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Book Review: “Moral Agents and Their Deserts: The Character of Mu‘tazilite Ethics,” by Sophia Vasalou

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Göknar, whose previous work includes an award-winning translation of Orhan Pamuk's *My Name is Red* (2001) has done an admirable job rendering into English Tanpınar's multi-dimensional world of taste, sound, color, and smell. Various citations of court and folk poetry and references to songs and sayings recreate at once their color and texture. Europeanisms, such as French loan words, inevitably get neutralized as cognates in English translation, but Göknar provides sufficient linguistic markers to identify the urban elite that speaks through the book.

Students of Turkish, Balkan, and Middle Eastern history, culture, and literature will find plenty of interesting material in the book, even if most undergraduates may find the novel difficult to get through, as they would find Joyce or Faulkner. As for connoisseurs of literature and of Istanbul, they should savor the reading experience. ✨

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SOPHIA VASALOU. *Moral Agents and Their Deserts: The Character of Mu'tazilite Ethics*. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2008. xiii + 252 pages, appendix, notes, bibliography, index. Cloth US\$39.50 ISBN 978-0-691-13145-0.

Sophia Vasalou's book provides an important window into the moral economy of Mu'tazilite thinking. It is an insightful inquiry into one specific ethical concept: desert, or the deserving of reward or punishment in consequence of one's actions. Over the course of six chapters, the author carefully investigates this integral concept and its implications for Mu'tazilite theology. The study is not comprehensive or chronologically extensive, but it makes no such claim. Rather, the book is sharply honed. As Vasalou states at the outset, the focus of the study is on the "Başran branch" of the Mu'tazilites, rather than on Mu'tazilism writ large (p. 9). Thus, the analysis rarely extends beyond the extant Başran corpus.

Nevertheless, Vasalou's attention to detail is remarkable. Before delving into the subject matter itself, the first three chapters establish and explore the parameters of the study. In Chapter One, boundaries are set. The author presents a succinct summation of the core Mu'tazilite tenets and then furnishes an abbreviated history of the Mu'tazilites until the eleventh century. The chosen terminus is unsurprising given that the book primarily draws upon theologians from this time period. Following this brief contextualization, Chapter Two demonstrates the author's judicious

care in how the sources should be read. This cautious and conscientious approach is much needed in the study of theology, where all too often historical polemics and disputes have clouded and colored scholarly interpretations. Throughout the book, but especially in this chapter, Vasalou rightfully questions current characterizations of Mu'tazilite rationalism. The interpreter's subjectivity is drawn sharply into question. Hence, George F. Hourani, George Makdisi, Oliver Leaman, and A. Kevin Reinhart, Vasalou's scholarly predecessors, are repeatedly reexamined. In contrast, the model of preference is Margareta Heemskerck, who seeks to "let the theologians speak for themselves" (p. 33). And so Vasalou does. Rather than privileging heresiographical descriptions, she draws primarily upon the writings of the Baṣran Mu'tazilites themselves, particularly the works of 'Abd al-Jabbār (d. 1025) and Ibn Mattawayh (d. 1076).

The study then turns to distinctions of disciplines in the third chapter. Here, Vasalou looks at the interplay of law and theology in Baṣran Mu'tazilite thought. After exposing the "cross-pollination" between the technical vocabularies and conceptual worlds of the two discourses, the definitions of *ḥuqūq* ("rights" or "claims") are considered from their human and divine perspectives, specifically issues of agency. Within this discussion, the interplay of morality and law, or reason and revelation, is also explored. All these matters are of great significance since the Mu'tazilite conception of *ḥuqūq* has a direct bearing on *istiḥqāq* or desert.

With these relational distinctions clarified, Chapters Four and Five take up desert properly. In the former, the author carefully traces the various ways in which desert was understood and articulated by its theological proponents. Vasalou charts its intricacies, taking into account issues of reward, punishment, and causality. Her analytical descriptions of blame and praise in this moral framework are especially well done. The fifth chapter introduces temporal considerations by asking how desert functions diachronically. As in the preceding chapter, Vasalou demonstrates how the Baṣran Mu'tazilites navigated the thorny issues of desert's duration and the scripturally understood perpetuity of punishment. In chapter six, temporality is taken to its limits with eschatology or the end times. In this final chapter, Vasalou instructively looks at the question of how desert or individual identity endures given the Baṣran Mu'tazilite understanding of a complete material annihilation followed by a bodily resurrection. Exactly how is desert sustained through the process of re-creation? While ultimately deferring to the Baṣran Mu'tazilites, the author also looks to the polemical speculations of their opponents, both philosophers (Avicenna) and Ash'arites (Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, al-Jurjānī). The author provides a

fascinating survey of the issue. Finally, the book ends with an appendix that is a translation of “one of the most continuous Baṣran Mu‘tazilite discussions of questions related to desert” (p. 181). Written by the Zaydite Mānkḏīm Shashḏīw, it offers yet one more important entryway into the Mu‘tazilite theological framework.

A synthetic conclusion is sorely lacking. This does not detract, however, from the book’s overall depth and impressiveness. And while the descriptive prose is cumbersome at times, it nevertheless reflects the complexity found in the source texts themselves. Conceptual density is matched with linguistic verbosity. In the end, Vasalou has deftly brought to the fore a much misread ethical viewpoint of the Islamic intellectual tradition. Her book stands as an invaluable contribution to the study of Islamic theology in general and Baṣran Mu‘tazilism in particular. ✎

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