart of every *nafs* force is a virtue. By this I mean that every force of the *nafs* is counterbalanced by one of the virtues. The sensual force has the virtuous counterpart of abstinence, the anger force has the virtuous counterpart of courage, while the rational force has the virtuous counterpart of wisdom. Through moderating those virtues and ensuring that they are properly balanced in relation to each other, a fourth virtue emerges – the virtue of equity.

The virtues represent the middle course between extremes, while the



extremes are vices. There are eight types of vices, since they are double in number to the number of virtues. They are recklessness and cowardice (the two extremes of the middle course, which is courage), gluttony and indifference to sensual pleasure (the two extremes of the middle course, which is moderate abstinence), ignorance and craftiness (the two extremes of the middle course, which is wisdom), and oppression and slackness, ie. tyranny and allowing oneself to be tyrannised (the two extremes of the middle course, which is equity). These are the types of moral ailments that are the counterparts of virtues, which are the elements that make for a healthy *nafs*. At a lower level than these categories there are others too numerous to mention, and that is why it is very difficult to find the true middle course, and why it is even harder to stick to it once you have found it. The extremes, which are called vices, are very numerous, so there are more motives for evil than there are motives for good. A chaste or abstinent person is not called chaste or abstinent unless he observes abstinence for himself and for its own sake and chooses to do so because it is a virtue; he can then satisfy each of his appetites as and when necessary and in the appropriate manner.

Similarly, a just person is not called equitable, nor a courageous person courageous unless they adopt those virtues for themselves and for their own sakes and act upon them as and when necessary and in the appropriate manner.

A truly equitable person moderates his forces, actions and conditions and maintains a balance between them. In doing so he seeks to practice the virtue of justice and equity for its own sake and no other.

Since equity is the middle course between extremes and is a faculty that enables a person to reject both excess and deficiency, this makes it the most 'complete' of all the virtues and the closest in nature to integrity. It is excess and deficiency, proliferation and dearth that impair and corrupt things if there is no balance of moderation to maintain their equilibrium. It is moderation that safeguards integrity and harmony and prevents the vices of proliferation, discrepancy and disorder from prevailing.

'*Adl* (equity) is derived from the concept of *musawat* (equality) and



represents the ‘noble mean’ referred to in musical composition and other arts. It is something that is indivisible and does not exist in plural form, ie. there is only one type of equity.

*I’tidal* (moderation), which is linguistically related to ‘*adl*’, is defined by the Sharia; indeed the Sharia defines the middle, or moderate, course in all those matters referred to above. Compliance with the Sharia is in line with the nature of equality and leads to wellbeing and happiness in the sense that they are the product of justice, because the Sharia commands mankind to do laudable things (since they are from Allah, Glory be to Him) and avoid the temptations of the flesh. It also enjoins courage, orderliness and ‘discipline in the ranks of jihad’, as well as abstinence, while instructing mankind to eschew depravity, lying, verbal abuse and desertion. In brief, it enjoins all the virtues and forbids all the vices.

All the virtues are manifestations of ‘*adalah* (justice), and ‘*adl*’ is a term that encompasses them all. The word ‘*adalah*’ is applied to a person who complies with the Sharia and an ‘*adel* (just) person acts with ‘*adalah*’ towards himself and other members of his community. Justice is not a *part* of virtue, it *is* virtue, and its counterpart – injustice – describes the manner in which an unjust person acts towards himself, his associates and the wider community. Like justice, injustice is not a *part* of vice; it *is* vice.

However, does a rational man intentionally harm and wrong himself by acting unjustly and reaping the wages of vice? Miskawaih’s reply to this question is that man is endowed with numerous forces that combine together to make him a single, whole human being; one cannot, therefore, deny that he performs a range of different actions in accordance with those forces. If a person prone to anger loses his temper, he chooses to do things that he would not do if he were calm and composed. The same would apply to an excitable person or someone whose lusts are easily aroused, because the force that arouses him induces him to do things that at a particular moment appear good and desirable. However, after he has calmed down and become rational again, he sees that what he has actually done is bad and ugly. At that point he is surprised at himself and says, ‘How could I have chosen to commit such ugly acts?’ and he feels remorse.



Miskawaih believes that man must train himself to live a virtuous life and not embark on any course of action until he has considered it carefully and ensured that it complies with the Sharia.

In appealing to people to follow a middle course, the philosophers may have been influenced by Aristotle, but the influence of Islamic sources (specifically Qur'anic verses and the Hadiths) was stronger.

Allah the Most High says, 'In order that ye may not transgress the balance. So establish weight with justice and fall not short in the balance.'

A person who castrates himself to get rid of his sexual urges, or abstains from sexual intercourse despite being capable of it and in good health, or stops eating, so that he can devote himself more wholeheartedly to worship, remembrance of Allah and contemplation, has fallen short in the balance, just as a person who devotes himself wholeheartedly to his bodily and sexual appetites has transgressed the balance. *'Adl* is when his weight neither exceeds nor falls short, so that the two scales are equal.

Proper ethical conduct demands following the middle course and avoiding extremes. As Allah the Most High says, 'Those who, when they spend, are not extravagant and not niggardly, but hold a just (balance) between those two (extremes).'

Generosity is laudable and falls between the two extremes of extravagance and niggardliness. The same is true of an appetite for food – 'eat and drink, but waste not by excess; for Allah loveth not the wasters.' The Messenger (PBUH) says, 'The best of things is their middle.' The way to reach the 'middle' and overcome vice is to cultivate the opposite of one's excessive tendency until it becomes a habit, which will cause a shift towards the centre ground. Al Farabi says, 'When we find ourselves in a position of moral excess or deficiency we restore it to the centre by looking at our ethical constitution. If it errs towards excess we should train ourselves to actions that are its opposite – that is to say, towards deficiency. If we find it inclined towards deficiency, we should train ourselves to actions that are its opposite – that is to say, towards excess – and continue to do so for a certain length of time. Then we should take stock and see



what ethical constitution has resulted; and we should continue to do this until we reach the middle, or near to it.’

This means that if one extreme becomes dominant, it should be countered with the other extreme until it returns to the middle and settles there. Allah the Most High says, ‘Therefore remain firm in the straight path as thou art commanded.’ Staying in the middle of the straight path is hard; it is finer than a hair’s breadth and sharper than a sword, as the Path has been described in the next world.

A person who remains firm on the straight path in this life remains on it in the next, since he dies in the state in which he has lived and the state in which he has died is the state in which he is resurrected. Hence, in every *rak’ah* (cycle) of the Prayer he has to recite *Surat al Fatihah* (the opening *Surah* of the *Holy Qur’an*), which includes Allah the Most High’s words: ‘[Show us the straight path](#)’. Staying on the straight path is the weightiest of duties and the most difficult for the seeker to achieve. Even if it applied to a single moral characteristic it would need much time and effort to attain, so think how hard it is when it applies to every element of one’s moral make-up.

No one has achieved ‘perfect moderation’ in this respect apart from the Messenger of Allah (PBUH). Those who came after him have been either relatively nearer to it or further from it. The nearer a person is to it, from a moral point of view, the closer he is to Allah the Most High and to the point of proximity achieved by the Messenger of Allah (PBUH). Anyone who combines the perfection of these different ethical qualities within himself deserves to be a king among creatures and obeyed by all Allah’s creatures, who should follow his example in his every action. Similarly, anyone who departs from all these moral standards and may be described as embodying their opposites deserves to be expelled from the world of men, because he has become close to Satan, the accursed, the banished one.

An ‘average’ or ‘middle-of-the-road’ action could be one that is average for everybody, or most people, either most of the time or always. Or it could be one that is average at some time for one group of people



but not another. Or it could be one that is average for a person from his own perspective at one particular time but not another. An average action is constantly changing and never the same from one moment to another, even as far as a single individual is concerned. It might be average at one time and extreme (either on the plus or minus side) at another. Al Farabi believes that not every individual is able to determine or deduce what that average is. The person who should determine it is the man who is in charge of running his city, or the king, while the process – that is, the actual job of working out what it is – should be an element of running the affairs of the community or exercising kingly rule.

Al Farabi does not deny or reject man's ability to determine what an 'average' action is, but he does not leave it within everybody's power, because if everyone was free to determine it, this would not make it an acceptable general yardstick. It would mean that the 'average' varied from one person to another and, if every individual were left to determine it, would lead to imbalance and disorder.

In determining what an average action is, so that he can govern his community properly, the king's objective is to endow himself and the rest of the population of his city with true happiness, which is the goal of kingship. The king of the Virtuous City must of necessity be the happiest person in the community because he is the reason behind the citizens' happiness. The person who governs the city is the person who sets this norm for the 'ethical average;' it is as if the city's pyramidal structure acquires its foundations from its chief, who is the supreme model for all its citizens.

Al Farabi puts his 'middle-of-the-road' theory in a political and ethical context, in which he has made the king the person who determines what the average is. He thus opposes the forces of disorder and relativism, which make it difficult for people to agree on a single average. The 'happy medium' is not within the power of every individual to determine it, even if he has the ability. The person who decides what it is must be the king or the person who governs the city. Al Farabi does not wish to see mankind as a whole deciding on the yardstick for the average, ie. setting the average for virtues and the standard for good and evil deeds – like the Sophists, who used people in general as their criteria for everything, good and bad, right



and wrong, and claimed that the idea of absolutes existing in the fields of knowledge or ethics was an illusion; in their view, everything was variable and differed from one person to another depending on circumstances and each person's individual viewpoint; hence, there were no fixed values and it was hard – nay impossible – to find agreement on any single issue.

It was this that led al Farabi to place the criterion for 'middle-of-the-roadness' in the hands of the ruler or king, so that it would not lead to the 'chaos hiding behind the Sophist principle' that Socrates, Plato and Aristotle warned us about, in other words, the relativist ethical yardstick which must inevitably lead to disorder. Accordingly, al Farabi believed that there must be a single general yardstick for everybody.

Al Farabi also pointed out that the king's own interest and welfare was not something separate from the interests and welfare of the people. The two were intimately connected, because what served the interests of the people was also in the interests of the king. Through doing his job of running the city, the king's aim was to benefit himself and the rest of the people, as opposed to looking after his own interests to the detriment of his people's. That is the purpose of a king's job.

We can see echoes of al Farabi's views in the writings of the English philosopher Thomas Hobbes, whose philosophy and ideas helped form the basis of English ethical thinking. He linked the welfare of the ruler to the welfare of his people, maintaining that the ruler was bound by the laws of nature in his endeavours to serve the interests of his people, interests that were inseparable from his own. He was answerable to God alone for the way in which he carried out this duty and his commands provided the yardstick for distinguishing between right and wrong in the way in which his subjects conducted themselves. It was the duty of every individual to obey him, protect him and desist from harming his person, because disputing his commands was the first step on the road to chaos. Chaos was the one supreme peril that was graver than any lesser infringements of the law. Listening to one's own personal conscience, rather than obeying the ruler without question would lead to chaos and was the greatest danger threatening the wellbeing of the community. For that reason questions of



good and evil should be referred to the state, in the person of its absolute ruler, who held absolute power in his hands.

In al Farabi's view moral virtue is a concept that only applies to voluntary acts and values that are freely embraced and undertaken. Man has free will and freedom of action, that is to say he is able to do good whenever he wishes, but that freedom is not absolute; it is bound by the laws of the universe. Every being is subject to the fate that awaits him, and every being – good or bad – is dependent upon the causes emanating from the Divine Will.

Man's choice is determined by what his intellect sees. When a person lives in accordance with his intellect, he is in harmony not only with himself, but also with everything else, ie. the whole of existence, because the intellect is not a specific property of man alone, but a characteristic of the cosmos as a whole. The human intellect is but a part of the Great, All-embracing Mind. With our intellects we live in harmony with ourselves, just as we live in harmony with the world around us.

Al Farabi classes pleasures as (a) bodily pleasures and (b) psychological pleasures. They are all either internal or external. An internal pleasure is 'a sense of something agreeable', while an external pleasure is 'an absence of what is unpleasant and disagreeable'. Something that is 'internally irksome' is 'a sense of something disagreeable', while externally it is 'an absence of agreeable pleasure'.

Pleasure is an awareness of the agreeable, while irksomeness is an awareness of the disagreeable. At the same time, every awareness is a component element of completeness and the acquisition of completeness is pleasure. Hence, an awareness of the agreeable is pleasure; pleasure is thus a sense of agreeableness or compatibility. Every sense comes from the sensory force and is activated when that force is stimulated; if it is agreeable or disagreeable it is, respectively, pleasure or pain. Just as a feeling of pleasure or pain is an accompanying element of the 'external' ie. physical sense, so too is it also an element of the 'internal' ie. psychological sense. 'Internal' pleasure is stronger than 'external' pleasure and intellectual pleasure is stronger than sensory pleasure. In our dull material world the



barrier of the senses and physical lusts and appetites, and of our bodies' indulgence in vices, prevents us from attaining the ideal higher state that we should be aiming for. If we are able to remove the noose of lust, desire and anger from around our necks and aspire towards some of that Sublime Pleasure, we shall be able to conjure up a picture of it in our minds, though only very faintly. For the *nafs al mutma'innah* (the satisfied, confident *nafs*), completeness and ultimate pleasure is to be found in knowledge and awareness of Allah, the Truth, because everyone who is truly aware and accepts what he is aware of becomes to some degree assimilated into it. When the outer covering of the body and the barrier are removed, you will not be asked about your actions. So if you suffer pain, then woe upon you! And if you are unscathed, then may you be blessed! Even while you are in your body, it will be as though you are not in your body, and as if you are exposed to the cold air of Allah's Kingdom; you will then see what no eye has seen and hear what no ear has heard and experience what has never entered into the hearts of mankind. So make a covenant with Allah the Truth until you come before Him alone. And when the veil is removed, 'sharp is thy sight this Day'.

Mankind often prefers pain to pleasure. If he knows that pleasure will lead him to notoriety, shame or unsatisfied craving, he turns away from it. A virtuous man does not indulge all his lusts, appetites and pleasures, but chooses those of them that are compatible with what his intellect tells him. That is why high-minded intellectual goals do more honour to the *nafs* than those base desires that a wise man despises and disdains. Godly men endowed with wisdom aspire to attain this former kind of kind of happiness rather than physical happiness. They hardly notice the latter, even if it is handed to them on a plate, and they regard it as being of no concern when compared with the happiness of being near to Allah. The baser *nafs* is only aware of those things that are close at hand; its only joy is in sensory pleasure and it never aspires to higher things and the pleasures that never fade. A person with this kind of *nafs* is without doubt the unhappiest and most wretched of creatures. He is, to quote Ibn Sina, 'a person whose *nafs* is absorbed in the physical world – ill-fated, whose back-to-front neck has no vertebrae.'



Most philosophers agree that there is a link between *nafs*-related virtues and happiness, regardless of the 'bodily virtues'. Happiness is not to be found in sensory pleasures or worldly success, because none of those things are free from defects; and it is a well-known fact that something with defects is not what a person wishes for himself, and what a person does not wish for himself is not true happiness.

True happiness, then, is not to be found in the world of the senses and the *nafs* cannot reach its ideal state in this world. That means that it must be sought in another world, not this one. The *nafs* finds its happiness and true pleasure in the Realm of the Divine – the Realm of eternal, supreme pleasure, that is, the spiritual pleasure that the *nafs* enjoys when it is near to the Light and Mercy of its Creator. The sensual pleasures it knows in the sensory world are profane and impure with damaging consequences. However, it is able to come to terms with them through contemplation and meditation on spiritual matters and by seeking to attain immortality, and by turning away from the things of this world and not thinking about its illusory joys.

As long as man remains human, he will only attain happiness by satisfying his needs at both levels. A happy person will fall into one of two classes: either he will be happy in his enjoyment of the things of the body, while at the same time striving joyfully towards higher things, or happy in the higher things of the spirit, while also concerning himself with worldly matters, which he will regard as signs of Allah's power and wisdom and will seek to do the best he can with them. Such people, Imam al Ghazali says, do not embrace the world for the sake of the world, but for the *deen*. They do not abandon the world entirely, nor do they embrace it wholeheartedly; instead, they follow a middle path between the two, which is the course Allah the Most High likes best. Allah says, 'No person knows what delights of the eye are kept hidden in reserve for them,' which is echoed by the Prophet (PBUH), when he says, 'There is that which no eye has seen, no ear has heard and which has entered into no human heart.'