



## Entrustment Ethics and Secularism: Taha Abdurrahman's Perspective

Fadi Zatari<sup>\*</sup>

### Abstract

With an ethical-centered philosophy, Taha Abdurrahman remains one of the most significant and sophisticated Arab philosophers of today. This review article seeks to elaborate on two of his recent books, which builds on and compliments his vision of philosophical independence,, particularly his 'Entrustment Ethics' (*Al-'timāniya*). Throughout two volumes, he aims to construct an ethical philosophy on the foundation of faith, as an alternative to Western ethics. In Volume I Abdurrahman establishes his ethical philosophy that is grounded in what he conceives as three Quranic Covenants: Testimony, establishing man's responsibility before God, Entrustment, establishing man's duties and responsibilities on earth, and Transmission, introducing an ideal form of conduct through the role model of God's Prophets and Messengers. The second volume projects Abdurrahman's theory on Western established ethical theories and Western ethical and political thought in a broader sense, wherein he both illustrates and critiques theories proposed by thinkers, including, *inter alia*, Christine Korsgaard, Robert Merrihew Adams, Annette Baier, and John Rawls.

### Keywords

Taha Abdurrahman, Entrustment Ethics, Secularism, Islamic Philosophy

- Abdurrahman, Taha. *Al-Mafāhim al-'khlāqia bayn al-'timāniya wal-'almāniyya: al-Mafāhim al-'timāniya*. [Ethical Conceptions: Between Entrustment Ethics and Secularism: The Entrustment Ethical Concepts]. Vol. I. Beirut: Nohoudh Center for Studies and Publications, 2021: 351 Pages. ISBN: 9786144700341.
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\* **Corresponding Author:** Fadi Zatari (Asst. Prof. Dr.), Istanbul Sabahattin Zaim University, Department of Political Science and International Relations, İstanbul, Türkiye. E-Mail: fadi.zatari@izu.edu.tr ORCID: 0000-0002-6413-7407

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The Moroccan philosopher, Taha Abdurrahman (1944-), is one of the most structured, sophisticated, and profound Arab philosophers in the contemporary age. It is not surprising to read Wael Hallaq articulating that “Abdurrahman Taha is one of the most significant philosophers that the world of Islam has produced since colonialism set foot in Afro-Asia.”<sup>1</sup> Abdurrahman has produced several philosophical projects<sup>2</sup>. For instance, Abdurrahman has written two volumes, as part of his overall project on modernity. In those two volumes, he ventures to deconstruct Western Modernity as he exposes its weakness vis-à-vis ethics. In a more particular sense, he demonstrates how Western Modernity-produced ethics are separated from religion and the consequence thereof. Alternatively, he constructs an Islamic-ethical modernity.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, he has devoted two books to Arabic/Islamic intellectual and philosophical independence. He advocates for a critical examination of Western philosophy to open the way for constructing an independent ethical Arabic and Islamic philosophy based on Islamic civilizational contexts<sup>4</sup>.

Ethics lies at the heart of Abdurrahman’s philosophy, as, for him, “there is no humanity without ethics.”<sup>5</sup> He has attempted in the previous decades to rejuvenate Islamic philosophy based on ethics, believing that the core of the Islamic message is ethics. Abdurrahman does not only engage with classical and modern Muslim thinkers but, uniquely in the Arab world, he engages heavily with Western philosophers in almost all of his works. This review article seeks to elaborate on two of his recent books, which are a continuation as well as completion of his innovative philosophical independence projects and particularly what he calls *al-’timāniya*, or ‘Entrustment Ethics’<sup>6</sup>.

- 1 Hallaq, Wael, B. *Reforming Modernity: Ethics and the New Human in the Philosophy of Abdurrahman Taha*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019), xiii.
- 2 For details bibliographical sketch of Abderrahman see, Hashas, Mohammed, and Mutaz al-Khatib, “A Bibliographical Sketch of Taha Abderrahmane,” in *Islamic Ethics and the Trusteeship Paradigm: Taha Abderrahmane’s Philosophy in Comparative Perspectives*. (Leiden, NL: Brill, 2021), 32-3.
- 3 Abdurrahman, Taha. *Su’āl al-’akhlāq: Musāhama fil-Naqd al-’akhlāqī lil-Ḥadātha al-Gharbiyya*. [The Question of Ethics: A Contribution to an Ethical Critique of Western Modernity]. (Casablanca: Al-Markaz al-Thaqāfi al-’arabī, 2000). See also, . *Abdurrahman, Taha. Rūḥ al-Ḥadātha: al-Madkhal ’ilā Ta’āsīs al-Ḥadātha al-’islāmīyya*. [The Spirit of Modernity: A Prolegomenon to Laying the Foundations of Islamic Modernity]. (Casablanca: Al-Markaz al-Thaqāfi al-’arabī, 2006).
- 4 Abdurrahman, Taha. *Al-Ḥaqq al-’islāmī fil-Ikhtilāf al-Fikrī*. [The Islamic Right to Intellectual Difference]. (Casablanca: Al-Markaz al-Thaqāfi al-’arabī, 2005). See also, Abdurrahman, Taha. *Al-Ḥaqq al-’arabī fil-Ikhtilāf al-Falsafī*. [The Arab Right to Philosophical Difference], 2nd ed. (Casablanca: Al-Markaz al-Thaqāfi al-’arabī, 2006).
- 5 Abdurrahman. *Su’āl al-’akhlāq*, 147.
- 6 Abdurrahman suggested this English translation (vol. I, p. 46).

In the introduction of the first volume, Abdurrahman argues that imitating the thought of another [i.e., the West] is the norm in the Muslim philosophical discourse. He asserts that imitating does not revive the intellect; it destroys it. Imitating others is due to dependency on them and a false, instilled, belief that their philosophy addresses all human minds equally. Throughout those two volumes, he aims to construct an ethical philosophy based on faith. He emphasizes that he does not shy away from his religious background as to satisfy any secular concerns. However, he promises his readers to innovate an ethical philosophy that will be acceptable regardless of religious commitment or lack thereof. He aims to construct a 'social contract' from grounds different to that of the West. Abdurrahman calls it '*al-tawāthuk*' (the covenant) (p. 17). As with the conventional notion of the social contract, it establishes a relationship between at least two individuals, *al-tawāthuk* is a relationship between at least two, but one of them is God. In other words, if the social contract is underpinned by a secular basis, *al-tawāthuk* is a religious postulation of the social contract (i.e., the covenant). For Abdurrahman, *al-tawāthuk* is the origin where social contact should be initiated.

In chapter 1, Abdurrahman highlights the necessity for a new ethics for the global society. He states that the division between ethics and faith has two approaches in modern thought. The first one advocates maintaining ethics and excluding religion, i.e. the original source of ethics, which is known as moral secularism. To Abdurrahman, the Enlightenment project expresses the exclusion of faith, considering ethics subjective. The second preserves faith and excludes ethics, and considers faith merely as commands and rules, not as values and wisdom. For Abdurrahman, both Islamic and Christian *Salafisms* (Protestantism) belong to this group. According to Abdurrahman, the corruption that mangles the contemporary world originates from the division of ethics and faith. Subjectivity, materiality, and the superficiality of ethics are consequences of this separation which, in turn, is a consequence of a reductive conception of faith or ethics. Thus, the Entrustment Ethics theory insists that subjectivity must be based on objectivity, materiality on spirituality, and outwardness on inwardness. In other words, in the current civilization phase, there exists a necessity for an ethics conceptualization based on faith.

The Entrustment Ethics theory infers its principles from covenants that God took from man, or what Abdurrahman calls Divinity's Covenants. These are three covenants: The Covenant of Testimony<sup>7</sup>, the Covenant of Entrustment<sup>8</sup>, and the

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7 Abdurrahman deduces it from Quran: 7: 172-174.

8 Abdurrahman infers it from Quran: 33: 72-73.

Covenant of Transmission<sup>9</sup>. Each of these covenants has its own role, function and outcome in his Entrustment Ethics theory. The Covenant of Testimony serves as the original ethical preparation that introduces a man to God. The Covenant of Entrustment serves as the second ethical preparation that introduces him to his responsibilities and obligations. The Covenant of Transmission is the third ethical preparation that informs man on how to behave individually and collectively. These three covenants are considered in chapters 2, 3, and 4, respectively. For Abdurrahman, these covenants are genuine, not delusive; they are multiple preparatory phases rather than one phase; they are universal covenants, not intended for one people or nation out of all humankind. In the Covenant of Testimony, the knowledge of God's Attributes is presented initially, followed by His Commands and Prohibitions. The Covenant of Entrustment makes humans aware that man is entrusted with everything in the worlds. Knowing that man is entrusted by God leads him to decrease his exploitation and mistreatment. To Abdurrahman, the Covenant of Entrustment improves people's action and behavior, serving as a shield stopping people from violating each other's lives. For Abdurrahman, property belongs only to God, not to the human being since man is merely entrusted with property and is not the actual owner. In this regard, he reviews and criticizes John Locke's (d. 1804) theory of property. According to Abdurrahman, Locke's conception of property is contradictory. Locke understands property as a right inherent in the natural state while Abdurrahman sees it merely as entrusted right (p. 143). The Covenant of Entrustment leads people to acknowledge the Oneness of the Owner; and being the rightful owner, He entrusts them with whatever they have. The purpose of the Covenant of Transmission is to enhance ethics through Messengers and Prophets, who are ethical models; not mere issuers of commands. They aim to remind the people of the Covenants of Testimony, as to return them to their *fiṭra* (default and good human nature)

Abdurrahman concludes by affirming that the epistemological outcomes from these three covenants vary. The Covenant of Testimony produces knowledge about God, the Covenant of Entrustment effects knowledge of man's responsibilities, and the Covenant of Transmission leads to knowledge of the self and proper conduct. Thus, in the Entrustment Ethics Theory, man first recognizes his God, then his responsibilities; the former is a means to understand the latter, and when man knows his responsibilities, he understands himself. In other words, for Abdurrahman, man certainly cannot know himself until he knows that he is responsible before God. The Divinity's Covenants aim to reform humans. The Covenant of Testimony as the first preparatory phase facilitates a person to get ready for righteousness; it provides

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9 Abdurrahman derives it from Quran: 33-7-8.

a sense of *fitra*, which is the repository of moral values. The second preparatory phase directs man to reform the world, in which he takes responsibility for himself and for everything in the world. The third preparatory phase implores man to act virtuously, wherein man follows the ethical role models (i.e. the Messengers and Prophets). In the appendix, the author elaborates on the relations between faith and philosophy and how modernists secularize religious concepts and notions either deliberately or unconsciously.

In the introduction of the second volume, the Moroccan philosopher claims that one can hardly find a critic challenging western philosophy in Arab intellectual circles: the philosophy of the west is taken for granted without critical evaluation. Abdurrahman seeks to appraise Western contemporary ethical conceptions from the Islamic civilization's perspective. He says that the Western theories he tackles in his work are not found in Arabic intellectual discussions. He presents one or more from these ethical theories in each chapter; then, he evaluates them critically using his Entrustment Ethics theory. He illustrates each theory in detail with enough descriptions and citations for two reasons. First, these texts are essential and decisive in contemporary ethical thought. Second, there is no Arabic translation of these philosophical texts, so he intends to comprehensively elucidate these theories so that readers can understand them even if they do not read the original texts themselves.

Chapter 1 considers ethical normativity from the perspective of the American philosopher Christine Korsgaard (1952- ), who seeks to discover the philosophical foundations of ethics when she asks, "Why should I be moral?" After a detailed elaboration on how Korsgaard considers the sources of normativity, Abdurrahman appraises her moral philosophy. To Abdurrahman, Korsgaard's philosophy entirely secularizes religious conceptions, even denying revelation as a source of normativity. For her, "[...] morality only comes into the world when laws are made" (p. 60). Also, it is grounded in Enlightenment-philosophy, in which she gives reason absolute epistemological authority, considering faith outside the realm of knowledge. Abdurrahman quotes from her work *The Sources of Normativity* where she declares, "But to value yourself just as a human being is to have moral identity, as the Enlightenment understood it." (p.60- 61). Abdurrahman makes it clear that her philosophy is based upon Enlightenment philosophy and specifically the views of Kant.

Moral theories vary according to their view of the subordination of morals to divine commands. Chapter 2 evaluates two theories in this regard. 'Divine Command Theory' by Robert Merrihew Adams (1937-), and 'Divine Command Ethics' by Philip L. Quinn (d. 2004). In the Divine Command Theory, God's commands and

ethics are identical. In other words, it is wrong to do X since it is contrary to God's commands to do X. Human responsibility arises from divine commands. However, Divine Command Ethics theory by Quinn rejects the identity relationship between God's commands and ethics. It asserts that the focus should be on God's intention of a command. Therefore, moral obligation responsibility arises when the divine intent is revealed. Abdurrahman contends that contemporary philosophical thought has become aware of the narrowness of its secularism, and with it the need to expand its space to include religious issues. In that context; the theories of the American philosophers, Adams and Quinn are a case in point. Nevertheless, Abdurrahman criticizes both theories; for instance, the first separates the Divine Attributes, and the second equates God's personal affairs with the psychological affairs of man.

Chapter 3 examines the Error Theory by John Leslie Mackie (d. 1981), who believes that "there are no objective values." (p. 132) The Australian philosopher claims that there are two reasons for denying the objectivity of values: 'the argument from relativity' and 'the argument from queerness'. Abdurrahman concentrates predominantly on the second argument, exposing its incoherence and fallacious nature. He argues that Mackie has a very narrow philosophical perspective since he only focuses on the world's appearance alone, assuming it was the whole world. Abdurrahman holds that if Mackie would meditate over the secrets of values, he would replace his confusion and doubt with awe and amazement, thereby extending his horizon to the inner meaning of values. Chapter 4 examines Annette Baier's (d. 2012) Theory of Trust. Abdurrahman describes her moral philosophy which is centered on the question, "Whom should I trust in what way, and why?" (p. 187) This philosopher from New Zealand elaborates on why philosophers have tended to shy away from expanding the notion of trust as it is associated with obedience or obligation which are seen as undesirable being closely bound to notions of religion. She constructs a theory of trust which Abdurrahman finds to be defective. One issue is that Baier's concept of trust has the same connotation as faith, it is just a secular rendering of the same. She achieves this in two ways: first, she transforms religious meanings and conceptions into secular ones, and second, she imputes God's Attributes to man. As a consequence, it is not surprising that she denies God's trust in man. Abdurrahman conversely emphasizes that Entrustment Ethics Theory is a more comprehensive model, established on firmer foundations than Baier's notion of trust.

Chapter 5 discusses the Imperative of Responsibility by Hans Jonas (d. 1993). Abdurrahman reviews Jonas's book *The Imperative of Responsibility: In Search of an Ethics for the Technological Age* and criticizes Jonas's notion of responsibility since, according to the former, it is established incoherently. For instance, the

German philosopher believes that an authoritarian system is the only system that can fulfill civilizational responsibility. Abdurrahman wonders how brutality and savagery can be means for civilizing a people. He reminds the reader that a dictator is a primitive man and cannot civilize people. Also, Abdurrahman elaborates on how his theory can improve the human sense of responsibility since the man entrusted by God knows his duties, including how to deal with technology. The entrustment of responsibility removes the greed for possession, because he who is entrusted becomes more cautious about his responsibility. In the last chapter, Abdurrahman discusses three leading theories on universal justice. The first by John Rawls (d. 2002), the second by Thomas Pogge (1953-), and the third by Martha Nussbaum (1947-). After he assesses the three theories in detail, Abdurrahman proposes the notion of universal entrustment justice, which is established on the three covenants established by the Divine. For instance, the Covenant of Entrustment enhances sense of obligation in human beings. In the Appendix, which is entitled “The Universal Ethical Entrustment and Political Question,” Abdurrahman elaborates on the three central notions related to the modern state, which are land, sovereignty, and citizenship, concluding that political actions of the modern state are established on these three pillars which are the outcome of the Westphalian Treaty.

To conclude, it is essential to emphasize that one should read these two volumes within the larger moral philosophical project of Taha Abdurrahman. Although the Theory of Entrustment Ethics was constructed – partially – over the last few decades in several of Abdurrahman's books. The first book presents the theory in its most comprehensive, improved, and complete form. The second book contextualizes his theory, comparing it to the West's central moral philosophy theories. Abdurrahman's books are exceptional, insightful, and well-argued in presenting an ethical philosophy based on Islam. The books (especially the second volume) also evaluate main Western philosophical theories showing their shortcomings and weaknesses. Abdurrahman's books present a novel theoretical framework of how Islamic ethics can contribute to significant fields like philosophy and political theory. Thus, it is recommended for academicians and experts in - Islamic and Western - philosophy and political theory.

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