

Virtue Ethics in Sufism? A Review of Atif Khalil, *Repentance and the Return to God: Tawba in Early Sufism*. Albany: SUNY Press, 2018, 272 pp.

Beginning in the 1950s, the revival of “virtue ethics” at the hands of Elizabeth Anscombe, Bernard Williams and Alasdair MacIntyre challenged the dominant ethical theories of the time, namely utilitarianism (ethics based on the consequence of an action) and deontology (ethics based on “*deon*” or duty). The growing influence of virtue ethics can be observed in fields outside of philosophy such as literature (Iris Murdoch and Doris Lessing for instance) and feminist ethics (Annette Baier for instance). Nevertheless, the idea that the Sufi exploration of various character traits such as gratitude, kindness, compassion, and temperance can be best understood in the context of virtue ethics is rather late in the story; hence Atif Khalil’s *Repentance and the Return to God: Tawba in Early Sufism*, along with Cyrus Zargar’s *The Polished Mirror: Storytelling and the Pursuit of Virtue in Islamic Philosophy and Sufism* (2017), breaks new ground to introduce virtue ethics in Islam. Khalil, who has published widely on virtue ethics, comparative religion and Sufism, hails from the new generation of young scholars whose work transcends the narrow disciplinary confines of Islamic Studies, and incorporates theories and insights from such disciplines as philosophy, sociology and anthropology. The work under review thus reflects Khalil’s interdisciplinary erudition in several fields ranging from philology to philosophical anthropology, resulting in a sophisticated analysis of *tawba* or repentance as a pivotal virtue in Sufism that addresses the spiritual concern of the modern *homo religiosus*. In what follows, I will first provide a synopsis of the book, and then comment critically on its most salient feature, namely how Sufi virtue ethics reorients our conception of “the good life.”

The book has two parts. Part 1, which consists of two chapters, examines the semantics of the term *tawba* and the parameters of its semantic field both from linguistic (*taʿrīf al-tawba fī al-lughā*) and religious (*taʿrīf al-tawba fī al-sharʿ*) viewpoints. Noting that “repentance” may not capture all the nuances of the term, Khalil argues that *tawba* is “a process of interior conversion that brings about a radical reorientation in the person’s life and a newfound sense of underlying purpose” (63). In the process, he also identifies five different ways “repentance” can take place in the life of the aspirant, namely, 1) an external admonition or invitation that can appear in the guise of a Qurʾānic verse, or a line of poetry that awaken the self from its “dogmatic slumber;” 2) an inner awakening whereby the sinner or lackadaisical believer is admonished by her own conscience; 3) a conversion that is brought about by a direct intervention of heaven, as a result either of 4) a charitable, generous, or a devotional act; 5) an occurrence of a miraculous experience.

Part II of the book explores the thesis that *tawba* involves a life-transforming alteration. Khalil thus places *tawba* in the larger journey of the soul as it strives to ascend into the divine presence. This helps to establish *tawba* as a virtue (along with other virtues) essential for the spiritual ascent insofar as it is embodied in the states (*aḥwāl*) and stations (*maqāmāt*) of the mystical path. Khalil further delineates the various levels of mystical realisation or attainment from which the contradictory role of the virtues could be conceived by underscoring their different functions in different contexts, which has been aptly described as the “ethical perspectivalism” of Sufi ethics.

Khalil draws on almost all the major figures of early Sufism such as al-Kharrāz (d. ca. 847), al-Muḥāsibī (d. 857), Sahl al-Tustarī (d. 896), al-Junayd (d. 910), and Abū Ṭālib al-Makkī (d. 998), as well as some of the later luminaries of the tradition, such as al-Ghazālī (d. 1111), Ibn ‘Arabī (d. 1240), and Rūmī (d. 1273) in order to develop a complex framework for virtue ethics that corresponds to the modalities of the mystical journey.

By placing an emphasis on the integration of virtues such as love, patience, and gratitude, Sufism, for Khalil, underscores the ethical imperative in the mystic quest. Khalil also resists the popular association of Sufism with miracles by arguing that Sufis are not so much concerned with supernatural or paranormal experiences, visions, or even higher states of the mind, as they are with guiding the mystical subject into the divine presence through the internalisation of virtues. The last two chapters provide a detailed exposition of “repentance” in al-Muḥāsibī and al-Makkī, both of whom are noted for their role in developing a science of moral psychology. The discussions around self-examination, meditation, and self-transcendence therein can be best understood in terms of Ignatius of Loyola’s famous phrase, “spiritual exercises” (*exercitia spiritualia*), which Khalil employs effectively. As with philosophers of antiquity (Hadot 2002), Sufis too undergo a regimen of spiritual exercises in order to neutralise the power of the passions. Such exercises are “spiritual” insofar as they help reorient the self toward a higher mode of being. The various spiritual exercises such as self-examination, meditation, silence and prayer have the objective of reorienting the subject toward a clearer understanding of its true nature in contrast to its imperfections such as inattention, anger, greed, envy, pride, and prejudice. These imperfections and passions of human nature must be tamed and controlled to enable the aspirant to reach the goal of self-perfection.

All this is to say that virtue ethics responds to the profoundest of human desires, that is, the “desire” for “self-perfection” that lies at the core of being a human. Reading through the pages of Khalil’s *Repentance and the Return to God*, it becomes evident that the author seeks to provide a Sufi response to the time-honoured question, “what it is to be human.” It can be said that in the Sufi

perspective, the meaning of being human hinges on attaining the perfection of all the divine names and qualities. That is to say, the idea of “self-perfection” in this perspective, occurs through the doctrine of the “perfect human” (*al-insān al-kāmil*) when in the course of life’s infinite variety of circumstances and experiences, one learns to realise the specific perfection associated with each divine name (the divine names are infinite and contain every possible perfection). Virtue ethics is highly relevant in this process, since such ethics enables the self to transition from potentiality to actuality and realise its *telos*. Nowhere does this become more apparent than in Ibn ‘Arabī’s original interpretation of “the Myth of the Fall,” which Khalil expounds with remarkable clarity. In contrast to the conventional interpretation of the Fall that sees it as a result of Adam’s forgetfulness or disobedience, the great Andalusian mystic Ibn ‘Arabī argues that Adam’s banishment from paradise should be understood as “a descent from place and not from level” (178). That is, the expulsion from paradise allowed Adam (i.e. humanity in general) to realise “his own latent capacity for wholeness and perfection,” (178) and thereby rise above all created beings to become a symbol of God’s own perfection and goodness.

One further highlight of the book is its comparative focus. Khalil convincingly shows how Sufi ethics maps onto Aristotelian virtue ethics. As is well known, for Aristotle, moral excellence is concerned with pleasure and pain. One cannot fully attain a particular virtue if one does not enjoy it. Moreover, virtues can be likened to crafts in that they need concrete practice for their actualisation. They will remain merely theoretical if they are not put into practice in one’s life. Like Aristotle, al-Makkī also asserts that as the traveler progresses on the spiritual path, she enjoys practicing virtuous acts and finds obedience to God pleasant, which may have been difficult at the beginning. This is another way of saying how the self concretises virtues of justice, friendliness, magnanimity etc. through “habituation.” For both al-Makkī and Aristotle it is not enough “to simply know a virtue, or to practice it with a heart that delights in its exact opposite” (159). Rather the idea is that the person who strives to attain ethical perfection must first actualise the latent goodness of her own self, so that it comes to find all that is morally good to be sweet, and all that is evil to be repugnant.

It must be remarked that such a conception of ethics differs from its rival theories that concentrates on some kind of “rule” or maxim as in both utilitarianism (the greatest amount of good for the greatest number of people) or Kantian deontic ethics (categorical imperative: act only according to that maxim by which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law), which Kant sets forth in his *Grundlegung zur Metaphysik der Sitten* (1967). In contrast to such “rule-based” ethics, Sufis such as al-Makkī, Rūmī,

Sa'dī (d. 690/1291) and others emphasise a narrative conception of ethics that directs one's attention to the ethical subject's intention, circumstances, intersubjectivity, experiences and *telos*—all of which influence moral decision-making. As MacIntyre has rightly pointed out (MacIntyre 2007, 246ff.), one can see the persistence of “rule-based” ethics in the liberal ethics of John Rawls's “distributive justice” (Rawls 1999) and the libertarian ethics of Robert Nozick's “personal entitlement” (Nozick 1974), both of which neglect the narrative character of the self and human life, push individual circumstances or subjectivities to the margin, and downplay *telos* and the intention of the agent. In contrast to Rawls and Nozick for whom society is composed of individual subjects, each seeking to maximise self-interest, who then have to come together to formulate common rules of life, Sufi ethics envisions a common origin and a universal *telos* for humans, namely lasting happiness.

Atif Khalil's book goes a long way to insinuate these matters, which would be highly relevant to contemporary Islamic ethics. However, to my mind the book could have done better by highlighting some of the key differences between Aristotelian and Sufi virtue ethics, since some of the key Sufi virtues such as love, compassion, and faith are absent in Aristotle. Moreover, Sufis do not always follow Aristotle's lead when it comes to their virtue ethics, which, as Khalil points out, often embraces “perspectivalism” of a sort, or what I call “situational ethics” that very much depends on the unique situatedness of the ethical self. I also thought the chapter dealing with the semantic field of *tawba* would have been more accessible had the author preferred not to mix English sentences with Arabic words, which look cumbersome and pose unnecessary difficulties to the Arabic-less reader.

These minor critical remarks should not, however, distract us from the worth of Atif Khalil's first-rate exposition of Sufi ethics through the concept of “repentance.” The book marks a significant contribution to the study of virtue ethics in Islam, and it will be of benefit to both students and specialists interested in Islamic ethics, early Sufism, Islamic intellectual history, anthropology, comparative mysticism, religious studies, and Islamic humanities. Above all, it will advance our understanding of the scope of ethics in the Islamic world.

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