

Intention, Faith and Virtue in Shi'i Moral Philosophy

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Abstract

The relation of faith and virtue is explored in the writings of three Shi'i philosophers: Nasir al-Din Ṭūsī, Mulla Sadra, and Allamah Ḥabataba'i. In this tradition faith is associated with knowledge and wisdom through which the right intentions may be formulated that are necessary for virtuous action. From Ṭūsī we learn that true virtue is to be distinguished from pseudo-virtue by the intentions with which actions are performed.

For Mulla Sadra, faith is deepened through self-knowledge; and virtue is realized as one traverses the spiritual path discovered with this ever deepening faith to escape the fetters of imitation and natural limitations. In the view of ‘Allamah Ṣābataḥā’i, Islam offers believers two systems of ethics, one in which virtue is pursued to achieve otherworldly rewards and to avoid divine punishment, and another ethics of spiritual wayfaring that aims at ever higher forms of perfection. The difference between these ethical systems is based on differences in levels of faith.

Keywords

Nasir al-Din ʿUsi, Mulla Sadra, 'Allamah ʿAbataba'i, Shi'i moral theory, virtue, faith, religious ethics

Introduction: Faith and Good Works

Faith and good works are repeatedly linked in the Qur'an with the phrase: “**Those who believe and do good works**” as in the following ayah: [1](#)

وَبَشِّرِ الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا وَعَمِلُوا الصَّالِحَاتِ أَنَّ لَهُمْ جَنَّاتٍ تَجْرِي مِنْ تَحْتِهَا الْأَنْهَارُ ۖ كُلَّمَا رُزِقُوا مِنْهَا مِنْ ثَمَرَةٍ رَزَقُوا ۖ قَالُوا هَذَا الَّذِي رَزَقْنَا مِنْ قَبْلُ ۖ وَأُتُوا بِهِ مُتَشَابِهًا ۖ وَلَهُمْ فِيهَا أَزْوَاجٌ مُطَهَّرَةٌ ۖ وَهُمْ فِيهَا خَالِدُونَ

And give good news to those who believe and do good works: that for them shall be gardens with streams running in them; whenever they are provided with fruit from them as provision, they will say, “This is what was provided for us before,” and they were given something similar to it. And in it there will be pure mates for them, and they will remain in them [the gardens] forever. (2:25)

The Arabic verb translated here as “believe” is *amanu*, the noun form of which is *iman*, faith, and the literal meaning of the verb is to testify or affirm, although in Islamic texts it is to testify to the revelation brought by the Prophet Muhammad (s)[2](#). According to commentators, this testimony has several levels, the lowest of which falls short of faith and is a mere verbal affirmation[3](#). At a higher level, faith implies good works.

Khwajah Nasir al-Din Ṣadīqī (1201–1273) mentions these points in the first chapter of his *Awsaf al-Ashraf* (The Attributes of the Noble)[4](#), an essay that launched a tradition of works on ethics from a perspective of Islamic mysticism.

The second part of the ayah quoted above describes some of the rewards of the afterlife for those who believe and do good works. In his monumental *Tafsir al-Mizan*, ‘Allamah Ṣābiṭ al-Ṣābiṭī (1904–1981) comments on the recognition of the fruits of paradise by those to whom they are given: “It indicates that man shall get there only what he himself has prepared here.”[5](#) So, the rewards of paradise are the results of the actions performed in this life; and these results are recognized as one may recognize the effects of one’s actions in one’s own soul as virtue is cultivated.

In what follows, I will provide brief introductions to three thinkers in the Shi’i tradition of philosophical and mystical treatments of ethics: Ṣadīqī, Mulla Sadra (c. 1572— 1640), and ‘Allamah Ṣābiṭ al-Ṣābiṭī. By focusing on the relation between faith and virtue, a consistent picture of Shi’i moral thought emerges in which the basic Aristotelian framework of virtue as an excellence of the soul that enables the soul to approach its final end remains interwoven with themes from the Islamic mystical tradition that describes the path toward union with God and the stations that must be crossed as one progresses through this spiritual wayfaring.[6](#)

In the Islamic literature, the term used for ethics is *akhlāq*, the plural of *khulq*, meaning innate disposition

or character trait. Hence, ethics, in this tradition, places emphasis on virtue. Rules of conduct, on the other hand, that cannot be established by reason alone but are needed to order the society, are provided by revelation. Hence, revelation contains commandments for rules of conduct that reason can discover independently of revelation, such as the prohibition of taking innocent lives, and commandments that are established in other societies by custom or convention, such as the rules governing inheritance. In this way, ethics and divine law are seen as being complementary rather than in conflict, and, in general, Shi'i scholars consider it impossible for faith and reason to issue demands or claims that contradict one another.

The virtues are excellences of character that dispose an agent to act in accordance with natural and revealed law; but virtues are much more than this, for they enable the agent to progress toward the final end of man, which is understood at an elementary level through natural reason, but at a more profound level through religious knowledge informed by revelation.

Faith is not contrasted with reason, but is seen as building upon what is known by reason independent of revelation, such as the existence of God and His essential goodness. In ethics, faith provides an endorsement of the cardinal virtues of Greek philosophy; but faith also enables us to identify traits of character that enable the wayfarer to achieve the goals to which we are invited by revelation. Faith itself is not usually categorized as a virtue, although Avicenna considered it as a branch of wisdom.⁷

Faith is related to virtue because faith is an affirmation of and commitment to revealed truths that confirm what is known by reason and deepen it; these truths provide knowledge of the goal at which we aim in moral behavior; and the perfection of the soul acquired with the ability to achieve the goals of action is virtue. Avicenna was right to place faith under wisdom, because it is through faith that commitment to the goal of action is fortified, which is necessary for practical wisdom, and because the goal is best and most completely understood through the aid of revelation.

Since faith (*iman*) is considered primarily as an affirmation of what is known through revelation rather than as trust in what cannot be known through reason, the dynamics of discussions of the relation between faith and virtue will differ considerably from corresponding discussions in the Christian traditions, which centered on the relations among faith, works, grace, and justification or salvation.⁸ The point is not that Islamic and Christian views must necessarily be irreconcilable or incommensurable, but that the cluster of issues pertaining to faith and practice are differently prioritized and give rise to different sorts of controversies.⁹

Khwajah Nasir al-Din Tusi

Khwajah Nasir al-Din توسي (1201–1273) was an outstanding Shi'ite scholar of religious law, astronomer, theologian, and moral philosopher. His Nasirean Ethics (*Akhlaq-e Nasiri*), in Persian, was the most outstanding work on ethics in the Islamic world of his age and remained so for some centuries. The work draws on the philosophical heritage of the Muslim tradition, in which Platonic, Aristotelian, and

Neoplatonic influences are evident. He begins his ethics with an acknowledgement of the Aristotelian division of the rational faculties into theoretical and practical. Each side of this division has its own natural ends. The theoretical faculty aims at knowledge and science; but beyond this, it also aims, ultimately, at union with God and the certainty that accompanies this union.

Thus, we find an introduction of religious ends, and more specifically mystical ends, in the Aristotelian framework, but in such a manner that the religious goals are seen as a perfection of the secular ones. This is in keeping with the Islamic Peripatetic (*masha'i*) tradition stemming from Avicenna, which ʿUsi had studied attentively, and to which he makes numerous references. If the Aristotelian *telos* (aim) of the theoretical faculty is knowledge and science, ʿUsi's aim (*ghayat*) is certainty (*yaqin*). Certainty brings knowledge to its ultimate perfection. The certainty at which ʿUsi aims, however, is the outcome of union with the divine, the ultimate gnosis (*ma'rifah*) of the path of the mystic. [10](#)

In the preamble to his Ethics, ʿUsi also defines practical philosophy with explicit reference to the otherworldly ends of revealed teachings:

As for practical wisdom (Hikmat 'amali), it is knowing what is right in voluntary movements and the skillful acts of humankind with respect to their being conducive to the ordering of their states of livelihood and afterlife (ma'ad) and the requirements for reaching that perfection toward which they are oriented. [11](#)

The practical faculty, as in the Greek tradition, aims at harmonizing the faculties and actions to bring about a condition in which none dominate, and then aims to extend this virtuous condition of the individual soul to the household and the city, until "all men arrive at a felicity shared by all." [12](#) After making the tripartite division of practical philosophy (ethics, household management, politics), ʿUsi continues:

It should be known that the source of right works and good actions of mankind that is required for the order of their affairs and states in principle is either nature or convention. What has its source in nature is that whose particulars are required by the intellects of the people of insight and experience, the masters of sagacity, and it is that which does not vary and change with the variations in cycles and revolutions of courses and traditions. These are the divisions of practical wisdom that were mentioned. As for what has its source in convention, if the cause of the convention is agreement of the opinion of a society, it is called manners and customs. If the cause is the requirement of the opinion of a great man, such as a prophet or an Imam, it is called a divine ordinance. [13](#)

For Plato and Aristotle, harmony in the soul is achieved through the domination of reason, and ʿUsi affirms the hierarchy of the faculties in subsequent discussion. Nevertheless, he introduces the general goal in terms of agreement among the faculties and an absence of domination (*taghallub*). The division of medicine into sciences that preserve health and cure disease is compared—by an analogy that is rooted in Plato's Republic—to moral sciences that preserve virtue and cure vice. Just as the body achieves health when its humors are properly balanced and none has excessive dominance over the

others, the soul achieves a state of virtue when the states, actions, and faculties of the soul are properly balanced and perform their functions in harmony with one another. [14](#)

ʿUsi reports that the recent sages hold that felicity (sa'adat) has two levels. First, there is the level of felicity that unites both worldly and spiritual virtues. The second level of felicity is reserved for the next world, and consists in a divine encounter (in Christian literature a beatific vision), "which is True Wisdom; thus he becomes immersed in the Majesty of Might, adorned with the attributes of Splendour and Truth." [15](#)

On the basis of the passages from ʿUsi's works quoted above, we can already begin to give an account of the relation between faith and virtue. First, through faith in revelation one achieves certainty about the ultimate goal toward which our actions are directed: felicity. Of course, knowledge that the ultimate goal is felicity can be acquired by reason independent of revelation; but through revelation we learn of the nature of felicity, and that it involves a heavenly reward. Secondly, it is through faith that one learns details of the behavior needed to achieve this felicity, such as the forms of worship. Most importantly, we learn that through emulation of the behavior of the Prophet (s) and by abiding by the conventional rulings instituted through the revelation he transmitted, the dispositions to act nobly and piously are attained that are manifestations of virtue.

It was only after completing his *Nasirean Ethics* that ʿUsi decided to pen another work on ethics, but from the perspective of Islamic mysticism. This work was the *Attributes of the Noble*. As indicated above, ʿUsi discusses the nature of faith in the first chapter of this work (the book consists of thirty-one short chapters plus an introduction and prelude). The second chapter is really an extension of the first, for it makes the point that faith must be steadfast if it is to be effective as a basis for the acquisition of virtue:

The cause of steadfastness is an insight into the truth believed in, the delight of having found it, and a perseverance in this state as a habitual condition of the inner self. That is why the performance of righteous works by those who have this steadfastness is perpetual as well as necessary. [16](#)

The next chapter is on intention (*niyyah*). An emphasis on intention can be found in Stoic and Christian ethics, and in the Western tradition, this emphasis reaches a culmination in Kant's moral philosophy. In Muslim ethics, it is ʿUsi's attention to the issue of intention that marks a turning point. Of course, we can find attention to intentions in Islamic narrations, *hadiths*, and in other texts that predate ʿUsi's ethical writings, but with these works, intention gains a prominence in philosophical treatments of the subject that will never be lost. [17](#)

Faith is the affirmation of what is known through revelation, and the practical virtues are excellences of character by which an agent has the ability to achieve the aims of actions; so, intention, which is the aim for the sake of which an action is performed, is the link, as ʿUsi puts it, between knowledge and action. Making an intention is the first requirement of any act of worship, and it is the first step taken by the seeker on the path:

The starting point in wayfaring is intention, the intention to reach a certain destination, and since the goal is to acquire perfection from the Absolutely Perfect, the intention should be one of acquiring nearness to the Almighty, Who is Absolute Perfection. [18](#)

Action without the proper intention will not be linked with the knowledge affirmed by faith, and, hence, will be void of the value it would have when executed in accord with right intention. Dispositions of behavior that outwardly may seem evidence the virtue of an agent may likewise fall short of virtue if they are not based on the appropriate principle. ʿUsi discusses this at length in his Nasirean Ethics, where he introduces a distinction between true virtues and pseudo-virtues. [19](#)

ʿUsi considers each of the cardinal virtues in turn. One may give the appearance of wisdom without having knowledge through memorization without understanding. One may appear to be temperate when one restrains one's appetites only as a means to satisfy these appetites more fully in this world or the next. With regard to temperance, he writes:

the continent man, truly speaking, is the person who observes the limit and the claim of continence, this (alone) being his incentive [ba'eth] to prefer this virtue. [20](#)

Now, an incentive is not exactly the same as an intention, for intentions must be made consciously and voluntarily, while one may have unconscious incentives over which one has neither knowledge nor voluntary control. In ʿUsi's discussion, however, unconscious incentives are ignored, and incentives are considered to be equivalent to the purposes for the sake of which one intends an action.

As an example of continence, ʿUsi considers the virtue of generosity, a branch of temperance. One may act in a way that seems to be generous only to win influence, or because one does not know the value of money. The truly generous person, however, does not act from base desires or from ignorance. He or she acts generously with the sole intention of acting in the best way, and understands that generosity in itself is a virtue, and, as such, is worthy of guiding one's actions. Likewise, Aristotle held that the noble chooses the noble action for its own sake, that is, because of its nobility; and he did not see this to be in conflict in any way with the overarching aim of εὐδαιμονία (eudaimonia, felicity). [21](#)

Doing what is noble for its own sake is not a means by which to achieve the good life; rather, it is a part of what constitutes the good life. Likewise, it is our good deeds performed with the right intention whose fruits constitute the heavenly rewards of the felicitous. ʿUsi discusses this problem in terms of primary and secondary purposes (qasd) in a lengthy passage that he attributes to Aristotle. [22](#) Wisdom requires one to choose what is right for its own sake, for the virtuousness or goodness of the action itself; but this is not to exclude a secondary purpose, which may be to bring some benefit to oneself or others; but choosing what is right for its own sake is constitutive of choosing for the sake of pure goodness, which is identified with the divine essence.

In sum, to choose something for its own nobility, according to Aristotle, is the same as acting with the

aim of α . The final end is constituted by an active life of virtue, which is a life constituted in part by actions chosen for their own nobility. When the final end is changed from α to felicity, the relation between actions chosen for their own value and the final aim, which for Aristotle may be interpreted as a constitutive relation, is threatened. One may intend the action not because it is right, but because it will bring an otherworldly reward. There are two strategies for bolstering the constitutive relation that are suggested in *ʿAṣi*’s writings, although he never explicitly formulates the problem: first, we may consider the primary intention the choice of the action for its own sake and consider the divine reward as a secondary intention; second, since God is identified with pure goodness, choosing an action for its own sake, that is, because of the goodness of the action, is identified with choosing the action for the sake of God, because the divine pure goodness is manifested in the goodness of the action.

Dispositions to act in a way that seems courageous but is only a pseudo-courage may be found in those who endure dangers and hardships for venal purposes, for example when “fortitude and constancy in the face of ... terrors come not from abundance of courage, but from an extreme of eagerness and greed.”²³ Pseudo-courage is also exhibited by those who undergo hardships only “in order that their name and reputation may endure and spread abroad among men, their fellows and companions, who are like them in ill-will and deficiency of virtue.”²⁴ Lovers may display what seems to be courage but only because of an excess of lust. “The truly courageous man is the person whose wariness of committing anything foul and abominable exceeds any anxiety over the severance of life, for which reason he prefers fair dying to reprehensible living.”²⁵

Likewise, a merchant may make a display of fairness, not because he is truly just, but because he desires to profit from a good reputation. To the contrary:

*the truly just man is the one who begins by balancing his psychical faculties and adjusting the actions and words which proceed from those faculties, so that no one dominates another.... At all times his eye is to the acquisition of the virtue of justice, not on any other purpose. The result then is that there accrues to the soul that psychical form which is demanded by total propriety, so that its actions and operations are drawn into the thread of order.*²⁶

ʿAṣi concludes that actions that appear to be virtuous are only good when they issue from a wise person. The conditions for true virtue require wisdom, both practical and theoretical wisdom. Theoretical wisdom is required in order to have knowledge of the ultimate goal, knowledge of the nature of true felicity. Practical wisdom is required for deliberation about the action to be performed in order to achieve felicity. Knowledge grounded in faith is essential for the highest levels of both theoretical and practical wisdom. In the Islamic Peripatetic tradition, theoretical knowledge is entirely restricted to knowledge of universals. Practical wisdom, however requires knowledge of particulars, since the universal truths of theoretical knowledge need to be applied to particular circumstances. Revelation provides some of this particular knowledge by specifying specific actions as required or prohibited, and by identifying particular persons as moral exemplars.

In an article on practical wisdom in the Islamic Peripatetic tradition, Deborah Black finds the dependence of practical wisdom on theoretical wisdom that is not available to all to be “somewhat disturbing” though fully compatible with the generally “elitist approach” of Islamic political thought. She writes:

For if practical wisdom itself is dependent not only upon some sort of rational habituation of the appetites and emotions through moral virtue, but also upon a theoretical grasp of the human good as a function of humanity's place within the overall metaphysical structure of the universe, then not only are the masses denied access to human theoretical perfection, but also to the possession of practical wisdom itself in the fullest sense of the term. Without the theoretical foundations provided by philosophy, virtuous actions cannot be explained or justified: they are not truly rational, except for someone possessing full knowledge of their theoretical grounding. Such a person must belong to the class of philosophers, who have exclusive claims upon theoretical perfection. To place practical wisdom upon theoretical foundations ultimately entails that only if one is a philosopher can one truly be ἡ φρόνησις [phronemos, one with practical wisdom]. And this effectively cuts the vast majority of humanity off, not only from the highest and most divine perfection available through the contemplative life, but also from the secondary and derivative form of happiness offered by the life of moral virtue. [27](#)

According to فلسفي, the very highest degree of wisdom is reserved for God alone. Wisdom comes in degrees. To the extent human beings are capable of rational deliberation, they are not cut off from the felicity of the moral life, and they are not entirely cut off from the contemplative life. Certainly, philosophers would have available to them a kind of felicity that is not available to those who lack intellectual abilities, but for فلسفي and others in this tradition, “philosopher” included all those engaged in any of the intellectual sciences who live a life in pursuit of knowledge and wisdom, and did not indicate one who merely had some sort of technical expertise. One can practice a philosophical way of life regardless of one’s career choice.

However, for the Muslim philosophers, wisdom is informed by faith. The path to be followed is the particular way established by the Prophet (s); and this cannot be reduced to any set of theoretical certainties. For those who are not philosophers, that is, for those who lack the patience or ability to engage in the spiritual life by serious thinking, what is to be accepted by imitation will have a wider range than for the philosophers. But this does not mean that only philosophers can be virtuous. The ideas that the appetites and passions must be checked and intentions purified are not so esoteric that only the mystic sage can grasp them. The most important knowledge needed for the attainment of virtue is not to be obtained through formal education; although it does require a certain amount of contemplation, an elaboration of which characterizes the moral philosophy of Mulla Sadra.

Mulla Sadra

Mulla Sadra or Sadr al-Din Shirazi (1571–1641) was not primarily a moral theorist, although there are discussions of moral theory to be found scattered throughout his works. Sadra is a systematic thinker

who synthesized elements of the major lines of thought of his intellectual milieu. These included *kalam* (scholastic theology), *falsafah al-masha'i* (peripatetic philosophy), *'ishraq* (the Illuminationist school of philosophy founded by Suhrawardi (1156–1191)), and *'irfan* (gnosis, mysticism). One of the themes taken from the latter and incorporated into Sadra's system as a major recurring motif is that of the spiritual journey.

Like Ṣūṣī, Sadra teaches that spiritual wayfaring is to take a path of moral improvement. This is not to say that spiritual wayfaring is nothing but the acquisition of virtue, but that moral improvement, becoming virtuous, is a key element of spiritual wayfaring. Moral knowledge, according to this view, is knowledge of the path. More precisely, spiritual wayfaring is at once the way to obtain moral knowledge and virtue. This means that moral knowledge is gained through a kind of experience, not sense experience, but the practical experience of the traveller who knows how to get from a point of departure to a destination.

The spiritual path, according to Mulla Sadra, is at once described in terms of ethics, ontology, and religion. Religiously, it is the *ṭariqat*, the path to God. Ontologically, it is the path of the intensification of existence, the path to pure being. Morally, it is the path toward virtue in the framework of a religious life.

One of the works in which Mulla Sadra considers moral issues in some detail relevant to metaethical discussions is his *Eksir al-'Arifin* (The Elixir of the Gnostics).²⁸ In ancient medicine, disease was considered the result of an imbalance of the humors. We have already seen that Ṣūṣī makes extensive use of the Platonic analogy between health and virtue. Mulla Sadra elaborates on the analogy by introducing a potion, an elixir, to cure the soul and preserve its life.

The elixir is knowledge, *ma'rifah*, more specifically, it is the knowledge of one's origin and end (mabda' wa ma'ad) that is understood through revelation, by faith, and at a deeper level by introspection, which yields a more profound level of faith. Felicity is gained through knowledge, while wretchedness is the result of ignorance. Knowledge by its essence is noble and perfect.²⁹ The ultimate goal of man is knowledge through the divine encounter or union with the divine.³⁰

In the Islamic ethical tradition, as we have seen in Ṣūṣī's moral theory, *ḥay'at* is transformed to *sa'adat*. This transformation parallels that in the Christian tradition, for which the terms "blessedness" and "felicity" (Latin: *beatitas*, *felicitates*) were often used. In both religious traditions, the effect of moving *ḥay'at* to the next life was to remove the contingencies that could destroy chances for a good life according to Aristotle, such as misfortunes of birth, physical defects, and catastrophes. Any of these contingencies might make one miserable in this life, but this would be irrelevant to one's situation in the afterlife. Hence, felicity became a more purely moral goal³¹ than Aristotelian *eudaimonia*.

While religion externalizes felicity by placing it in the next world, Mulla Sadra re-interiorizes it: "knowledge of heaven consists of the presence of a form equal to heaven in the knower's essence."³² Knowledge of felicity is a kind of domination over it, or rather, several levels of domination or subjection over it, for knowledge, like existence, is graduated in intensity (*tashkiki*). The highest form of domination

is that of the divine meanings given by God to the perfect man (*insan al-kamil*). One achieves happiness through domination over the self, and domination through knowledge of that which is within one. This self-knowledge is gained by spiritual wayfaring.

According to Sadra, the felicity of domination over the self through self-knowledge involves the purification of one's outer and inner faculties of sense and cognition, which are compared to stations on the path. This purification takes place to the accompaniment of the recitation of the Qur'an, whereby the seven divine signs are recognized within the soul: nature, soul, intellect, spirit, secret heart, hidden, and most hidden. By witnessing the divine signs at these levels, one attains felicity; at the same time, faith is deepened and certainties are disclosed.

When one gains control over one's own soul, one is able to awaken from the vegetable and animal levels of the soul to the soul's higher levels, which include: first, arithmetic.

This does not mean that man is merely able to recite multiplication tables. The arithmetic level of the soul is that by which one measures, that is, by which one assigns values to things. From numbers we proceed to spoken and written letters, that is, from the interior of the soul, which is the place of number, there are successive manifestations of the interior in the external world through speech and writing. Just as one is the imam of the numbers,

the reflecting soul (al-nafs al-mutafakkurah) is the imam that dominates over the levels of the psychic sciences and unfolds in the stages of reflective cogitations. So it is up to the traveler to make her into a straight path by which he may be guided to the precinct of the Real. [33](#)

The straight path (*sirat al-mustaqim*) is the path of those divinely blessed, the path of divine guidance. Faith implies a commitment to travel that path. In the remarkable passage quoted above, Mulla Sadra is telling us that we are to be guided toward God, the Real (*Haqq*), as we take up the practice of making something out of ourselves by which we may be guided. Through the knowledge of the self by which the appetites and passions may be properly ordered and virtue achieved, the wayfarer makes the thinking soul into a straight path leading to felicity.

Revelation describes the nature of the human being. So, faith, as confirmation within the heart of the truth of what is given in revelation, implies some degree of self-knowledge, for faith is deepened as one finds the instantiation of revealed truth in one's own soul.

Know that the form of the natural elemental body is potentially solid, and the form of mineral things is actually solid and potentially vegetable. The form of the vegetable, that is, the vegetative soul, is actually a growing, self-nourishing, and reproducing substance and potentially an animal. The animal's form, that is, its soul, is actually a sensate substance and potentially a human. Children's souls are actually sensate and potentially intellecting. Adult's souls are actually intellecting and potentially philosophers. Philosophers are actually sages and potentially angels; so, when they depart from their bodies, they actually become angels. [34](#)

Sadra does not mean to suggest that the souls of philosophers literally become angels, but that they, like angels, are to be considered near to God. Again, by “philosophers” he does not mean those with expertise in the academic field of philosophy, but those who are true lovers of wisdom. Here, we may pause to consider again Debora Black’s charge of elitism. Mulla Sadra seems to be saying that felicity is for the philosophers or sages and everyone else must be left hopeless. Sadra’s point is that anyone can recognize within themselves various levels that are reached through improvement of the self.

The extent to which these levels and their values are recognized varies from one person to another; but “... when man reaches the degree of knowledge and faith and comes forth from the sleep of ignorance and the slumber of nature, **God forgives him...** [48:2].”³⁵ Even for those who never pass the level of verbal imitation, Sadra holds out an eschatological hope. About a man who lacks any understanding but merely imitates true beliefs and worthy conduct, Sadra writes:

*In this respect he does not possess an afterworldly life or a real faith that is established by itself with the Real, for imitative knowledge is not a true knowledge of certainty that comes to be from inward insight, which is why it is receptive to transformation. However, it is a kind of subordination and a making oneself similar to the Folk of Life. [According to a hadith:] “And he who makes himself similar to a people is one of them,” so he will be mustered with them.*³⁶

ʿUsi claimed that true virtue was not obtained by those who acted in accordance with virtue but without the proper intention founded on faith. Sadra holds that God’s mercy will not exclude those who are not capable of the sort of intention that springs from profound faith and the proper operation of one’s intellectual and emotional capacities.

Mulla Sadra invites all who are able to gird themselves for the spiritual journey, and to free themselves from the shackles of imitation, which Kant would call their “self-imposed minority.” Kant compares those who are too lazy or cowardly to think for themselves to domesticated animals that are bound and unable to go their own way.³⁷

Mulla Sadra uses the same analogy, but describes how the sheep may free itself. In its fallen state, the soul is like a sheep with its legs bound. As it advances, the legs are unbound until she makes her dwelling place wherever she wills in the Garden (39:74).³⁸

This is about as explicit a reference as can be found in Sadra for the identification of felicity with freedom, although he continues by describing those who fail to purify themselves as imprisoned in veils that block them from the divine and in natural entanglements. He also points out that the damned are described in the Qur’an as being in chains and fetters. (36:8–9; 5:64) Freedom is achieved through the full realization of one’s human capacities and rising above the animal level. This is why, according to Sadra, the Qur’an compares the damned to beasts and cattle. (25:44) The freedom for which God appointed man is indicated in the Qur’an through the concept of human domination over all things in the heavens and the earth. (45:13) This domination is not descriptive of the limited powers exercised by

humans over nature, but indicates the *ghayat*, مقصد, or destiny of man as having power and domination over all his lower faculties, which is the actualization of virtue.

The actualization of virtue requires one to move from the potential to the actual in a series of stages. While for Aristotelians this actualization is directed toward the end given by the human quiddity as rational animal, for Mulla Sadra there is a substantial motion through which the wayfarer realizes successive potentials and overcomes the limits of the quiddities of the mineral, vegetable, animal, human, and rational, until one's existence reaches an intensity that is described as proximity to the divine.

Mulla Sadra identifies the straight path that leads to felicity with the proper operation of the faculties that constitute the soul and allow it to ascend through substantial motion toward God:

Thus, the soul who rises up to her Lord through these steps is as it were on a straight path [6:39].

Or rather, she is a straight path essentially, while other souls are on twisted or inverted paths. [39](#)

The path is not a moral/religious reality that is independent of the human soul and its functions; rather the soul itself is the path, when it is ordering itself in such a manner as to live virtuously and faithfully. Faith becomes deepened as moral and spiritual knowledge is acquired through the use of and reflection on the faculties, on the origin and return; and moral and spiritual truths are realized in the practice of gaining knowledge of and control over the self with the aim of approaching the Real, which requires an active life of virtue.

‘Allamah Tabataba’i

Sayyid Muḥammad Husayn Ṭabāṭabā’i (1904–1981), known by the honorific title, *‘Allamah* (the most learned) was a mystic, philosopher, exegete of the Qur’an, and mujtahid (a legal scholar able to derive rulings on the basis of the sources of Islamic law).⁴⁰ His most important reflections on ethics are found in his exegesis of the Qur’an, *al-Mizan fi al-Tafsir al-Qur’an* (The Balance in the Interpretation of the Qur’an) and writings on *‘irfan* (Islamic mysticism).

In *Al-Mizan*,⁴¹ ‘Allamah Ṭabāṭabā’i discusses two ways in which intentions may be formulated to perform virtuous actions: first, one in which the goal is to do what is laudable in one’s society; and, second, one in which the goal is otherworldly. One is motivated to pursue the first sort of goal because earning the respect of the members of one’s society has worldly benefits. Virtue that results from this sort of intention is what Ṭusi described as pseudo-virtue. ‘Allamah considers this to be the basis on which the ancient Greeks framed their ethics. Of course, having a virtue is not the sort of thing that an agent can directly bring about at will, like raising one’s hand, but it can be brought about by specific actions designed to instill the appropriate character trait. One can purposefully throw oneself into

situations in which one is forced to face danger. If the dangers are overcome, one can acquire courage in this manner.[42](#)

‘Allamah affirms the Platonic division of the soul into desirous, emotional, and rational faculties and defines the final cause of their composition by God in man to be human felicity. He explains the cardinal virtues in accordance with the classical tradition as corresponding to this division of the faculties with justice emerging from temperance, courage, and wisdom; and he provides a brief explanation of the Aristotelian doctrine of virtue as a mean between extremes. He then offers a diagram to display subsidiary virtues as branching off from the four cardinal virtues.[43](#) All of this, however, pertains to worldly morality, although it will be supported by religious moralities, as well, for the virtues “are absolute and unchanging—although there may occur some difference sometimes in their applications...”.[44](#)

‘Allamah remarks that the worldly framework for ethics is rejected by the Qur’an, despite the existence of some verses that seem, at first glance, to endorse it, and despite the fact that the worldly prudential aims could serve to provide goals for practical reasoning that would support efforts to acquire the virtues. Faith in God, in divine providence, and in the hereafter, according to ‘Allamah, will serve to encourage a stoic attitude in the believer. The good and bad fortune one experiences in this world will not prompt excessive joy or sadness, which would seem meaningless to the believer who keeps in mind that everything happens according to divine decrees. ‘Allamah quotes the following ayah of the Qur’an and comments:

No affliction comes about except by Allah’s leave. Whoever has faith in Allah, Allah guides his heart... (64: 11)

Such verses... create high morals by pointing to the sublime goals of the next world. These other worldly goals are real, not imaginary, perfections. These verses reform the human character by fixing man’s attention to the real already existing causes, like the divine measure and decree, adaptation of the divine characteristics and remembrance of the beautiful names of Allah and His sublime attributes.[45](#)

Both of the moral orientations described by ‘Allamah are prudential, or practical, since in both cases the agent’s goal is to gain benefits and avoid harms. The difference is only that the benefits and harms that define the goals are worldly in one case and supernatural in the other. He comments: “both systems are similar in that the ultimate goal of both is the perfection of man in his character and morals.”[46](#)

In addition to these two outlooks on moral reasoning, ‘Allamah introduces a third outlook, which is not prudential, but mystical.

In this [third] system, man is trained in character and knowledge, and the knowledge is used in such a way that does not leave room for base and low traits. In other words, this system removes the vile characteristics, not by repulsing them, but by eliminating all motives other than Allah.[47](#)

‘Allamah explains that when one’s motive is restricted to God alone, then there can be no question of

performing the action from self-interest (or for any of the ulterior motives that characterized what ʿUsi called pseudo-virtues). Once again, we find the key element to be that of intention (*niyyah*). The ordinary believer acts for the sake of some benefit, while the spiritual wayfarer (*salik*) acts without intending any benefit for himself or others. The intention of the wayfarer is purified. The result of the purification of one's intentions is described in several ways:

- (1) the wayfarer acts for the sake of God;
- (2) the wayfarer is motivated solely by love for God;
- (3) the wayfarer is motivated by thankfulness to God;
- (4) the wayfarer obeys and worships God because God is worthy of obedience, admiration, and worship;
- (5) the wayfarer acts for the sake of divine satisfaction (*ridhwan Allah*). The love of God is frequently mentioned by the *ʿurafa* (mystics) as a motive.

ʿAllamah cites several narrations to show the different levels of purity of intention on which he bases his distinction between practical morality and mystical morality. His third system of mystical morality is for those whose intentions are purified as with that to which the narrations refer as the worship of the free. At the most sublime levels of purity, the wayfarer ceases to be aware of any duality or otherness between himself and God, and a self that is capable of forming its own intentions is annihilated in divinity.

At this time even intention (niyyat) disappears from the heart of the wayfarer because there is no longer a personal identity and selfhood from which intention would originate. [48](#)

Short of that, however, practical and mystical moralities are differentiated by intention, as indicated in the following narrations:

In Nahjul Balaghah, Imam ʿAli (ʿa) says:

Some people worship Allah avariciously, and that is the worship of traders. Some people worship Allah fearfully, and that is the worship of slaves. And some people worship Allah gratefully, and that is the worship of the free. [49](#)

It says in Al-Kafi, narrating from Harun who narrated from Imam Sadiq (ʿa) who said:

The servants are three [in kind]: One group worships Allah from fear. This is the worship of the slaves. And a group worships Allah from greed. This is the worship of the traders. And a group worships Allah from love. This is the worship of the free. [50](#)

To solve the problem of the discrepancy between gratitude and love, ʿAllamah argues that they boil

down to the same thing, for thanking is praising for benevolence, and God is essentially benevolent. So, thanking God is praising Him for what He is. Love is the attraction toward beauty, and God has absolute beauty. Both love and gratitude incite one to turn to God for His own sake, rather than in hope of a reward or fear of punishment.[51](#)

In ‘Allamah’s third system, which aims only at God, the wayfarer will come to be attracted to meditation on the divine names until he feels himself to be in the divine presence and is overwhelmed by love for God. When this happens, the person’s entire view of things will change. He will no longer be motivated by aims of worldly or otherworldly perfection, and will seek only his Lord. He will see everything as a sign of God, and nothing will have any significance for him except as a sign of God.

Whatever he loves, it is only for the sake of Allah and in the cause of Allah....

Now, his destination is his Lord; his provision, his humility of servitude; and his guide, his love.[52](#)

‘Allamah claims that in this moral outlook, questions of perfection and defect become irrelevant: “As a result, ... it may happen sometimes that what is counted as a virtue in other systems becomes evil in this one, and vice versa.”[53](#) He does not give any examples or explain the matter further; but in the mystical tradition it is common to point out that because the mystic’s spiritual abilities exceed those of common people, what is supererogatory for normal people may be obligatory for one who is more advanced.[54](#) ‘Allamah compares this relativism, which gives different moral rulings for different people according to their spiritual development, with a kind of moral relativism that views the changing moral standards of different societies to be valid only insofar as they contribute to the progress of the society through stages set out in some Marxist theories.

‘Allamah rejects such views for ignoring the constants of human nature and the nature of human societies, on the basis of which he affirms the absolute validity of the general characterizations of the cardinal and subsidiary virtues. So, although there is a relativism introduced by affirming that religion allows for two systems of morality: a morality that aims at the perfection of the agent, which we might call practical morality; and a morality of mysticism that aims only at God, mystical morality. Both of these systems agree on the cultivation of the virtues, although they issue different judgments of a relatively minor sort. Where the two systems differ most importantly is with regard to intention. The ordinary believer acts on the basis of practical reasoning with a goal of otherworldly rewards or perfections, while the mystic acts only from love of God or an absorption in God that goes beyond love.[55](#)

The wayfarer does not use faith in order to construct a practical syllogism on the basis of which right conduct is chosen. Instead, a high level of faith takes control of the spirit which results in moral conduct and virtue.

But when he reaches the realm of iman-i akbar [the greater faith], his state of iHsan [goodness, doing the beautiful] is transformed into a second nature, and he attains the station of the people of good deeds (muHsinin). At this point, every conduct and act of the traveler, whether major and significant or minor

and insignificant, emanates from his spiritual yearning (shawq) and longing (raghbat, Arabic raghbah), and is carried out with certainty and serenity. Because at this stage faith has taken over the wayfarer's spirit...[56](#)

Above this level of faith, which is only achieved by divine grace, knowledge and the greater faith are replaced by direct witnessing and unveilings. This level is called the greatest faith (*iman al-a'lam*).[57](#) These levels of faith are divided somewhat differently in other texts. In his discussion of the submission (*islam*) of the prophets ('a),[58](#) 'Allamah distinguishes four levels of submission and faith, yielding eight stages:

1. Islam I: to accept and obey the basic principles and rules of Islam.
2. *Iman* I: sincere belief in what is accepted at stage 1, which should result in faithfully observing the shari'ah.
3. Islam II: sincere acceptance of true beliefs, "with its necessary concomitant, that is, good deeds".
4. *Iman* II: believing in the realities of the religion in detail and with reasoning.
5. Islam III: to worship Allah as though one were seeing Him, and if one does not see Him, to worship Him knowing that Allah sees him.
6. *Iman* III: this stage is accompanied by "sublime virtues, for example, being pleased with whatever God decrees, submitting to His commandments, forbearance and patience for the love of God, self-denial, piety...."
7. Islam IV: total surrender, which is sometimes accompanied by the divine gifts of visions.
8. *Iman* IV: certainty that everything is by divine permission, accompanied by calmness when faced with tragedies and protection from fear when dangers loom.

In the progression of these stages, we can observe how mystical ethics links faith and virtue. It is through successive stages of the strengthening of faith that attachments to anything but God are cut off, so that the wayfarer becomes completely selfless and exhibits the moral virtues that are pleasing to God because of the essential and complete divine goodness. In this way, the path of spiritual wayfaring is also a path by which the wayfarer becomes more perfect and acquires virtue.

However, the intention of the acquisition of virtue is not for the sake of beautifying one's own soul, or even to achieve heavenly rewards. The beauty of the soul and the heavenly rewards will be won, by the grace of God; but the intention of the wayfarer is directed solely toward God until the annihilation in Him that permits nothing but the manifestation of the divine will.

Concluding Remarks

This brief survey of the views of three of the greatest figures in the tradition of Shi'i philosophical and ethical thought displays how this tradition has evolved along one of its many lines. All three of our thinkers are philosophers. All three are trained in the Platonic/Aristotelian synthesis that is characteristic of Islamic philosophy. All three are also indebted to the mystical tradition that developed among the Shi'ah.

In this tradition, increasing emphasis is placed on faith and its levels, particularly in the manner in which faith informs intentions. The acquirement of traits of character trained by the performance of actions whose intentions are informed by faith results in an active life of virtue.

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Appendix I: The Tree of Virtue from Al–Mizan

(Tabataba'i, *Al–Mizan*, Vol. 2, 1984), 231.



- [1.](#) The verses of the Qur'an are called ayat (sing. ayah), which means signs.
- [2.](#) The Shi'ah write an abbreviation for a salutation for the Prophet and his family after mentioning his name, and ('a) for "peace be with him/her/them" after mentioning the other infallibles.
- [3.](#) In accordance with the Qu'an: (49:74).
- [4.](#) (Tusi K. N.–D., *The Attributes of the Noble*, 1994), 5–8.

5. (Tabataba'i, Al-Mizan, Vol. 1, 1983), 126.
6. For a broader overview of the types ethical thought about which Shi'i scholars have written, see (Javadi, 2012).
7. For a comparison between the virtues in various Islamic texts on ethics and Ghazali's lists, see (Sherif, 1975), 177–180.
8. For a discussion of the relation between divine favor or grace and ultimate felicity, see (Tusi K. N.–D., The Nasirean Ethics, 1964), 209.
9. In a comparison between concepts of faith in Christian scriptures and the Church Fathers and iman in the Qur'an and hadiths, Qorbani finds that both faith and iman are considered by Christians and Muslims, respectively, to be: virtues, voluntary conditions, a commitment and submission to the object of belief, belief in God and the resurrection, a cause for salvation, and a condition that can be increased or decreased; the main difference between faith and iman, according to Qorbani, is that Christians give priority of faith over knowledge, while Muslims consider knowledge necessary for faith. (Qorbani, 1390/2011), 97–192.

Qorbani cites no evidence to support the claim that Muslims view faith as a virtue except to say that it is considered praiseworthy. Qorbani also discusses a debate among Shi'i scholars about whether faith is an action of the heart of affirming what is known, or whether knowledge itself implies affirmation. A brief overview in English that compares faith and morality in Christianity and Islam is provided in (Fanaei Eshkavari, 2012). For a discussion of controversies about faith in early Islamic kalam, see (Izutsu, 1965). Some of the issues pertaining to having faith in God in the Christian tradition, for example, are considered in discussions of trust in God (tawakkul) in the Islamic literature. See (Tusi K. N.–D., The Attributes of the Noble, 1994), 61–63.

10. For a discussion of revelation, mystical unveilings, and reason as sources of knowledge (ma'rifah) in the correspondence between ʿUṣī and the famous Sufi, Qunawi, see (Schubert, 1995) and (Chittick, 1981).
11. (Tusi K. N.–D., The Nasirean Ethics, 1964), 28.
12. (Tusi K. N.–D., The Nasirean Ethics, 1964), 52.
13. (Tusi K. N.–D., The Nasirean Ethics, 1964), 28–29.
14. Compare: (Plato, 2004), 444d–e; (Tusi K. N.–D., The Nasirean Ethics, 1964), 113–149.
15. (Tusi K. N.–D., The Nasirean Ethics, 1964), 64.
16. (Tusi K. N.–D., The Attributes of the Noble, 1994), 9.
17. See the hadiths quoted by Tusi: (Tusi K. N.–D., The Attributes of the Noble, 1994), 10–11. Sajoo claims that ʿUṣī “anticipated Kant by over five centuries” (Sajoo, 2004), 1, because of his judgment that the moral value of an action depends on the intention with which it is performed; however, it has been cogently argued that Aristotle was not oblivious to this point, even if he had no technical term corresponding to “intention”. See (Korsgaard, 2008), 166.
18. (Tusi K. N.–D., The Attributes of the Noble, 1994), 9.
19. (Tusi K. N.–D., The Nasirean Ethics, 1964), 89–95.
20. (Tusi K. N.–D., The Nasirean Ethics, 1964), 90.
21. See (Korsgaard, 2008), 174–206.
22. (Tusi K. N.–D., The Nasirean Ethics, 1964), 68; (Tusi K. N.–D., 1356/1977), 92.
23. (Tusi K. N.–D., The Nasirean Ethics, 1964), 91.
24. (Tusi K. N.–D., The Nasirean Ethics, 1964), 92.
25. (Tusi K. N.–D., The Nasirean Ethics, 1964), 92.
26. (Tusi K. N.–D., The Nasirean Ethics, 1964), 94–95.
27. (Black, 1995), 461.
28. Although the Arabic word al-eksir derives from the Greek, ξερών (xerion), which was used for a powder for drying wounds, from ξερός (xeros) "dry", the English elixir and German Elixier, stem from the Arabic rather than directly from the Greek. The Arabic, Latin, English and German words all have alchemical associations; alchemists in various ages and cultures sought the means of formulating the elixir vitae by which to gain eternal life and/or eternal youth.
29. (Sadra, 2003), 78.
30. (Sadra, 2003), 87.
31. It is more purely moral because it is more voluntary, and morality is defined in the Peripatetic tradition as a subdivision

of practical philosophy, which is concerned with voluntary actions. See the quotation from ʿUṣī for fn. 10, above.

[32.](#) (Sadra, 2003), 19.

[33.](#) (Sadra, 2003), 28.

[34.](#) (Sadra, 2003), 54.

[35.](#) (Sadra, 2003), 81.

[36.](#) (Sadra, 2003), 79.

[37.](#) (Kant, 1996), 17; 8:35. The line in Horace from which Kant takes the motto, “sapere aude,” is: “Dimidium facti, qui coepit, habet; sapere aude, incipe.” (The task begun is half done; dare to know) (Horace) The usual English translation of the motto is “Have the courage to be wise,” or “Dare to be wise,” but it might be more accurate, given Horace’s “incipe,” (Begin!) to translate it as “Have the courage to become wise,” or even, “Dare to achieve knowledge or wisdom,” for sapere also means to taste, and when used as a transitive verb it means to come to know something.

Horace is not telling us to rely on the knowledge that we already have, but to set out to gain knowledge. Kant explains it as: ‘Habe Muth, dich deines eigenen Verstandes zu verdienen.’ Is one to serve one’s own understanding by simply accepting its judgments and acting on them, or by improving it and deepening it? The Shi’i tradition of imitation of the basic principles of faith to be prohibited. Mulla Sadra goes beyond this to invite his readers to eschew imitation to the extent possible by setting out on the spiritual path.

[38.](#) (Sadra, 2003), 65.

[39.](#) (Sadra, 2003), 55.

[40.](#) For short intellectual biography, see (Algar, 2006) and (Fana’i Eshkavari, 2012), 37–61. For a more comprehensive treatment, see (Tehrani, 2011).

[41.](#) (Tabataba’i, Al-Mizan, Vol. 2, 1984), 206 ff.

[42.](#) ʿUṣī prescribes the same sort of treatment for cowardice: (Tusi K. N.–D., The Nasirean Ethics, 1964), 136.

[43.](#) See Appendix.

[44.](#) (Tabataba’i, Al-Mizan, Vol. 2, 1984), 241.

[45.](#) (Tabataba’i, Al-Mizan, Vol. 2, 1984), 209.

[46.](#) (Tabataba’i, Al-Mizan, Vol. 2, 1984), 232.

[47.](#) (Tabataba’i, Al-Mizan, Vol. 2, 1984), 212.

[48.](#) (Tabataba’i, Kernel of the Kernel, 2003), 99.

[49.](#) (Tabataba’i, Vicegerency, 2009), 65, (my translation of the Arabic). From Nahj al-Balagha, saying 237 (in most editions, although the numbering differs in some of the English translations).

<https://www.al-islam.org/nahjul-balagha-part-2-letters-and-sayings/selec...> [3]

[50.](#) (Tabataba’i, Kernel of the Kernel, 2003), 96 (my translation of the Arabic). Also quoted in (Tabataba’i, Vicegerency, 2009), 64–65.

[51.](#) (Tabataba’i, Vicegerency, 2009), 65–68.

[52.](#) (Tabataba’i, Al-Mizan, Vol. 2, 1984), 233.

[53.](#) (Tabataba’i, Al-Mizan, Vol. 2, 1984), 234. He also writes: “As for the third system... it differs from the above two in that it aims at seeking the pleasure of Allah, not at achieving human perfection. Consequently, its goals sometimes differ from that of the earlier two systems. It is quite possible that what appears as the middle way from this point of view, may not look so from the other two angles.” (Tabataba’i, Al-Mizan, Vol. 2, 1984), 232.

[54.](#) More controversial is the idea that something that is wrong according to religious law (shari‘ah) might be permitted for the mystic. Some Sufis have been condemned on various occasions through Islamic history for claiming to be above the law, although such cases are exceptional and generally the mystics of Islam have insisted on strict observance of the law.

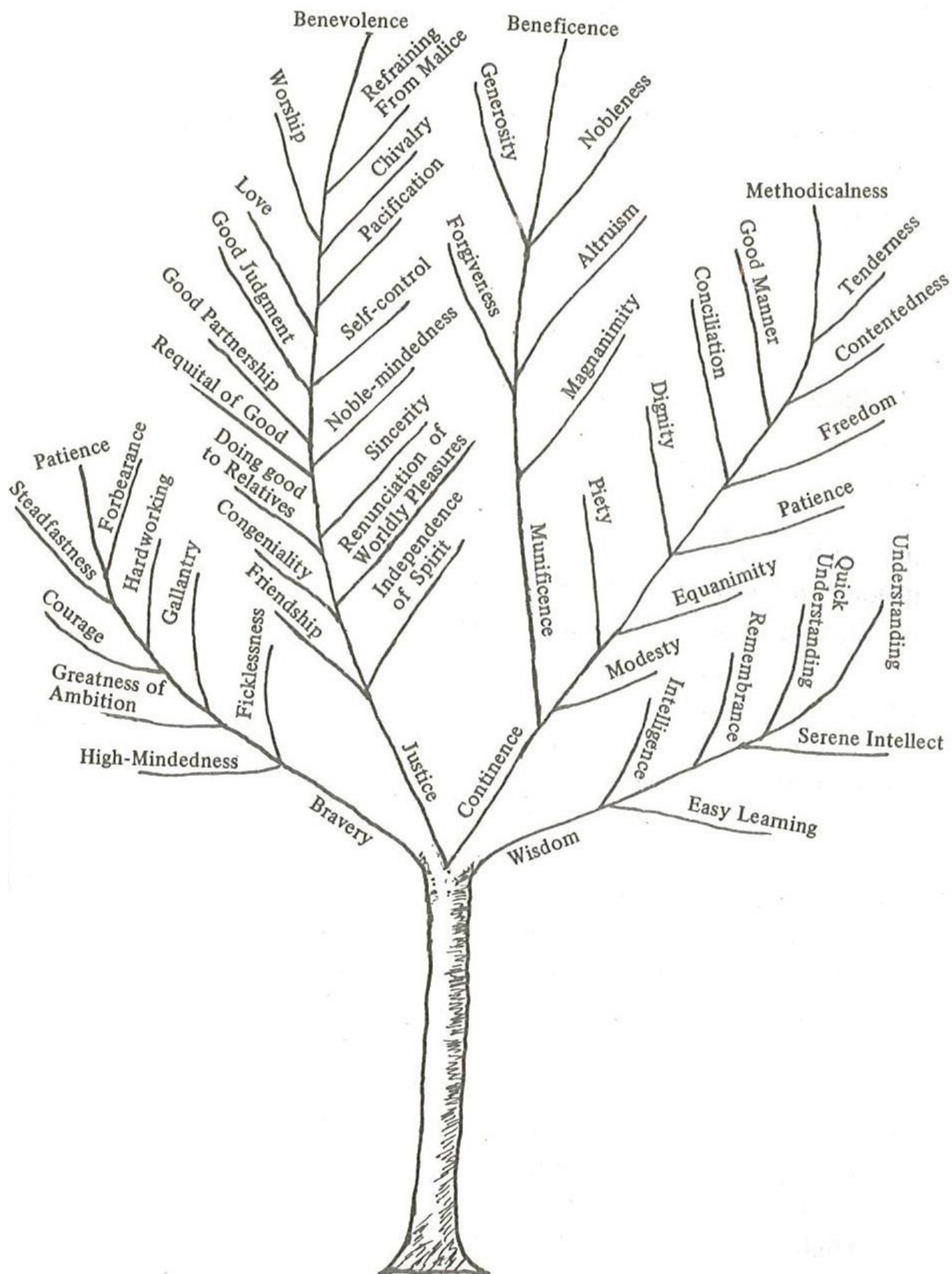
[55.](#) (Tabataba’i, Kernel of the Kernel, 2003), 102.

[56.](#) (Tabataba’i, Kernel of the Kernel, 2003), 48.

[57.](#) (Tabataba’i, Kernel of the Kernel, 2003), 57–58.

[58.](#) (Tabataba’i, Al-Mizan, Vol. 2, 1984), 125–127.

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