

## CONFERENCE PAPER

### Avicenna (Ibn Sīnā) on Medical Ethics: An Analysis of Principles, Philosophical Foundations, and Contemporary Relevance

#### Abstract

This article provides an in-depth analysis of the medical ethical principles espoused by Avicenna (Ibn Sīnā). Drawing from scholarly analyses of his philosophical system and his masterpiece, *The Canon of Medicine*, the study unveils Avicenna's ethical proposals in three pivotal areas: the primacy of patient interests, the art of patient-physician communication, and the imperative of professional excellence. These principles have deep philosophical and metaphysical foundations. They are linked to his concepts of the rational spirit, the virtue of moderation (*haddi e'tidal*), and his proto-scientific methodology. The report provides a comparative analysis that highlights the similarity between Avicenna's ethical principles and modern bioethical principles, such as beneficence and nonmaleficence. It also examines the historical divergence regarding patient autonomy and informed consent. The study concludes that Ibn Sina's ethics constitute a complex, integrated system based on a holistic philosophy of the human person, offering enduring insights for contemporary medical education and practice.

**Key words:** Avicenna, Ethics, Medical Ethics, History of Medicine

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## Introduction

Avicenna (Ibn Sīnā) did not dedicate a specific, standalone chapter to ethics in his encyclopedic medical work, *The Canon of Medicine (Al-Qanun fi'l-tibb)*. This book consists of five volumes. The first volume is called *al-Kullīyyāt*, which contains principles of medicine, including general anatomy, physiology, etiology and health, and symptomology (Avicenna, 2005). Although Ibn Sīnā (also known as Avicenna) presented a chapter called “*waṣāyīyah*” at the end of the first volume, he did not dedicate any specific chapter to medical ethics (Azmand, and Heydari, 2017).

“*Waṣāyīyah*” can refer to both moral guidance and professional teachings. According to the content of this part in *The Canon of Medicine*, Ibn Sīnā used the word in the second meaning (Arezaei, and Zargaran, 2023). However, his ethical recommendations were systematically expressed throughout his writings, and were later compiled and commented upon by scholars such as Qutb al-Din Shirazi in his manuscript *Fi Bayan al-hajat Ela al-Teb va al-Atteba va Vasayahom (on the needs of medicine and physicians and their recommendations)* (Arezaei, and Zargaran, 2023).

## About the *Fī Bayān al-Ḥājah ila al-Ṭibb wa al-Aṭibbā wa Waṣāyāhum*

Different parts of the *al-Tuḥfa al-Sa'dīya* discuss medical ethics issues in the form of various topics, such as professional recommendations, talking about death, teaching methods of medical knowledge, etc. (Arezaei, and Zargaran, 2023). Qutb al-Dīn did not have a distinct book or treatise in the field of medical ethics. The bibliographic evaluation of the manuscripts indicates that, to provide a separate book on medical ethics, some scholars interested in ethical issues who lived after Qutb al-Dīn tried to collect these pages related to medical ethics. They have selected and transcribed relevant parts of the *al-Tuḥfa al-Sa'dīya* just to teach their students in the form of a single book named *Fī Bayān al-Ḥājah ila al-Ṭibb wa al-Aṭibbā wa Waṣāyāhum*.

## The Ethical Assessment of Avicenna (Ibn Sīnā)

Canon contains practical ethical guidance for physicians, yet Avicenna's moral framework is more profound and systematically articulated in his philosophical and mystical writings, particularly in his seminal work, *Admonitions and Recommendations (Al-Isharat wa al-Tanbihat)* (Inati, 2014).

The purpose of this article is to conduct an in-depth analysis of the ethical principles of Avicenna underlying the intellectual and philosophical architecture. This study will present Avicenna's ethics as a coherent, integrated system, demonstrating how his medical recommendations were a direct application of his broader metaphysical and moral philosophy. (Ahmadi, 2024).

Table 1 provides a concise summary of the conceptual parallels between Avicennian ethics and the four pillars of modern bioethics.

## Avicenna in the Artificial Intelligence Age

Avicenna's legacy as a physician and philosopher provides a powerful and surprisingly relevant framework for addressing the ethical challenges of medical Artificial Intelligence (AI). His two-tiered ethical system, which connects the external dimension of social justice with the internal pursuit of personal flourishing, offers a comprehensive model for ethical thought that remains potent today.

The external dimension of his ethics, rooted in “*Ara-e Mahmoudeh*” (accepted norms, social contract), provides a moral imperative for the development of AI systems that are



transparent, equitable, and fair. As demonstrated by the problem of algorithmic bias in ophthalmology, a technology that systematically disadvantages certain populations violates the fundamental social contract that is based on mutual benefit. The ethical challenge, therefore, is to create AI that serves all of society, ensuring that the “*credit of good justice*” he championed is applied not just to individuals but to the complex sociotechnical systems we are building (Ahmedi, 2024).

**Table 1:** A Concise Summary of the Conceptual Parallels Between Avicennian Ethics and The Four Pillars of Modern Bioethics

Modern Principle	Avicennian Concepts	Foundational Source/Explanation
Non-maleficence	<i>Do no harm</i> ; avoid potential harm; compensation for harm caused	Explicit recommendations in <i>The Canon of Medicine</i> , avoiding lethal substances and using the simplest treatments.
Beneficence	Acting in the patient's best interest; continuous professional improvement.	Recommendations consider the patient's interests above all else, including in financial matters. Emphasized duty to gain knowledge and experience.
Respect for Autonomy	Self-determination, informed choice rooted in knowledge ( <i>'ilm</i> ); avoidance of extraneous questions	The concept that a person's decisions should be respected if made with knowledge and free will. Physicians' role in providing necessary information.
Justice	Social contract; <i>Ara-e Mahmoudeh</i> ; civil justice and supreme happiness	Ethics is an agreement for mutual benefit and social justice. Ensuring fairness in societal structures.

The internal dimension of Avicenna’s ethics, centered on the flourishing of inner character, reminds us of the imperative to preserve the humanistic core of medicine. Avicenna’s distinction between practical and theoretical reason provides a powerful lens through which to understand the physician’s new role (Inati, 2014). Practical reason, which tells us what “*should be done*”, needs to be raised to the level of metacognition, which means being able to think about your own thoughts and see how the AI’s output is changing them.

### Discussion

Unlike al-Ruhawi, the author of the first medical ethics book in Islamic Medicine, Avicenna did not dedicate a specific, standalone chapter to ethics in his encyclopedic medical work, *The Canon of Medicine (Al-Qanun fi'l-tibb)*. Instead, his ethical recommendations were systematically woven into the very fabric of his medical and philosophical texts and later compiled and commented upon by scholars. This integration signifies his profound philosophical stance: for Avicenna, ethics was not a separate “add-on” but an intrinsic, inseparable part of the practice of medicine itself. This fusion of technical and moral instruction indicates that medicine is fundamentally a moral art, requiring a constant ethical mindset rather than a set of rules to be consulted only occasionally (Avicenna, 2005).

### Conclusion

The ethical challenges posed by AI, from algorithmic bias to privacy and accountability, are not entirely new; they are modern manifestations of ancient ethical dilemmas. Avicenna’s holistic model, which seamlessly integrated philosophy, medicine, and ethics, provides a crucial lesson for today. It underscores that true medical mastery is not merely technical competence but an integrated practice of science, virtue, and compassionate care. The future of medicine lies in a strategic synthesis of technological intelligence with profound



human wisdom, ensuring that the legacy of the Prince of Physicians continues to inspire a global medical community.

#### **Authors' Contribution**

Kadircan H. Keskinbora conceived and designed the study, collected and analyzed the data, interpreted the results, and drafted the initial manuscript. Kadircan H. Keskinbora also contributed to the critical revision and approved the final version of the article. Kader Keskinbora conceived the study and supervised the project. All authors reviewed and approved the final version.

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#### **Conflict of Interest**

None.

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