

Human Nature and the Orientation of Happiness: A Philosophical Comparison of Ibn Miskawayh and Jeremy Bentham

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abstract

This research aims to show the comparison of human concepts according to Ibn Miskawayh and Jeremy Bentham in ethics. The research method used is qualitative research with a literature study approach. The main sources of information are *Tahdhīb al-Akhlāq* by Ibn Miskawayh and *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation* by Jeremy Bentham. Information collection is carried out through documentation and a search of academic literature, while data analysis techniques use descriptive-comparative analysis. The results of the study show that differences in conceptions of human nature are the main foundation in the formulation of ethical systems. Ibn Miskawayh is a classical Islamic ethical figure, and Jeremy Bentham is the initiator of modern Western utilitarianism. Ibn Miskawayh views man as a rational and spiritual being with the aim of achieving moral perfection and true happiness, while Bentham views man as a pleasure-seeking creature who acts on the principle of utility. These conceptual differences have direct implications for the orientation and ethical character of each thinker, but both place rationality as an essential element in human moral action.

Keywords: Human Concept; Happiness; Comparative Studies; Moral Principles; Utility Principles

1. Introduction

The discourse on the concept of human beings is a central theme in moral and ethical philosophy, because from this conception of human beings are derived views on the purpose of life, moral values, and the orientation of action. Every ethical system is implicitly or explicitly built on certain assumptions about the nature of human beings, whether as rational beings, moral beings, or beings driven by certain interests. In this context, the comparison between classical Islamic ethical thought and modern Western ethics is important to enrich the treasures of science while opening up space for dialogue across intellectual traditions.¹

Ibn Miskawayh (d. 1030 AD) was one of the leading Muslim philosophers who made significant contributions in the field of ethics through his work *Tahdhīb al-Akhlāq*. He viewed man as a rational and moral being who has the potential to achieve perfection through the cultivation of the soul and the control of passions. The concept of man in Ibn Miskawayh's thought was heavily influenced by Greek philosophy,

¹ A. T. Almunawaroh. The Concept of Perfect Man from the Perspective of Ibn Miskawaih (Study of the Book of Tahdzib Al-Akhlak). *Journal of Religious Research*, 2(3). (December, 2022). doi:<https://doi.org/10.15575/jra.v2i3.17988>.

especially Aristotle and Neoplatonism, but was creatively integrated with Islamic values.²

On the other hand, Jeremy Bentham (1748–1832), as the main figure of classical utilitarianism in the modern West, developed the concept of human beings based on the principles of *pleasure* and suffering. According to Bentham, humans are essentially creatures who act to maximize pleasure and minimize suffering. This conception gave birth to the principle of utility as the basis for moral judgment and social policy.³

The differences in philosophical, historical, and cultural backgrounds between Ibn Miskawayh and Jeremy Bentham make the comparative study of the concept of man in thought both relevant and significant. This research aims to: (1) examine the concept of man according to Ibn Miskawayh; (2) analyze the concept of man according to Jeremy Bentham; and (3) compare the two views to find common ground and their differences and implications in ethics.

2. Literature Review

The study of Ibn Miskawayh's ethics generally places him as a pioneer of systematic Islamic moral philosophy. Researchers emphasize that the concept of human beings in his thinking is rooted in the theory of the soul, which divides the human soul into three faculties, namely the rational soul (*al-nafs al-nāṭiqah*), the emotional soul (*al-nafs al-ghaḍabiyyah*), and the soul of orgasm (*al-nafs al-shahwāniyyah*). Human perfection is achieved when the rational soul is able to control the other two faculties in a balanced manner, thus giving birth to moral virtue.⁴

A number of studies place Ibn Miskawayh as a pioneer of philosophical ethics in Islam who integrated Greek philosophy, particularly Aristotelianism and Neoplatonism, with Islamic values. His major work, *Tahdhīb al-Akhlāq wa Tathīr al-A'rāq*, is often cited as a major reference in understanding his views on man, the soul, and moral virtues. Researchers affirm that Ibn Miskawayh views humans as rational beings who have the potential to achieve perfection through the development of morality and soul balance.⁵

The literature that discusses Ibn Miskawayh's ethics generally highlights his theory of the division of the soul into three faculties, namely the rational soul, the emotional soul, and the orgasmic soul. These studies conclude that human perfection is achieved when the rational soul is able to control the other two faculties proportionally. Thus, the concept of human beings in Ibn Miskawayh's thought is normative and teleological, as it is always directed towards the ultimate goal of true happiness (*al-*

² E. Pratiwi, T. Negoro, & H. Haykal. "Jeremy Bentham's Theory of Utilitarianism: Legal Purpose or Legal Product Testing Methods?" *Constitution Journal*, 270. doi:<https://doi.org/10.31078/jk1922>.

³ M. Alfarizi, & R. M. Kartanegara. The Concept of Happiness (Comparative Analysis of Ibn Miskawaih and John Stuart Mill). *PARADIGM: JOURNAL OF KALAM AND PHILOSOPHY*, 5(2), (December, 2023). 148.

⁴ M. N. Oma. (January-February, 2018). THE SOUL (AL-NAFS) AND ITS INFLUENCE ON CHARACTER: AN ANALYSIS OF THE GREAT MUSLIM MORALIST THOUGHT, MISKAWAYH (D. 1030). *Sci.Int. (Lahore)*, 30(1), 55.

⁵ J. Hall. (May, 2014). Selected Criticism of the Philosophical Foundations of Neoclassical Schools. *Portland State University*, 59, 6.

sa'ādah al-ḥaqīqiyah). Some contemporary studies also emphasize the relevance of Ibn Miskawayh's ethics in the context of character education and moral development in modern society.⁶

On the other hand, studies of Jeremy Bentham have focused heavily on utilitarianism as an influential ethical theory in moral philosophy, law, and public policy. Bentham is understood as a thinker who developed a consequence-based ethics by making pleasure and suffering the basis for moral judgment. In Western philosophical literature, Bentham's concept of the human being is often categorized as empirical, psychological, and hedonistic.

Studies emphasize that Bentham viewed humans as rational agents who acted on the basis of profit-loss calculations through the principle of utility. The concept of *felicific calculus* has been the main focus of many studies, as it shows Bentham's attempt to make ethics objective and measurable. However, a number of critical studies have also highlighted reductionist tendencies in Bentham's anthropology, which is seen as simplifying the moral complexity of human beings into mere pleasure-seeking. Nevertheless, the literature agrees that Bentham's thought has made a major contribution to the development of applied ethics, particularly in the formulation of modern law and social policy.⁷

Comparative research between Islamic ethics and modern Western ethics is still relatively limited, especially those that specifically compare the concept of human beings in the thought of Ibn Miskawayh and Jeremy Bentham. Some comparative studies of Islamic ethics and utilitarianism tend to address differences in moral paradigms in general, such as the difference between *virtue ethics* and consequentialist ethics. These studies show that Islamic ethics emphasizes character building and intrinsic moral goals, whereas utilitarianism is more oriented towards social outcomes and benefits.

However, studies that explicitly place Ibn Miskawayh and Bentham in a comparative dialogue on the concept of man are still rare. Therefore, this study seeks to fill this gap by focusing the analysis on the anthropological assumptions underlying the ethics of the two figures. By examining the concept of the human being as the foundation of ethics, this study is expected to make a theoretical contribution to the development of a cross-tradition ethical discourse and enrich the understanding of the relevance of classical and modern thought in the context of contemporary ethics⁸

3. Method

This research is a qualitative study with a library *research approach*. Primary data are obtained from Ibn Miskawayh's main works, especially *Tahdhīb al-Akhlāq wa Taṭhīr*

⁶ S. Bakri. HUMAN PHILOSOPHICAL THOUGHT IBN MISKAWAIH: A CRITICAL REVIEW OF THE BOOK OF TAHDZIB ALAKHLAQ. *Journal of Islamic Thought and Philosophy*, XV(1). (January - June, 2018).152. doi:10.22515/ajpif.v15i1.1102.

⁷ Ridwan, & N. Aisyah. (April, 2022). The Concept of Moral Education of Ibn Miskawaih's Thought in the Book of Tahdzib Al-Akhlak. *Bashrah Journal*, 02(01), 71.

⁸ Salamah. (January-June, 2025). The Concept of Morality According to Ibn Miskawaih and Its Application in Islamic Character Education. *SCIENTIFIC JOURNAL OF MADRASAH TEACHERS (JIGM)*, 4(1), 310.

al-A'rāq, as well as Jeremy Bentham's work, especially *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*. Secondary data are derived from books, scientific journal articles, and other academic works relevant to the research topic.

The analysis method used is descriptive-comparative analysis. Descriptive analysis is carried out to systematically explain the concept of human beings according to each character, while comparative analysis is used to identify similarities and differences in views between the two as well as their philosophical and ethical implications. The philosophical approach is used as the main framework of analysis.

4. Results and Discussion

Ibn Miskawayh had the full name Abū 'Alī Aḥmad ibn Muḥammad ibn Ya'qūb ibn Miskawayh. He was born in Rayy (Persia, present-day Iran) around 932 AD and died in Isfahan in 1030 AD. Ibn Miskawayh is known as one of the leading Muslim philosophers of the classical period of Islam, especially in the fields of ethics and moral philosophy. He lived during the Buwaihi Dynasty and served as a librarian and administrative secretary in the government, which gave him extensive access to the works of Greek philosophy and the scientific literature of his time.

Ibn Miskawayh's greatest contribution lies in the development of philosophical ethics in the Islamic tradition. His most famous work, *Tahdhīb al-Akhlāq wa Taṭhīr al-A'rāq*, is one of the first systematic ethical treatises in Islam that discusses human nature, the structure of the soul, moral virtues, and the purpose of human life. In his work, Ibn Miskawayh integrates Greek philosophical thought—especially Aristotle and Neoplatonism—with Islamic moral teachings. He views human beings as rational and moral beings who have the potential to achieve perfection through moral development and education of the soul. Because of his contributions, Ibn Miskawayh is often referred to as the "father of Islamic ethics" (the *father of Islamic ethics*).⁹

Jeremy Bentham was born in London, England, on February 15, 1748, and died on June 6, 1832. He was an English philosopher, jurist, and social reformer widely known as the founder of the classical utilitarianism school in Western moral and political philosophy. Bentham showed remarkable intelligence from a young age; he entered Queen's College, Oxford, at the age of 12 and then pursued legal studies, although he was ultimately better known as a sharp critic of the English legal system of his time.

Bentham developed an idea of ethics centered on the principle of utility, namely that actions or policies are judged good to the extent that they produce the greatest happiness for the greatest number of people. His thinking departed from the assumption that humans are naturally driven by two main principles, namely *pleasure* and *pain*. He elaborated on this idea systematically in his influential work, *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation* (1789). In addition to ethics, Bentham's thought also had a great influence in the fields of law, politics, and public policy, especially in the development of legal positivism and social reform. His thinking

⁹ Hakim, A. (2014). Ibn Miskawaih's Philosophy of Ethics. *The Knowledge of Ushuluddin*, 13(2), 140.

places man as a rational agent whose actions can be evaluated calculatively based on the consequences produced.¹⁰

4.1 Ibn Miskawayh's Concept of the Human Perspective

According to Ibn Miskawayh, humans are creatures that have the potential to achieve moral and intellectual perfection. The essence of humans lies in their souls, especially in the rational soul that distinguishes them from other creatures. The rational soul allows humans to know the truth, distinguish between good and bad, and direct behavior towards virtue.

Ibn Miskawayh emphasized that the goal of human life is to achieve true happiness (*al-sa'ādah al-ḥaqīqiyyah*), which is not solely material, but spiritual and intellectual. This happiness is achieved through the habit of noble morals, balance of the soul, and the control of lust. Thus, the concept of human beings in Ibn Miskawayh's thought is teleological and normative.¹¹

Ibn Miskawayh developed a theory of the soul that divided the structure of the human psyche into three faculties, namely the rational soul, the emotional soul (*al-naḥs al-ghaḍabiyyah*), and the soul of the soul (*al-naḥs al-shahwāniyyah*). In an ideal order, the rational soul should function as a controller and guide for the other two faculties. If the rational soul is able to direct emotional impulses and orgasms in a balanced manner, then moral virtues such as wisdom (*ḥikmah*), courage (*shajā'ah*), self-control (*'iffah*), and justice (*'adl*) will be formed. Thus, morality in Ibn Miskawayh's view stems from the internal harmonization of the soul, not solely from external obedience to the rules.

Furthermore, Ibn Miskawayh emphasized that the ultimate goal of human life is to achieve true happiness (*al-sa'ādah al-ḥaqīqiyyah*). This happiness is not understood as sensory enjoyment or material attainment alone, but as a condition of spiritual and intellectual perfection of the soul. True happiness is realized when man is able to realize his rational potential optimally, know the truth, and live a life in harmony with virtue values.¹²

The process of achieving happiness is pursued through the habituation of noble morals (*ta'wīd al-akhlāq*), moral education, and the control of lust. Ibn Miskawayh emphasized that morality is not an innate trait that is static, but can be formed and perfected through practice and self-discipline. Therefore, ethics in his thought has a strong pedagogical dimension, because it places education as the main means of forming a moral human being.¹³

¹⁰ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jeremy_Bentham?utm_source. Quoted on December 24, 2025 at 09:16 WIB.

¹¹ J. P. Radez. *Ibn Miskawayh, The Soul, and the Pursuit of Happiness of the Happy True Sage*. London: LEXINGTON BOOKS. (2019). PP.47-50.

¹² Miswar. (2020, January-June). THE CONCEPT OF MORAL EDUCATION ACCORDING TO IBNU MISKAWAIH. *Al-Fikru: Scientific Journal*, 14(1), 17.

¹³ W. Daniyarti. "Moral Education as a Builder of Human Nature: Ibn Maskawih's Perspective". *Lisyabab Journal of Islamic and Social Studies*, 3(2). (December, 2022). 158. doi:<https://doi.org/10.58326/jurnallisyabab.v3i2.130>.

Thus, the concept of human beings in Ibn Miskawayh's thought is teleological and normative. Teleological because human beings are understood as beings who have the ultimate goal of perfection and true happiness, and normative because these concepts also contain demands on how humans should live and act. This view shows that Ibn Miskawayh's ethics are not only descriptive about human behavior, but also prescriptive, that is, providing normative direction for the formation of the ideal human being in the perspective of Islamic philosophy.

4.2 The Human Concept of Jeremy Bentham's Perspective

Jeremy Bentham views man as a creature that is naturally under the rule of two rulers, namely pleasure and suffering. All human actions, according to him, can be explained as an attempt to obtain pleasure and avoid suffering. On this basis, Bentham formulated the principle of utility as the main criterion in judging the good and bad of an action.

Bentham's concept of the human being is empirical and psychological, because it departs from the observation of human behavior. Humans are understood as rational agents who are able to perform moral calculations through what is called *felicific calculus*, which is the calculation of the intensity, duration, certainty, and breadth of the impact of pleasure or suffering produced by an action.¹⁴

Based on this view, Bentham formulated the principle of utility as a normative criterion for assessing the good and bad of an action. The principle of utility states that an action is judged good insofar as it tends to produce the greatest happiness for the greatest number of people (*the greatest happiness of the greatest number*), and vice versa is judged bad when it causes suffering or reduces happiness. Thus, morality is not determined by inner intentions, intrinsic moral obligations, or perfection of character, but by the real consequences produced by an action.

The concept of man in Bentham's thought is empirical and psychological because it departs from the observation of the factual tendencies of human behavior. He emphasizes the view of how man lives his life. He did not start his theory from metaphysical speculation about the nature of the soul or the transcendent purpose of man, but from the fact that man naturally reacts to the stimulus of pleasure and suffering. In this context, man is understood as a rational agent who has the ability to consider the consequences of his actions calculatively. Human rationality is not interpreted as a contemplative ability to attain metaphysical truth, but rather as an instrumental capacity to choose the most advantageous action.¹⁵

This rational ability is expressed in what is known as *felicific calculus* or happiness calculus. Through this calculus, human beings—both as individuals and policymakers—can judge an action based on several variables, such as the intensity of

¹⁴A. C. Kolang. (December, 2024). Jeremy Bentham's Utilitarian Principle(-ism) and His Involvement in the Development of Classical Legal Positivism. *Journal Home*, 10(2), 191. doi:<http://dx.doi.org/10.52947>.

¹⁵ B. A. Prakasa, & E. Gultom. "Jeremy Bentham's Theory of Utilitarianism Methodology in the Corporate Legal System in Indonesia". *JISPENDIORA: Journal of Social Sciences, Education and Humanities*, 4(1). (April, 2025).700. doi:<https://doi.org/10.56910/jispendiora.v4i1.2512>.

pleasure or suffering, its duration, the degree of certainty of its occurrence, its proximity in time, the breadth of its impact on the number of people, and the likelihood that the action will produce further consequences. Using these parameters, Bentham sought to make moral judgment objective, measurable, and practically applicable.

Furthermore, Bentham's concept of the human being has far-reaching implications in the fields of law, politics, and public policy. Man is seen as a subject whose interests can be calculated and accumulated, so laws and social institutions should be designed to maximize collective happiness. However, this approach at the same time demonstrates the reductionist character of Bentham's anthropology, as the moral complexity of human beings is reduced to a calculation of pleasure and suffering. Nevertheless, Bentham's thought remains of great significance because it provides a systematic, rational, and applicable ethical framework in regulating modern social life.¹⁶

4.3 Comparative Analysis

The comparison between Ibn Miskawayh and Jeremy Bentham shows a fundamental difference in the view of human nature. Ibn Miskawayh emphasizes the spiritual and rational dimensions of man, as well as the goal of moral perfection as the main orientation of life. Bentham, on the other hand, emphasizes the empirical and hedonistic dimensions of human beings by making pleasure the main measure.¹⁷

In contrast, Jeremy Bentham places humans in an empirical and psychological framework by emphasizing the hedonistic dimension as the main driver of human action. Humans are understood as creatures who are naturally driven by the desire to obtain pleasure and avoid suffering. On the basis of this assumption, Bentham makes pleasure the main measure in assessing the moral value of an action through the principle of utility. This view does not depart from the question of human intrinsic perfection or the transcendent purpose of life, but from the real and measurable consequences of human actions in social life. Thus, Bentham's ethics is consequentialist and pragmatic.¹⁸

Despite their sharp differences, the thoughts of the two figures also show a significant common ground, especially in the recognition of the role of rationality in human actions. Ibn Miskawayh places reason as the highest force in the structure of the human soul that functions to control emotional impulses and organs. Rationality in this context is normative and ethical, because it is in charge of directing humans to virtue and balance of the soul. Meanwhile, Bentham interprets rationality instrumentally, namely as the ability of humans to calculate utility through the consideration of the advantages and disadvantages of pleasure and suffering. Ratio

¹⁶ R. Martin. "Moral Decision-Making: From Bentham to the Curtain of Ignorance through Accessibility Taking Perspective". *Behavior. Sci.*, 11(66). (2021). 12. doi:<https://doi.org/10.3390/bs11050066>.

¹⁷ M. A. Mufazzal, & N. F. Chaudhary. "From apocalypticism to eschatology: a comparative analysis between Western "Utilitarianism" and Islam's "Maṣlaḥah." *IJISH (International Journal of Islamic Studies and Humanities)*, 7(1). (April, 2024). 45-55. doi:<https://doi.org/10.26555/ijish.v7i1.9705>.

¹⁸ H. J. Rehman, & Farooq. (December, 2023). A Comparative Study of Educational Ethics: Insights from Islamic Philosophy of Education and Western Literature. *Al-Idah*, 41(II), 18.

does not function as a determinant of intrinsic value, but as a tool to achieve a predetermined goal, namely happiness in a hedonistic sense.

The main difference between the two, thus, lies in the final orientation of the use of such rationality. For Ibn Miskawayh, rationality is directed at the formation of an ideal human being who is moral and achieves the perfection of the soul. For Bentham, rationality is directed at moral and social efficiency through the maximization of collective happiness. This difference in orientation results in different ethical implications: Ibn Miskawayh's ethics emphasizes the internal transformation of the individual, while Bentham's ethics emphasizes the external regulation of behavior through law and policy.¹⁹

In the context of contemporary ethics, the two ideas have complementary relevance. Ibn Miskawayh's thought offers an ethical framework that is holistic, character-building-oriented, and relevant in the context of moral education and personality development. The orientation of Ibn Miskawayh's views, in addition to leading to worldly things, is also inseparable from the ukhrawi orientation. Meanwhile, Bentham's thought provides a practical and applicable ethical model, especially in the formulation of public policy, law, and social governance. It seems that in this context, Bentham only has a worldly orientation and does not consider matters of a spiritual nature. When contextualized critically, the dialogue between these two approaches has the potential to give birth to an ethical synthesis that is not only oriented to social effectiveness, but also to moral and humanitarian depth.²⁰

5. Conclusion

Based on the analysis that has been carried out, it can be concluded that the concept of man according to Ibn Miskawayh and Jeremy Bentham is built on different philosophical assumptions. Ibn Miskawayh views man as a rational and spiritual being who aims to achieve moral perfection and true happiness, while Bentham views man as a pleasure-seeking creature whose actions are driven by the principle of utility.

This comparative study shows that the differences in human concepts have direct implications for the formulation of the ethics of each character. Nevertheless, both thoughts equally affirm the importance of rationality in human moral life. Thus, the dialogue between classical Islamic ethics and modern Western utilitarianism can make a valuable contribution to the development of a more comprehensive and contextual ethic.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*p.19.

²⁰ *Ibid.*p.20.

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