



ETHICS

ETHICS (*aklāq*, q.v.). For ten centuries authors writing in Persian have engaged their readers with moral and ethical questions. A body of practical moral doctrine was elaborated as part of the earliest development of Persian literature, at which time considerable reflection was devoted to topics ranging from morals to ethics, from the exhortation not to harm one's fellow creature to the search for the meaning of life. Some modern scholars (e.g., Aḥmad Karīmī Ḥakkāk) have questioned whether or not there was a Persian ethics, in the sense that there was a Greek ethics. The invasion of the Persian cultural area under Alexander the Great (q.v.) and later the Islamic conquest certainly brought great disruption and change, but it seems that they did not interrupt a secular Persian concern with how man should conduct his life. The consistency of this concern offers a fertile hypothesis for further research.

In the first centuries of the Islamic period two strands of moral thought were expressed in Arabic: Islamic thought, centered on the Qur'ān and the Hadith, and Greek thought, derived from the major works of Aristotle and the Neo-Platonist tradition. A variety of essential works were translated from Middle Persian, Syriac, and Greek. Greek thought was adapted to Islamic thought in brilliant writings by Abū Yūsof Ya'qūb Kendī, Abū Naṣr Muḥammad Fārābī (q.v.), Avicenna (q.v.), and Abū 'Alī Aḥmad Meskawayh. The secretaries to the caliphs, most of them familiar with the old Persian style of administration, played a determining role in the transmission of influential texts; 'Abd-al-Ḥamīd, secretary to the Omayyad caliph Marwān II (127-32/744-50), and 'Abd-Allāh Ebn al-Moqaffa' (q.v.), secretary to leading members of the 'Abbāsīd



family under al-Manṣūr (136-58/754-75), are the best-known examples. Some anonymous authors also introduced significant texts, for example, *Serr al-asrār* and *Nehāyat al-arab fī aḳbār al-Fors wa'l-'Arab* (cf. Grignaschi). The academy at Jondīšāpūr in southwestern Persia, the hermetic milieu of Ḥarrān in northern Syria, and translations by the Syriac Christian Ḥonayn and his son Eshāq also provided major elements of an ethics and a morality that were gradually accommodated to Islam. Another great enterprise was the compilation in Arabic of maxims, for example, by Moḥammad b. Yūsof 'Āmerī, Abū Manṣūr Ṭa'ālebī, Mobaššer b. Fātek, and Ebn 'Abd Rabbeh, all of whom flourished just when Persian literature was emerging, in the late 10th and early 11th centuries.

The phenomenon of a non-Arabic literature within the Islamic world, a new venture in the 9th and 10th centuries, was the creation of men who were most often bilingual and who were well acquainted with the Arabic texts referred to above but who had decided to write in Persian, in order to reach the largest possible audience in the Persian cultural area. It is possible to trace the evolution of this literature over several centuries. At first collections of maxims and words of counsel, covering both moral behavior and how to live in society, were circulated. In the 11th century there was a movement to classify this body of material, apparently on the model of reference works organized by subject and ready for use by other writers; even illustrative anecdotes began to be included. At the end of the century a brilliant series of ethical treatises, drawing on this literature of maxims, began to appear. The type can be labeled “traditional,” for it was inspired by the same moral principles that had implicitly guided the earlier compilations. This movement reached its apogee in the second half of the 13th century in the work of the poet Sa'dī of Shiraz, who argued that the decisive moral act was persuasion and that it was to be accomplished through literary excellence. Mirrors for princes ranked foremost among such traditional treatises; they were animated by the contemporary conviction that to persuade a prince to moral behavior is to persuade his people as well. Systematic moral thought, derived mainly from the works of Avicenna and Fārābī, did not appear in Persian literature until the end of the 12th century. It followed the broad classification of Greek rational thought, in which the categories of individual morality, domestic morality, and civic morality were distinguished.

Some modern authors (see ADAB, Ā'ĪN-NĀMA, AḲLĀQ, ANDARZ) have emphasized the connections of medieval Persian moral thought with that of



the Sasanian period. Concern with maxims and the forms in which they were expressed, as well as attention to good thoughts, good words, and good deeds, was indeed inherited from the pre-Islamic past. On the other hand, one legacy of Hellenistic-Byzantine syncretism was insistence on the several cardinal virtues expected from the ruling classes of society.

Moral thought in Persian emerged in a specific context, however: A morality, even an ethics, had already been elaborated in Arabic, often by Persian Islamic thinkers. Furthermore, in the Qur'ān and the Hadith the whole of human life was viewed from a religious perspective, including what can be considered to belong to the domain of ethics and morals. Certain human actions were prescribed and others forbidden; sanctions would ultimately be applied in another world. God's commands, as embodied in Koranic revelation, defined the paths of good and evil; reason was simply the intelligent application of the prescriptions of faith. In Greek thought, on the contrary, careful inquiry into what is good is the primary condition of a moral life. The brilliant achievement of Persian thinkers was to accommodate this Greek rational approach to faith in koranic law. The debate on the relation between reason and tradition, *'aql o naql*, lasted for several centuries.

Aside from disputes among schools, this accommodation was already apparent from the beginning of Persian wisdom literature, in two ways: On the one hand, no maxim that would have contradicted the Islamic faith was included in the compendia; on the other, the most important maxims gradually came to be imbued with the authority of one or another prominent individual, which elevated them to the status of holy writ and elicited authorized commentary. It was through this literature that a specifically moral point of view could be introduced into an all-encompassing system of thought in which the authority of revelation and interpretation had fixed forever the limits of the legal and the illegal.

Another important and original facet of Persian moral thought was reliance on literature. In rational discourse the author seeks intellectual persuasion through logical argument, and thus in systematic moral thought reason is applied to the question of what should be within a system of values, sometimes only implicit, embodying philosophy, faith, and ideology. Persian moral thinkers proceeded in a totally different fashion, turning to the rhetorical and poetic aspects of discourse and relying on the special power of language to exhort and persuade. Three devices predominated: the maxim, expressed sonorously and poetically in order that it might remain in memory;



the anecdote (*hekāya*), often specifically illustrating such an elevated pronouncement; and verse exploiting the full potential of language. Indeed, even systematic moral thought, when first expressed in Persian, was presented with emphasis on rhetoric and poetics; the chronological evolution of Persian moral thought can thus be witnessed in the development of elevated locutions.

The maxim (*pand*, *naṣīḥat*) was the basic expression of Persian systematic moral thought and the one embodying most respect for human free will. It was addressed primarily to the adult male (*kas*, *šaḳṣ*, to “you”) and more specifically to the one with the most power, the prince. The faculty of reflection (*andīšīdan*, *segālīdan* “to reflect”), which had to be informed by alertness (*huš*, *āgāhī*) and foresightedness (*tadbīr*), was emphasized. In particular one was supposed to foresee the consequences (*‘āqebat*) of proposed actions on several dimensions: success or failure, happiness or unhappiness, personal interest (*maṣlaḥat*), and so on. The point of departure was thus not a set of moral precepts but convenience: Morality was knowing how to live in society (*farhang*, *adab*). Behavior was to be regulated according to what the society of the time judged conducive to its equilibrium (*šāyesta*, *ravā*, *sazā*, *darḳʻor*). To regulate behavior was first of all to repress what was not commonly accepted, and the maxim was often a ban on a particular action. Wisdom literature was thus linked to *adab* and rooted in the social judgment of propriety. Maxims led into moral thought when referring to a violent act by one man against another (*āzār*, *setīz*, *setam*, *zūr*, *ḳolm*, etc.), with all that such an act presupposes of malice and evil. The magnitude of the fault was measured by the power of the one who committed it. The moral man was thus distinguished from the immoral man primarily by abstention from harming anyone (*kam-āzārī*).

The intimate voice of the solitary conscience did not figure in Persian moral thought; rather, the primary point of reference was experience (*dīdan*, *āzmūdan*, *tajreba kardan*), not personal experience but that of the sages (*dānāyān*, *keradmandān*, etc.) who had gone before. It was not necessary to repeat their experience; the maxims they had drawn from it were valid for all time and served as a kind of collective conscience by which the individual was integrated into society. The system was not closed, however, for in every period violence required the reworking of relevant subjects in the guise of commentary.

There is no Persian word for “conscience,” but the reflexive *ḳod*, or *-ḳʻīs* is



commonly used to refer to the moral person. Maxims do not address his conscience but demand from him above all alert reflection; he must avoid inattention (*ḡaflat*), keep to himself, live in abstinence from many things (*parhīzīdan*, etc.), and resist all haste (*šetāb*), that great enemy of the moral life. Thus beyond simply “not harming” others, the moral man is vigilant; failure to attend is often judged an immoral act. Advice literature abounds in examples. Maxims are not judgments, and it is important to recognize the exactitude with which they were used in Persian moral thought: They were to be carried in memory and recalled in order to reinforce an impulse to action with the clear light of reason. In this sense Persian moral behavior was an art.

Even to speak of moral behavior implies a belief in free will. Man must be confronted with a certain array of choices; if everything is fated or predestined, he has no need for morality. That morality is thus contrary to an inevitable destiny was already clear in the oldest Persian advice literature, in which effort (*kušeš*, *jahd*) was constantly opposed to fate (*qažā*, *dawlat*, *bakt*, etc.). The debate over human free will and its limits, which has occupied theologians and philosophers through the centuries, found few echoes in Persian moral thought, which is based on exhortation to effort. Destiny implies that man is bound by sequences of events and constraints, but the heavens, though impervious to human will, nevertheless offer gaps: propitious occasions (*forṣat*) that, if man is alert enough to seize them, permit him to generate new sequences. It seems that this traditional Persian notion of *forṣat* made it possible to reconcile destiny and free will.

Nevertheless, Persian moral thought developed in an Islamic context, in which destiny is considered to be determined by God’s command (*amr*). He commanded that the world come into existence, which implies a world order (*nezām*) in which each being has its place and each man his role (*bakt*, *qesmat*); this belief in turn implies that those responsible for the world order are to command good and forbid evil, as defined by divine revelation. The duty to obey devolves on every man.

In traditional Persian moral thought fate was accepted as a reality to which human effort is opposed. Only slowly did philosophers come to attribute to it a divine character. In Ferdowsī’s work there is no evidence that destiny and God had yet been conflated, but religious influence made inroads in the course of the 11th century, particularly under the pressure of Sufism, with its positive conception of love. Destiny came to be conceived as animated by the thought of perfection. From this point of view, the intellectual distance between



Ferdowsī and Sa'dī is considerable.

In fully developed Persian moral thought destiny was thus taken as ordering the world on the principle of perfection. Implicitly (explicitly in Sufism) perfection appeared superior to all law: Man is commanded to perfection, that is, to his destiny, already at work in the vicissitudes of the world. Acceptance of this destiny (*reżā*) is one of the conditions of fulfilling it, as well as of contentment (*korsandī*, *qenā'at*, etc.) with one's lot in life. Persian moral thinkers devoted part of their effort to awakening man to this acceptance and to refining its modalities; Islam, on the other hand, embodied the conviction that man can become perfect, "pure" (*pāk*), and that society can become a "perfect city." The conception of human perfection, implying man's satisfaction with his lot, soon became a horizon common to morality and religion. Seen from the vantage point of the purpose of life, which is that of ethics, this perspective has major consequences of every kind.

On one hand, the role of morality was to assign guilt. Individual guilt lay in the realm of words, but in society as a whole it was the prince who was held guilty. The human word has a power that can give life or condemn to death. The just prince was the shadow of God on earth, and even the repository of His glory, but, when he fell into injustice, he was held responsible for all the ills of the people. On the other hand, the role of morality was to lead to reason, which, when its object was action, was taken for a cardinal virtue. In the immense literature related to *kerad*, the term refers to much more than reason (see 'AQL). It can mean good sense or healthy thought, the faculty of reasoning well, wisdom in the sense of perception of deep secrets, or even the mysterious intelligence that orders the world. Reason can encompass deliberation, calculation, and trickery to further the good. It brings a sense of measure and moderation in every sphere. It is equivalent to light, and what it illuminates above all is the virtue of justice, the justness of human powers in balance, or even the justice of rulers.

The Persian texts in which this morality is expressed are numerous. Probably the first was a book of wisdom, *Kerad-nāma* (ed. M. Tarwat, Tehran, 1367 Š./1988), compiled in the 11th century; it was drawn from seventeen collections, each attributed to a prominent person, and represents the fruit of choices among numerous earlier texts. This work is noteworthy on two counts: On one hand, the selected counsels and ideas prefigure the most important concepts in Persian moral thought for many centuries, and, on the other, care was taken, through pseudepigraphy, to identify, preserve, and endow with



authority certain coherent groups of texts.

It has thus been possible to reconstruct (de Fouchécour, 1987, pp. 38-131) clusters of earlier wisdom texts: those attributed to Anōšervān and Bozorgmehr (q.v.); to Aristotle, Plato, and Hermes Trismegistus; to Ardašīr; and to the Prophet Moḥammad and his faithful companion ‘Alī b. Abī Ṭāleb. Although these texts, whether isolated or included in larger narratives like those in Ferdowsī’s *Šāh-nāma*, continued to be copied for a long time, new ones soon displaced them at the leading edge of moral thought.

Beginning in the 12th century, writers on morality were engaged in the task of classifying maxims according to notions that seemed important to them. For example, among the collections in Arabic (and perhaps also in Persian) was one that had been compiled by the Hanafite jurist Abu’l-Layṭ Samarqandī (d. ca. 373/983) and entitled *Tanbīh al-ġāfelīn* (ed. ‘A-‘A. Moḥammad al-Wakīl, 2 vols., Jeddah, 1980), comprising almost 3,000 aphorisms and quotations arranged under eighty-five headings; it was translated into Persian at the beginning of the 12th century (see, e.g., Rieu, *Persian Manuscripts* III, p. 1064). Morality was Samarqandī’s main concern, and the arrangement of his material reveals the preoccupations of a middle-class man of his time. Among such compilations classified by ideas two were particularly important: *Aḳlāq-e moḥtašamī* (ed. M.-T. Dānešpažūh, Tehran, 1339/1960), compiled by Našīr-al-Dīn Ṭūsī before his celebrated *Aḳlāq-e nāšeri*, and especially *Toḥfat al-molūk* by ‘Alī b. Abī Ḥafṣ (unsatisfactory ed. Tehran, 1317 Š./1938; for manuscripts, see Monzavī, *Nosḳaha*, p. 1565), both of the first quarter of the 13th century. They stand at the apex of a tradition that had developed through the 12th century; the choice of headings reveals long familiarity with the earlier wisdom compilations.

From the end of the 11th to the end of the 13th century, in fact, there was a floruit of works on morality. They are traditional in character, in the sense that they are based on earlier wisdom compilations, from which their authors drew heavily; they are traditional also because they are organized according to clear-cut moral notions, around which all the wisdom of their own time is assembled. What distinguishes them from the early compilations is the extensive reliance on technique and literary effect, for example, extensive use of anecdotes and a Persian style exemplified by the translation into prose of the stories from *Kalīla wa Demna* (q.v.), completed after 538/1143 by Našr-Allāh Monšī, who thus initiated a literary school. This Persian style was recondite, owing in particular to extensive Arabic vocabulary; in the second



half of the 13th century Sa'dī profoundly altered it, turning to a Persian closer to the everyday language and more influenced by great Persian poetry.

Ṭabarestān, Khorasan, Azarbaijan, Anatolia, and the cities of Ġazna and Shiraz delimit the vast literary map where magisterial works were produced in the specified period. The *Qābūs-nāma* (ed. Ġ.-Ḥ Yūsufī, Tehran 1345 Š./1966) was finished by its author, the prince Kay Kāvūs, a little after 475/1082. Although the moral thought represented is of the most traditional kind, its author implicitly followed the rational division of morality into individual, domestic, and communal categories. In the last chapter all human life is reconstructed around the notion of *javānmardī*, the spirit of generosity coupled with honor, by which man links himself with other men prompted by the same spirit.

Kīmīā-ye sa'ādat (ed. Ḥ. Kaḍīv Jam, Tehran, 1362 Š./1983), completed in 499/1106 by the great Sufī jurist and theologian Moḥammad Ġazālī (q.v.), is a classic of religious moral thought in Persian. Sanā'ī left his great verse work *Ḥadīqat al-ḥaqīqa* (ed. M. Rażawī, Tehran, 1329 Š./1950) unfinished when he died in 525/1131; it reflects all the different facets of the author's personality (poet, courtier, Sufi), as well as his constant scolding and exhortation of his fellow men. *Baḥr al-fawā'id* (ed. M.-T. Dānešpażūh, Tehran, 1345 Š./1966), by an unknown author, dates from 550/1155 and is a sort of moral encyclopedia, guided by religion and influenced by Ġazālī's book. Neẓāmī Ganjavī composed his influential poem *Maḳzan al-asrār* (ed. W. Dastgerdī, Tehran, 1313 Š./1934) in about 570/1174, with the intention of surpassing Sanā'ī's work; in it a great ascetic poet confronts princely power. Rażī-al-Dīn Nīšābūrī composed *Makārem al-aḳlāq* (in M. Mīnovī, ed., *Do resāla dar aḳlāq*, Tehran, 1341 Š./1962, pp. ix-254) before the end of the 12th century; it stands in a long line of works with the same title, comprising lists of opposed virtues and vices, well defined and illustrated with quotations, aphorisms, and anecdotes. Malātīawī dated his *Barīd al-sa'ādat* (ed. M. Šervānī, Tehran, 1351 Š./1972) 606/1209; it belongs to the genre of compilations of quotations from illustrious men, witness to the evolution of early advice literature into words endowed with authority.

Eshāq Sajāsī's *Farā'ed al-solūk* (ed. N. Weşşāl and Ġ.-R. Afrāsīābī, Tehran, 1367/1988), on ten virtues, completed in 610/1212, is particularly interesting for the quality of his writing and his views on royal charisma. From the beginning of the 13th century there is the anonymous *al-Mofīd le'l-mostafīd* (ed. N. Taqawī, Tehran, 1310 Š./1931; see BĀBĀ AFZĀL-AL-DĪN), halfway between a traditional and a speculative treatment of morality; it is presented in the guise of an initiation, and the author was particularly attentive to the



evils issuing from man's inherent shame. Finally, there was Sa'dī, who first dedicated his *Būstān* in 655/1257 and his *Golestān* in 656/1258 (Tehran, 1359 Š./1980, 1368 Š./1989). Although recapitulating the whole of ancient moral thought, of which he offered a superb sampling, he was particularly innovative in his use of an ancient narrative form, the "assembly" (*maqāmāt*), in which he marvelously combined maxims and anecdotes, prose and strong, limpid poetry. Because of his lively use of the most common circumstances of Shiraz life in the 13th century, his work is rooted in daily moral realities.

The tradition of mirrors for princes holds a privileged place in Persian moral thought, having begun well before Islam. The literature of this genre from the Islamic period is, however, enormous. Histories and chronicles, epic poems, and poems of praise can all be mirrors for princes. Moral lessons intended for princes are common in many works in Persian, for example, those of Neẓāmī, especially his *Eskandar-nāma* (q.v.), which his imitators transformed into a book of wisdom.

Two categories of mirrors for princes can be distinguished, those composed of tales and those in which the material is organized by ideas. Those composed of tales offer successions of stories with moral themes. Two great compilations are *Kalīla wa Demna* (which took its title from the first story) and the *Marzbān-nāma* (Tehran, 1355 Š./1976). The latter was composed in Ṭabārestān in the 10th century, then revised twice, at the end of the 12th century and the beginning of the 13th century. The second reworking, by Varāvīnī, is in the style of Naṣr-Allāh Monšī's translation of *Kalīla wa Demna* and with the same basic theme: Friendship (*dūstī*) is the key to success in politics. The original tales treat politics (*sīāsat*), that is, the duty of the prince to assign and maintain every subject of his kingdom in his destined place in society. This theme is treated in *Kalīla wa Demna* but from the point of view of the prince's courtiers, torn between ambition and the duty to serve. *Kalīla wa Demna* was based on the Indian *Panjatantra*, or five occasions to learn wisdom; the original text was translated into Middle Persian, Arabic, and Persian and was augmented by additional tales, rendering it a treasury of reflections for generations.

Tales embedded in a frame story belong to a tradition well known from *A Thousand and One Nights*, the frame story of which was also originally Persian, as was demonstrated in the 10th century by such great bibliophiles as Mas'ūdī and Ebn al-Nadīm (q.v.). The *Sendbad-nāma* (ed. A. Ateş, Istanbul, 1949), for example, received a final reworking by Zāherī (Kāteb Samarqandī) at the end of the 12th century. A young prince falsely accused of seduction must wait



seven days for his fortune to become more favorable, and during this period he must suffer the attacks of the viziers, motivated by the seductive mother-in-law; the book touches in particular upon the role of women in politics. The *Baktiār-nāma* (ed. D. Şafā, Tehran, 1348 Š./1969) is also of ancient origin; it is the story of a young prince who has been condemned but saves his life by means of telling stories, the last of which, on the last day, is the story of his father, the king, who had abandoned him. The general theme of the book is again that of man confronting his destiny.

Aside from the aforementioned *Qābūs-nāma*, three great works can be cited as examples of mirrors for princes with contents organized conceptually. *Sīar al-molūk* (ed. H. Darke, Tehran, 1340 Š./1962) was composed by the grand vizier of the Saljuq ruler Malekšāh and completed a year before his assassination in 485/1093. The book treats the organization of royal services but draws abundantly, for the purposes of political and moral instruction, on two kinds of stories: traditional anecdotes and historical tales closer to the author's own time. Moḥammad Ġazālī's *Naṣiḥat al-molūk* (ed. J. Homā'ī, Tehran, 1351 Š./1972), written around 499/1105 and dedicated to Malekšāh's son, was a great source of inspiration in Persian literature. It begins with a theoretical introduction on the roots of the prince's faith in government. The seven following chapters, the authenticity of which can be problematic, include advice and stories covering a vast field of moral action. In 552/1157 Zāherī wrote *Aḡrāz al-sīāsat* (ed. J. Še'ār, Tehran, 1349 Š./1970), with seventy-four chapters in the old style, each devoted to a royal personage from the pre-Islamic or Islamic period with whatever information on his life and his counsels was retained in the tradition.

Systematic treatment of morality and politics first appeared at the end of the 12th century in Faḡr-al-Dīn Rāzī's great encyclopedia of sciences, *Jāme' al-'olūm* (ed. M.-H. Tasbiḥī, Tehran, 1346 Š./1967). It paved the way for the magisterial work of Nāṣer-al-Dīn Ṭūsī, *Aklāq-e nāserī* (ed. M. Mīnovī, Tehran, 1356 Š./1977), on which many commentaries were written and of which there were several imitations. Composed in 633/1235 in an Isma'ili milieu in Qohestān, it constituted a synthesis of works on morality and politics by Meskawayh, Avicenna, and Ebn al-Moqaffa'. The work, characterized by considerable technical precision for the period, has remained unsurpassed and served to guide the writings of many disciples.

Only a few of the works attesting to Persian moral and political thought in the periods of its formation and full floruit have been mentioned. Others include



Jawāme' al-ḥekāyāt (ed. M. Mo'īn, Tehran, 1340- Š./1961-), which 'Awfī completed at Lahore in 632/1232, an example of great compilations of Persian literary treasures outside the Persian cultural area, and *Sāz wa pīrāya-ye šāhān-e pormāya* by Afzāl-al-Dīn Kāšānī (in *Mošannafāt-e Afzal-al-Dīn Moḥammad Maraḡī Kāšānī*, ed. M. Mīnovī and Y. Mahdavi, 2 vols., Tehran, 1331-37 Š./1952-58, I, pp. 83-110), an example of the high level of writings produced in the Isma'īli community.

Over the centuries there have been many works on morality in Persian, but all have been inspired by models from the first four centuries of Persian literature. Almost every year a previously unknown treatise is rediscovered, published, or translated (see, e.g., recent translations by Moḥammad Bāqer Najm-e Tānī, *Maw'ēza-ye jahāngīrī*, ed. and tr. S. Alvi as *Advice on the Art of Government: An Indo-Islamic Mirror for Princes*, Albany, N.Y., 1989; *Baḡr al-fawā'ed*, tr. J. S. Meisami as *The Sea of Precious Virtues*, Salt Lake City, Utah, 1991; and *Marzbān-nāma*, tr. M.-H. Ponroy as *Les contes de Marzbān*, Paris, 1992). In this uninterrupted succession of works the task is to recognize their respective distances from their models. The question is important, for these writings, though presented in a general historical guise, were aimed at specific milieux, in order to reveal in what ways they transgressed what the authors conceived of as morality.

See also [AQLĀQ](#); [ANDARZ](#).

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