

# Practical wisdom in Islamic philosophical tradition, an investigation of causes of imperfect growth

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## ABSTRACT

According to Aristotle's famous classification, wisdom is divided into practical and theoretical. Following Aristotle's classification, Muslim philosophers divided practical wisdom into ethics, household management and civil policy. With a glance at the Muslim philosopher's heritage, we can see that some philosophers like Al-Farabi, Ibn Miskawayh and Nasir al-Din Tusi wrote in-depth and dedicated books on this subject, while others such as Avicenna, Suhrawardi and Mulla Sadra only talked briefly about practical wisdom. Studying life and teachings of some Muslim philosophers, we found three main cause of ignoring practical wisdom: Muslim scholar's attitudes toward practical wisdom, social and political conditions of their era and checking back practical wisdom to knowledges such as jurisprudence.

**Keywords:** Theoretical wisdom, practical wisdom, political philosophy, Islamic philosophy.

## Introduction

According to Aristotle's famous classification, wisdom is divided into practical and theoretical. Following Aristotle's classification, Muslim philosophers divided practical wisdom into ethics, household management and civil policy. Every Muslim scholar - depending on his method of thinking and rational abilities - takes different attitude toward practical wisdom; and even some of them choose to make some changes and rearrangement in Aristotelian divisions of practical wisdom. Muslim scholars have published various books regarding ethics - which is one of the tree branches of practical wisdom - but there was few attention to two other branches (i.e. household management and civil policy or political philosophy).

With a glance at the Muslim philosopher's heritage, we can see that some philosophers like Al-Farabi, Ibn Miskawayh and Nasir al-Din Tusi wrote in-depth and dedicated books on the subject of practical wisdom, while others such as Avicenna,

Suhrawardi and Mulla Sadra only talked briefly about this subject. Now the key question is that why Muslim philosophers pay no or little attention to details of these three branches? The authors have attempted to answer this question from three perspectives: examining the concepts, reviewing books written by Muslim scholars about the subject and examining factors of paleness of practical wisdom among Muslim philosophers.

## First part : Examining Concepts

### • Theoretical and practical wisdom from Aristotle's viewpoint

Aristotle in book 6 of *Nicomachean Ethics* discusses rational virtues and tries to find a virtue that can help us discover a mean virtue. He Assumes that human soul have five different stable dispositions (hexis: something that the soul can have, and which can disclose truth with it): 1. Art (Techne) 2. Knowledge (Episteme) 3. Practical Judgement (Phronesis) 4. Wisdom (Sophia) 5. Intellect (Nous)

### ✓ Theoretical wisdom from Aristotle's viewpoint

Aristotle's motivation for introducing theoretical wisdom is to elevate human's capacities such that they can reason on constant, general and necessary affairs. From his viewpoint, certain knowledge is only obtained when we use certain and correct premises in our reasoning.

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Aristotle believes that theoretical knowledge is based on axioms which cannot be obtained through argumentation. He believes that these axioms can be obtained only from immediate knowledge by human soul. He also believes that theoretical wisdom is a combination of both immediate and conceptual knowledge. He says the Anaxagoras and Thales are good examples for philosophers that discuss this kind on wisdom. In fact, Aristotle considers the theoretical and immediate knowledge as two essential elements in theoretical wisdom. He says that the theoretical philosopher is one who understands the first principles with the immediate knowledge, and after receiving these principles, he will make the correct method of proof. The main purpose of Aristotle in Sixth Book of Nicomachean Ethics is to identify practical wisdom.

### ✓ Practical wisdom from Aristotle's viewpoint

In the Sixth Book of Nicomachean Ethics, Aristotle has tried to express the nature and characteristics of practical wisdom. From Aristotle's perspective, practical wisdom belongs to practical intellect, and theoretical wisdom belongs to theoretical intellect. He considers practical and theoretical wisdom a rational virtue. Aristotle counts politicians as examples of persons with practical wisdom and establishes a strong connection between morality and politics. Aristotle believes that practical wisdom must be carried out by the politicians who take steps towards goodness and try to bring others to happiness. The words of Aristotle are as follows:

"It is clear that practical wisdom is not possible if a person is not morally competent."

He believes that there is an interaction between moral virtue and practical wisdom: It is impossible to be one without the other. He writes:

"It is impossible for a person to have good morals without practical wisdom, and it is impossible to have practical wisdom without moral virtue."

Aristotle writes about the relationship between moral virtues and practical wisdom:

"Moral helps you to have a correct goal, and practical wisdom shows the right path toward that goal."

### • Theoretical and practical wisdom from the perspective of Islamic scholars

Islamic philosophers, have followed from Aristotle in the division of wisdom into theoretical and practical forms. Theoretical wisdom refers to the knowledge associated with the two issues of "being and not being" and is outside the scope of human action; and the knowledge that relates to the scope of human action and is referred to as "must and must not do" is practical wisdom. Issues such as, the necessary existence, contingent existence, the cause and the effect, the immaterial substance and the material substance, are related to theoretical wisdom and issues such as ethics and politics are related to practical wisdom. Similarly, in Aristotle's philosophy, general principles, the issues of "theoretical wisdom" and the issues related to the civic administration, the home economics and the ethics, have been cited as issues of "practical wisdom."<sup>[1]</sup>

## Part II: The History of Practical Wisdom among Muslim Scholars

Before describing the reasons for the lack of attention to practical wisdom among Muslim philosophers, we should take a look at the history of practical wisdom among Islamic philosophers, and then the reasons for its paleness are discussed in detail.

### • Practical Wisdom in Farabi Philosophy

Farabi is the first person among Islamic philosophers, which has discussed practical wisdom independently and systematically. Most of his works are focused on political philosophy and practical wisdom. He was an expert in these fields: philosophy, logic, sociology, medicine, mathematics and music. Farabi belongs to the Neoplatonic School and tries to reconcile Plato's and Aristotle's views using monotheistic approaches. Islamic philosophers count him as a peripatetic philosopher. Farabi is known as "The Second Teacher" among Muslim Philosophers, because he writes many commentaries on Aristotle works.

Some of Farabi works in practical wisdom are:

1. Ma Yanbaghi an Yoa'lam Ghabl Al-Phalsapha' (What we should learn before philosophy): In this book, Farabi mentions the knowledges that are prerequisites of philosophy such as: logic, geometry, morality.
2. Al-Syasasa' Al-Madania' (Civic Politics): This book is about politics which is a branch of practical wisdom.
3. Tahsil Al-Sa'aada' (Acquiring Happiness): This book is on ethics and theoretical philosophy.
4. Resala'ton Fi Al-Syasasa' (A treatise on politics): Farabi discusses the principles of political science in this book.
5. A'ara'o Ahl Al-Madina' Al-Fazela (Opinions of the people of Utopia): Farabi describes his ideal city (his utopia) in this book.

Farabi's works in practical wisdom led him to outperform other Muslim philosophers and be a model for later scholars in practical wisdom and to influence their thoughts.

### ✓ Farabi's influence on Ibn Rushd

Ibn Rushd, according to Farabi, divides politics into theoretical and practical. He interprets Plato and Aristotle by using Farabi works, also he has a commentary on Plato's Republic. Although he uses Farabi's words in his works, he does not use the term "government". "The government" is one of the phrases Farabi describes in political philosophy. Also, Ibn Rushd, unlike Farabi, does not speak of the Madina' Al-Jahela' (The City of the Corrupt, City of the Ignorant and City of the Misguided). Therefore, it should be said that Ibn Rushd has been affected by Farabi in practical wisdom, but he differs in some aspects from him.<sup>[2]</sup>

### ✓ Farabi's influence on Khaje Nasir al-Din Tusi

Khaje Nasir al-Din Tusi, in his book Akhlaq-i Nasiri (Nasirean Ethics) - which has been written on the subject of civil policy -

has adapted the discussions from Farabi's book named Fosool Al-Madani (Civil Topics). In this way, it becomes clear that in the seventh century AH, this book was studied, and Khaje Nasir al-Din Tusi had access to it. Nasiruddin Toosi clearly says that I have taken the civic politics from Farabi's works. (Ibid)

### ✓ The reason behind Farabi's attention to practical wisdom and discussion of political philosophy

Farabi's era – which is known as the founder of Islamic philosophy – was a turning point in politics and culture in the civilization of Iran and Islam. In the second century AH, due to the intellectual movement of Shiite Imams, such as Muhammad Baqir (PBUH) and Ja'far Sadeq (PBUH), Islamic jurisprudential schools were formed. During this age, jurisprudential interactions between Shiite and Sunni were expanded. In the same age, the Ismai'li government ruled and with the formation of intellectual circles like "Ekhanan al-Safa", taught of Greek philosophers were combined with Islamic and Shi'i subjects. Ismai'lies opened their minds to Greek philosophy, then Muslims discovered the practical wisdom of the Greeks. In the same age, the works of Plato and Aristotle – which were in the Greek and Sanskrit languages – was translated to Arabic at Eskandari's schools. Muslim thinkers believe that Plato and Aristotle were great scholars; they used Greek philosophy as a fundamental and universal knowledge. Muslim philosophers were fond of Plato, partly because Plato and his moral and political philosophy was more consistent with Islamic and Shia doctrines. Plato's "Philosopher King" was identical with the Iranian's Shi'i Imams. With these explanations, we can grasp the cause of comparative studies between Platonic political theories and the "Imamate" theories.<sup>[3]</sup>

#### • Avicenna and Practical Wisdom

Because Avicenna has no book in practical wisdom, Muslim scholars have not discussed the ethics of Avicenna. So to understand Avicenna's idea on the topic of practical wisdom, all his works should be studied and his views on practical wisdom must be harvested manually. The only book published on the Avicennian's practical wisdom is a work entitled Hekmat e A'mali e Sheikhallerais<sup>[4]</sup> by the Institute for "Avicenna Scientific and Cultural Foundation" in Iran. This book consists of eight articles on the practical wisdom of Avicenna, English translation of the titles of these articles are as follows:

1. Biography of Avicenna and critical analysis of his theory of practical intellect, by Ali Abedi Shahrudi.

In this article, the author has described and criticized the practical wisdom of Avicenna and expresses the views of his commentators.

2. Practical Philosophy of Avicenna, by Mohammad Lignhausen

In this article, the writer describes practical philosophy of Avicenna and believes that Avicenna and Aristotle have similar viewpoint on this subject.

3. Happiness in the philosophy of Avicenna, by Fathali Akbari.

In this paper, the author first describes the role of the Iranian dynasts such as Al Boyeh in flourishing of Islamic civilization and emergence of scholars such as Avicenna. Then he mentions the differences between Farabi and Avicenna on the definition of happiness.

4. The acceptance mechanism of prayer from the viewpoint of Avicenna, by Ahmad Abedi.

In this paper, the author first explains the importance of prayer in the spiritual and moral life of man; then he explains how a person's prayer causes changes in his fate.

5. The Necessity of Prophecy in Practical Wisdom and Practical Intellect, by Amir Divani.

In this article, the author has discussed the necessity of prophecy from the viewpoint of human need for legislation.

6. Avicenna's Ethical Realism, by Mohsen Javadi.

In this article, author first describes Avicenna's ethical viewpoints and then proves that his viewpoint has no contradiction with ethical realism.

7. The Political Teaching of Avicenna, by Charles E. Butterworth, translated by Reza Bakhshayesh.

In this article, the author first pictures tedious and hard conditions of Avicenna's life time. Then he tries to explain Avicenna's motivation for mentioning a summary of ethics and politics in his book despite of lack of a standalone and comprehensive discussion on this topics in his writings.

8. Avicenna's Political Theory, written by Ahmad Fouad Al-Hawani, translated by Mohammad Firouzkoobi

In this article, the author explains that Avicenna has no independent book on policy, but his views can be extracted from his various writings.

### Shahrzur and practical wisdom

Shahrzuri is one of the distinguished scholars of Hikmat Al-Eshragh (Wisdom of Illumination) in Islamic philosophical tradition. The works of Shahrzuri show that he has a supreme position in theoretical and practical wisdom, and a complete understanding if thoughts of previous philosophers and the scientific situations of his age. He discusses the subject of practical wisdom in the third part of his book and summarize it to Arabic.<sup>[5]</sup>

### Khaje Nasir al-Din Tusi and practical wisdom

Khaje Nasir is a follower of Farabi in the topic of Utopia and civil policy. He wrote:

"Most of my words in the book Akhlaq-i Nasiri (Nasirean Ethics) are from the words of the second teacher (Abu Nasr Al-Farabi)." (Tossi, 1413, p. 395)

Also, Khaje Nasir is the interpreter of the works of Avicenna and Masqueqi e Razi. He continues their work on practical wisdom with his book titled Akhlaq-i Nasiri (Nasirean Ethics). Khaje Nasir Tusi, in his book has used taught of thinkers such as Plato, Aristotle, Neo-Platonism, Farabi, Avicenna, Miskawayh and Ibn Moghtafi.<sup>[6]</sup>

Although his views on justice, like other Islamic philosophers, are influenced by Plato's and Aristotle's thoughts, but sometimes they are taken from Quranic and Islamic teachings. He has followed the Aristotle and Miskawayh in his views on

economy and politics, but at the same time, he has added some things that are more relevant to himself. Khajeh Naseer, in the second article in the discussion on science of household management, explains that the most important source of this part of wisdom is from a person called Brucean, translated from Greek into Arabic. And after Brucean, Muslim philosophers have been worked with the strong thoughts and pure minds in purifying and classifying this discipline and inferring its principles. (Ibid., P. 208)

Therefore, part of the contents of this essay has been taken from Greek philosophers, and most of it is the result of the efforts of Muslim scholars such as Farabi and Avicenna, who have perfectly arranged and perfected it. Therefore, the book "Ethics' Nasseri" from Khajeh Nasir is one of the masterpieces of Muslim scholars on practical wisdom, translated by Shahzouri. [5]

### Suhrawardi and practical wisdom

Suhrawardi is one of the Muslim philosopher trying to establish a new school in Islamic philosophy. He founded his philosophy on the basis of light and called it the Illumination Philosophy. Suhrawardi did not write a separate section on practical wisdom in any of his works.

Like Avicenna, he divides wisdom into theoretical and practical, and then divides the practical wisdom into ethics, household management and civil wisdom. Suhrawardi mentions this division only in the book "Al-talvihat". He also explains issues of politics, government, and Urban management in some of its books. (Ibid., P. 48)

### Mulla Sadra and practical wisdom

Mulla Sadra, after Avicenna, is undoubtedly the significant Islamic philosopher. He founded a new philosophical school and tried to present a new philosophical interpretation in the Islamic tradition. He called his philosophical school "Transcendent Wisdom". From Mulla Sadra's viewpoint, wisdom is effective in purifying the human soul, and it provides the basis for human separation from sin. He believes that wisdom makes human beings closer to divine ethics and also helps in understanding the religious teachings and in obeying God's commands. Mulla Sadra explains the evolutionary process of human reason in the four journeys. Mulla Sadra explains the evolutionary process of human reason in the four journeys. After the man completes the third journey, the conditions for reaching the stage of leadership of others are provided for him. Mulla Sadra believes that after knowledge of God through theoretical wisdom and acting on it, man joins God and can be the head of the human society and organize and correct the affairs of the people.

He believes that the ultimate goal of practical wisdom is to attain tolerance towards hardships for the satisfaction of God, and the ultimate goal of theoretical wisdom is to attain the light of science. And the divine philosopher is the person who combines these two kinds of wisdom. Mulla Sadra considers the combination of both theoretical and practical wisdom as a great salvation for man. [7,8]

Mulla Sadra's words about practical wisdom in his works are brief and has a psychological and anthropological approach. In some of Mulla Sadra's works, he is detailed the branches of practical wisdom and mentions almost the same words of Aristotle's practical wisdom.

Now, in the remainder of the article, we have to answer the important question:

Why did Mulla Sadra and other Islamic philosophers, unlike Aristotle and Plato, spoke less of the practical wisdom and did not independently develop it like theoretical wisdom?

## Part III: reasons for not paying attention about practical wisdom by Islamic philosophers

In the author's belief, the answer to this question can be found in three factors:

1. The particular attitude of Islamic philosophers to practical wisdom
2. Social and political conditions governing in the age of Islamic philosophers
3. The transfer of practical wisdom to jurisprudence by Islamic philosophers

### The particular attitude of Islamic philosophers to practical wisdom

Some Islamic philosophers, such as Mulla Sadra, explain the theoretical wisdom is valuable than practical wisdom and consider the study of practical wisdom as one of the characteristics of divine human beings. He criticizes Avicenna and his philosophical mistakes, and And writes such:

"The philosophical mistakes stem from a lack of attention to the characteristics of existence. Another reason, the study of non-philosophical sciences is, such as linguistics, mathematics, medicine, which God has created the people, learn them. (that is, in age of Mulla Sadra, those who have the ability to read philosophy should be Philosophy is more important than other sciences for them) And that is why when Socrates was asked why he turned away from non-philosophical sciences, he said: "I am busy with the supreme sciences which are divine knowledge and require profound understanding and talent." [1]

In Mulla Sadra's view, it is concluded that theoretical wisdom or philosophy is superior to practical wisdom and other sciences. Mulla Sadra's reason is that philosophy or theoretical wisdom is the basis of other sciences and And can be recognized as the mother of other sciences. [9]

Mulla Sadra mentions a number of practical wisdom in the book "Asrar Al-Ayat" after he has named the main goals of the Qur'an, which include:

House design, political science, and sharia law. Mulla Sadra mentions these three types as sub-goals. His phrase is as follows:

"In this book, we deal with the affairs of the first three which is important, and this is in fact the pillars of faith and the principles of mysticism ... But for the rules of other sciences,



God has created put those who have made every effort to study it. They spend their life in the study of other sciences. God bless them and give them Paradise for these deeds." [10]

Also, Seyyed Ahmad Hosseini Ardakani, in the book "Merat al-Kavan", has ordered the supremacy of theoretical wisdom versus practical wisdom. His statement is as follows:

"Theoretical wisdom is superior to practical wisdom, because practical wisdom is a tool of action, and the instrument of everything is lower than that, so practical wisdom is lower than action ... Another reason for the superiority of theoretical wisdom on practical wisdom is that it derives from the theoretical wisdom of knowledge of origin and resurrection and thinking in the creation of God, and derives from practical wisdom, knowledge of the system of subsistence and salvation of resurrection." [11]

It is concluded from the words of the Muslim philosophers that in their attitude, practical wisdom is important, but its importance is not as much theoretical as wisdom, because theoretical wisdom is the basis for the knowledge of God and the world and the attainment of happiness in the hereafter, but practical wisdom is only For the happiness of this world.

So if the Muslim philosopher wants to choose one of these two, firstly consider the theoretical wisdom and then he discuss the issues of practical wisdom.

### Social and political conditions governing in the age of Islamic philosophers

With a glance at the life of some of the Muslim philosophers such as Farabi and Khajeh Nasir al-Din Toosi, one can understand that the social and political conditions of Muslim philosophers, have influenced their discussion of practical and theoretical wisdom.

Farabi was at a time when two centuries and has passed since the formation of Islamic governments, and the scientific and cultural exchanges between Islamic and Christian scholars had begun seriously. The beginning of the translation of Greek sciences into Arabic in the era of "Harun al-Rashid" and "Mamoun" Abbasi led Muslims to become acquainted with the intellectual and theological sciences of non-Islamic civilizations. These translations, along with the verbal debate between Muslim and Christian scholars, made the Muslim scholars' passion for knowing the rational sciences of other civilizations to increase. [12]

At the same time, Farabi reached the peak of scientific development and could transfer the philosophical works left of Greek civilization to the Islamic world. He succeeded in linking philosophical ideas and Islamic intellectual sciences. Due to the Compatible of political conditions of the Farabi era, he was able to write works on practical wisdom, especially in practical wisdom.

Also due to the skill of Khaje Nasir Tusi in various sciences, he became the favorite of the Mogul Hallakkhan and managed the ministry of endowments. The influence of Khaje on Halak Khan caused the many scholars to be saved from the oppression of Halakuk, and the libraries and places of science and culture did not be lost. Khajeh Nasir al-Din Tusi created a library of

400,000 books and provided a forum for many scholars. He was able to gently control the intellect and thought of Halako and force him to reform social affairs. [11]

The support of the Mongol rulers, lead Khajeh Nasir to he bring practical wisdom in his books. Of course, he has written more in the field of political philosophy of the book. He did not engage himself with the Mongol rulers and tried to gradually influence on the their thoughts.

The phrase "Khajeh" in the book of Naseri's ethics is as follows: "Know that the rulers are like floods that flow from the mountains. If someone wants to return them from one side to the next, they will be destroyed at first glance. But if he looks forward to them, he can affect the rulers." [6]

Therefore, it can be concluded that the lack of political conditions in the era of the Islamic scholars, led they write independent books on practical wisdom, especially in political philosophy.

### The transfer of practical wisdom to jurisprudence by Islamic philosophers

Some believe that due to the character of the practical wisdom and knowledge of Islamic jurisprudence, many Muslim scholars did not consider the issues of practical wisdom in the knowledge of philosophy necessary, and they have assigned such discussions to the islamic jurisprudence.

The reason for this is some of the words of Islamic philosophers such as Avicenna and Duhani.

The words of Avicenna are as follows:

"The branches of practical wisdom is civil wisdom, household management, and ethics. The source of these three wisdom is taken by divine religion, and then, by thinking, human beings find the practical rules of these three kinds of wisdom and apply them in som cases." [13]

Jalaluddin Dwani also believes that The Muslim philosophers understood the religion of Islam accurately and observed that in the Islamic religion, there are many practical wisdom materials. herefore, they did not discuss the details of the works of wisdom independently. [14]

## Conclusion

Given the contents of this paper, it is concluded that practical wisdom began in philosophy of Greece by Plato and Aristotle. Then, among Islamic philosophers such as Farabi, Ibn Mussquieh, Khaje Nasir al-Din Toosi, it took a coherent and systematic form and found a religious color. Also we conclude that independent studies have not been conducted on practical wisdom, especially in two branches of household management and civic politics, by scholars such as Avicenna, Suhrawardi, and Mulla Sadra.

In short, the possible reasons for the reduction of practical wisdom among Islamic scholars are as follows:

- 1) The particular attitude of Islamic philosophers to practical wisdom

- 2) Social and political conditions governing in the age of Islamic philosophers
- 3) The transfer of practical wisdom to jurisprudence by Islamic philosophers

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