

*Gendered Morality: Classical Islamic Ethics of the Self, Family, and Society*

Zahra Ayubi

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What does it mean to be human? Who defines and shapes our understanding of humanity? How have androcentric approaches to Islamic virtue ethics constructed a gendered hierarchical understanding of human rationality, the *nafs* (self), and the right to happiness? And, finally, in what ways can feminist scholarship address the deep embeddedness of male-centered epistemologies and philosophies?

Zahra Ayubi poses these questions in her first monograph, *Gendered Morality: Classical Islamic Ethics of the Self, Family, and Society*. In this well-woven and rigorously argued book, she examines the ways in which pre-modern Muslim ethicists created an androcentric imaginary that offered prescriptive instructions for how Muslims should live moral lives and strive for flourishing (*sa'adat*) and vicegerency (*khilafah*) on the tripartite levels of the self, marriage, and society (6). Following in the footsteps of foundational scholars of Islam and gender, such as Fatima Mernissi, Leila Ahmed, amina wadud, Sa'diyya Shaikh, and Kecia Ali (among many others), Ayubi applies a feminist hermeneutic to unravel the ways in which three Muslim ethicists, Abu Hamid al-Ghazali, Nasir ad-Din Tusi, and Jalal ad-Din Davani, reproduced their gendered understanding of existence and metaphysics in their treatises on virtue ethics. In doing so, Ayubi argues that these Muslim male ethicists rooted their conceptions of Islamic virtue ethics in hierarchy and inequality, privileging only the male elite, who could access their full rational faculties.

*Gendered Morality* is divided into four chapters, in addition to an introduction and a conclusion. Chapter one provides an overview of the genre of Islamic virtue ethics (*akhlaq*) and the psychology of the *nafs*, situating the three texts by al-Ghazali, Tusi, and Davani within this genre. In this chapter, Ayubi establishes her methodological approach: reading the texts through the analytic of gender, and highlighting the gendered themes, ontologies, hierarchies, and ethics employed therein.

Chapters two, three, and four investigate the ethicists' understanding of the tripartite cosmology of self, marriage, and society. Ayubi highlights how this cosmology rests on a logic of exclusion. Chapter two builds on the gendered methodologies she established in the previous chapter to unpack the metaphysical tension of these three Muslim ethicists' approaches to the problematic of recognizing the humanity of each individual. Ayubi deftly notes how, while the ethicists acknowledge the humanity of women as a social class, their patriarchal cosmologies and epistemologies operate through a logic of male supremacy,

exclusion, and oppression of lower classes such as non-elite men, women, and animals. Ayubi returns to this tension in her subsequent chapters, examining the ways in which this dynamic unfolds in the domestic economy of marriage (chapter 3) and in the homosocial relations between men (chapter 4).

In her conclusion, Ayubi offers a prolegomenon to a feminist philosophical turn in the study of Islam guided by feminist philosophers such as Luce Irigaray and Martha Nussbaum, among others. Echoing Sādiyya Shaikh's attention to the role of experience in feminist epistemologies,<sup>1</sup> Ayubi's conclusion opens up pathways for interrogating the epistemological and philosophical underpinnings of what constitutes knowledge (265). This allows her to highlight the male-centered metaphysics undergirding the concept of human stewardship or *khilafah*, to decouple this patriarchy from the concept, and to redefine the notion of *khilafah* along more gender-inclusive parameters (265–270).

Ayubi's intervention highlights the depths to which ideal conceptions of masculinity and male supremacy shape not only the marital, domestic, and social realms but also the metaphysical conceptions of what it means to be a human (103, 110) and homosocial relations between men (177). Drawing from Elizabeth Clark's understanding of "thinking with women," or how women are used as moral foils for male superiority (117), and Raewyn Connell's theory of hegemonic masculinities (64–65), Ayubi demonstrates how these Muslim male ethicists' constructed an ultimate masculinity that rests on the intertwining of patriarchy, masculinity, and class. While Ayubi does an excellent job unpacking how elite masculinity rests on rational intellectual supremacy that implicates non-elite men in addition to women and animals, she nonetheless seems to work with a fixed understanding of hegemonic masculinity as toxic or lowly masculinity (65, 200). Connell's reworking of this theory suggests that, much like hegemony, notions of hegemonic masculinity shift and act as organizing notions of power for the society, place, and historical time in which they emerge.<sup>2</sup> Thus, I wonder if it is the elite ethical masculinity of the male ethicists' that operates as a certain type of hegemonic masculinity rather than the lowly masculinity of the non-elite men? How would disentangling hegemonic masculinity from the association of an "assemblage of toxic traits" further shed light on the silent ways in which this elite ethical masculinity forms an operating principle for relations of self, society, and cosmology?

Ayubi's strength lies in her ability to map and to hold the tensions presented within al-Ghazali's, Tusi's, and Davani's work as well as the broader genre of Islamic virtue ethics. In doing so, she offers simultaneous interventions in the fields of Islamic ethics and philosophy, and Islam and gender, presenting a reparative reading or what she terms a "constructive approach" to Islamic virtue ethics. Rather than dismissing the genre altogether for its clear patriarchal and hierarchical worldviews, she constructs a feminist philosophical framework for reading and engaging the perennial questions these three authors pose. This epistemological approach shifts the focus from uncovering endemic instances of masculinist logic and language to a reconstructive approach that grapples with the question of "how to live a moral Muslim life," and to rethinking "the goals of [ethics] *akhlaq* itself" (277). She suggests that the paradoxical tensions within these texts—"that individual refinement, which is supposedly for all of society's benefit, occurs at the cost of many individuals"—illustrate that a modern understanding of *akhlaq* should be reworked. Rather than emphasizing the exclusionary logic that only certain men can achieve flourishing and vicegerency, a modern understanding of *akhlaq* should emphasize that no human can attain ultimate

perfection; thus, all humans should be allowed to refine themselves. Here, Ayubi seems to gesture toward a gender-inclusive philosophy of virtue ethics that troubles the gendered hierarchy of Islamic virtue ethics.

*Gendered Morality* is an exciting contribution to the fields of Islamic philosophy and ethics, Islam and gender, feminist philosophy, and the study of Islam more broadly. It should be required reading for all scholars of Islam, religion, and philosophy and would make an excellent addition for any advanced undergraduate course or graduate seminar.

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### ***Endnotes***

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1. Sa'diyya Shaikh, *Sufi Narratives of Intimacy: Ibn 'Arabī, Gender, and Sexuality* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012).

2. Raewyn W. Connell and James W. Messerschmidt, "Hegemonic Masculinity: Rethinking the Concept," *Gender & Society* 19, no. 6 (2005): 829–59.