

SOPHIA VASALOU:

Moral Agents and Their Deserts: The Character of Mu'tazilite Ethics.

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The Mu'tazila, the major rationalist theological school in Islam from the eighth to the thirteenth centuries, has attracted increasing attention in Western scholarship during the last half-century. This interest was first sparked by the discovery of important Mu'tazilite texts in manuscript from the Zaydī community in Yemen, among them the voluminous *Kitāb al-Mughnī* of the Būyid Chief Judge 'Abd al-Jabbār al-Asadābādī (d. 1025) which forms the main source consulted by the author of the present book. More recently it has been rekindled by the discovery of fragments of numerous Mu'tazilite texts in the Geniza collections, chiefly from Cairo, attesting the adoption of Mu'tazilite theology among Rabbanite and Karaite Jews in the Fatimid age.

The book deals with Mu'tazilite ethical thought from a modern philosophical perspective. After a brief introduction on the history of the Mu'tazila, the author critically discusses the theological and legal foundation of their ethics, in contrast to traditional Greek philosophical ethics envisaging a purely humanist morality. Further chapters focus on the Mu'tazilite concept of desert for acts of freely choosing agents, including the right to praise and blame, on the long-term continuity of moral deserts and the justification of permanent punishment, and finally on the individual identity of human beings in Mu'tazilite eschatology after annihilation and resurrection.

In analysing previous studies of Mu'tazilite ethics by modern Western scholars such as G. Hourani, O. Leaman and T. Heemskerck, the author distinguishes between two approaches, a purely descriptive one and another that engages critically with the author whose thought is under discussion. Her own preference is one of cautious engagement. She explains at one point that her cautious distance from the Mu'tazila was motivated by fear that answers to some concerns could be elicited from them only by "becoming a Mu'tazilite oneself, and if conversion was the cost of conversation, the latter would certainly have gone too far..." (p. 140). Yet surely the Mu'tazila were a school of theological thought, not a religious community to which one might "convert" and which one could join. This is why Jews and other non-Muslims could adopt its teaching and discourse fully or partially without converting to Islam. If one wants to engage seriously with any school of thought, one must obviously be prepared to investigate its foundations fully without fear of "conversion".

The attitude of cautious distance is apparent in the author's treatment of the conflict between the Mu'tazila and the Ash'arite school which later became the predominant theological school in Sunni Islam. Here she describes some of the conflicting doctrines of the two schools without much engagement on either side, commenting: "The Mu'tazilites said, and the Ash'arites answered" (p. 12). It would be historically more accurate to state: The Mu'tazilites said, the Ash'arites (whose founder was originally a Mu'tazilite) criticized some of their teaching, and the Mu'tazilites answered the Ash'arite criticism. Any unbiased investigation would reveal that most of the Ash'arite criticism was rationally unsound, based on scriptural argument, and that the Mu'tazilites could easily refute it.

In other sections of the book, the author does engage seriously with Mu'tazilite thought and makes valuable contributions to a better, more thorough, understanding

of aspects of it than had been achieved in previous modern studies. Her discussions are often lengthy and involved, preceded by expressions of perplexity and astonishment about the Mu‘tazilite position and arguments. This is partly due to Qāḍī ‘Abd al-Jabbār’s difficult and sloppy language and style of argumentation in his *Kitāb al-Mughnī*, which itself is only partly extant, and some volumes of whose edition are replete with faulty readings. A fuller study of the foundations of Mu‘tazilite theological thought on justice, however, would also have obviated some of the initial perplexity in dealing with ‘Abd al-Jabbār’s treatment of various questions of ethics.

A serious misunderstanding of Mu‘tazilite doctrine, putting their credentials as rationalist theologians into question, must here be noted. The author asserts that “in the Mu‘tazilite definition of belief (*īmān*) belief is constituted by external acts of obedience over and against the cognitive act of belief” (p. 151). In contrast, “the Ash‘arites gave primacy to the internal, cognitive act of belief in God’s unity as a criterion for faith” (p. 7). In reality, the Mu‘tazila regularly stipulated as the first obligation of every person *compos mentis* on reaching maturity to acquire knowledge of God, not just to aver belief (*taṣḍīq*) in His unity as the Ash‘arites required. Many modern theologians and philosophers obviously define faith as belief in God and hold rational knowledge of God to be impossible. Medieval Ash‘arites and philosophers mostly considered such knowledge as reasonable, at least for advanced scholars and the elite of philosophers, but would not require it from the mass of ordinary believers. That Mu‘tazilites were interested only in external acts as a criterion for faith is entirely mistaken.

Acceptance of the rational foundation of Mu‘tazilite theological thought on justice does not require acceptance of all their teaching on ethics and desert. The author is evidently right in questioning their doctrine on the divine threat (*wa‘īd*) and punishment. Justice, as defined by them, allows reward above what is deserved as a favour of the benefactor, but it does not allow punishment beyond desert. Only a tyrant metes out punishment above desert. In insisting that God will inevitably carry out His scriptural threat of infinite punishment in hell-fire for finite offence, the Mu‘tazila abandoned their rational principles for popular religious belief. They ought to have realized that this threat can only be justified as a rhetorical one. They commonly claimed that if God failed to carry it out, He would be lying in the Quran. Is a mother, when she warns her misbehaving toddler: “I’ll give you a hot bottom if you don’t stop!” actually lying if she does not carry out her threat, realizing that a spanking would be excessive punishment?

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JAMES GREHAN:

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Everyday Life and Consumer Culture is an extraordinary achievement, and a real break-through in the field. One of its great strengths is its author’s humanistic concern for ordinary people, whose life experiences and often straitened circumstances come to life on every page. The book’s principal source materials, apart from the chronicles and the writings of contemporary religious scholars (especially al-Budayri, Ibn Kanna and ‘Abd al-Ghani al-Nabulsi), are about a thousand