

Tusi's Medieval Logical Appropriation of Philosophical Ethics

Mostafa YOUNESSIE

(Tarbiat Modares University – Tehran)

Abstract

In this article the contribution of Tusi to medieval Arabic/Persian virtue ethics will be explored and examined. The letter and spirit of his famous ethical writing is basically logical and its medieval Arabic reading comes from so-called Aristotelian formal logic. This means that within the environment of medieval virtue ethics Tusi tries to make an organic naturalization of basic principles together with other related beliefs and notions. The net result of such an approach is a codex of ethical rules that determines the standards for good and bad behavior/action.

ملخص

بالرجوع الى المقاربة (الافلاطونية/الأرسطية) لأخلاق الفضيلة في سياق الفلسفة العربية الفارسية الوسيطة سنقوم بدراسة موقف الطوسي من هذه المسألة و الخط العام الذي يتوخاه في مؤلفه الاخلاقي الشهير هو منطقي بالاساس و يندرج داخل القراءة العربية لمنطق أرسطو من حيث هو منطق صوري ففي سياق اخلاق الفضيلة الخاصة بالفلسفة الوسيطة ، يحاول الطوسي بلورة مقاربة مطبّعة للمبادئ الأساسية مع المفاهيم و الاعتقادات الاخرى المرتبطة بها و تكون النتيجة الواضحة لمثل هذه المقاربة جملة من القواعد الأخلاقية التي تحدّد موازين السلوك/الفعل الحسن و السيء

Résumé

A la lumière de l'approche (Platonicienne/Aristotélicienne) de l'éthique dans le contexte de l'éthique médiévale de la vertu (Arabe/Persique), la manière avec laquelle Tussi traite de cet enjeu sera explorée et examinée. La lettre et l'esprit de son fameux écrit en Ethique sont logiques dans le sens de la lecture arabe de la dite logique aristotélicienne formelle. Ceci veut dire que dans le contexte de l'Ethique médiévale de la vertu, Tusi essaye d'élaborer une naturalisation organique des principes essentiels avec les autres croyances et notions. Le résultat clair d'une telle approche est un ensemble de règles qui déterminent les standards du bon et du mauvais comportement/action.

It seems that Tusi's Nasirean Ethics is a contribution to the genre of philosophical ethics (Fakhry 1991, p. 131). In order to systemize his discussion about ethics this paper will focus only on the First Discourse of his book and the use of a specific logical format. Here we want to explore and examine this format and if possible draw a model and sample of how it works – an issue that becomes more interesting with regard to Tusi's preoccupations as a medieval logician.

In the beginning we take an emic approach and see how our translator defines “logic” and “ethics” in his compilation, as well as what “logical format” is possible. This shows that the related text has many dimensions that should be kept in mind, and here the focus is only on these three components that have interplay with each other in order to shape a meaningful construct for those who read the text.

1. Logic / Mantiq

According to Tusi's definition of logic/mantiq that draws inspiration from Aristotle (the definition of logic/mantiq comes from the Arabic/Persian root simultaneously meaning reason/speech), it is “confined to recognizing the modality of things and the method of acquiring the unknown” (Wickens 1964, p. 28) and has two functions in the felicity of the soul and treatment of perplexity. In both cases it has some analogy with bodily felicity and disease, so accordingly it may be said that if we put differences in parenthesis then on the whole science of logic is comparable with the science of medicine for both deal with making the soul and body healthy and without disease, respectively. We should moreover bear in mind that analogy is one of the basic and prevalent heuristic categories and paradigms in the mediaeval thinking.

According to the definition of mantiq offered by Tusi we can infer that in the First Discourse about ethics he wants to pinpoint the specific manner, quality, and state of ethical things (in a very general meaning) and at the same time by an appropriate method make known this unknown that is ethics. For doing these two tasks as a logician he needs an appropriate instrument exclusive for human beings as natiq (both rational/speaking) animals. But it seems that it is not possible to delineate this instrument on its own and it is more suitable to look at a more sophisticated science of the time that is “medicine” and its dealings with “body,” although Tusi's use of physical words and terms are not confined to logic and he employs them in their singular or composite forms for explaining his points about ethics, economics, and politics too.

Besides, there is a crucial point about Tusi's definition of logic and its place in his divisions between the speculative practical sciences. For after dividing the class of speculative sciences, and in the same paragraph about natural sciences, he mentions logic. Why does he not mention it

after the practical sciences? Why here if it is only an instrument? What can it mean? Or is this a periphery issue. In this regard we refer to another book by Tusi named *The Basis of All Sciences/Asas Al-Eqtebas* and see how he gives his understanding of logic that has nine parts and techniques. Here he defines logic in its medieval version as “knowing of all meanings through which it is possible to reach to the different kinds of acquired sciences, considering which meaning leads to the so-called science and ways of manipulating meanings” (Tusi 1326, p. 5). Accordingly, there are two things done in logic: both knowing the meanings, and at the same time, different ways of manipulating them for a favored aim.

With this background, when we refer to the form of the First Discourse of Nasirean Ethics, logically the main collected meanings that lead to ethics are presented through the terms such as soul, dispositions, and virtue/vice. Tusi manipulates these terms in order to introduce the favored telos of his ethics exactly like a technician, such as a carpenter who first knows the meanings of a piece of timber and then manipulates them in order to make a specific timber into a couch.

Accordingly, there is the human being with specific meanings and through intervening them our translator/compiler wants to outline the realization of a virtuous healthy person as the favored goal and perhaps on this basis we can justify why, in form and structure, Tusi’s First Discourse on Ethics has two divisions. One presents the meanings and defines them, and in the next one they are worked and oriented towards the specific aim. But before going further on, research prudence necessitates that we have a look at the pertinent object of this logical ordering and systemization. In other words, what are the capacities of ethics that make its logical ordering possible in a positive way? Otherwise will this doing be failed and unsuccessful?

2 - Ethics / Akhlaq

In his book preamble, Tusi discusses “ethics” as a discipline in its wide sense, in a gradual, piecemeal and deductive way. He begins with the brief but general definition of “Philosophy or/and Wisdom” that contains the possibility of inferring the two branches of “theoretical” and “practical”. Then he outlines these two main divisions with their pertinent subdivisions with the ethics as the first subdivision of the practical philosophy.

This explicitly declared schema in a preamble of a book is very crucial for understanding the “perspective and approach” of the compiler for discussing ethics in the following lines of the text. But there is a contested point here, for in the related paragraph Tusi uses wisdom/hekmat, and the English translator uses Philosophy with a capital “p” as the equivalent (Wickens 1964, p.

26). This implies that the word is “wisdom/hekmat” in the Persian text (Tusi 1387, p. 37). But it can be speculated that there are two words called “philosophy” and “wisdom” that, according to the context and subject matter, in some places both have similarities and in the other places differences. And here it seems that for Tusi both philosophy and wisdom have a common view about the definition of philosophy and its divisions.

Anyway, the writer wants to discuss ethics as a discipline but it is dependent on a prior discussion about philosophy as a whole that has some definite parts. On this basis the discipline should have its own specific subject matter, method, and end. In other words, the formation of ethics as a branch of practical philosophy is dependent upon having these three mentioned factors. And qualities of these factors form the capacity of ethics in order to accept or refuse the appropriate related logical ordering. For as a rule we do not want, or cannot apply or prepare, an artificial logical format for a discipline that has not in itself the internal potential of accepting this order, and for this reason it is crucial and methodological that one first evaluate and measure its capacity for such logical reception.

With regard to this rationale in relation to ethics as a discipline, Tusi delineates the subject matter with regard to formal logic according to the genus and differentiation of human soul, inasmuch as it can proceed from it according to its will and acts fair and trustworthy, or ugly and condemnable (Wickens 1964, p. 35). Accordingly, the human soul will be taken as genus and the determinants such as human will, action, and fairness or unfairness as differentiation that cannot be found in others than human being. Therefore the human soul and its faculties will be the subject matter of ethics, but two preliminary points are in order. This word as a “noun” has three different meanings and applications (Wickens 1964, p. 41) but it is not necessary to explore all of them here, therefore there should be a deliberative and pertinent choice. Besides, the most discussion about the soul should be done in natural science that considers our favored subject as a natural phenomenon too, therefore, our discussion about soul is not enclosed and limited in ethics and we should take a look at natural science that belongs to one of the branches of speculative science. It means that human “soul” in distinction of “spirit” should be considered in interplay with “matter” and, accordingly, we can speak of “psychology” as a subdivision of natural science that seeks the knowledge of the states of the rational human soul and its regulation and control by body and what is outside the body (Wickens 1964, p. 27-28).

According to this rationale, understanding the human soul as the subject matter of ethics as a practical science is dependent upon psychology and we should have a prior initial knowledge of its discussion in natural science.

That is the first step in Tusi's procedure in order to shape our mind about the way we should consider ethics as a scientific discipline. But it is not enough, and he proceeds further on and mentions the end(s) of this branch in relation with its subject matter. Speaking only of human soul with its various different faculties is not enough and we have not said anything essentially ethical and moral. Thus it necessities that we go further, and Tusi does it through his discussion about the telos of ethics as the thing that "ought to be".

Therefore, soul as a psychological category in natural philosophy should be guided toward a specific worthy purpose. This brings Tusi to write about "healthy" soul and the favored "virtues" that can bring our "dispositions" to this final goal in contradistinction of those vices which through our dispositions bring about a sick soul (a reverse reading from 149 to 33 in Wickens 1964). According to this narration the crucial point returns to the nature of human disposition/malaka and how we should consider it. With regard to the role of nature and use or custom it seems that human disposition is not something given and determinant forever but it has the capacity of change and alteration as something absent in the other animals. Therefore, it is the supposition of the treatise that human disposition is "alterable" in right/wrong or moral/amoral directions. But in ethics we should practice good actions and avoid bad actions, therefore, the telos of ethics is a realization of a healthy virtuous soul and the fighting of vices that act as obstacles.

According to the form and structure of the explored treatise, compiler in his discussion about ethics begins from a definite clear point and gradually wants to reach a definite goal. Then the issue can be about the procedure and method for moving from subject matter as the beginning to the end. It can be said that in reading this treatise we can experience the spirit and rationale of the medieval formal logic in explicit and implicit ways.

The texture of the two parts of the First Discourse of Nasirean Ethics is a complexity of demonstrations, definitions, divisions, and combinations in a medieval spirit of logic in conformity with the subject that is under consideration. Discussion about ethics as a practical discipline begins its movement from "principles/archai" that function as the basis and starting points that should reach to a specific destination. Therefore, the geography of Tusi mediated writing about ethics is marked by two limits and a procedure in order to have a "philosophical" movement from the start to the end.

From the beginning it is emphasized that we should "know" these principles (Wickens 1964, p. 35) that first shape part of the First Discourse, and these axioms are mostly provided in natural science as an exact discipline. After describing the pertinent three principles there comes a

definition of soul and in its continuation demonstrations about six related issues. As a primary result, stated in words that will be repeated throughout the text, we read: “so much intended to drawing attention to the true nature of the soul, appropriate to this place: thus much suffices for knowledge of the rational soul” (Wickens 1964, p. 40). Afterwards, there is the division of the Soul into Vegetative, Animal, and Human ones, alongside the division of human faculties into irascible, concupiscible, and rational parts. Then the perfection and defection of human soul as the combination of all these three faculties are considered. But here, about the relation between whole/compound and parts/simples, a question arises which should be considered and in fact is considered. We can experience the same above-mentioned format about the first part of ethics as well as in the second part about ends too. Here discussion about the healthy soul has its preliminary steps in the basic quality, different kinds of human dispositions, and virtues. Therefore, in order to reach to the last or favored point as the title of this part of treatise is aimed, it is necessary to cover and link its two pertinent precedent points. At the same time writing about dispositions has an interconnection with the first division, for it has become clear that the subject matter of ethics as a discipline is the human soul.

3 - Logical Appropriation of Ethics

As we have seen, according to Tusi ethics has the capacity of becoming represented in logical format and at the same time logic can treat ethics in a specific way. Accordingly, both have a kind of interplay with each other, but even all this is not possible without the specific interpretation of medieval Arabic philosophy in general or Tusi in particular about Aristotle logic. In other words, it is through a new inherited reception of Aristotle’s *Organon* that Tusi in its framework can appropriate ethics. We may call this version “thick [or context” according to Black (1990, p. 1)] theory that has cultural roots in medieval Arabic texts. It seems that unlike the predominantly “thin” and “intermediate” versions of Syriac and modern scholars, respectively, the “thick reception” expands the domain and meaning of logic in a hierarchal way from up to down and through this reception wants to include all the available branches of knowledge according to Aristotle exposition. Therefore, we may infer that as a cosmic instrument it is available for any sympathetic thinker and philosopher in order to apply and use it for any discipline in its own specific way.

With regard to this brief but crucial clue about the thick version of *Organon* in medieval Arabic thinking, here through interplaying logical and ethical treatises called *Asas Aleqtebas* and *Nasirean Ethics*, we will consider the Tusi narration of the thick version and its appropriation of ethics. According to the logical treatise, in an organic way he combines three layers of logic as “speech/language,” “demonstration,” and “communication.” Therefore as far as possible he tries

to have a balanced and ordered presentation of the mentioned levels, although in his *Fist Discourse of Ethics* the speech/word is in minority whereas demonstrations and communications have the upper hand. Therefore it seems that he has a thick reception of logic, and we see verification of this point in the content of his treatise about logic which is divided into nine parts or techniques as the basis and regulator of the other disciplines (*Asas Al-Eqtebas* 1326, p. 6), each one of which has its own book. For him logic begins with discussion about basic, pertinent, and particular terms and their meanings. Therefore, as a norm the edifice of medieval thick logic begins from singular particular blocks that are pertinent words and their meanings and function as conceptions/*tasawwur*. Then he discusses the primary genera or ten categories with the start and focus on “substance”. As we read in *Nasirean Ethics*, Tusi begins with the pair of classification and definition as a necessary and customary vehicle in order to define the nature of philosophy as a whole and its parts. Then while focusing on practical philosophy he considers its definition and parts, and lastly, among the parts of practical philosophy, ethics begins with its subject matter on the individual soul. And it is more congenial with Tusi logic to begin from the singular and then go towards the intermediate (family), and at the end to the larger word/meaning that is the city (Wickens 1964, p. 26-31 which functions as a prolegomena that should be preceded before engagement with the related subject matter that is ethics).

Up to this point, the logical appropriation of the meanings of ethical words such as philosophy, practical philosophy, and ethics are described. After this stage Tusi goes to the second one, which is the subject and genus of ethics, and in what category it should be placed. In this regard he mentions some late opinions that say that discussion about genera is not pertinent to logic as a discipline. But as can be inferred Tusi thinks otherwise, and it is necessary to consider ten categories as a necessary introduction to definition, description, and shaping the premises of syllogisms (Tusi 1326, p. 34). And in this relation, he introduces the human soul as the subject matter of ethics and then considers it as a “simple substance” (Wickens 1965, p. 36).

Tusi, with his narration about the pertinent words and meanings of practical philosophy, ethics, and soul as substance and subject matter of the latter, provides a partial image of his thick reception of Aristotelian logic that we will put it in the category of conception/*tasawwur* in its individuality. But as is expected he does not stop at this stage but enters into composition, sentence, propositions, and premises. Or, as he himself calls apophantic speech/*aqawl e jazim* and different kinds of it (Tusi 1326, p. 61, and with regard to Avicenna Black 1990, p. 54).

According to this rationale, when we know the conceptions/*tasawwurat* then we can form and construct different sentences and premises about them and thereby enter into assent/*tasdiq*. The

mentioned plurality and diversity of different premises means that they are not monolithic, and as Tusi's classification verifies, according to their nature and function we may put claim against them as it is not rational and logical to claim the same thing from all of them. Thus all the premises of Nasirean Ethics are not apophantic, for we read premises which are not so. In this relation it may be said that those propositions that are not apophantic function in order to communicate with the people at large and persuade them to become ethical human beings. This phenomenon makes the text multilevel for it speaks or has translated and compiled for different audiences and readers as a crucial point in regard to sciences and disciplines that are essentially practical and their object are all the segments of the community and not some specific parts of it.

In this relation in the Ethical Discourse of Nasirean Ethics, we read some rhetorical, dialectical, and poetical statements and propositions, although in comparison with the other kinds of propositions they are mostly short and serve as clues for the confirmation or refutation of some notions. For example, Tusi begins his discussion about the subject matter and elementary principles of ethics according to the customary and prevalent axioms that function in delineating the subject matter of sciences, and accordingly, he logically introduces the human soul as the first category or subject matter. Then through proofs, inductions, and analogy Tusi demonstrates six points pertinent to this substance in about six pages (from page 36-41, see Wickens 1964). Through these sections and pages there are no traces of non-apophantic sayings, such as poetics or rhetoric and the like. But it is not the same in other sections, and, for example, when at random we take the fourth section of the First Discourse that discusses man as the noblest existent being in the world, we see it is a multi-textual composition made of proofs, Traditions of prophets, verses of the Quran, Shiite and mystical beliefs, and Arabic Poems (respectively Wickens 1964, p. 44, 46-48). Besides, all of them are at the service of theoretical enhancing or affirming the nobility of human being among the existents. At the same time this is the usual norm of the rest of the First Discourse about ethics, and in order to show it we have considered as examples the seventh section in the Second Division of the First Discourse on Ethics.

The topic of the mentioned section is about the superiority of "justice," its states and divisions, which is the essential focal category in classical and medieval ethical mentality. For instance Tusi reserved the term "love" for economic and political philosophy (Wickens 1964, p. 108). This section contains some interrelated levels that begin with the signification of the word "Justice," denoting both the ideas of "equivalence" and "unicity" (Wickens 1964, p. 95). Therefore by saying and writing the word "justice," two notions represent themselves in a particular order with the prevalence of "unity". And at the same time it becomes clear that our medieval logician understands it in the Aristotelian meaning of "relationship," and wants to demonstrate the "superiority" of it in comparison with the other virtues. According to this reading and

perspective, it seems natural that Tusi forms the main framework of his discussion on the basis of his reception of the chapters of Book 5 of *Nicomachean Ethics*. Therefore Tusi's narration about justice is in the context of his appropriation of the Aristotelian notion of "proportion" and its different kinds (Wickens 1964, p. 96). Thus in order to discuss a pivotal ethical category with a few references to God and no reference to rhetorical and imaginative propositions, our logician resorts to a philosophical/logical category and through its pertinent divisions continues his discussion about justice.

After his proportional representation of justice, Tusi considers its related divisions through a rather long logical classification and description, together with an introduction to the other various but related beliefs and ideas as a customary Aristotelian way of thinking and researching. In this regard it is interesting that in his proportional appropriation he narrates Plato's rationale about justice through notion of proportion, although at the same time considering it as a psychological affection too – we will consider this notion in the following lines. In regard to Aristotle, it is noteworthy that before introducing the rationale of the First Philosopher as his model, Tusi mentions his method of reading Aristotle at the beginning of his related three-page discussion (Wickens 1964, p. 100-102) and also at the end of it. At the same time he says that Aristotle divides justice into three categories and that all of them are "relational" in regard to titles such as God, human beings, and predecessors (Wickens 1964, p. 100), although most of this discussion is limited to the first subject in its Abrahamic Islamic version (and in comparison with it, the other two titles are absent). It seems that three factors are influential in this specific narration, which is Tusi's particular culturally conventional assumptions (see also Kennedy-Day 2003, p. 120), alongside his logical/philosophical general natural presuppositions, the content of the transmitted tradition (that was unfortunately only briefly mentioned), and the quality of his readers (and especially patrons for compiling the ethical treatise).

In the context of narrating Aristotelian notions, Tusi introduces the opinions of others, relating them directly or indirectly to Greek (Plato) or Islamic thinkers (Avicenna or Ibn Miskawaih) by their proper names. As we mentioned above, our medieval logician places Plato's notion of justice in a specific framework of "mean", for "centrality of justice is not like the centrality of other virtues, because both peripheries of justice are tyranny" (Wickens 1964, p. 104). But immediately he introduces justice as a psychological affection in distinction of act, faculty, and knowledge, which can be regarded in three ways such as psychological habit, psychological virtue, and justice (Wickens 1964, p. 104-105, 107).

Beside Plato, Tusi mentions two questions without the name of their questioners and their related answers as are presented in the Islamic territories, and among the answers he resorts to

two Traditions of the Islamic prophet too. But his conclusion is with the First Philosopher through his emphasis on the necessity of a collector dominant faculty, in human being, and world, in order to gather in a proportional way the different faculties and forces into a “unity” which is the shadow of God (Wickens 1964, p. 108). This can show how with the introduction of God, as a conclusive entity that is unheard and absent in the classical Greek mentality, the Islamic medieval logician in his own way should confront and engage with.

Conclusion

Tusi as a general and cultural thinker seeks to present his version of philosophical ethics that is possible among different constructions of the same discipline. Accordingly, we expect that his narration cannot be monolithic, but there are factors that make its overall spirit philosophical, and with more reading and the essential functions of Aristotelian logic, it is normal to trace its medieval version of the Organon.

Beside this general technical aspect, there is the new unprecedented introduction of a panoptic entity and its consequences that are basically philosophized under the broad universal particular problem (Abed 1991, p. 1; note that this will be considered as the focal problem of Arabic medieval logic and not only of Farabi). Therefore, in order to present a logical appropriation of Ethics, it is necessary to accommodate both the universal and particular aspects, and as a result, this accommodation realizes itself through a “thick reception” of the Aristotelian Organon that Tusi presents in nine layers and levels. Thereby through this thick reception his logical appropriation of ethics includes both the natural (apophantic sentences) and conventional (non-apophantic sentences) dimensions of morality.

Bibliography

1. G. M. Wickens, **the Nasirean Ethics**, George Allen & Unwin LTD, 1964.
2. Majid Fakhry, **Ethical Theories in Islam**, Leiden, 1991.
3. Kiki Kennedy-Day, **Books of Definition in Islamic Philosophy**, Routledge, 2003.
4. خواجه نصیرالدین طوسی ، اساس الاقتباس ، دانش‌گاه تهران 1326.
5. خواجه نصیرالدین طوسی ، اخلاق ناصری ، خوارزمی 1387.
7. Deborah L. Black, **Logic and Aristotle’s Rhetoric and Poetics in Medieval Arabic Philosophy**, Leiden, 1990.
8. Shukri B. Abed, **Aristotelian Logic and Arabic Language in Alfarabi**, State of NY Press, 1991.