

Brief Reviews of Books

The Polished Mirror: Storytelling and the Pursuit of Virtue in Islamic Philosophy and Sufism. By CYRUS ALI ZARGAR. London: ONEWORLD, 2017. Pp. 341. \$30, £20 (paper).

The Polished Mirror represents a rare work in which an entire field (or, in this case, fields) of study can potentially be recast and reframed, and this in the most positive way possible. Islamic philosophy and Sufism are two disciplines that are not often brought into conversation with each other, largely because scholars in both fields choose to be ghettoized, as it were, with the net effect that the only questions asked are of a historical and philological nature. When there is engagement with other traditions, particularly in the case of Sufism, it is often rather superficial or even misplaced. The recent wave of works on Sufism and critical theory is a case in point.

Cyrus Zargar is acutely aware of these problems and therefore takes another approach altogether, namely, one guided by a different set of questions. He is not alone in this regard, as a number of scholars have approached the traditions of Islamic philosophy and Sufism looking for a *rapprochement* between them. Yet Zargar not only stresses the commonalities between Islamic philosophy and Sufism, but shows how their common approaches and interests relate to our ethical and moral concerns.

In *The Polished Mirror* we are offered a sampling of the views of many major figures in the Islamic philosophical and mystical traditions, equally distributed among authors writing in medieval Arabic and Persian. Most of the heroes we would expect to see are present: Ikhwān al-Ṣafāʾ, Ibn Ṭufayl, Ibn Sīnā, ʿAṭṭār, Rūmī, al-Ghazālī, Miskawayh, etc. One immediate result from the careful selection of figures and the attendant analysis of their writings is the realization that Islamic philosophy and Sufism indeed share much in common, even if their historical representatives worked in distinct traditions that overlapped. It is therefore not surprising to see so many parallels in their explorations into such topics as the nature of happiness, the virtue of temperance, and how one ought to live the good life.

To illustrate the intricate moral universes of these writers, *The Polished Mirror* does not present us with the manner in which our authors engaged in arcane, philosophical argument, which would likely only appeal to a handful of specialists. Rather, the book focuses on how they imparted their philosophical, spiritual, and ethical goals by way of creative prose and poetry. That is to say, many of these premodern authors were just as concerned with conveying the significance of their

ethical quests and visions to a wider audience as we are today—they were, after all, addressing issues of abiding human concern. To transmit their insights, what better way than through an exploration of their literary genius vis-à-vis the art of storytelling and even mythmaking?

The Polished Mirror is a remarkable book in every way. It gives us a first-rate presentation of what was significant in Islamic philosophy and Sufism in the past, and how this significance is very much alive in the present. The topic is fascinating and Zargar has made his intentions and the importance of the investigation eminently clear. Both generalists and specialists will find this work useful, not least because of the author's considerable narrative skill. The inquiry is framed and discussed very well throughout the book, as it is set against the backdrop of a critically sophisticated understanding of the categories of virtue ethics with respect to Islamic civilization on the one hand and contemporary ethical and moral theories on the other. Furthermore, Zargar is not slavish in accepting the claims of any one ethical tradition and also gives us much food for thought with respect to our assumptions on a host of issues, from the notion of ethics itself to even that of "humanism."

The Polished Mirror strikes a fine balance between analytical rigor and poetic sensitivity, which is rare in contemporary writing on Islam. It further recommends itself in that many of its broached topics have strong parallels with issues that arise in cognate religious traditions, particularly Judaism, Confucianism, Buddhism, and Christianity. There is no doubt that this volume will serve as a very effective point of entry into the Islamic ethical landscape, and will be of great benefit to anyone interested in the broader fields of comparative philosophy, virtue ethics, moral psychology, and theology.

MOHAMMED RUSTOM
CARLETON UNIVERSITY

The Bronze Age Towers at Bat, Sultanate of Oman: Research by the Bat Archaeological Project, 2007–12. By CHRISTOPHER P. THORNTON; CHARLOTTE M. CABLE; and G. L. POSSEHL. Museum Monographs, vol. 143. Philadelphia: THE UNIVERSITY MUSEUM, 2016. Pp. 352, illus. \$69.95.

One of the first statements which I heard as a newcomer to Oman in the 1980s was that Bat is the country's best archaeological site. The reason is that this large site (2000 × 1500 m), which boasts a scattering