Book Reviews

Taha Abderrahmane's Ethics for a Secular Age

Taha Abderrahmane

al-ʿAmal al-dīnī wa-tajdīd al-ʿaql (Religious Practice and the Renewal of Reason).
Casablanca: al-Markaz al-thaqāfī al-ʿarabī, 1997. 223 pp.

Taha Abderrahmane

Rūḥ al-ḥadātha: al-madkhal ilā taʾsīs al-ḥadātha al-islāmīyya, (The Spirit of Modernity: An Introduction to Founding an Islamic Modernity). Casablanca: al-Markaz al-thaqāfī al-ʿarabī, 2013. 287 pp.

I first encountered Taha Abderrahmane in a footnote on page 12 of Wael Hallaq's *The Impossible State: Islam, Politics, and Modernity's Moral Predicament*. He described Abderrahmane as the most powerful voice to the claim that the central sphere of Islam is the moral. Furthermore he insists that global society can learn much from Islam about creating moral communities highlighting the intellectual project of Taha Abderrahmane as a primary source. As a prolific author Abderrahmane has created an important body of work that seeks to re-ground Islamic philosophy in its tradition by placing ethics at the heart of its practice. Not only does his work address an ethical re-awakening within the Islamic community, but also his project acts as a global message that engages Western secular dominance in political, social and philosophical spaces. He expresses his central ethical message to the global community highlighting man's stewardship of the earth, resources, and inhabitants. His critique takes up a diverse array of topics including secularism, modern ethical theories, political Islam, and the standard Western binary tropes of pitting reason against revelation and religion against politics.

Two of his works written at the turn of the 21st century focus on the need for a reinvigoration of Islamic ethics combined with a more robustly developed Islamic ethical theory. He offers a complex and cogent theoretical analysis on both accounts as an alternative to the dominant philosophy of Western secular modernity. He first provides a complex ethical theory aimed at an Islamic intellectual renewal in *al-ʿAmal al-dīnī wa-tajdīd al-ʿaql* (*Religious Practice and the Renewal of Reason*). In a second text written in *Rūḥ al-ḥadāthah: al-madkhal ilā taʾsīs al-ḥadāthah al-islāmiyya*, (*The Spirit of Modernity: An Introduction to Founding an Islamic Modernity*) he continues this line of ethical inquiry by outlining a conceptual framework for an Islamic modernity that places ethics at its core. Unfortunately unlike many of his Muslim intellectual contemporaries Abderrahmane's works have yet to be translated into Western languages being neglected in Western scholarship. To help combat this deficit I will provide a brief synopsis of both of these important works.

Religious Renewal

In *Religious Practice and the Renewal of Reason* Abderrahmane asks in an era defined by a rapidly globalizing Western secular hegemony, what of ethics? Where are they to be found? And how are they to be expressed? Abderrahmane begins by critiquing the standard Western secular binaries of reason vs. revelation and religion vs. politics. He believes that this separation of man's original ontological unity has led to a degradation of ethics that he argues define human existence. His project articulates the need for a return to man's original unity as expressed in the Islamic tradition. He argues that the majority of Muslim scholars since the 19th century have blindly imitated the Western philosophical tradition in its secular approach that defines man as a rational animal placing rationality as the highest human attribute leaving no room for religious tradition in the public sphere. He critiques Aristotle's definition of man as a rational animal who places the faculty of reason above other human faculties and actions. For Abderrahmane reasoning is simply one of many actions. He argues that the supremacy of reason has led to a strict binarism that characterizes Western secular modernity and its philosophical core that holds reason opposes revelation and religion opposes politics. These oppositional binaries characterize the division of man from his true nature as a holistic being. The core of his intellectual message is to restore this unity. His intellectual project begins from a teleological position of man as an ethical animal. Whereas the West places man and reason prior to ethics, Abderrahmane claims man as a 'Man' emerges—as ethics emerge. Man and ethics emerge simultaneously.

Furthermore he insists that without religion there are no ethics. These core arguments construct his central thesis. There is no man without ethics, and no ethics without religion. He sees these three domains: man, ethics and religion as a single unified ontological field. It is this re-grounding of man in his original ontological unity that he believes is necessary for a politico-philosophical awakening where Islam's answer to the question of ethics in the 21st century can contribute to the formation of a pluralist civilization of *ethos* worldwide.

After defining the ontological difference on the concept of man between the West and Islam, Abderrahmane provides his framework of Islamic rationality in contrast to Western secular rationality. He faults the West for insisting that rationality consists of two types, abstract rationality (*al-'aql al-mujarrad*) and guided rationality (*al-'aql al-musaddad*). He criticizes the Western concept of reason as a reason that possesses freedom in choosing a means to an end for achieving its goals without the obstacle of first asking the ethical question. It only requires that the purposes chosen will be engaged in objectively. This secular ideal of objectivity replaces the traditional value of ethics centered in religion. In the modern era, objectivity becomes the central value.

In contrast to what he describes as the limited rationality of the Western tradition Abderrahmane insists three types of reason exist. In addition to abstract reason and guided reason a third reason, supported rationality (*al-'aql al-mu'ayyad*) exists. In Abderrahmane's conceptual scheme abstract reason is limited to the description of things and ideas. Western reason not only describes material objects and physical processes, but also makes value judgments in the areas of law, society and morality through the second type of reason, guided reason common referred to in the Western tradition as practical reason. The third type of reason, unique in Abderrahmane's scheme, is supported reason. Supported reason focuses on understanding internal identity. By this he means understanding the essence of a thing by seeking the wholeness of the "thing", while at the same time maintaining a sincerity of intention as a fundamental support to the reasoning process. It is in this third type of reason that ethics and asking the ethical question precedes the use of reason as an instrument.

Mirroring his tripartite categorization of reason, Abderrahmane speaks of three levels of ethics; abstract ethics *al-akhlāq al-mujarrada*, guided ethics *al-akhlāq al-musaddada* and supported ethics *al-akhlāq al-mu'ayyada*. First, by ethics he means the quest for good that as previously mentioned distinguishes man from any other species. Second, he insists that ethics must be at the core of every decision and action that man makes, for without ethics man devolves from man to animal. Abstract ethics and guided ethics match to abstract and guided (practical) reason in that they are separate from religion and do not require ethical questions in exercising them as a human capacity.

For Abderrahmane this means they are an inferior expression of man because man's distinguishing attribute of his ethical capacity does not get activated. It is through the third and final type of his reason/ethics framework, supported ethics that man activates and realizes his full potential.

Supported ethics consists of four guiding principles. These are: the principle of obligation (*mabda' al-ijāb*), the principle of reproduction (*mabda' al-takthūr*), the principle of organization (*mabda' al-tartīb*), and the principle of expansion (*mabda' al-ittisā'*). First, the principle of obligation means ethics as the true essence of man is an essential requirement for action to be fully human action. This feeling of obligation operates as an internal spiritual authority of motivation for taking action. Second, the principle of reproduction means that ethics does not necessarily reproduce in the same manner spatio-temporally. Ethics can take a different form according to the place, time, or consequences in which a human manifests ethics into action. Rather than limiting ethics to literal code the principle of reproduction interprets ethics as an expansive embrative state of being. Third, the principle of organization further emphasizes the expansiveness of ethics in that ethical acts are inclusive and mutually reinforcing. Ethical action begets ethical action. The fourth and final principle of expansion serves as a cumulative principle in that the three preceding principles create in man the inability to conceive of a space or time where one can act unethically. All points in space and time become stages for ethical enactment.

The enactment of ethics finds its foundation in three fundamentals. The first fundamental requirement is that ethics must be a lived experience *mabda' al-ishtighāl al-mubāshir*. A system of belief or religion without a practice reduces ethics to an empty intellectual pursuit. Second, the expansive nature of the principles of reproduction, organization and expansion are ideal expressions of the divine that ethical practice strives toward. These divine ideals are the attributes that humans in their limited material existence inhabit to approach a consistency of living with their status as ethical beings. Finally, in light of the divine, perfect nature of the ethical ideals man needs a concrete example for imitation. In the case of Islam the life of the prophet provides the singular exemplar. In this scheme reason and action are but means to activate and manifest the divine in the physical world. Religion becomes the ethical path that guides rationality in seeking the good of man.

The Soul of Modernity

Abderrahmane developed an answer to the question of ethics he directed towards Western secular modernity in his 2005 book, *The Spirit of Modernity: An Introduction to Founding an Islamic Modernity* by employing the themes

he first articulated in *Religious Practice and the Renewal of Reason*. In this work he conceptualizes an Islamic modernity based upon his expanded ethical theory that he poses as counter narrative to Western secular modernity built upon abstract reason and a public discursive space devoid of religion. He expands his critique of the Western secular tradition by including a critique of the effects of globalization on human society. He identifies three pests or ills created by a rapidly expanding hegemony of Western secular modernity. He refers to these ills as sovereign global controls that infect two areas of human life. The first sovereign global control shapes economic life by valuing capitalism over the principle of charity. Second globalizing Western secular modernity prefers technical knowledge to a broader human conception of knowledge. The desire of technology drives manufacturing, communication, society and culture where knowledge becomes a mere instrument in the pursuit of material progress. This global control places man as sovereign over nature rather than envisioning man as caretaker of nature as is the case in Abderrahmane's trusteeship paradigm. For him these ills damage the spirit of modernity, which he also refers to as the essence of modernity. Arguing from a multiple modernities paradigm he insists that non-Western traditions have the right to engage in a critical discourse with the West for this spirit. With that right Abderrahmane creates a conception of an Islamic modernity that places man as ethical animal at its center. His vision of an Islamic modernity intends on combatting the ills created by Western secular modernity.

Abderrahmane's approach to conceptualizing an Islamic modernity is a deconstructive/reconstructive method. He first deconstructs Western secular modernity to find its essence, its spirit, its soul, its essential attributes. He then reconstructs these core essences through an interpretative framework based upon his metaphysical starting point of man as an ethical animal. Similar to the Platonic model of the harmonious society mirroring the Platonic model of the harmonious soul, Abderrahmane's modernity likewise bases his society as one rooted in ethics, as man is rooted in ethics. The ethical society mirrors the ethical man. He replaces abstract reason as the central defining determinant in society for action with his concept of supported ethics. He neither rejects reason completely, nor does he seek a wholesale importation of Western secular modernity. Rather he creatively appropriates Western secular values by re-grounding them in ontological unity with religion in the same manner he re-grounded man to his essential ethical nature in *Religious Practice and the Renewal of Reason*.

It is clear that Abderrahmane refuses to base his reading of modernity on classical concepts like liberty, equality, and secularism, rather he looks at a different set of core concepts in which to build his vision of an Islamic modernity.

In his reading of modernity its essence revolves around three principles. Each of these principles are in turn built upon two pillars. These include: 1) the principle of maturity (*mabda' al-rushd*), and its two pillars of autonomy (*rukn al-istiqlāl*) and creativity (*rukn al-ibdā'*), 2) the principle of criticism (*mabda' al-naqd*) and its pillars of rationalization (*rukn al-ta'qīl*) and differentiation (*rukn al-tafṣīl, or al-tafrīq*), and 3) the principle of universality (*mabda' al-shumūl*) and its pillars of extensibility (*rukn al-tawassu'*) and generality (*rukn al-ta'mīm*).

Abderrahmane draws from Immanuel Kant's essay, "What is Enlightenment?" for his first principle of maturity. This principle urges independence in thought for the self without blind acceptance of what is truth given by the other. A failure to reach independence in thought will be a cause of either 1) the choice of voluntary dependence or 2) an unwittingly resorting to imitation in the thinking of someone else. He faults the majority of modern Muslim intellectuals in lacking independence of thought in relation to the West. His Islamic modernity would be built upon two cornerstones of modernity, autonomy and creativity. Independent thinking requires both an individual autonomy and an allowance for creativity. The first cornerstone of autonomy means autonomy from the Western monopoly of the interpretation of modernity, which he argues has turned into a neo-colonial tutelage in the Arabo-Islamic world. The second pillar, creativity in thought does not require a break from tradition, faith and revelation. A creative renewal and reinterpretation of traditional values becomes an essential requirement within modernity itself.

The principle of criticism in the Western conception of modernity is to trigger a shift from belief to one of questioning. In the Western secular tradition the natural sciences become the final arbiter for decision-making, development and advancement in society. Rationality becomes the foundational value system for society and its institutions. The two pillars of differentiation and rationalization underlie criticism. The first pillar differentiation compartmentalizes knowledge, man and society into separate fields such as law, morality, science, the arts. It also results in secularization of institutions that aid in solidifying the binary couplets of reason vs. revelation and politics vs. religion. For Abderrahmane differentiation undermines the unity of man by cleaving his spiritual side that is required to engage in ethical practice. The second pillar, rationalization places religious tradition outside the public sphere. As mentioned above Abderrahmane argued in *Religious Practice and the Renewal of Reason* that the limited rationality of the Western secular tradition needs to be expanded to include supported rationality that will allow for a supported ethics. This expanded idea of rationalized religion sees the divine ethical

imperative guide reason, where ethics as the prime directive precedes the use of reason.

According to the principle of universality, modernity is intrinsically based upon a necessary and natural shift from the particular to the universal. Universality within Western secular modernity then is a process that transcends and negates particularity both contextually and socially. The pillars of extensibility and generality support this principle. Extensibility means that the process of modernity that shifts towards universality extends beyond the field of philosophy into all areas of thought, science, religion, the arts, law and the economy. Rationality as the primary universal value prevents differentiation in modalities of thought across disciplines and segments of society. Abderrahmane asserts that extensibility does not mean that the Western secular modernity is the only and final version of modernity. Rather than the “modern” *Weltanschauung* acting as sovereign over man, man should be sovereign in defining “modernity”. As a moral being, man can always reshape the contours of modernity by imbuing it with the values that give him meaning. An authentic extensibility would consist of ethics and the spirit of man rather than of material values alone. The second pillar, generality operates in a similar manner to extensibility. In the same manner rationality as a “universal” value spills over into all academic disciplines, it likewise spills beyond its own Western borders into other cultures and traditions. Western secular modernity becomes the “universal” paradigm for all contexts, all cultures, and all traditions. This denies the right to particularity of the locale into which Western secular modernity migrates. Abderrahmane interprets generality to mean that extensive thinking considers the universal society. This expanded notion of universality shows that solidarity with the other. This allows for the respect of other to autonomously and creatively interpret modernity according to their particular cultures and philosophies. Modernity cannot be simply replicated one the Western secular model that claims absolute universality for itself.

A Few Remarks

This brief review only gives a small glimpse into a rich ethical theory that deserves more attention in the West than it has received up to this point. Scholars with an interest in comparative ethics, Islamic ethics, or ethics in the modern era could find much in these two books. In many ways his intellectual project falls within the same genre and line of thinking with many Western ethicists. Most notably, the virtue ethics of Alasdair MacIntyre and Charles

Taylor's critique of secularism can be viewed as Western intellectual cognates to Abderrahmane's work. His is a unique and engaging approach that seeks to invert the asymmetrical dialogue between Islam and the West, by providing a significant alternative narrative to the dominant narrative in modern Islamic scholarship on Islam and modernity.

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