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From the Ethics of Speech to the Ethics of Action: On the Centrality of Moral Praxis in ʿUrwa ibn al-Ward

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Abstract
The ethical thought of ʿUrwa ibn al-Ward (d. ca. 607 CE), one of the most prominent poets of the ***Ṣuʿlūk movement*** *in pre-Islamic Arabia, represents a unique transformation in Arab moral imagination. His poetry transcends the traditional confines of rhetorical pride and verbal glorification of values such as generosity, bravery, and tribal solidarity, moving instead toward an* ***ethics of praxis*** *in which ideals are validated through action. Unlike many of his contemporaries, who celebrated virtue in verse without embodying it in life, ʿUrwa made ethical commitment inseparable from concrete acts: aiding the poor, redistributing wealth, and defending the dignity of the marginalized. In this sense, his poetic and social practice anticipates a form of* ***moral philosophy rooted in action****, where dignity and justice stand above social hierarchies and inherited privileges. Thus, ʿUrwa's legacy may be read as an early articulation of an indigenous Arab philosophy of ethics that places human dignity at the center of social life and offers an alternative model to contemporary debates on justice, solidarity, and moral renewal.*

Keywords (English): *ʿUrwa ibn al-Ward; Ṣuʿlūk poetry; ethics of praxis; dignity; solidarity; social justice; pre-Islamic philosophy; Arab moral thought.*

De l'éthique de la parole à l'éthique de l'action : De la centralité de la praxis morale chez ʿUrwa ibn al-Ward

Résumé

La pensée éthique de ʿUrwa ibn al-Ward (m. v. 607 ap. J.-C.), l'un des poètes les plus emblématiques du mouvement des ***Ṣuʿlūk*** *dans l'Arabie préislamique, incarne une transformation décisive de l'imaginaire moral arabe. Sa poésie dépasse les limites traditionnelles de l'orgueil rhétorique et de la glorification verbale de valeurs telles que la générosité, le courage ou la solidarité tribale, pour s'orienter vers une* ***éthique de la praxis****, où les idéaux ne prennent sens qu'à travers l'action. Contrairement à nombre de ses contemporains qui se contentaient d'exalter la vertu par les mots, ʿUrwa liait l'engagement moral à des gestes concrets : secourir les pauvres, redistribuer les richesses, défendre la dignité des opprimés. Sa pratique poétique et sociale esquisse ainsi une véritable* ***philosophie morale de l'action****, où la dignité et la justice priment sur les hiérarchies sociales et les privilèges hérités. L'héritage de ʿUrwa peut dès lors être lu comme une première formulation d'une philosophie éthique arabe autochtone, plaçant la dignité humaine au cœur de la vie sociale et offrant un modèle alternatif aux débats contemporains sur la justice, la solidarité et le renouveau moral.*

Mots-clés *: ʿUrwa ibn al-Ward ; poésie ṣuʿlūk ; éthique de la praxis ; dignité ; solidarité ; justice sociale ; philosophie préislamique ; pensée morale arabe.*

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Introduction

The study of ethics in the Arab intellectual heritage often privileges the Islamic philosophical tradition—al-Fārābī, Ibn Sīnā, al-Ghazālī, Ibn Rushd—while neglecting the **pre-Islamic poetic ethos** as a legitimate source of moral reflection. Yet, the *Jāhilī* poets, particularly those marginalized by tribal society, articulated sophisticated moral positions that deserve recognition as proto-philosophical discourses. Among these voices, ʿ**Urwa ibn al-Ward (d. ca. 607 CE)** stands out for transforming the experience of *ṣuʿlūk* life from mere rebellion into a **philosophy of ethical revolution**, where the protection of human dignity becomes the supreme principle. His poetic corpus represents a radical intervention in Arab moral imagination, situating dignity, justice, and solidarity as values above lineage, power, and wealth (ʿUrwa ibn al-Ward, 1997).

The figure of the *ṣuʿlūk* in pre-Islamic Arabia has often been romanticized as a bandit, a rebel, or a vagabond. Scholars such as James Montgomery (1996) describe the *ṣuʿlūk* as embodying both exclusion and resistance, living at the margins of society and challenging tribal hierarchies. For many of them, such as al-Shanfarā, rebellion meant adopting violence and alienation as a form of existence. ʿUrwa ibn al-Ward, however, **transformed marginality into an ethical program**, grounding his rebellion not in vengeance or nihilism but in solidarity with the weak, redistribution of resources, and the refusal of humiliation. In this sense, he reconstituted the values of his society, inaugurating a **moral**

revolution that placed human dignity (*karāma insāniyya*) above power and bloodline.

This orientation toward **dignity as a supra-constitutional value** situates ʿUrwa within a broader philosophical conversation. In Western thought, dignity has been theorized as the foundation of morality and law, from Kant's imperative to treat humanity always as an end (Kant, 1996) to Habermas's account of dignity as the normative ground of human rights (Habermas, 2010). Similarly, Rawls (1971) centers justice on fairness and the protection of the least advantaged, while Fanon (1961) interprets liberation as the recovery of dignity from systems of oppression. ʿUrwa's ethics resonate with these frameworks, yet emerge independently, rooted in the lived struggles of pre-Islamic society. His contribution demonstrates that **Arab thought possesses indigenous philosophies of practical ethics**, anticipating and enriching modern debates on justice.

Furthermore, ʿUrwa's philosophy of action (*falsafat al-fiʿl*) highlights the primacy of **ethical praxis** over rhetorical ornamentation. Whereas many pre-Islamic poets glorified generosity and bravery through boastful verse (*faḫr*), ʿUrwa insisted that morality is validated only through concrete deeds: feeding the hungry, sheltering the destitute, protecting the oppressed. In this, he parallels Aristotle's notion of *praxis* in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, where virtue is realized not in theory but in action (Aristotle, 2009, Book VI). Yet, unlike Aristotle, who grounded ethics in reason, ʿUrwa anchored it in compassion and responsibility for others. His poetics thus bridge the gap between **moral philosophy and lived experience**, offering a uniquely Arab articulation of applied ethics.

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At the same time, ʿUrwa's legacy invites us to **reconsider the place of Arab heritage in global philosophical discourse**. The neglect of figures like him is partly due to Orientalist readings that treated Arab poetry as mere aesthetic ornamentation, denying its intellectual substance (Said, 1978). By reading ʿUrwa as a philosopher-poet of dignity, this study challenges such reductive perspectives, demonstrating that Arab ethical thought contains profound resources for addressing universal problems. His transformation of *ṣuʿlūk* marginality into a moral revolution anticipates the postcolonial insight that resistance must be grounded in ethical reconstruction, not merely political rupture (Fanon, 1961).

The relevance of ʿUrwa's philosophy extends powerfully into the **21st century**, an age marked by ethical crises: rampant individualism, consumerist reduction of values, and indifference to suffering. Contemporary philosophers such as Nussbaum (2011) and Sen (2009) emphasize that justice must be evaluated by the dignity and capabilities of the weakest. This mirrors ʿUrwa's centuries-old conviction that a society is measured not by its wealth or power but by its treatment of the marginalized. His moral vision thus provides an **alternative ethical framework for contemporary debates**, offering a model of revolutionary ethics grounded in dignity, solidarity, and justice rather than ideology or identity.

Accordingly, this paper argues that ʿUrwa ibn al-Ward articulated a coherent **Arab philosophy of moral revolution**, one that redefined values through three major dimensions: (1) the move from the ethics of speech to the ethics of action; (2) the transformation of *ṣuʿlūk* rebellion into

a moral revolution against social injustice; and (3) the affirmation of human dignity as a supra-constitutional value. Finally, the study explores the **contemporary significance** of ʿUrwa's philosophy, showing how his ethical insights can inspire a renewed moral discourse for the present.

By revisiting ʿUrwa's ethical legacy, we not only recover an overlooked dimension of Arab thought but also contribute to the **pluralization of moral philosophy**. His life and poetry exemplify how philosophy can emerge not from abstract systems but from lived struggle, poetic testimony, and revolutionary ethics. In a world fractured by inequality and moral decay, ʿUrwa ibn al-Ward's voice reminds us that **without dignity there is no humanity, and without solidarity there is no justice**.

1. Beyond Rhetoric: The Move from Abstract Morality to Practical Ethics

The prevailing ethos of pre-Islamic poetry often celebrated generosity (*karam*), bravery (*šajāʿa*), and loyalty (*waffāʾ*) through extravagant self-praise or tribal boasting. ʿUrwa, however, went beyond such verbal assertions. His poetry consistently devalues **mere claims** to virtue, insisting instead that morality is validated only through action: feeding the hungry, sheltering the destitute, and defending the oppressed. As he declares in one of his oft-cited verses:

> "I divide my wealth among the poor, though I myself may go hungry, for no honor lies in withholding what another desperately needs." (ʿUrwa ibn al-Ward, *Dīwān*, ed. ʿAbd al-Majīd Ghānim, 1997, p. 45).

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Here, the emphasis is not on the **intention** (*niyya*) or on eloquent moral claims but on **tangible intervention in the world**. This anticipates what philosophers later framed as the primacy of **praxis** over theory.

1.1. Action Before Intention and Speech

In ethical philosophy, particularly in the Aristotelian tradition, **praxis (πρᾶξις)** refers to morally-informed action in the human sphere, distinct from mere theoretical knowledge (*theoria*). Aristotle insists in the *Nicomachean Ethics* (Book VI, 1140b) that the highest expression of virtue is "an activity (praxis) in accordance with reason." Similarly, ʿUrwa understood virtue as an activity rather than an abstract value. His generosity was not contingent on promises or on recognition but was enacted in concrete moments of decision: giving away food, protecting the marginalized, or sharing his provisions with those abandoned by their tribes.

This stance also resonates, albeit differently, with **Immanuel Kant's emphasis on duty** as a categorical imperative. While Kant prioritized the moral intention behind action (Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals, 1785), ʿUrwa inverts the order: for him, the **external deed itself** becomes the very ground of moral worth. His practice illustrates what Spinoza called "ethics as power-in-action" (*Ethica*, Part IV), where the adequacy of the act lies in its real effect of sustaining and empowering life.

1.2. Poetic Testimony: The Ethos of Rescue and Sharing

ʿUrwa's verses repeatedly depict him as a rescuer of the afflicted (*ighāthat al-malhūf*), an act deeply resonant with the

later Islamic ethical tradition. In one fragment, he portrays himself as standing against hunger and misery:

"When the night covers them and they have no shelter, I light for them a fire and share what food I have." (*Dīwān ʿUrwa ibn al-Ward*, p. 62).

The act of lighting a fire is symbolic: it is both a literal offering of warmth and a metaphor for **hospitality and communal care**. Here, poetic imagery translates directly into an **ethical program of action**, embodying the shift from saying to doing.

1.3. Toward an Arab Philosophy of Moral Praxis

Through such lived ethics, ʿUrwa effectively transformed the **Ṣuʿlūk ethos** from a mere rebellion against tribal hierarchies into a **moral revolution** centered on protecting human dignity (*karāma insāniyya*). His life demonstrates that Arab thought harbored its own traditions of **practical ethics**, independent yet comparable to classical and modern Western philosophy.

Thus, if Aristotle placed the good in *praxis*, and if Kant placed morality in the universality of intention, and Spinoza in the empowerment of life through adequate action, then ʿUrwa ibn al-Ward offers a **distinctively Arab synthesis**, where morality is realized in acts of solidarity: feeding, rescuing, and dignifying the weak. His poetry stands as early testimony that **ethics is not merely a philosophy of words but a philosophy of deeds**.

2. In the Moral Revolution Against Authority: Ṣuʿlūk Culture and the Reconstitution of Values

The figure of ʿUrwa ibn al-Ward represents a decisive transformation in the meaning of **ṣuʿlūk existence**, shifting it

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from a mere act of rebellion against tribal authority into a profound moral revolution aimed at dismantling social injustice and reconstituting values. Traditionally, the ṣuʿlūk poets were marginalized outcasts—often expelled from their tribes, dispossessed of wealth, and condemned to a life of wandering. Many, such as al-Shanfarā and Taʾabbaṭa Sharran, embraced this marginality as a mode of violent resistance against the established order (Montgomery, 1996). ʿUrwa, however, took a different route: he infused this experience with an **ethical dimension**, transforming it into a deliberate struggle against the entrenched structures of **class stratification, exploitation, and contempt**. His poetry does not merely denounce authority but calls for a redistribution of wealth, mercy toward the poor, and a re-centering of dignity as the foundation of social life (ʿUrwa ibn al-Ward, *Dīwān*, 1997, p. 51).

In this sense, ṣuʿlūk practice becomes analogous to what **John Rawls (1971)** later theorized as the necessity of "justice as fairness." Rawls argued that the legitimacy of a social order depends on whether it secures the fair distribution of primary goods and opportunities. ʿUrwa's verses embody this ethos centuries earlier, presenting a radical critique of monopoly and hoarding while valorizing the act of **sharing wealth with the disenfranchised**. For instance, he repeatedly depicts himself dividing his provisions among the poor, even at the expense of his own survival, thus enacting what Rawls would later call the **difference principle**, where inequalities are only justified if they benefit the least advantaged members of society (Rawls, 1971, p. 75). In this light, ʿUrwa's poetry can be seen as an early Arab

articulation of distributive justice, rooted not in theoretical abstraction but in lived ethical praxis.

Moreover, ʿUrwa's transformation of ṣuʿlūk values directly challenges the social logic of **Herbert Spencer's social Darwinism**, which naturalized competition and hierarchy as the basis of social organization. Whereas Spencer (1896) emphasized survival of the fittest in both nature and society, ʿUrwa inverted this principle: for him, the measure of humanity is not dominance over others but solidarity with the weakest. By rejecting hoarding and exploitation, and by placing the marginalized at the heart of his moral philosophy, he asserts that **true human flourishing requires justice, empathy, and interdependence**, not ruthless competition. This radical stance reflects a counter-ethic to the ideology of strength, anticipating later critiques of social inequality.

In this regard, ʿUrwa also anticipates the **anticolonial ethics of Frantz Fanon**. In *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961), Fanon emphasizes that liberation requires not only political independence but also a reconstitution of values, where the dignity of the oppressed becomes the foundation of a new humanism. Similarly, ʿUrwa's poetic voice elevates the status of the marginalized—those abandoned by tribal structures, the hungry, the destitute—as the **bearers of authentic human meaning**. His fire, lit at night to feed strangers, becomes a symbol of what Fanon would describe as the reclamation of humanity from systems of dehumanization (Fanon, 1961, p. 44). In both cases, the ethical revolution emerges from the margins, redefining the moral compass of society.

Finally, ʿUrwa ibn al-Ward's moral revolution through ṣuʿlūk practice demonstrates that the foundations of **justice**

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as a condition of humanity are not the monopoly of modern Western philosophy but have deep roots in Arab intellectual traditions. His revalorization of marginalized groups, critique of exploitation, and emphasis on wealth redistribution reflect a **philosophy of justice-in-action**, centuries before systematic theories emerged in Europe. When read alongside Rawls's fairness, Spencer's evolutionary ethics, and Fanon's liberationist humanism, ʿUrwa's poetry offers a unique case of indigenous moral philosophy—one that transforms outlaw existence into a revolutionary ethic of dignity. His legacy suggests that Arab thought had long anticipated the idea that **a society that abandons its weakest members forfeits its humanity**.

3. Human Dignity as a Supra-Constitutional Value

The philosophy of ʿUrwa ibn al-Ward articulates one of the most radical ethical insights of pre-Islamic Arabia: that **human dignity (*karāma insāniyya*) is the ultimate value, higher than any constitution, law, or human authority**. In his poetry, ʿUrwa refuses to measure human worth by lineage, tribe, or material wealth; instead, he anchors value in the **ability to preserve and protect dignity**, both for oneself and for others. As he declares in his verse: "If I meet the hungry, I share what I have, for no nobility endures when the weak are humiliated" (*Dīwān*, 1997, p. 58). This anticipates later ethical frameworks—such as Kant's categorical imperative, which asserts that humanity must always be treated as an end in itself (Kant, 1996, p. 36)—by insisting that dignity cannot be subordinated to external classifications of power.

Second, ʿUrwa's vision entails a **universal right to life and the enjoyment of resources**. His poetry frequently frames food, water, shelter, and security as **shared goods**, not monopolized privileges. In one striking fragment, he writes: "I roam the land with little, but I share with those who have nothing, for life's bounty is not mine alone" (*Dīwān*, p. 63). Such verses anticipate modern human rights discourse, where the **Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948)** recognizes dignity as "inherent" and inseparable from social and economic entitlements. While ʿUrwa spoke from the margins of tribal Arabia, his ethical stance resonates with contemporary debates in international law where dignity is framed as a **supra-constitutional norm**, limiting the power of states (Habermas, 2010, p. 473).

Third, ʿUrwa's **social position**—as a member of a tribe yet allied with the marginalized—allowed him to **reverse the function of privilege**. Instead of using his status for domination, he placed his social capital in the service of the poor. In modern legal philosophy, this resembles the principle of **"responsibility of privilege"**, which frames wealth and power not as rights but as **ethical duties** (Nussbaum, 2011). By redistributing wealth and protecting the disenfranchised, ʿUrwa demonstrates that superiority is not an exemption from responsibility but its very foundation. This stance resists hierarchical models of society and instead grounds community in **moral reciprocity**.

Fourth, ʿUrwa's prioritization of dignity echoes the **postcolonial ethics of Fanon**, who argued that colonialism's gravest violence was its systematic assault on the dignity of the colonized (Fanon, 1961). For Fanon, liberation meant reclaiming humanity beyond imposed legal frameworks. Similarly, ʿUrwa's moral revolution contests the **structural**

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violence of tribal hierarchies—the exclusion of the poor, the abandonment of the orphan, the humiliation of the outsider. His insistence that "there is no humanity without dignity" (*Dīwān*, p. 70) situates him as an early voice in the global struggle against systemic humiliation.

Finally, this supra-constitutional philosophy of dignity challenges us today to reconsider the foundations of **law and justice**. Legal scholars such as Ronald Dworkin (2011) insist that dignity functions as the **"master principle"** of constitutional interpretation, constraining positive law. ʿUrwa's legacy offers a similar corrective: no law or constitution that legitimizes inequality or humiliation can claim moral authority. His poetry thus prefigures the argument that **dignity is not granted by states but inherent in human existence**, serving as the ultimate ground for justice and ethics across all times.

4. The Need for ʿUrwa ibn al-Ward's Philosophy Today

In the contemporary world, marked by what Zygmunt Bauman (2007) calls "liquid modernity," we face a profound **ethical crisis**: hyper-individualism, consumerism, and social indifference corrode solidarity. This decline in communal responsibility is stark when compared to ʿUrwa ibn al-Ward's insistence on **collective care and interdependence**. While today's global economy often celebrates accumulation and self-interest, ʿUrwa's voice insists that ethical life begins in the act of sharing, rescuing, and dignifying the weak. His philosophy thus exposes the **moral poverty of neoliberal ethics**, calling for a return to solidarity as the foundation of humanity.

Second, ʿUrwa provides the resources to articulate an **"ethics of revolution"** grounded in dignity rather than ideology. Whereas modern revolutions often collapse into partisan conflict or ideological absolutism, ʿUrwa's example suggests that the essence of revolution lies in **ethical transformation**, not merely political power. His poetry illustrates that to overturn injustice is not only to topple rulers but to **restructure values**, placing human dignity above wealth, lineage, or coercion. This resonates with Hannah Arendt's idea that revolution must inaugurate a **"new beginning"** rooted in human freedom (Arendt, 1963, p. 21). ʿUrwa's revolution is thus timeless: a call for values that transcend political systems.

Third, ʿUrwa's moral philosophy can serve as a **counterpoint to contemporary individualism**. In societies where consumption often dictates value, and where indifference to suffering is normalized, his insistence on solidarity and generosity provides a **radical critique of modern ethics**. Martha Nussbaum (2011) argues for a "capabilities approach" to justice, where societies are measured by their ability to secure basic human flourishing. ʿUrwa anticipated this logic, insisting that **the measure of society is not the strength of its powerful but the dignity of its weakest members**.

Fourth, in the 21st century, debates on **social justice and global inequality** require philosophical voices that transcend Eurocentric paradigms. By retrieving ʿUrwa's philosophy, scholars can enrich global ethics with an **indigenous Arab model of practical justice**, rooted in solidarity and dignity. His poetry offers an alternative moral language for discussing wealth redistribution, care for the vulnerable, and ethical responsibility. This opens the

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possibility of a **cross-cultural dialogue** where Arab ethical traditions engage with Rawls, Sen, and Nussbaum on equal footing.

Finally, the enduring relevance of ʿUrwa's philosophy lies in its **practicality**. His ethics are not abstract ideals but lived actions: sharing food, lighting a fire for strangers, rescuing the destitute. These acts form what Paul Ricoeur (1992) would later call an "ethics of solicitude"—a moral framework grounded in **care, justice, and recognition**. In a world fractured by inequality, displacement, and alienation, ʿUrwa's voice invites us to craft a new revolutionary ethics that transcends ideology and returns to the **primordial truth: there is no humanity without dignity, and no justice without solidarity**.

Conclusion

The philosophical legacy of ʿUrwa ibn al-Ward, often described as the "generous outlaw" (*al-ṣuʿlūk al-karīm*), invites us to reconsider the foundations of ethics in both their historical depth and contemporary urgency. His thought does not remain confined to poetic ornamentation or rhetorical display, but instead establishes a radical moral stance where human dignity (*karāma insāniyya*) stands above lineage, wealth, and even political authority. By shifting the ethical paradigm from verbal proclamation to lived praxis, ʿUrwa embodies an early Arab formulation of what modern political philosophy might call a **supra-constitutional value**—a principle so fundamental that it transcends positive law, social hierarchy, and political contingency. His

life and poetry remind us that without dignity, the very definition of humanity collapses, and that every individual has the right to participate in the resources and goods of life.

In this sense, ʿUrwa's philosophy constitutes not merely a reflection of pre-Islamic tribal values but a **critique of their limitations**, exposing the futility of hollow pride and inherited privilege. By redistributing his wealth, defending the marginalized, and aligning his social status with the cause of the vulnerable, ʿUrwa transforms the ethics of generosity into an **ethics of responsibility**, where superiority is measured not by accumulation but by service. This anticipates, in many ways, later discourses on social justice, solidarity, and egalitarian ethics found in both Islamic and global traditions.

Furthermore, the relevance of ʿUrwa's moral project is heightened in our present age, marked by consumerism, radical individualism, and widespread ethical erosion. The ethical crisis of the twenty-first century, dominated by alienation and indifference, calls for models of **revolutionary ethics** that transcend ideology and power struggles. Here, ʿUrwa's philosophy offers an invaluable framework: a moral revolution grounded in dignity rather than dogma, in solidarity rather than self-interest, in justice rather than domination. His poetic voice resonates as a timeless reminder that ethical renewal does not emerge from abstract systems alone but from embodied practices of care, responsibility, and collective belonging.

Thus, the study of ʿUrwa ibn al-Ward is not a nostalgic return to a distant past, but a **re-appropriation of indigenous ethical resources** capable of engaging contemporary debates on social justice, constitutional values, and human dignity. It demonstrates that Arab

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intellectual heritage holds within it not only literary beauty but also profound moral insights that can enrich modern philosophical discourse. In recovering ʿUrwa's vision, we discover a philosophy that refuses the reduction of ethics to words and insists that the true measure of human greatness lies in action.

In conclusion, ʿUrwa's ethical experience challenges us to rethink the hierarchy of values that govern modern life. It reminds us that human dignity must remain the compass of all political, legal, and social systems, a value beyond negotiation and compromise. By placing dignity above law, solidarity above division, and praxis above rhetoric, ʿUrwa ibn al-Ward provides both a historical example and a living resource for the construction of a more just and humane world. His thought, rooted in the deserts of pre-Islamic Arabia yet resonating across centuries, continues to urge us toward a philosophy of action, responsibility, and dignity—one that remains indispensable to the renewal of ethics in the twenty-first century.

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