The Nature of "Society" from the Perspective of Ibn Miskawayh

Ruhollah Tohidinia *
Assistant Professor, Research Institute of Hawzah and University, Qom, Iran.
tohidinia@rihu.ac.ir

Zahra Akhoundzadeh
Level 4 Graduate Student (M.A. equivalent), Al-Zahra Islamic Seminary (Jami'at al-Zahra), Qom, Iran
z.khondzade@gmail.com

Abstract

The question of the nature of "society" (al-ijtimāʿ) is a fundamental issue in social philosophy. The significance of this question stems from the fact that an accurate understanding of human relations and the laying of foundations for the human sciences require the explanation of that very essence which transforms human beings into a coherent civilizational unit. Employing a descriptive-analytical method and focusing on the views of Ibn Miskawayh, the present study explains how society is formed, how it endures, and what its ultimate end is. The findings indicate that from Ibn Miskawayh's perspective, society is a volitional entity and a product of "customary practice" (al-sīrah / al-ruṭbah). The primary origin of the human inclination toward collective life is "natural deficiency" (nuqṣān ṭabʿī) and the quality of "sociability" (uns). However, the reality of society is only realized by transcending natural necessities through a volitional bond. The continuity of society depends on the type of love (maḥabbah) arising from pleasure, benefit, or virtue, which, as the social form of justice, acts as the main adhesive of collective life. Ibn Miskawayh considers the ultimate human end—i.e., worldly and otherworldly happiness—to be contingent upon the structural perfection of society, namely the organic unity (ittihād / taʿāḥud) of its members. From this perspective, the emphasis on "customary practice" portrays a novel agency in contrast to social structures, and virtue-oriented love, as opposed to benefit-oriented love, can offer a model for the analysis of social solidarity.

Keywords: Ibn Miskawayh, Muslim Philosophers, Social Philosophy, Nature of Society, Organic Unity (Ta'āḥud), Love (Maḥabbah).

https://orcid.org/0009-0000-2720-8627

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