

Living Wisely

*Teachings of Māwardī on Ethics
and Human Wellbeing*

An Abridged Translation of Māwardī's
Adab al-Dunyā wa al-Dīn

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Foreword

We have in our hands one of the most commonly read Arabic classics on ethics for more than a millennium, rendered into English thanks to Dr. Ahmed Bangura's admirably persistent and meticulous efforts. It is a great contribution to literature, intellectual history and the present-day discussions in the practical and narrative ethics for those who are interested in it at the personal and academic levels. Māwardī's book is well-known to be a highly enjoyable read because it marshals the ethical legacy of the Chinese, Hindu, Iranian, Greek and Arab cultures along with Jewish, Christian and Muslim narratives. It also brings together, in a high-level literary format, citations from the sacred texts, narrations from Prophets, sayings of sages, intriguing stories with great morals and poems. This makes the book an outstanding piece of literature in addition to its scholarly content in ethics and morality. This is because Māwardī did not intend it to be a book only for scholars and serious students of knowledge but also to the general public.

I want to briefly share three points with the readers which may serve as a key to better contextualize and understand the book: the concept of the multiplex human being and the self in the background; multiplexity of ethical reasoning; and the ethical universalism.

The multiplex human being and the multiplex self

Māwardī uses the multiplex human ontology with its three major levels: body, mind and soul. The interrelations and conflicts among them give rise to the multiplex concept of

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self with its three major levels: ruling self, critical self, content self. The self is open to change based on the constantly changing inner conflicts and reconfiguration of relations, particularly during the conflict in the heart between reason and desires. Māwardī, along with other Muslim thinkers of ethics, uses this concept of the multiplex self to understand and explain the cause(s) of human action, be it good or evil. In order to understand the causal relationship between the multiplex self and action we need to closely examine the theory of the levels of self and its practical outcomes in the form of moral attributes and social action.

Māwardī sees the multiplex self as the source of human action. Simply put, the levels of self are an outcome of the conflict between reason and the appetitive self in the heart which is the source of desires. Thus comes emphasis in the book on the reason and the heart. Furthermore, angels stand with reason and Satan stands with the appetitive self. Thus, the struggles in the human heart turns into a proxy war between angels and Satan who try to influence the human being from outside. There are numerous works on the levels of self and their behavioral outcomes. Most commonly, it is accepted that there are seven levels of self. It would diverge our attention here if we indulge in its details because there is a rich literature and discussion about it produced over many centuries in the wide Muslim geography. However, for our purpose here, it is possible to reduce them to three major levels depending on the phases of the conflict between reason and the appetitive self:

1. *Al-nafs al-ammāra*: the ruling appetitive self which subjugates reason for its service.
2. *Al-nafs al-lawwāma*: the critical self which blames itself for its moral faults.

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3. *Al-nafs al-mutma'inna*: the content self which is at peace under the control of reason.

Māwardī, following the heritage of earlier Muslim scholars of ethics, uses these levels of self to explain change and diversity in human action.

Multiplex ethical reasoning

The most important source Māwardī derives ethical values from is the Qur'an and hadith, the two major sources of Islam. The ethics in the Qur'an and hadith are multiplex in the sense that one can determine three levels of ethics: (1) reciprocal ethics, (2) tolerant ethics and (3) altruistic ethics. The key concepts for the reciprocal ethics are exchange, retaliation and retribution (*qīṣāṣ*), for the tolerant ethics are forbearance and forgiving and for the altruistic ethics are responding to cruelty with goodness and giving priority to the needs of others. Let me briefly describes these three levels of ethics through verses from the Qur'an:

1. *Reciprocal ethics*: It provides the foundation for Islamic law and, in extension, an ethics based on reciprocity to be applied in all areas of life and social relations.

And there is life for you in retaliation (retribution, *qīṣāṣ*) (The Qur'an 2: 179).

2. *Tolerant ethics*: It calls believers to forgo their rights and to forgive. The Qur'an calls the believers to go beyond reciprocity and retaliation by forgiving. Hence comes the second level of the Qur'anic ethics based on tolerance and forgiveness.