

*Original-Forschungsarbeit*

## **Eine vergleichende Studie zu den Grundlagen spiritueller Erziehung in sozialen Interaktionen: Unter besonderer Berücksichtigung der Perspektive von Imam 'Ali (AS) und der Theorie der Tugendethik**

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### **Zusammenfassung:**

Diese Studie unternimmt eine vergleichende Analyse der Grundlagen und Komponenten spiritueller Erziehung in sozialen Interaktionen aus der Perspektive von Imam 'Ali (AS) im Rahmen der Tugendethik. Während sich die meisten Studien zur spirituellen Erziehung im islamischen Kontext hauptsächlich auf individuelle Aspekte wie Gottesdienst, Frömmigkeit und Selbstreinigung konzentriert haben, zielt dieser Beitrag darauf ab, eine kohärente Darstellung des Einflusses spiritueller Bildung auf zwischenmenschliche Beziehungen zu bieten – unter Rückgriff auf die Nahdsch al-Balagha und die philosophische Struktur der Tugendethik. Die theoretische Grundlage dieser Forschung ist die Tugendethik, die die Entwicklung eines tugendhaften Charakters, die allmähliche moralische Entfaltung, die Internalisierung von Tugenden und die Rolle der praktischen Vernunft bei der moralischen Urteilsfindung betont. Mithilfe einer vergleichend-analytischen Methode untersucht die Studie Prinzipien wie Gotteszentriertheit, den Glauben an die angeborene Güte des Menschen, Freiheit und Verantwortung, eschatologisches Bewusstsein sowie die Rolle der Emotionen in sozialen Interaktionen. Die Studie zeigt, dass sich diese Prinzipien im Erziehungssystem Imam 'Alis (AS) in Form sozialer Tugenden wie Kooperation, Gerechtigkeit, Toleranz und Verantwortlichkeit manifestieren. Die Ergebnisse legen nahe, dass Imam 'Alis (AS) Sozialethik nicht nur im religiösen Rahmen verständlich ist, sondern auch mit den Grundlagen der Tugendethik übereinstimmt und als integriertes Modell zur Neugestaltung zeitgenössischer Sozialethik dienen kann. Abschließend kommt die Studie zu dem Ergebnis, dass spirituelle Erziehung aus der Sicht Imam 'Alis (AS) ein innerer, gradueller und sozial ausgerichteter Prozess ist, durch den die moralische Transformation von Individuum und Gesellschaft gleichzeitig erfolgen kann. Dieser Ansatz bietet ein tragfähiges Modell zur Bewältigung ethischer Krisen und zur Neubewertung menschlicher Beziehungen in der modernen Welt.

**Schlüsselwörter:** Grundlagen spiritueller Erziehung; soziale Interaktion; Theorie der Tugendethik; Nahdsch al-Balagha

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## مطالعه‌ای تطبیقی درباره بنیان‌های تربیت معنوی در تعاملات اجتماعی: با تأکید بر دیدگاه امام علی (ع) و نظریه اخلاق فضیلت

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### چکیده:

این پژوهش به تحلیل تطبیقی بنیان‌ها و مؤلفه‌های تربیت معنوی در تعاملات اجتماعی از دیدگاه امام علی (ع)، در چارچوب نظریه اخلاق فضیلت می‌پردازد. در حالی که بیشتر پژوهش‌های حوزه تربیت معنوی در بافت اسلامی عمدتاً بر ابعاد فردی مانند عبادت، تقوا و تهذیب نفس تمرکز داشته‌اند، این مقاله تلاش دارد با بهره‌گیری از نهج‌البلاغه و ساختار فلسفی اخلاق فضیلت، روایتی منسجم از تأثیر تربیت معنوی بر روابط انسانی ارائه دهد. مبنای نظری پژوهش، نظریه اخلاق فضیلت است که بر پرورش منش‌های اخلاقی، سیر تدریجی رشد اخلاقی، درونی‌سازی فضایل، و نقش عقل عملی در تشخیص موقعیت‌های اخلاقی تأکید دارد. با به‌کارگیری روش تحلیلی-تطبیقی، اصولی چون خدا-محوری، باور به فطرت نیک انسانی، آزادی و مسئولیت، توجه به معاد، و نقش هیجان‌ها در روابط اجتماعی بررسی می‌شود. یافته‌ها نشان می‌دهند که این اصول در نظام تربیتی امام علی (ع) به‌صورت فضیلت‌های اجتماعی همچون همکاری، عدالت، مدارا و پاسخ‌گویی تجلی یافته‌اند. نتایج حاکی از آن است که اخلاق اجتماعی امام علی (ع) نه‌تنها در چارچوب دینی قابل فهم است، بلکه با مبانی نظریه اخلاق فضیلت نیز هم‌راستا بوده و می‌تواند به‌عنوان الگویی تلفیقی برای بازسازی اخلاق اجتماعی معاصر مطرح شود. در نهایت، مقاله نتیجه می‌گیرد که از منظر امام علی (ع)، تربیت معنوی فرایندی درونی، تدریجی و اجتماعی‌محور است که می‌تواند دگرگونی اخلاقی فرد و جامعه را به‌صورت هم‌زمان رقم بزند. این رویکرد، مدلی کارآمد برای مواجهه با بحران‌های اخلاقی و بازاندیشی در روابط انسانی در دنیای معاصر ارائه می‌دهد.

**واژگان کلیدی:** بنیان‌های تربیت معنوی؛ تعامل اجتماعی؛ نظریه اخلاق فضیلت؛ نهج‌البلاغه

Original Research Paper

# A Comparative Study of the Foundations of Spiritual Education in Social Interactions: Emphasizing the Perspective of Imam Ali (AS) and the Theory of Virtue Ethics

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## Abstract

This study undertakes a comparative analysis of the foundations and components of spiritual education in social interactions from the perspective of Imam Ali (AS), within the framework of virtue ethics. While most studies on spiritual education in Islamic contexts have primarily focused on individual dimensions such as worship, piety, and self-purification, this paper seeks to present a coherent account of the influence of spiritual education on human interactions, drawing on Nahj al-Balagha and the philosophical structure of virtue ethics. The theoretical basis of this research is virtue ethics, which emphasizes the cultivation of virtuous character, gradual moral development, the internalization of virtues, and the role of practical reason in discerning moral situations. Employing a comparative-analytical method, the study explores principles such as theocentrism, belief in innate human goodness, freedom and responsibility, eschatological awareness, and the role of emotions in social interactions. It demonstrates that these principles manifest in Imam Ali's (AS) educational system as social virtues such as cooperation, justice, tolerance, and accountability. The findings suggest that the social ethics of Imam Ali (AS) are not only intelligible within a religious framework but also align with the foundations of virtue ethics and can serve as an integrated model for reconstructing contemporary social ethics. Ultimately, the study concludes that, from Imam Ali's (AS) perspective, spiritual education is an internal, gradual, and socially oriented process through which the moral transformation of both the individual and society can occur simultaneously. This approach offers a viable model for addressing ethical crises and rethinking human relationships in the modern world.

**Keywords:** Foundations of spiritual education; social interaction; virtue ethics theory; Nahj al-Balagha

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## **Introduction**

According to many Western scholars, spirituality is an intrinsic aspect of human nature and an essential element of a healthy life—regardless of religious affiliation (Giesenberg, 2000). In contemporary Western contexts, spiritual education is increasingly recognized as a foundational need in schools, as it is believed to instill universal human values in children and teach them to serve society and live in peace and love (Arweck & Nesbitt, 2007). Beyond fostering holistic human development (Moulin-Stozek, 2020), spiritual education contributes to a healthy lifestyle, psychological well-being, and even physical health (Muminova, 2021), while reducing emotional and behavioral issues among learners (Woodward, 2007).

Although spiritual education and formal schooling were once considered contradictory in the West, a new interest has emerged in integrating spiritual growth with academic instruction in many Western educational systems, bridging the perceived divide (Moulin-Stozek, 2020).

In a similar vein, spiritual education in Islamic thought is a comprehensive concept that extends beyond individual self-cultivation to include the fundamental reform of social relationships. However, existing scholarship has largely restricted this concept to the domains of worship, remembrance, and personal purification. As a result, the social dimensions of spiritual education—particularly prominent in the conduct of Imam Ali (AS) and the teachings of Nahj al-Balagha—have not been systematically analyzed. This study seeks to revisit the principles and foundations of spiritual education in social interactions through the conceptual lens of virtue ethics.

Unlike duty-based or consequentialist approaches, virtue ethics focuses on the development of virtuous character and ethical personality. For instance, Aristotle describes virtue as a state involving deliberate choice guided by reason, such that human actions are characterized by a “golden mean” and moral appropriateness (Aristotle, 1999). Similarly, Imam Ali (AS), in Nahj al-Balagha, repeatedly underscores the importance of reasoned decision-making and moderation in social interactions, portraying the believer as one who avoids both excess and deficiency.

Rosalind Hursthouse argues that the moral correctness of an action is determined by whether it aligns with the behavior of a “virtuous agent”

(Hursthouse, 1999). On this basis, virtues such as tolerance, justice, human dignity, and responsibility in the conduct of Imam Ali (AS) are not abstract doctrines but manifestations of his virtuous character, offering replicable models. Julia Annas sees virtue not as a static state but as a “developing process” (Annas, 2011), and Philippa Foot views virtue as a human quality essential for flourishing, rationally justified by human nature (Foot, 2002). These perspectives resonate with Imam Ali’s (AS) teachings on human dignity and the intrinsic value of goodness in social interactions—for example, his counsel that no person should be a slave to another, for God has created them free, and one should treat others as one wishes to be treated.

The core issue addressed in this article is the absence of a clear philosophical and conceptual model for analyzing the social dimensions of spiritual education based on the conduct of Imam Ali (AS)—a model that could systematically frame social virtues such as justice, empathy, dignity, and tolerance. To address this gap, the study employs the theory of virtue ethics, emphasizing the narrative of virtue in Imam Ali’s (AS) life, to propose a conceptual framework for spiritual education within the context of social interactions. The central research question is: How can the principles and components of spiritual education in social interactions, as reflected in Imam Ali’s (AS) teachings in *Nahj al-Balagha*, be analyzed through the theory of virtue ethics to provide a systematic model for reconstructing ethical and spiritual relationships in contemporary society?

## **Methodology**

This study is a theoretical investigation employing a descriptive-analytical and comparative approach, situated within the framework of Islamic philosophy of education. Its primary objective is to extract, analyze, and reconstruct the concepts of spiritual education found in *Nahj al-Balagha*, based on the virtue ethics theory. Given that virtue ethics has developed within the Greco-Western philosophical tradition, whereas spiritual education has evolved along a distinct trajectory within Islamic religious discourse, the present article seeks to establish a comparative dialogue between these two conceptual systems. The research data were collected qualitatively through selective content analysis of *Nahj al-Balagha*.

The data analysis followed both conceptual and deductive methods. Initially, the foundational components of virtue ethics theory—including virtuous character, gradual development of virtues, the role of narrative and tradition, the criterion of a virtuous agent, and the teleological nature of ethics—were identified. These components were then compared with educational-social themes present in the life and teachings of Imam Ali (AS). Subsequently, using a comparative analytical method, similarities and differences between the two systems were examined in order to explore the theoretical capacity of Nahj al-Balagha within the framework of virtue ethics.

## **Literature Review**

Several studies have addressed the theme of spiritual education, including:

- Adams, Bull, and Maynes (2015), who explored early childhood spirituality and identified its distinctive features in educational settings.
- Arweck and Nesbitt (2007), who discussed the promotion of children's spiritual development through values education.
- Bellous (2021), who argued for spiritual care as a foundational element of children's religious education.
- In the Iranian context:
  - Ash'ari (2008) analyzed the concept, principles, and methods of spiritual education based on the thought of Allameh Tabataba'i, portraying spirituality as the inner essence of religion and a common axis among divine traditions. The study outlined spiritual education goals in cognitive (knowledge of God), affective (faith), and behavioral (righteous action) domains.
  - Heydari-Setoudeh (2012) focused on spiritual education according to Imam Ali (AS) based on his letters in Nahj al-Balagha, emphasizing concepts such as piety, self-purification, and proximity to God.
  - Sarami, Mohammadi, and Momeni (2017) examined the principles and objectives of education in Nahj al-Balagha, limiting their scope to themes such as eschatology, action-orientation, and humility.
- It appears that most existing literature on spiritual education has

predominantly concentrated on its individual dimensions—such as piety, worship, and inner purification—while the social dimension, which constitutes a vital context for the realization of spiritual education, has received insufficient attention.

### **Conceptualization of Spiritual Education**

Spiritual education is a process through which an individual cultivates and actualizes inner dimensions such as meaning, purpose, connection with the transcendent, and moral integrity within both personal and social contexts. It transcends specific religious doctrines by focusing on the development of deep meaning-making, interdependence, and a sense of responsibility toward the world (Tisdell, 2003). This concept also encompasses the nurturing of virtues such as love, forgiveness, honesty, and empathy, which promote moral and psychological growth in social interaction (Lickona, 2004). Palmer (1998) emphasizes that spiritual education, through lived experiences, inner reflections, and value-based actions, contributes to the formation of moral and spiritual identity.

In some perspectives, spiritual education is associated with the individual's "core being," aiming to empower human beings to live authentically, meaningfully, and in connection with themselves, others, nature, and the transcendent (Miller, 2000). Accordingly, spiritual education is not merely the transmission of information but a transformative process grounded in "experience, relationship, and reflection," guiding individuals toward a purposeful and ethical life.

### **The Impact of Spiritual Education on Social Relations**

Spiritual education not only leads to inner growth and a meaningful personal life but also fundamentally influences the quality of human social relationships. In this approach, interactions with others are not based solely on individual interests or social contracts, but are grounded in internalized virtues such as love, honesty, mutual respect, and a sense of responsibility (Lickona, 2004).

Individuals who are spiritually nurtured tend to adhere more closely to values such as empathy, justice, cultural tolerance, and forgiveness in their social relationships (Palmer, 1998). These values contribute to peaceful coexistence, reduction of conflicts, and the strengthening of human bonds in society. From an educational perspective, spiritual education fosters a sense of interdependence among individuals, guiding them away from egocentrism towards altruism (Miller, 2000).

Moreover, spiritual education plays a key role in cultivating social responsibility. Individuals with a coherent spiritual identity often feel committed to social issues and actively participate in philanthropic, environmental, or public service activities (Tisdell, 2003). For such individuals, social action is not merely a tool for achieving personal goals; rather, it is a reflection of a spiritual life in which relations with others are seen as part of one's relationship with the Divine.

Thus, by reinforcing the moral and spiritual dimensions of personality, spiritual education provides a foundation for enhancing human relationships—relationships in which love, dignity, tolerance, and responsibility are the core elements of social interactions.

To understand the foundations of spiritual education in social interactions, this topic is examined in several parts:

### **The Role of Beliefs in Spiritual Education**

Beliefs play an undeniable role in the institutionalization of spiritual education. In fact, spiritual education inherently involves the domain of belief. It seems that the primary condition for the formation of spiritual education is the belief systems of individuals.

A diverse set of individuals can only engage in spiritual education within a social context when their interactions are based on shared beliefs. In other words, mutual interaction only leads to a sense of social cohesion when individuals' semantic systems reach a relative consensus in their beliefs. Affection and friendship among people stem from shared beliefs. Furthermore, although individuals differ in nature and personality, what creates harmony among these diverse souls is the similarity of their beliefs.

This epistemic commonality occurs when social agents share unified perceptions and beliefs regarding the fundamental dimensions of human existence—namely, God, the world, and humankind. Imam Ali (AS) referred to Muslims as brothers and called them to unity in the face of societal discord: “So beware lest you become the banner of sedition or the signposts of innovation. Make binding upon yourselves that which keeps the unity of the Muslim community firm and maintains the foundations of obedience.”

### **Belief in Divine Centrality and Its Role in Social Spiritual Education**

Within the framework of socially-oriented spiritual education, the centrality of God as the ultimate source of meaning, ethics, and values plays a foundational role in regulating human relationships. This belief not only transforms one’s orientation toward existence and the self, but also provides a moral framework for social action based on responsibility, dignity, and fairness.

Imam Ali (AS) repeatedly emphasizes that “the reformation of one’s relationship with God is a prerequisite for reformation in one’s relationship with others”:

"Whoever purifies his inner self, God will beautify his outward appearance; whoever works for his religion, God will suffice him in his worldly affairs; and whoever improves his relationship with God, God will improve his relationship with people."

He also said: “Whoever acts upon truth, people will be inclined toward him.”

In virtue ethics, Aristotle underscores that virtuous character must be inspired by a transcendent telos (ultimate purpose); without such an end goal, the formation of a coherent ethical system is impossible (Aristotle, 1999). In religious discourse, this telos is none other than connection with God and the realization of servitude (*‘ubdiyyah*), which grants human life meaning, tranquility, and moral order. Julia Annas, in her analysis of virtue ethics, notes that the virtuous individual is one who finds life’s meaning in alignment with values greater than the self—values that also shape his or her relationships with others (Annas, 2011).

Hence, in Imam Ali's educational framework, theocentrism acts as an inner guide and a regulator of social interactions. This belief manifests in various domains such as social justice, the observance of others' rights, and the rejection of self-centeredness. According to MacIntyre, virtuous actions are realized when individuals see themselves as part of a grand, ethically-oriented narrative whose direction originates beyond the self (MacIntyre, 2007).

Accordingly, belief in God in Imam Ali's social ethics is not merely a theological statement but a functional element that imbues social relationships with meaning, stability, and moral legitimacy. This form of theocentrism is not a cause of isolation or individualism, but rather a spiritual foundation for solidarity, tolerance, and social responsibility.

In the monotheistic worldview, the entire universe is seen as an integrated, purposeful system governed by divine order and subject to divine laws – both natural and legal. Resisting these divine laws leads ultimately to failure (Misbah Yazdi, 1996, p. 20). Understanding that the cosmos is created by wise divine will, that it operates on principles of goodness and mercy aimed at leading beings to their appropriate perfections, and that humanity occupies a place of dignity and responsibility within this system, frames the world as a school for human development. Each person is rewarded by God according to sincere and proper efforts (Mutahhari, n.d., p. 16).

Theological beliefs foster intimacy and solidarity in social interactions. Imam Ali (AS) considers love and affinity as outcomes of spiritual affinity and sees such affinity as contingent upon shared knowledge of God.

### **Belief in the Innate Goodness of Human Nature and Its Role in Social Spiritual Education**

Belief in the innate goodness – or pure nature (*fiṭrah*) – of the human being is a foundational principle in Islamic spiritual education, especially in the thought of Imam Ali (AS). This principle plays a central role in shaping virtue-based and ethical social relationships. According to this view, humans possess inherent capacities for the development of moral and spiritual virtues, and spiritual education is the process by which these innate potentials are cultivated and actualized.

In Nahj al-Balaghah, Imam Ali (AS) portrays the human being as a dignified creature of God, endowed with intrinsic nobility: “God created him free and embedded human virtues in his very nature” (Nahj al-Balaghah, Letter 53). This emphasis on innate goodness guarantees the possibility of moral and spiritual development, opening up a horizon of hope for the reform of both the individual and society.

In the framework of virtue ethics, this view is aligned with Aristotle’s belief that humans are naturally disposed to virtue, and that virtue entails the cultivation and realization of their rational and emotional capacities (Aristotle, 1999). Similarly, Alasdair MacIntyre argues that a person’s moral identity is formed through recognizing and nurturing these natural capacities within the context of cultural narratives (MacIntyre, 2007).

A person who is endowed with divine dignity adopts values and social roles according to the vision they hold of their place in the cosmic order, thereby contributing to the vitality of the community (Amid Zanjani, 2000, p. 350). From the perspective of Islamic scholars, the human being possesses exceptional intellectual, cognitive, and volitional capacities, rendering them incomparable to other creatures. The emphasis on human dignity constitutes a fundamental Islamic perspective on the social status of the human being. Thus, any action in social relations that compromises human dignity or insults this status is considered a violation of Islamic principles. All human beings are of one essence; no one is inherently superior to another. This principle serves to regulate many human interactions and preserve individual and collective values. A person who regards themselves as inherently valuable will in turn respect the dignity of others.

Imam Ali (AS) constantly calls on people to reflect on their elevated status and the responsibilities that arise from it. This attention does not lead to arrogance or rigidity; rather, it results in liberation from egocentrism and narcissism. It nurtures the human being into an effective, multifaceted force that engages the world responsibly, constantly facing new duties and realities through a perspective enlightened by divine guidance. This process can give rise to a deep emotional sense of security that shields the person from anxieties imposed by external pressures (Fadlallah, 2020, Vol. 1, p. 218).

In Imam Ali’s (AS) vision, belief in human goodness implies deep trust in the human capacity to attain moral excellence and promote social reform.

Accordingly, the role of spiritual education is to provide conditions for the internal growth of the individual and to strengthen their moral and social dimensions, such that the individual not only refines their own character but also contributes meaningfully to societal advancement.

In conclusion, belief in the innate goodness of the human being forms the foundation of spiritual education. It affirms the possibility of realizing virtues within social relations and elevates spiritual education from a personal endeavor to a process of fundamental social transformation.

### **Belief in Human Freedom**

Another essential pillar of Imam Ali's (AS) framework for spiritual education is the belief in human freedom and volition – a belief that forms the basis for moral responsibility and the possibility of virtue development within society. In *Nahj al-Balaghah*, human liberty is emphasized both in its internal dimension (freedom from the tyranny of the soul) and in its social dimension (freedom from domination by others). Imam Ali (AS) famously states: "Do not be a slave to others when God has created you free" (*Nahj al-Balaghah*, Letter 31), clearly highlighting the innate freedom of human beings and the necessity of preserving their dignity and inner autonomy.

Islam considers the elevated desires of the human being to be the origin of human freedom. Freedom is deemed essential to human identity and is defined as liberation from any obstacle to human perfection (Amid Zanjani, 1987, p. 552). Freedom, combined with a sense of responsibility, is among the most fundamental human rights. It can be argued that the ultimate purpose of reason and perception is to enable the free use of creation's blessings in the human journey toward perfection.

Within this intellectual framework, freedom is not merely the absence of external constraints. Since true freedom is tied to the realization of human perfection, the provision of conditions conducive to that perfection is a necessary component of freedom. The more conditions that support human development are provided, the more genuine human freedom is realized.

Thus, freedom must be assessed not only by the mere fact of release from constraints, but also in terms of the outcomes it produces. Only those forms of liberation that remove obstacles to human growth and pave the way

toward the ideal human condition qualify as true freedom. Otherwise, unchecked liberation may devolve into servitude to desires and open the door to a deeper form of enslavement (Baqeri, n.d., p. 133).

In virtue ethics, too, virtue does not arise from blind obedience or mere legal conformity but is actualized through the deliberate and conscious choices of the moral agent. Aristotle explicitly states that virtuous action is “voluntary, goal-directed, and rooted in character” (Aristotle, 1999, Book II). Julia Annas adds that the cultivation of virtue is only possible when the individual is capable of autonomous decision-making and treats virtue as a skill requiring ongoing reflection and willpower (Annas, 2011).

From this perspective, Imam Ali’s (AS) emphasis on spiritual freedom aims to emancipate the individual from the domination of whims, psychological fears, and social subjugation, enabling the emergence of a self-aware, responsible actor in society. This view constitutes a convergence of religious teachings with the virtue-centered philosophical tradition, as both regard freedom as a prerequisite for self-realization, moral character formation, and the advancement of communal life.

### **Belief in the Afterlife and Its Role in Spiritual-Moral Social Education**

Belief in the afterlife is a foundational component of the Islamic spiritual and moral framework, playing a central role in the cultivation of morally responsible, future-oriented individuals within society. In the thought of Imam Ali (AS), eschatological belief is not merely an answer to the ultimate reality of existence; it functions as an epistemological and ethical tool for guiding social conduct in this world. Imam Ali (AS) instructs, “Increase your remembrance of death and what lies beyond it,” urging individuals to live with a continual sense of final accountability, thus liberating themselves from negligence and self-forgetfulness (Nahj al-Balagha, Letter 31).

Within the theoretical framework of virtue ethics, forward-looking orientation and the contemplation of life’s ultimate goal are essential in the cultivation of virtues. Aristotle identifies *eudaimonia*, or ultimate flourishing, as the ethical *telos* toward which all virtues should be cultivated (Aristotle, 1999). In Islamic thought, this *telos* is elevated and eternal, associated with divine proximity (*qurb ilahi*) and the eschatological vision of

a blessed life (*hayat tayyibah*), providing a meaningful horizon for ethical living in the temporal world. Julia Annas similarly contends that moral virtues gain meaning when a person is on a trajectory of personal and purposeful growth, which entails reflection, perseverance, and continual moral evaluation (Annas, 2011). Accordingly, in the spiritual pedagogy of Imam Ali (AS), belief in the afterlife serves as a motivational force that enhances self-restraint, ethical action, altruism, observance of others' rights, and commitment to social justice.

As MacIntyre argues, virtuous action is embedded within a larger moral narrative that situates individual conduct within a framework of meaning and responsibility (MacIntyre, 2007). In *Nahj al-Balagha*, the overarching narrative is eschatologically driven, attributing transcendent significance to worldly actions and shaping the moral identity of individuals as social agents.

In summary, belief in the afterlife constructs a powerful semantic framework that bridges the present and the future, the worldly and the transcendent, the self and the other. This framework transforms ethical agency from a temporary or self-serving pursuit into a continuous, purposeful, and meaning-oriented responsibility.

### **The Role of Emotions in Spiritual-Moral Social Education**

In socially-oriented spiritual education, human emotions are not peripheral or disruptive but are central components in the realization of ethical virtues in collective behavior. In the thought of Imam Ali (AS), emotions such as compassion, empathy, love, mercy, righteous indignation, and aversion to injustice are regarded as dimensions of a virtuous character that must be cultivated and directed. In various sayings in *Nahj al-Balagha*, he calls for kindness toward people, compassion for the weak, generosity to the needy, and leniency toward the faults of others: "Show mercy and you shall receive mercy; forgive and you shall be forgiven" (*Nahj al-Balagha*, Wisdom 90).

In virtue ethics, emotions play a central role in both the formation and sustainability of virtues. Aristotle emphasizes that virtue is not merely a matter of action but of feeling rightly; the virtuous person is one who not only does the right thing but also feels appropriately about it (Aristotle, 1999, Book

II). This perspective aligns with the Islamic tradition, in which Imam Ali (AS) views the integration of reason, heart, and action as essential to moral perfection.

Julia Annas considers emotions not as rivals to reason but as preconditions for moral motivation. She argues that virtue is dependent on the proper cultivation of emotions within the framework of rationality, and that virtuous character emerges from a thoughtful integration of affect and deliberation (Annas, 2011). Similarly, Imam Ali (AS) treats spiritual education as incomplete and ineffective without the refinement and guidance of emotions.

In *Nahj al-Balagha*, emotions are also seen as means to strengthen social cohesion. The exhortation to “love for others what you love for yourself” (*Nahj al-Balagha*, Letter 31) exemplifies emotional training that fosters balance and justice in social interactions. This aligns with MacIntyre’s view that moral character is shaped within emotionally and socially embedded interactions and internalized commitments (MacIntyre, 2007).

Overall, in the spiritual education modeled by Imam Ali (AS), emotions are not passive or private but are active resources for guiding social ethics, enhancing human solidarity, and actualizing justice in daily interactions. Recognizing that emotional convergence among members of society is a foundation of spiritually-based social education, it becomes essential to explore specific manifestations of such emotional alignment in the realization of spiritual-moral training.

### **Social Cooperation as a Manifestation of Spiritual Education**

Social cooperation is one of the practical manifestations of spiritual education in the teachings of Imam Ali (AS), rooted in the integration of human dignity, compassion, responsibility, and justice. Such cooperation is not merely a utilitarian or contractual act, but an expression of empathy and benevolence grounded in a nature-based spiritual upbringing. In his letter to Malik al-Ashtar, Imam Ali (AS) calls on his governor to treat all people with kindness, whether Muslim or non-Muslim, declaring: “People are of two types: they are either your brothers in faith or your equals in creation” (*Nahj al-Balagha*, Letter 53).

Within the framework of virtue ethics, such cooperation arises from a

virtuous character. According to Aristotle, ethical relationships are established when one integrates personal virtue with the public good, since authentic moral action is always defined in relation to others and society (Aristotle, 1999). Virtues such as generosity, justice, and charity can only be actualized within a social context.

Julia Annas argues that cooperation results from the cultivation of moral interaction skills with others. She emphasizes that a virtuous person can only realize their virtues within communal life, where moral and emotional judgment is tested through interaction (Annas, 2011). This aligns with the teachings of Imam Ali (AS), who in his sermons and letters, consistently describes human beings as inherently social and collectively responsible, calling for shared experiences of joy and hardship.

Alasdair MacIntyre similarly asserts that virtues acquire meaning through interpersonal relationships and within the framework of traditional structures; moral action cannot be defined outside of active participation in society (MacIntyre, 2007). Imam Ali (AS) frequently emphasizes the importance of altruism, charitable giving, and support for the underprivileged – acts that reflect inner purity, spiritual refinement, and the realization of justice.

Thus, from the perspective of Imam Ali (AS), social cooperation is not a reactive behavior but a component of the spiritual identity of the virtuous human being. Through internalizing compassion and benevolence, this identity is outwardly expressed and simultaneously contributes to personal and societal reform.

### **Effective Communication as a Reflection of Spiritual Education**

A fundamental manifestation of spiritual education in the realm of social interactions is the ability to engage in effective, ethical, and purposeful communication with others. In *Nahj al-Balaghah*, interpersonal communication is not a tool for personal gain, but a reflection of one's understanding of human dignity and social responsibility. Imam Ali (AS) advises his son: "Interact with people in such a manner that if you die they weep for you, and if you live, they long for your presence" (*Nahj al-Balaghah*, Letter 31).

From the perspective of virtue ethics, human relationships are the testing ground for one's moral character. Aristotle evaluates virtues such as friendship, respect, self-restraint, and moderation within the context of social interaction, emphasizing that a virtuous life only flourishes within interpersonal relationships (Aristotle, 1999). This idea resonates in Imam Ali's (AS) words: "The weakest person is the one who cannot make friends, and weaker still is the one who loses them" (Nahj al-Balaghah, Wisdom 11).

In contemporary interpretations of virtue ethics, Julia Annas highlights the roles of dialogue, flexibility, active listening, and mutual understanding in moral relationships. According to her, effective communication is part of the practical learning of virtues and a form of training in complex moral skills within the social arena (Annas, 2011). Imam Ali's (AS) frequent advice to show tolerance, respect, politeness, and fairness in speech reinforces the connection between ethics and human interaction.

MacIntyre also maintains that a virtuous agent is one who understands themselves in relation to ethical traditions, social commitments, and shared narratives—an understanding that renders their communication meaningful (MacIntyre, 2007). In this light, Imam Ali (AS) views effective communication as a rational, moral endeavor aimed at social reform—not merely a tactical or superficial act.

In conclusion, for Imam Ali (AS), effective interpersonal communication is a tangible reflection of spiritual education. Through such communication, internal virtues are translated into meaningful social actions that simultaneously preserve personal integrity and strengthen communal bonds.

### **Selectivity in Social Interaction: Measuring Virtue through Human Relationships**

In the spiritual education framework of Imam Ali (AS), social interaction is both necessary and universal; however, the quality of such interaction depends on moral awareness, discernment, and ethical selectivity. Imam Ali (AS), with a deep understanding of mutual influence among social actors, consistently emphasizes the importance of deliberate companionship. He states: "Companionship with the wicked leads to misfortune, while companionship with the virtuous leads to happiness" (Nahj al-Balaghah,

Wisdom 438). This reflects a systematic understanding of how companionship shapes moral character.

In virtue ethics, Aristotle sees social interaction as essential for actualizing virtue, warning that association with the unvirtuous weakens one's character. He stresses the need to cultivate practical wisdom for discerning between healthy and harmful relationships (Aristotle, 1999). From this perspective, selectivity in social relations is a moral skill requiring insight, experience, and a deep understanding of human values.

Julia Annas also emphasizes that virtue development depends on the surrounding social environment – one that offers authentic moral exemplars for learning and internalizing virtues. She asserts that moral character is shaped through constant interaction with one's environment, making relationship selection a crucial step in one's moral growth (Annas, 2011).

In the teachings of Imam Ali (AS), social interaction is a moral act that must be guided by reason, dignity, and inner guidance. He advises: "Do not associate with the ignorant, for they will think you are like them," and further warns: "Companionship with the ignorant is a calamity" (Nahj al-Balaghah, Wisdom 373).

From MacIntyre's viewpoint, human relationships should not be based on superficial preferences or immediate benefits, but must be structured within a grand moral narrative. He underscores the importance of recognizing ethical roles within the traditions of a community (MacIntyre, 2007). Nahj al-Balaghah similarly treats relationship discernment as part of spiritual training and a safeguard for the psychological, spiritual, and moral health of society. Imam Ali (AS) states: "Companionship with the righteous leads to righteousness, like a breeze passing over perfume that carries its fragrance," and also warns: "Do not associate with evildoers, for your nature may adopt their vices without you realizing it."

In summary, from Imam Ali's (AS) perspective, selectivity in social interaction is not a call for isolation or social rejection, but a sign of moral maturity and an awareness of how relationships shape both character and community. Such discernment lays the foundation for individual virtue and collective moral renewal.

## Social Justice in Light of Spiritual Education

Social justice emerges as one of the most prominent manifestations of spiritual education in the discourse of Nahj al-Balagha. In this view, justice is not merely legal fairness but a form of moral virtue reflected in everyday behavior toward others—whether friend or foe, superior or subordinate. Imam Ali (AS), in a letter to Malik al-Ashtar, writes: “Be equitable in your dealings with the people... for equity is the dearest of all things to God” (Nahj al-Balagha, Letter 53).

In virtue ethics, equity (*epieikeia*) is considered a central social virtue, indicative of moral maturity and practical wisdom. Aristotle views it as a nuanced form of justice that transcends rigid legalism by incorporating human contexts into ethical judgment (Aristotle, 1999). This aligns with Imam Ali’s approach to justice, which emphasizes human dignity and public welfare.

MacIntyre similarly describes equity as the internalization of ethical traditions, whereby a virtuous person, grounded in internal character, adheres to fairness even in the absence of legal or social compulsion (MacIntyre, 2007). Imam Ali (AS) underscores this moral dimension of fairness, stating: “Blessed is the one who practices equity” (Nahj al-Balagha, Saying 437). Julia Annas also identifies fairness as an achievement born of gradually cultivated virtue within social interactions, emphasizing the roles of empathy, understanding of differences, and contextual awareness (Annas, 2011).

In this framework, Nahj al-Balagha organizes spiritual education not through abstract rules but through complex and often unpredictable human interactions. Social justice, thus, is not limited to political or legal contexts but extends to family relations, treatment of servants, the poor, and even adversaries. Imam Ali (AS) asserts that equity dispels discord and fosters solidarity: “Do not abandon equity toward God and His servants. Be fair to your close ones, family, and subordinates. If you do not practice fairness, you are unjust; and whoever is unjust toward God’s servants becomes His enemy. Whoever becomes God’s enemy, his arguments are rendered null, and he is at war with God—unless he repents and refrains from injustice” (Nahj al-Balagha, Letter 53).

Hence, social justice is a crucial component of spiritually grounded social education, playing a key role in managing social conflicts. This perspective demonstrates the internalization of fairness as a virtue and its link to human dignity – a factor that elevates spiritual education from individual ethics to a foundation for civilizational development.

### **Tolerance and Forbearance in the Horizon of Spiritual Education**

Tolerance and forbearance are foundational virtues in spiritually oriented social education, essential for fostering ethical, stable, and humane interactions. In the practice of Imam Ali (AS), tolerance is not a sign of weakness but a symbol of moral strength, social insight, and the flourishing of a cultivated soul. He states: “The fruit of intellect is tolerance” (Nahj al-Balagha, Saying 46), and also emphasizes: “Forbearance is a shield against anger and an adornment in character” (Nahj al-Balagha, Saying 112).

In virtue ethics, *praotes* (gentleness or forbearance) is a median virtue between harshness and weakness, marked by thoughtful regulation of emotions and responses. Aristotle sees it as a complex virtue requiring practical wisdom, self-control, and an understanding of social circumstances (Aristotle, 1999, Book IV). Such a virtue empowers individuals to respond with dignity and responsibility in the face of ignorance, mistakes, or social friction.

Julia Annas frames tolerance as a moral virtue cultivated through lived experience, especially within unequal relationships, cultural differences, and ambiguous situations. The virtuous agent is one who can regulate emotions in complex social contexts and respond in a manner befitting human dignity (Annas, 2011). Imam Ali’s guidance to practice patience, forgiveness, and gentle correction exemplifies such a virtuous disposition.

MacIntyre considers forbearance an element of committed moral action, wherein the virtuous individual respects differences within a tradition-bound society without sacrificing core principles (MacIntyre, 2007). This perspective resonates with Imam Ali’s treatment of opponents and even the Khawarij – respecting their rights until they resorted to violence. Tolerance enhances social cohesion and emerges through increased awareness, effective communication, and robust social networks – playing a crucial role in the

advancement of spiritual education. Imam Ali (AS) notes: "So long as the community is not in danger, I remain patient" (Nahj al-Balagha).

A decline in tolerance leads to reduced social compassion and intensifies societal dysfunction. Imam Ali advises: "Overlook the thorns of rudeness, for you will never be satisfied if you fixate on them" and further: "Endure their ignorance, harshness, and clumsy speech, and refrain from harsh treatment, so that God may open His mercy to you and grant you the reward of obedience" (Nahj al-Balagha).

From the perspective of spiritual education, forbearance is not a defensive reaction but a conscious act to preserve one's dignity and that of others. In a society grounded in spiritual training, forbearance becomes a means to reduce violence, strengthen social solidarity, and realize cultural justice.

### **Social Responsibility in the Light of Spiritual Education**

Social responsibility represents the pinnacle of spiritual education manifested within society. According to Imam Ali (AS), a spiritually trained individual is not a recluse or mere worshiper, but an active, committed agent attuned to social suffering. In a letter to his governor, he writes: "Support the oppressed wherever they may be, and be the enemy of the oppressor, whoever he may be" (Nahj al-Balagha, Letter 53). This directive expands responsibility from individual obligations to structural justice and the defense of public rights.

In virtue ethics, social responsibility is a product of moral character development. Aristotle argues that a virtuous person does not only seek personal perfection but, as a citizen of the polis, holds a civic duty to contribute to the common good (Aristotle, 1999). This perspective harmonizes with Nahj al-Balagha, where Imam Ali (AS) ties human dignity to social concern, reform, and selfless service.

Julia Annas views responsibility as part of practical virtue, developed through engagement with real human needs and societal challenges. The virtuous individual must act within unjust structures, not remain a passive observer (Annas, 2011). Imam Ali (AS) embodies this ethic—attending to orphans, the poor, and the marginalized, not just as a caliph, but in his personal conduct.

MacIntyre affirms that moral character is not formed in a vacuum but within the sphere of social action. Ethical agency requires taking on social roles and bearing moral and civic duties (MacIntyre, 2007). Imam Ali (AS) therefore regards community engagement, advising rulers, promoting virtue, and supporting the oppressed as vital expressions of ethical and religious duty.

Imam Ali (AS) remarks: “How strange is the behavior of a Muslim who declines to help a fellow believer in need, though he should hasten to do so – if not for divine reward or fear of punishment, then for the sake of noble character, which itself leads to salvation” (Nahj al-Balagha). Thus, a sense of obligation toward others is essential to the spiritual formation of Muslims. Social cohesion, which depends on the alignment of individual and collective responsibilities, fosters psychological well-being and a harmonious society.

The Imam condemns the spirit of evading responsibility, which he saw as a cause of social decline, and reproaches the people of Kufa for such apathy. This dynamic moves society from passivity toward empowered, responsible participation. However, achieving this shift depends on raising individuals' awareness and their recognition of the need for collaborative engagement in all dimensions of social life.

Spiritual education in Nahj al-Balagha guides individuals toward conscious activism, attentiveness to societal suffering, and the building of a morally guided community—one in which virtue is realized through responsibility, not mere silence.

## **Conclusion**

This study aimed to conduct a comparative analysis of the components of spiritual education in social interactions based on the teachings of Imam Ali (AS) and within the framework of virtue ethics theory. The findings reveal that Nahj al-Balagha not only emphasizes devotional and personal dimensions of moral formation but also presents a comprehensive model for realizing social, virtue-centered ethics. This moral system, rooted in divine unity and revelation, resonates with the internal logic of virtue ethics.

As articulated by philosophers like Aristotle, MacIntyre, Hursthouse, and Annas, virtue ethics highlights character development, the process of moral

growth, and the internalization of values within cultural narratives. In the teachings of Imam Ali (AS), virtues such as tolerance, cooperation, fairness, and social responsibility are not merely moral exhortations but are outcomes of spiritual and innate human development. This conceptual alignment suggests that Nahj al-Balagha can be interpreted within the lens of contemporary moral philosophy.

Imam Ali (AS), by emphasizing innate human goodness, free will, intrinsic dignity, and eschatological orientation, proposes a framework in which spiritual education is realized within the context of social interaction – not in isolation. This view aligns with modern virtue ethics' emphasis on continuous moral development through human relationships. Moreover, the ethical system of Imam Ali (AS), through its sacred orientation, offers a transcendent dimension often absent in secular accounts of virtue ethics.

Ultimately, the findings of this article suggest that dialogue between Islamic ethical tradition and virtue ethics theory can offer a novel and integrative framework for rethinking social ethics in the contemporary world—one in which spiritual education becomes a force for moral transformation and the reform of unjust structures.

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