The author's precise analysis of the thematic structure of the library stocks leads to surprising results. His statistics, which are illustrated with well-designed tables, reveal that the professor's specialization is only marginally reflected in the holdings. Instead, poetry, mostly secular, makes up about a third of the books. Substantially more than half of the library's books belong to the fields of poetry, *adab* and philological sciences. This is an important testimony for the process of the "adabization" of the *ʿulamāʾ* during this period.

In addition to a full-colour facsimile reproduction, the text of the catalogue is given in transcription and has been fully translated and annotated. In almost 300 pages (pp. 144–441), Hirschler presents and translates the titles of the 1,707 works. He manages to identify almost every work and assign it to its author, despite the fact that the catalogue often gives anonymous short titles only. Further data, such as a book's position on the shelf, its scribe, the number of quires, or its present location, are given when available. This part, the core of the work, is a philological masterpiece and will be extensively used by scholars of Arabic literature and cultural history.

Mistakes are extremely rare (read al-Ruhā instead of al-Ruhāʾ, Āmid instead of Āmad; the weird transcription as "Abū al-Shīṣ", etc., is not the author's fault). Concerning the index of authors (pp. 508–20), readers must know that it follows Brockelmann's GAL in determining the name under which a certain person is known. Brockelmann, however, did not always hit the right one. To mention one example, the person given as "al-Ṭarābulusī al-Raffāʾ" in the index (p. 520) is in fact better known under the name "Ibn Munīr al-Ṭarābulusī". However, these are very minor points. In sum, Konrad Hirschler's book is a pioneering study that will certainly give a new turn to library studies and remain indispensable for everyone working on Ayyubid scholarship and Arabic literary and cultural history.

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SOPHIA VASALOU:
Ibn Taymiyya's Theological Ethics.
ix, 342 pp. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016. £47.99.
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doi:10.1017/S0041977X17000180

The primary impetus for this book, as the author explains in her introduction, was tracing the historical roots of the modern claim that Islam is "the religion of our original nature", *fiṭra*, and specifically to see if it carried a message of moral rationalism independent of religious input. The focus is on Ibn Taymiyya because in his writings – as is often recognized today – the concept of *fiṭra* assumed unusual importance, especially with regard to ethics. The answer this book has for the initial research question is in the negative. In Ibn Taymiyya's thought, reason is far less substantive and far more dependent on revelation than it appears on first reading, and his ethics are more directly indebted to al-Rāzī or al-Ghazālī than he cares to admit. But in the course of the quest, this turns out to be a book devoted to a critical, often intimate, engagement with Ibn Taymiyya's ethical thought, set against a rich background of medieval Islamic theology as well as the writings of Bentham and Hume.

The book begins with the morality of actions. Ibn Taymiyya seems, *prima facie*, to argue that the values of actions can be known by reason as well as by revelation,

and thus to be close to the Muʿtazilite objectivist position of ethical value. But while the Muʿtazila argued that reason can determine whether actions are just or unjust, Ibn Taymiyya replaces the criterion of justice with the notion of utility. We know something to be good because it serves our interests, and we desire good actions because our innate nature is to love justice. Ibn Taymiyya's *fiṭra* is not a duty to do justice but a desire "that has benefit as its primary object" (p. 69).

The problem is, of course, that people desire some very bad things. Ibn Taymiyya solves this by arguing that our natural desires are inclusive of a desire for our overall welfare, an understanding of the longer-term consequences of our actions that balances immediate and longer-term pleasures. It is only when a person becomes corrupt that "one craves and takes pleasure in things that harm one" (p. 89), and one becomes corrupt by not following the natural disposition towards God. It is then that we lose sight of our long-term interests, knowledge of which ultimately comes from revelation. The definition of long-term interests is broad, and sometimes means public rather than individual interests. It is not in the interest of the individual to suffer certain punishments, but the punishments serve the long-term interests of the community.

It also follows that the aim of God's law is to promote a broadly conceived notion of human welfare. For Ibn Taymiyya, God's law is not arbitrary but has a specific concern with human interests and a wise purpose (*ḥikma*). We can ask why God commands us to do some things and avoid others, and when Ibn Taymiyya does explain God's wisdom, it is again in utilitarian terms: "When He creates what He hates, it is for the sake What He loves" (p. 173).

It is implicit here that there is something in the nature of actions that is independent of God's will, but Ibn Taymiyya is not interested in confronting this challenge. As Vasalou rightly explains, his agenda is overwhelmingly pragmatic in nature. The believer should not be tasked with following arbitrary commands and prohibitions. The Divine purpose of the Law has to fit with what humans understand to be to their benefit: "We should be able to believe that *our* sense of the good and the *Lawgiver's* sense of the good coincide" (italics in original, p. 228).

What are the practical implications of this view of God's wise purpose for the substance of the law? Since Ibn Taymiyya is adamant that knowledge of the overall and long-term welfare of humankind has to come from revelation, the legal principle of benefit (*maṣlaḥa*) has limited scope: it can only affirm what is already in scripture. Coming back to the ethical dimension of Ibn Taymiyya's thought, it also means that the Law tells us which of our desires are natural and which are corrupt. In that sense, Vasalou argues, Ibn Taymiyya's *fiṭra* is never independent or objective as it may appear. In reality it is much closer to Ash'arite ethics, which accept the appearances of a Divine purpose while rejecting its reality.

As a legal historian, I have two caveats with regard to this rich and engaging book – one concerns law and the other history. In terms of law, Vasalou concedes the interpretive possibilities of Ibn Taymiyya's utilitarianism, but too easily glosses over the gap between scripture and legal interpretation. True, the application of *maṣlaḥa* should always be in conjunction with an indicant from scripture, but for an innovative interpreter such indicants can be quite easy to come by. I do believe that Ibn Taymiyya's utilitarian purpose of the Law opens radical avenues of reinterpretation, as is demonstrated by his unorthodox rulings on questions of practice.

Vasalou rightly argues that Ibn Taymiyya can be fragmentary, contradictory and unsystematic. At the same time, she does not provide a systematic or chronological overview of the corpus she is using. It would be illuminating to follow the development of Ibn Taymiyya's concept of *fiṭra* over time, a task which is, I believe, possible given

the amount of biographical data at our disposal. These twin caveats notwithstanding, this is a stimulating book that goes beyond the surface of the texts to create new insights and new connections in the study of ethics across time and place.

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KIRSTEN THOMSON:
Politics and Power in Late Fatimid Egypt: The Reign of Caliph al-Mustansir.
(Library of Middle East History.) 240 pp. London: I.B. Tauris, 2016. £69.
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doi:10.1017/S0041977X17000210

The reign of the Fatimid imam-caliph al-Mustanṣir, which spanned the exceptionally long period from 427/1036 to 487/1094, saw both the highs and lows of this rule and a number of fundamental changes in many aspects of it, including most significantly the advent of military dictatorship under the wazir Badr al-Jamālī and the corresponding decline of dynastic royal authority. This period certainly deserves as much scholarly attention as possible; it is a key to the success and failure of the Fatimids over their two hundred year domination of Egypt and could explain many critically important developments in the larger Islamic world where the Ismaili appeal also operated at that time. However, although historians interested in this subject, beginning with the 15th century al-Maqrīzī and running continuously to the present, have wanted to do better, they have all had to confront the reality of substantial gaps in the sources available for the task. The crucial twenty-year reign of Badr al-Jamālī, from 466/1074 to 487/1094, which likely profoundly altered the way the Fatimid state was run, is one extended blank in the historical record, almost as if nothing happened or perhaps no one bothered to account for it if in fact something did occur. Al-Maqrīzī's frustration with this lack of information is almost palpable; for those years in his chronological history of the Fatimids, he could say little or nothing. The earlier phase of al-Mustanṣir's reign was much better covered and thus for it a detailed historical account is possible – but not this later phase.

Still, given this reality, which should serve as a warning of the difficulties involved and the problems to be overcome, we might welcome an attempt to help us fill the blanks and provide a complete account of such a key period. Unfortunately the book under review here, although expressing a desire to do exactly this, fails on so many levels and measures of scholarship, it may, in the long run, do more damage than good. The errors, mistakes and misleading claims in it are considerable, commencing with a title that makes reference to "Late Fatimid Egypt". How the reign of al-Mustanṣir, 1036 to 1094, is "late" for a dynasty that ruled in Egypt from 969 to 1171 is hard to understand. But there is much more. Right at the beginning of the book we find a map of the Fatimid Empire that has Mecca well north of Madina and al-Mansuriyya wildly off of where it should have been. The bibliography is full of mistakes, incomplete entries and typos and it contains only a limited portion of the works that are essential material for this project. Also the latest of the secondary sources consulted appears to be from 2002; it would seem that the author has not kept up with the scholarship on this subject – the Fatimids in general and her period in particular – for over a decade. In justifying an assertion that the era of al-Mustanṣir has been neglected by scholars, she faults