Book Reviews

Zahra Ayubi, *Gendered Morality: Classical Islamic Ethics of the Self, Family, and Society*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2019, 336 pp.

Zahra Ayubi's *Gendered Morality: Classical Islamic Ethics of the Self, Family, and Society* represents a major feminist intervention in the field of Islamic ethics (*akhlāq*). The book is specifically concerned with a tradition of philosophical ethics that Ayubi epitomises with the towering figures of Islamic thought, Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī (d. 505/1111), Naṣīr al-Dīn Ṭūsī (d. 672/1274), and Jalāl al-Dīn Davānī (d. 908/1502). Ayubi shows that, despite their historical and sectarian separateness, these three operated in a shared discursive space that made reference to Hellenic traditions of philosophical ethics, without being beholden to them (47–49). Ayubi analyzes an important work by each author. She reads al-Ghazālī's *Kīmīyā-yi Sa'ādat* ("The Alchemy of Happiness"), Ṭūsī's *Akhlāq-i Nāṣirī* ("The Ethics of Naṣīr [al-Dīn al-Ṭūsī]"), and Davānī's *Akhlāq-i Jalālī* ("The Ethics of Jalāl [al-Dīn Davānī]") with an eye to how each imagined elite men to be the exclusive subjects of ethical formation, the only ones to possess full humanity (113). Her central premise, steadfastly and sonorously demonstrated, is that we cannot retroactively read these works to be inclusive of all humanity, at least not without rethinking their ontological foundations.

The book positions itself in a venerable tradition of Muslim feminist thought, most of which has taken place in and around the Euro-American academy over the last several decades. Ayubi is in conversation with amina wadud (b. 1952), Asma Barlas (b. 1950), Aysha Hidayatullah (b. 1979), Kecia Ali (b. 1971), and Ayesha Chaudhry, among others. Unlike the first three scholars, who are primarily concerned with scriptural hermeneutics, and the second two, who specialise primarily in Islamic legal traditions, Ayubi makes an eloquent case for a Muslim feminist turn to philosophy, an argument I will return to at the end of this review. Ayubi reads gendered Islamic studies as having mostly engaged in one of two moves: it has either distinguished between ontological equality of the genders, on the one hand, and social or worldly inequality, on the other,

or it has diagnosed the ways that male authorities have theorised women's inferiority (4). For Ayubi, these moves have been helpful but are ultimately not up to the task of diagnosing "gender asymmetry in the Islamic tradition," because they do not interrogate the "philosophical underpinnings of gendered ontology in Muslim thought" (5). Ayubi shows that male scholars rested their views of women's worldly inequality on natural and ontological inequality. "The ethicists believed that patriarchy mirrors the cosmos; they looked at the state of male-dominated society, believed it to be beneficial, and imagined that God created the cosmic order on an analogous patriarchal structure" (251). Countering these authorities requires demonstrating how their very ontology is gendered in unequal ways.

With this in mind, she reads the al-Ghazālī-Ṭūsī-Davānī tradition with an eye to how these thinkers both theorised hierarchy and failed to meet their own standards of justice. Of her subjects, she writes, "Classical ethicists fail to harmonise the potentially just metaphysics with hierarchical values, giving rise of exclusionary hierarchies that often do not conform to their own goals or ideal vision of society flourishing in the Islamic philosophical ethics texts themselves" (7). Having demonstrated the cohesiveness, centrality, providence, and wide reception of the ethical tradition in question (chapter 1), Ayubi devotes each of the next three chapters to one of the categories of the book's subtitle: self, family, and society. These categories are taken from the structure of the ethicists' works themselves; together they describe a "tri-level ethical progression" (47), each of which nests within the others, creating microcosmic-macrocosmic concordance with the goal being for the elite male subject to take on the responsibility of being God's vicegerent (*khalīfa*) on earth (68).

In each of these chapters, Ayubi provides rich explanations and faithful translations of the authors' Persian texts, carefully indicating where they converge and diverge in their understandings of ethics. In chapter 2, which focuses on the self, Ayubi shows how the ethicists' concept of the metaphysical soul (*nafs*) is normatively male. This creates a hierarchy that makes the elite men at the top into guarantors of an ethical society. This hierarchy is formed despite the ethicists' premise of the metaphysical equality of all matter. Ayubi's analytical prowess shines most brightly when she indicates that the ethicists cannot maintain their own hierarchies. She shows how the ethicists attribute to men the capacity to control and coordinate the faculties of the soul so as to yield justice, making the latter a quintessentially male virtue (97). In a familiar move, men are made to occupy the position of transcendence and mind, while women remain immanent and corporeal. Ayubi points out that the ethicists hold that women are lacking in rationality, which causes them to

inconsistently slip below the ethicists' own threshold of humanity. But, "It is precisely the ethicists' recognition of the man's need for the corporeal faculties, as well as recognition of women's *nafs*es, that disrupts their own gendered cosmology. Women are limited by their baser instincts, but so are men—hence the need for ethical refinement" (112). Observations like these allow Ayubi to turn the ethicists against themselves. In her hands, their seemingly elegant and intricate schemas, spheres turning inside spheres, become crossed and confused. This opens the door for Ayubi to recover their use of rationality in more expansive and inclusive ways.

Ayubi undertakes similar operations in chapters 3 and 4. She describes the "metaphysical tension" between, on the one hand, women's status in the household as subservient to their husbands and, on the other, the fact that that subservience is a factor of her status as a human who possesses a *nafs* (117). She shows how this tension arises in the ethicists' discussions of several aspects of homelife: the prerequisites for marriage, identifying an ideal wife, monetary and sexual arrangements within a marriage, child rearing, and divorce. In all of these activities, the ethicists must constrain women's allegedly equal souls in order to make their bodies instruments through which men can carry out ethical duty. Chapter 4 shows men leaving the household and entering the homosocial public sphere. There, the exclusion of women, slaves, and lower class men is the means by which elite men are able to form both loving and competitive relationships between themselves. Yet again, this schema requires the ethicists to do damage to their own presumptions about the souls of these excluded classes.

The conclusion of the book, "Prolegomenon to Feminist Philosophy of Islam," is an extraordinary rich text, worthy of several readings. The chapter addresses the question of why Ayubi feels the need to continue to work in the Ghazālī-Ṭūsī-Davānī tradition at all. The answer is, in part, because this tradition has remained important to Muslim communities around the world. Ayubi demonstrates this by, for example, showing the active dialogue around gender in al-Ghazālī's *Kīmīyā* in the reviews section of Amazon.com (238–40). But, her interest in the tradition goes beyond its continued importance for Muslim communities. The reason to continue engaging these texts, she argues, is that they pose questions and offer tools that remain vital to understanding the human condition for those both within and outside of Muslim communities (241). Her appealing case for philosophy rests on its ability to help us engage tradition (and not only scripture) to reexamine our conceptions of justice and the metaphysics in which they are embedded.

Drawing on the work of the feminist philosophers Michele Le Doeuff (b. 1948) and Genevieve Lloyd (b. 1941), Ayubi writes that the present can

reveal tensions earlier philosophers were not able to see in their own work. The feminist philosopher engages the history of her discipline to expose the, “shameful face of philosophy” (247). *Gendered Morality* carries out this task exquisitely well. The conclusion turns to the task of describing why, exactly, the face of philosophy is shameful and to examining what might be done about it. Ayubi writes, “Patriarchy as an ordering principle is contradictory to the goal of *akhlaq*—namely, the creation of a just, virtuous society in which all individuals are fulfilling their cosmic purpose” (270). On what grounds might such a virtuous society be built?

Ayubi discusses five strategies for recovering gender egalitarianism drawn from existing feminist philosophical work: “constructing an ethics of care; reflecting on the concept of love for the rational soul embedded in the rational ideal; expanding the definition of rationality itself; decoupling rationality from its historio-cultural sexist context; and shifting away from valuing rationality as the basis of moral worth” (256). Ayubi does not ultimately side with one strategy. She does dispense with the first strategy because a focus on an ethics of care does not redress the way the ethicists deprived women of full rationality. She argues that what is needed is to rethink the concept of viceregency (*khilāfa*), to reorient it from “male stewardship and authority” to “human stewardship of the world” (265). Ayubi offers three helpful recommendations for ways to accomplish this shift: First is the aim to reconceptualise and broaden what kinds of knowledge constitute philosophically relevant knowledge and to dispense with the notion that there is universal knowledge (265). Second is to be attentive to intersections of race, gender, and class (270–74). Finally, drawing on the work of feminist philosopher Lisa Tessman (b. 1966), Ayubi argues that the goals of *akhlaq* should be shifted. The *akhlaq* tradition, like the Greek tradition that Tessman studies, takes human perfectionism as its ideal; but the notion that human interdependence will lead to perfection is overly optimistic. In practice, interdependence can lead to exploitation. “The rationale for making *akhlaq* inclusive is not necessarily that everyone is human and thus should be included, since not everyone recognises the full humanity of women and nonelites. Rather, the argument for rethinking *akhlaq* is that *no* humans can attain perfection, and so *all* humans should be allowed to refine themselves” (277).

Ayubi holds open the possibility that rationality may not be the best or exclusive grounding for the definition of humanity. However, her work shows special attentiveness to it. I would suggest that affect is a category worthy of further investigation alongside rationality. An affect like shame and the act of shaming are both powerful, but undertheorised, tools in Ayubi’s approach.

Likewise, it could be said that the ethicists she analyzes theorised ways that shame could be avoided. The encounter between Ayubi and al-Ghazālī, Ṭūsī, and Davānī represents a complex play of shame and shaming, one that might—together with the play between their forms of reasoning—show alternative ways of understanding humanity and engaging the history of Muslim philosophy for a new era.

In the final pages of the book, Ayubi makes a turn toward the necessity of ethnography in constructing feminist Islamic ethics (278). For this reviewer, this comment represents another vital intervention. Beneath this observation lays all of Ayubi's careful reading of the ethical tradition, her astute backgrounding of the material against social history, and her plea to reorient *akhlāq*. As Ayubi shows, the ethicists' gendered assumptions rested on an ontology that saw homologous relationships between the (male) self, family, society, and cosmos. Our world is considerably more fractured than this vision and, as Ayubi shows, traffics in entirely different metaphysics. As the anthropologist Stefania Pandolfo recently demonstrated with her *Knot of the Soul: Madness, Psychoanalysis, Islam*, ethnography is one mode of asking how the *nafs* can strive to be ethical in this disjointed world.

Despite the fact that this book can make an undisputable claim to originality, I am not convinced by the notion that a feminist philosophy of Islam has not yet developed (245). This claim, of course, rests on how we define of philosophy. To be sure, such an unrelentingly systematic and skillful reading as this one has, to this reviewer's knowledge, never before been undertaken. However, no less a figure than Fatima Mernissi (1940–2015) rooted her observations in philosophical modes. She was in dialogue with Arab and European philosophers; and premodern Muslim philosophy was among the many genres of literature that she synthesised and scrutinised. In her work *Islam and Democracy*, she excavated the modes of reasoning by which women were excluded from the political sphere (Mernissi 2002). Foreshadowing Ayubi's call to be more inclusive of diverse epistemologies, she drew on local knowledges to show cracks in women's exclusion. Mernissi, who Ayubi mentions as a foundational scholar of gender and Islam (3), might be further considered a foremother of Ayubi's philosophical project. But, whether or not *Gendered Morality* represents a first in Muslim feminist philosophy, it will certainly clear the way for many, many more works. This reviewer, for one, cannot wait.

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