

Moral Agents and their Deserts: The Character of Mu'tazilite Ethics, by Sophia Vasalou (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), xiii + 252 pp., ISBN: 978-0-691-13145-0, \$42 (hb)

The purpose of this book is to discuss the problem of the desert, *istiḥqāq*, in the views of the Baṣran Mu'tazilites from a philosophical perspective. To unfold the complexity of the issue, the author frequently shifts between *kalām*, Muslim legal theory, and modern ethics. She does not focus on the significance of the desert in Islamic thought. Instead, using a continental philosophical style, she engages in a philosophical discussion of the problem of a person's entitlement to punishment. Often, Mu'tazilite ethics is a vehicle for insights on moral agency, worthiness, and reward.

The author develops her conversation with Mu'tazilite ethics in six chapters. In a brief and scattered opening chapter, she reminds us of the Mu'tazilite principles. In the second chapter, she brings into focus the theological character of Mu'tazilite ethics. A considerable part of this chapter reads like an introductory chapter, with a review of literature on the topic. In the third chapter, she leaves the realm of *kalām* for that of legal theory in quest of Mu'tazilite materials on the desert problem. In particular, she is interested in the notion of *ḥuqūq* as it manifests the ambiguity of desert and rights. Chapter four explores causality in moral actions, and chapter five investigates the durability of punishment. Thus, the author returns to *kalām* to expand her discussion of human agency and divine reward. This leads her to examine Mu'tazilite ontology and its explanation of moral identity. However, she returns to Islamic law to address notions of legal status, *ahkām*. Finally, in chapter six, she concludes with a study of reward in Mu'tazilite eschatology and ontology. Thus, she is compelled to elaborate on Mu'tazilite views of accidents and identity. The author adds an Appendix that contains an English translation of the section on "the Promise and the threat" from *Sharḥ al-uṣūl al-khamsa* by Mānkḏīm Shashdīw (d. 425/1034). Her plan is not linear and seems rather to be instigated by her Mu'tazilite partners in dialogue.

The book builds on G. Hourani's scholarship on Mu'tazilite ethics to fill a gap in the research on the Mu'tazilite understanding of the

desert issue. In particular, it offers “closer analytic attention to the conceptual structure of the texts.” (p. 36) At this level, the book is extremely interesting. It is probably for this scrutiny that the book received The 2009 Albert Hourani Book Award by the Middle East Studies Association for the year’s most notable book in Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies. However, the book has little impact on our understanding of Mu‘tazilite ethics.

With regard to the author’s approach, she explicitly claims the line of “*Principia Ethica*” of G. E. Moore. Although she uses Moore’s philosophical tradition to carefully scrutinize Mu‘tazilite concepts, she does not justify her theoretical framework or the relevance of modern ethics to Mu‘tazilite tenets. Most specialists of medieval Islamic thought would assert that it is a vain task to pose modern ethical questions to medieval Muslim theologians. To be fair, the author acknowledges several times the intricacies of such a task. However, she enjoys her philosophical dialogue with the Mu‘tazilites, and she does not justify the examination of the chosen authors, periods, or concepts. Her Mu‘tazilite material seems to be secondary to her adherence to Moore’s analytic philosophy.

In dealing with such a topic, one would expect a discussion of Greek ethics and its Muslim interpretations as a prelude to the examination of Mu‘tazilite ethics. As a consequence of using modern ethics, there is a bit of confusion in the book. In shifting between Mu‘tazilite and modern, the author uses a dialogical method. However, some parts of her writing sound like a monologue. Indeed, the author displays esthetics and artistic devices in several passages that are written as variations or ballads, not wholly devoid of interest but irrelevant to the topic. Further, she frequently refers to common sense to elucidate ethical problems, in accordance with Moore’s ethics. This makes her book pleasant but fairly convenient. Common sense is a changing notion and does not have the same meaning in Mu‘tazilite and modern ethics. At times, the author is unable to find the bridge out of continental philosophy to return to Mu‘tazilite ethics or *vice-versa*.

The book’s major finding is the significance of divine agency in Mu‘tazilite ethics and theology. (p. 179) The author observes that divine presence in space is a persistent Mu‘tazilite idea. The author is almost disappointed to see that God occupies such a significant place in this school. That said, she is correct that the divine is decisive in

Muʿtazilite ethics, in which God explains the continuation of desert and the preservation of identity across time and justifies punishment. These findings hardly surprise the reader and seem tautological because *kalām* is not, after all, a discourse about human agency but about divine essence, attributes, and acts.

In her philosophical discussions of the Muʿtazilites, the author begs the question of whether *kalām* is a systematic ethics or a set of debates on ethical principles. In other words, can a modern ethical systematic approach compensate for a structurally missing ethical system in *kalām*? One must acknowledge with the author that there is some consistency in Muʿtazilite ethics. Although the author sheds light on this consistency, the reader is simply unable to identify systematic answers to specific moral questions in Muʿtazilite ethics. Therefore, with reference to the moral issues of modern times, which is apparently the main motivation for writing this book, the author leaves her readers puzzled. She draws excessively on the implications and interpretations of the Muʿtazilites.

This is a risky task. On the one hand, her sober analysis of philosophical implications in Muʿtazilite ethics largely convinces the reader. On the other hand, the author does not take us far in the study of proper Muʿtazilite ethics. Overall, the book is excellent reading for an audience with a background in modern ethics as well as in Muʿtazilite ethics and theology. The reader must have a sense of the conversation between philosophy and theology; otherwise, he or she would not be easily persuaded to engage in dialogue about the desert when the author does not attempt to answer the open questions she poses. In short, this book is an invitation to an agreeable conversation on Muʿtazilite ethics.

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