



## The Views of Ibn al-Muqaffa on Morality and Power in the Works

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“Al’Adab es-saghir” and “Al-Adab al-Kabīr”

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### Abstract

Ibn al-Muqaffa, the eminent thinker and accomplished writer, expounded his perspectives on morality and power in his two works, “*Al’Adab es-saghir*” and “*Al-Adab al-Kabīr*”. In “*Al’Adab es-saghir*”, Ibn al-Muqaffa conveyed the cultural legacy of the Persian, Greek and Arab people. This work imparts moral and social lessons, intending to educate and inspire individuals toward virtuous actions. The author employs concise language and allegories. Some of the themes in “*Al’Adab es-saghir*” encompass the intellect, wisdom, and the pursuit of life objectives; religion and eviton; classification of people; power and its dynamics; the critique of poverty; moral values and deviant behavior; knowledge and morality. On the other hand, “*Al-Adab al-Kabīr*” presents aphorisms and wisdom, akin to “*Al’Adab es-saghir*”, but distinguishes itself in terms of form and content. The work is divided into two chapters: the first delves into power, while the second explores amity. Havig had direct and intimate exposure to power; Ibn al-Muqaffa was familiar with political, social, and economic occurrences, state administration, as well as the limitations and shortcomings of governance. Consequently, he adopted a critical stance and advocated for various issues to undergo reforms.

**Keywords:** *literary figures, morality lessons, social criticism, types of power.*

### Al’adab es-saghir - الأدب الصغير

The term “Al’adab,” which Ibn al-Muqaffa’ uses in his two works, “Al’adab es-saghir” and “Al-Adab al-Kabīr” means behaviour or morals. During the Umayyad period, this notion was used in the sense of education (Abdulatif Hamza (1965): 152), encompassing the transmission of information, knowledge, and skills to the younger generations. This book contains 30 pages and imparts moral and

social lessons, educating and motivating individuals in both personal and public life. The author employs concise and allegorical language, addressing various important themes in human life such as:

1. Mind, wisdom, and the achievement of life objectives.
2. Faith and devotion.
3. Classification of people.
4. Power and relationships.
5. Condemnation of poverty.
6. Moral values and deviant behaviours.
7. Knowledge and morality.

Four things should not be underestimated: “*Fire, illness, enemies, and debt*” (Ibn al-Muqaffa (1989a): 303).

### 1. Mind, Wisdom, and Achievement of Life Objectives:

All people aspire to live a prosperous and happy life, achieved through possessing great wealth, a sound mind, and a clear vision regarding life’s concerns. According to Ibn al-Muqaffa’, “Knowledge adorns a person in abundance and saves them in difficulty” (Ibn al-Muqaffa (1989a): 288).

A healthy and rational mind is one that “*chooses matters with vision and realizes them with patience and determination*”. It emphasizes the need for nourishing both the body and the mind, as “*just as we need food and drink to fill the stomach, we also need to fill the mind*” (Ibn al-Muqaffa (1989a): 283). “*The wise person assesses their actions, perfects their morals, and acts every day*” (Ibn al-Muqaffa (1989a): 285).

### 2. Faith and Devotion:

Ibn al-Muqaffa’ distinguishes between faith and opinion. He explains that “*faith is secured through belief (Iman), while opinion is strengthened through contradiction*” (Ibn al-Muqaffa (1989a): 294).



Treating religion as a polemic reduces it to the level of mere opinion. If one treats faith as a polemic, they reduce it to the level of opinion and lose faith. True faith is a great and precious gift from God to humans, bringing benefits. Faith is emphasized as essential because *"devotion and education do not deceive a person, as a mind without devotion (faith) brings no benefit, and self-interest is a flaw of the mind and stagnation in desire"*(Ibn al-Muqaffa (1989a): 285).

### 3. Classification of People:

Ibn al-Muqaffa' classifies people into different categories based on their qualities, distinguishing between the good and the evil, the knowledgeable and the ignorant, the sincere and the cunning, the just and the deceitful, the generous and the miserly.

### 4. Power and Relationships:

Leadership is a significant challenge that requires vision, determination, and stability. It is achieved by selecting competent administrative staff, maintaining high trustworthiness, following the principle of meritocracy, carefully monitoring successes and failures, rewarding merit, and punishing failure and corruption(Ibn al-Muqaffa (1989a): 287-289).

### 5. Condemnation of Poverty:

Poverty is criticized, and it is explained how poverty deprives individuals of the material and financial benefits of life, leading to unhappiness, resentment, harm, and a negative perception of others.

### 6. Moral Values and Deviant Behaviours:

Wisdom involves knowing what is not known. Three of the best deeds are *"being honest in anger, charitable in difficulty, and forgiving when you have the power"*(Ibn al-Muqaffa (1989a):305). Signs of a deceiver and cunning person include being eloquent but doing evil deeds, being free from nervousness and close to jealousy, lacking shame, being filled with hatred, and lacking generosity(Ibn al-Muqaffa (1989a):297).

### 7. Knowledge and Morality:

Knowledge without faith is destructive. Much knowledge, if not used for God's pleasure, lead to hell. *"The most beautiful thing a parent can leave for their child is good education and virtuous siblings"*(Ibn al-Muqaffa (1989a): 293).

### الأدب الكبير - Al-Adab al-Kabīr (The Great Ethics):

Al-Adab al-Kabīr contains aphorisms and wisdom similar to Adab es-Sagīr but differs in form and content. It begins with an introduction and two main chapters: the chapter on leadership, power relations, and the system of life, and the chapter on friends and the treatment of people.

In the introduction, Ibn al-Muqaffa' provides a historical overview of cultural heritage, the civilizational achievements of past generations, the need to benefit from them, and emphasizes that previous generations, despite their knowledge and civilization, were not satisfied with their achievements(Ibn al-Muqaffa (1989b): 245).

Considering his close and direct contacts with power as an administrator, Ibn al-Muqaffa' advises leaders to govern wisely in relation to the general population, work honestly, and defend their power with the help of scholars. He warns against arrogance and complacency, urging leaders not to be satisfied with praise and to rely on three principles: *"special care, pleasing God, and your competence"*(Ibn al-Muqaffa (1989b): 248).

Ibn al-Muqaffa' classifies powers into three types: religious power, stormy power, and invisible power. He advises people close to power to be cautious, distance themselves if they see the leader's unwillingness to reform and improve the people's welfare, as this can lead to the destruction of their faith and life. In the second chapter on friends and the treatment of people, especially in challenging times, Ibn al-Muqaffa' emphasizes the need for good friends who consider them as a crucial pillar in human life, promoting love, solidarity, sincerity, and humanity. He advocates for sacrifice for friends and treating them like family(Ibn al-Muqaffa (1989b): 253).

He highlights the qualities of a good society, including trustworthiness, sincerity, preserving trust, help, and solidarity. Ibn al-Muqaffa' demonstrates these qualities in his practical life, particularly in the case of his friend Abdul Hamid when they imprisoned him. He advises on how to behave with friends and cultivate social relationships, emphasizing the importance of avoiding gossip, listening attentively, and communicating with maturity(Ibn al-Muqaffa (1989b): 253).

He concludes by advising on relationships with enemies, recommending not to reciprocate betrayal with betrayal, and cautioning against manipulation. Ibn al-Muqaffa' believes that a person sees the world as small when they consider it so in their eyes. He advises patience with bad relatives and recommends treating close friends and enemies wisely(Ibn al-Muqaffa (1989b): 266).



In summary, the text contains valuable insights into various aspects of life, morality, governance, and interpersonal relationships, providing guidance for individuals and leaders alike.

### **Summary**

Ibn al-Muqaffa placed great emphasis on human principles and values, which shape individuals into wise and less fallible beings. His wisdom resonates with all age groups, genders, and communities. He advises leaders on the just administration of the state, policymaking, and developing relationships between the government and the populace. Various themes are addressed, including wisdom, its value and role, friendship, sincerity, the treatment of friends and enemies, wealth, poverty, flattery, traps, betrayal, counsel, moral values, deviant behaviors, and their censure. Ibn al-Muqaffa's ideas have a timeless impact as they serve as guides for moral, political, and social education, encourage good deeds, and motivate social, political, and societal cohesion through the principle of meritocracy.

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