

Pseudo-Māwardī's perhaps surprising preference for *kalām* over *fiqh* also comes through clearly (as Marlow discusses, comparing Pseudo-Māwardī's approach to that of al-Fārābī; vol. 2, p. 101). Marlow's book might now usefully be read alongside recent publications treating the Buyid vizier al-Ṣāḥib b. 'Abbād (d. 385/925), who is known to have promoted the teaching of Mu'tazilī theology throughout Buyid territories and beyond (W. Madelung and S. Schmidtke, *Al-Ṣāḥib Ibn 'Abbād, Promoter of Rational Theology: Two Mu'tazilī kalām texts from the Cairo Geniza* [Leiden, 2016]; M. Pomerantz, *Licit Magic: The Life and Letters of al-Ṣāḥib b. 'Abbād (d. 385/995)* [Leiden, 2017]).

The second volume also includes an impressively detailed identification and analysis of the non-sacred sources for *Naṣīḥat al-mulūk* (chapter two, "Sources and Authorities: The Living Meaning of Ancient Wisdom"). Marlow's discussion of transmission and reception of pre- and early Islamic Iranian texts into Arabic and Persian is nuanced and engages with a very wide range of specialist scholarship—as elsewhere, her bibliography represents the state of the field extremely well. Again, here the comparisons with other works are important and show, for example, that Pseudo-Māwardī, writing in the Islamic East, had a more intimate knowledge of pre-Islamic Persian writings (*kutub al-'ajam*), such as the Testament of Ardashīr (*'ahd Ardashīr*), than someone like Ibn Qutayba, and that early writers drew from "a common repertoire," in which accounts circulated in multiple forms (vol. 2, p. 58).

To summarize, Marlow has produced a perceptive and thorough study of *Naṣīḥat al-mulūk*, the result of deep thinking about the literary possibilities available to the text's author. The relevance of her study extends beyond this book, time, and geography, as she sets a high standard for reading even a little-documented text in its full literary and historical context.

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*Ibn Taymiyya's Theological Ethics*. By SOPHIA VASALOU. New York: OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2016. Pp. ix + 342. \$74, £47.99.

Sophia Vasalou's most recent work tackles the vast writings of the enigmatic Mamluk-era theologian and jurist, Ibn Taymiyya (d. 728/1328), in an attempt to understand the place of human nature, *fiṭra*, in his ethical theory. This is no easy task. As Vasalou notes, Ibn Taymiyya's writing on ethics are scattered throughout his vast corpus, an artifact both of his predilection for polemic and his general preference for the genre of the fatwa over that of systematic treatises. Nevertheless, Vasalou argues that Ibn Taymiyya's writings on ethics, scattered and episodic as they are, are sufficiently engaging as to justify our efforts in trying to reconstruct his ethics. After reading this book, most students of medieval Islamic ethics and theology will agree with the author that her efforts were well worth the effort.

This book is not only about Ibn Taymiyya, however. One of its most valuable contributions is its situating Ibn Taymiyya squarely in the middle of the tempestuous array of the diverse and wide-ranging theological and philosophical debates of his era. In fact, based on Vasalou's reading of medieval Islamic ethical thought, Avicenna (d. 428/1037) may be the central figure in understanding the rise of Ash'arite ethics, and perhaps represents Ibn Taymiyya's principal intellectual opponent. This book also makes an important contribution to comparative ethics, placing Islamic ethical debates within the more familiar framings, to Western readers at least, of Socrates's debate with Euthyphro, Hobbes's rational egoism, Humean sentimentalism, and English utilitarians, among other ethical traditions. It concludes with a nod to the possible influences of Ibn Taymiyya's ethical thought on modern Muslim conceptions of the Sharia. This book deserves therefore a wide readership—not only among those interested in medieval Muslim theories of theology, ethics, and jurisprudence, but also among all who are interested generally in comparative ethics, theology, and jurisprudence.

Vasalou introduces the problem of her book, paradoxically, with references to modern Muslim discourse, and its insistent claim that "Islam is the religion of our original nature" (*al-islām dīn al-fiṭra*). This opening is paradoxical for two reasons—first, because although the substance of the book is osten-

sibly about medieval ethical debates, it begins with a reference to what now seems to be little more than a modern, hackneyed expression, and second, a more profound reason, because in medieval Muslim debates about the nature of ethical value, *fiṭra* was hardly central to the tradition. Rather, most medieval ethical debate centered around the dichotomy between the conclusions of reason (*‘aql*) and revelation (*sam‘* or *shar‘*). This binary between reason and revelation, of course, led historians of Muslim ethics, in reductive fashion, to divide Muslim theologians into two camps, the “rationalist” Mu‘tazila and the anti-rationalist Ash‘arites. Neither camp, however, used *fiṭra* as an important concept in their respective systems, whether positively or negatively.

It is for this reason, perhaps, that Ibn Taymiyya appears to offer a promising bridge from the medieval debates on ethics to the current Muslim elevation of *fiṭra* into a central concept underlying contemporary Muslim ethics. This is because Ibn Taymiyya did make *fiṭra* a central feature of his ethical and theological thought. Trying to unpack exactly what it means in Ibn Taymiyya’s thought is essentially the problem Vasalou takes up through the rest of the book, a journey that will take her, as mentioned above, through Ibn Taymiyya’s polemical arguments against Avicenna and the Muslim philosophers, and the Muslim theologians, whether Mu‘tazilites or Ash‘arites.

Chapter one explores Ibn Taymiyya’s ontology of ethics, particularly in light of his claim that his ethical theory represents “a middle way” (*via media*) that avoids the extremes of the *falāsifa* and the *mutakallimūn*, both Ash‘arites and Mu‘tazilites, and represents the way of the pious ancestors (*salaf*) and the majority of Muslims. Vasalou seems to endorse Merlin Swartz’s characterization of Ibn Taymiyya’s *via media* as a strategy based on putting the two dyads of a conflict, e.g., reason and revelation, into a dialectical relationship, on the assumption that the truth contains aspects of each. Doctrinal error is the result of confusing one element of the truth, e.g., reason, for its whole. From Ibn Taymiyya’s perspective, both the Mu‘tazila and the Ash‘arites fell into this error, the former attempting to restrict God’s command to what humans perceived as rational, and the latter resisting the Mu‘tazilite claim by arguing that God’s omnipotence and perfection mean that the essential features of His commands and prohibitions are necessarily inaccessible to human reason. The reality, according to Ibn Taymiyya, is more complex, with divine law including both commands that are rationally necessary and those constituted by divine fiat.

Ibn Taymiyya’s affirmation of a positive role for reason suggests a certain affinity with the Mu‘tazila, especially in light of his vehement denunciation of the Ash‘arite claim that the content of the divine command is arbitrary in itself. Vasalou, however, carefully dispels this mistaken interpretation: although Ibn Taymiyya shares with the Mu‘tazila a commitment to the rationality of at least some subset of ethics, his conception of reason is radically different from that of the Mu‘tazila and ultimately much closer to the Ash‘arite conception. The Mu‘tazila, according to Vasalou, maintained a belief that actions had an ontological reality that human reason could discover through careful investigation of an action’s notable characteristics (*ṣifāt*), a commitment that led them to conclude that God’s perfection meant that He could not order anything contrary to reason. For Ibn Taymiyya, however, reason was intimately connected to our human nature, our *fiṭra*, and that nature is essentially desiderative: for Ibn Taymiyya, utility forms both the basis of value and the most important human motive for action.

Vasalou also points to another strategy for understanding Ibn Taymiyya’s claim regarding the synthetic ontology of ethical obligation: ethical obligation is not rooted in the rationality of the individual, but rather in the reason of particular communities that, through what amounts to a social contract, mutually agree to pursue what they collectively deem to be good and to resist what they collectively deem to be bad. In this sense, ethical obligation is both rational and conventional: it consists of a collective rational judgment about the goodness and badness of certain ends for its own existence, but relies on social convention as the exclusive means to ground this sense of ethical obligation in the individual. Although Ibn Taymiyya’s rationalist rhetoric is resonant of the ethical objectivism of the Mu‘tazila, his rationalism is not based on a deontology of acts, but rather a utilitarian conception rooted in human desire.

Chapter two takes up the question of the extent to which Ibn Taymiyya believes that human beings are capable of self-guidance in the absence of revelation, in light of his conception of the naturalness/rationality of ethics. Recall that for Ibn Taymiyya, ethical knowledge, in principle, is rationally

accessible through desires rooted in our nature as human beings. In that respect, he rejects Avicenna's view of ethics (and that of his Ash'arite followers) as merely socially produced (and ultimately arbitrary) conventions. The foundation for our knowledge of ethics is in an important sense objectively related to our desires as human beings. To behave rationally is, for Ibn Taymiyya, to act in a manner calculated to achieve what is beneficial. Yet, there is a paradox here, because our desires do not always lead to our happiness. In fact, the unrestrained pursuit of our desires will lead to our perdition in this world and the next. Accordingly, rationality requires us to pursue only what constitutes our long-term benefit. It is only in this sense that we can say, confidently, that we "desire" the good. We "know," for example, that the long-term benefits of acting justly outweigh any immediate advantage acting unjustly might give us. This perspective on utility, however, raises another problem—specifically, how are we to understand or know where our long-term interest lies? While sense experience gives us a rudimentary idea of benefit and harm, it does not assist us, or it is insufficient to allow us to calculate long-term benefit and harm, which is the true foundation of ethical action. It is here that revelation for Ibn Taymiyya serves a crucial role: the revealed law completes or perfects the incomplete ethical knowledge nature and experience give us. Revelation provides us with the detailed means by which we can pursue the rational goods that our "reason" or our *fiṭra* can identify only in the broadest outlines.

If chapters one and two serve to distance Ibn Taymiyya from the prevailing intellectual currents of his day, chapter three aims to uncover his relationship to Ash'arite understandings of ethics. Ibn Taymiyya criticized the Ash'arites for their refusal to countenance any objective basis to human or divine ethical judgments, their position that human judgments of good and bad were entirely relative, based solely on the desires of the appetitive soul (*tabʿ*) which varied from person to another, and their view that divine judgments of good and bad were entirely arbitrary. Vasalou demonstrates, however, that renowned Ash'arites had already qualified this theory in important respects by identifying a *universal* human desire to seek benefit and ward off harm, a feature rooted in the appetitive nature of human beings, and that this formed the basis by which it can be said we are bound by revelation's commands. The prospect of divine punishment responds to our objective (and universal) *desire* to ward off harm, and thus forms a bridge between human desires (*tabʿ*) and the divine command. More generally, this concession to a connection between human desire and the content of divine command led to a broader reconsideration of the relationship between the content of divine law, human desire, and obligation (*wujūb*). Accordingly, while humans inevitably will have differing views of what is "good"—based on their different subjective desires—Vasalou points out that for al-Ghazālī (d. 505/1111), obligation is rooted not in the subjective apprehension of the good, but rather the objective assessment of the consequences of actions. From this perspective, there is a practical convergence in later Ash'arite ethical theory with Ibn Taymiyya's theory of *fiṭra*: both recognize a connection between natural desires and ethics, and both deny that desire as such can tell us what we ought to do. Only those actions that are consistent with our ultimate well-being can be described as commanded, and both theories agree that only revelation can provide human beings with knowledge regarding the long-term consequences of our actions. Only through adherence to divine law, then, can our long-term *desire* for happiness be assured.

Given these affinities, one might be puzzled why Ibn Taymiyya finds Ash'arite ethical theory to be so offensive. Vasalou attempts to answer this question in chapter four. She argues that the central point of contention between Ibn Taymiyya and the Ash'arites was the conception of God that each held. Ibn Taymiyya apparently believed that the Ash'arites' rationalist conception of God as a being free of purposes ultimately made it impossible for human beings to relate to God through love. Revelation, however, describes God as loving those who believe in Him, and it describes believers as loving God. And as Ibn Taymiyya argues in connection with his ethical theory, it is in our *nature* (*fiṭra*) as human beings to love those who benefit us. According to Ash'arite theology, however, God does not *intend* to benefit us in any meaningful sense. He is necessarily indifferent to us. The fact that His commands further our well-being is coincidental, much as causation in the natural world is coincidental. We may very well respond to His commands and prohibitions out of fear of punishment, but we cannot love such a God. Ash'arite theology, for all its epistemological similarity to Ibn Taymiyya's, undermines the ability of humans to live the religious life that is the true source of their happiness because it precludes them from truly loving their Creator, and to that extent, it is contrary to their *fiṭra*.

Chapter five, the book's last substantive chapter, considers the actual impact of Ibn Taymiyya's theory of *fiṭra* and the "natural," utilitarian foundation of divine law on Ibn Taymiyya's practice as a jurist. Again, the legacy is mixed. In certain cases, such as his famous opinions condemning what he deemed to be the excessive legalisms of medieval Islamic contract law, Ibn Taymiyya relied on his ethical theory to endorse a robust conception of the substantive compatibility between human needs—including commercial needs—and the demands of divine law. Yet in other cases, and perhaps more generally, he was much less willing to allow the substantive demands of human claims to determine the contours of divine law in the name of benefit (*maṣlaḥa*). Indeed, Vasalou argues that for Ibn Taymiyya, revelation sits in judgment of human reason such that human reason is in need of revelation to provide it a decisive criterion for decision-making. It is as though human legislative reason is capable of reaching a number of plausible solutions to a specific problem of social ordering, but is incapable of determining which of these solutions is the best. Revealed law steps in to provide the solution. Such a conception of revelation, however, has the potential of rendering any appeal to benefit as a real source of legislative activity utterly moot: benefit, one might say, simply lies in conforming with the commands and prohibitions of revelation, and any contrary judgment of human reason is simply a result of human beings' bounded rationality.

The book concludes with the place of *fiṭra* and utility in modern Muslim ethical, legal, and political thought. One might say that in the thought of the modernist 'Allāl al-Fāsi (d. 1974), *fiṭra* is now understood not so much as the origin of value, but as representing the telos toward which humans should aspire to realize their true ends. At the same time, as a source of legislation for modern Islamic law, Muslim thinkers continue to struggle between whether the idea of benefit is a substantive concept independent of revelation, and supplements it, or whether the revealed law already encompasses all possible benefit within its textual domain.

Aside from his ambiguous legacy in the modern age, Ibn Taymiyya seems to have been one of several medieval Muslim intellectuals who expressed profound dissatisfaction with the theological project of *kalām*, whether in its Mu'tazilite or Ash'arite form. While it might be too hasty to group intellectuals as disparate as al-Ghazālī, Averroes (d. 594/1198), Ibn Taymiyya, and Abū Ishāq al-Shāṭibī (d. 790/1388) into a movement, all of them, in their own way, expressed dissatisfaction with the effects of *kalām* on the practical health of the Muslim public, and each sought to remold religious discourse, particularly legal discourse, in a fashion that would make it psychologically and intellectually plausible to the average person. That, however, is a larger story that remains to be told.

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*Novel Medicine: Healing, Literature, and Popular Knowledge in Early Modern China.* By ANDREW SCHONEBAUM. Seattle: UNIVERSITY OF WASHINGTON PRESS, 2016. Pp. viii + 283. \$50.

Novels, with their detailed description of the private lives of their protagonists, take the reader inside the home and confront him or her with many aspects of human existence that are largely absent from public life. This applies not only to Western fiction, but also to vernacular Chinese fiction, as it was produced in ever larger quantities from the sixteenth century onward. From the nineteenth century Chinese novels have been translated into Western languages to allow their readers an opportunity to learn about the private life of their subjects. Now that traditional society has disappeared, novels provide a unique vantage point to view its inner workings, because they offer scenarios not only of how people should behave, but also describe how people actually did behave, especially in situations of stress. Illness is of course one of the situations that test the norms and values of society, and is therefore a popular topic in traditional Chinese fiction, even if not as popular as love or war. At the same time that traditional vernacular Chinese fiction increasingly explored private emotions and actions, medical literature took a narrative turn as it increasingly came to rely on collections of case histories. Where earlier medical literature might have listed symptoms and their cures or provided theoretical discussion