Book Reviews

The Path to Virtue: The Ethical
Philosophy of al-Raghib al-Isfahani

Yasien Mohamed
Kuala Lumpur: ISTAC, 2006. 589 pages.

Modern hermeneutics, specifically H.-G. Gadamer's hermeneutics, asks what kind of meaningful horizon a text opens to us and what happens to us when we interpret and understand that particular horizon. The same questions arise when we read Yasien Mohamed's *The Path to Virtue*, a scholarly organized text full of fine historical and philosophical analyses. Not only does this book meet internationally accepted research standards, but it also deserves to be a missing link between the philosophical ethical thought of medieval Islamic culture and our own modern ethical culture.

When we read *The Path to Virtue*, we quickly find ourselves within the so-called "hermeneutical circle" as regards the text's major topic. This circle reveals itself in two distinct viewpoints: the structure and the horizon of the text. As regards its structure, Mohamed's text discloses both the most general aspects of al-Isfahani's ethical thought and the critical detailed corners of his way of thinking. Hence he is able to show us how the relationship between general aspects of al-Isfahani's thought fulfills itself in a logically coherent manner with the particularities of the same thought. He does so not only in terms of referring to the internal relations between general and particular aspects of al-Isfahani's thought, but also by disclosing the external references of al-Isfahani's thought, among them Plato, Aristotle, basic Islamic texts like the Qur'an and the hadith literature, Miskawayh, and others. When we focus on the text's structure, we soon find ourselves as silent participants of a grand discussion on character ethics among Plato, Aristotle, al-Kindi, al-Farabi, Miskawayh, the Ikhwan al-Safa, al-Isfahani, al-Ghazali, and others.

Mohamed's treatment of the text's horizon allows us, as moderns, to begin comparing and contrasting the ethical views and discussions of

ancient and medieval thinkers with our own ethical projections, ideals, and practices. The author occasionally criticizes the shortcoming of modern ethical discussions for neglecting the classical notion of character ethics. While he does not make any personal preference on either classical or modern ideals of ethics, he invites us to rethink and reconsider the problem of morality by acquiring a historical consciousness of the ethical conceptions belonging to the ancient and medieval eras and by being aware of our own shortsightedness on morality. Accordingly, the hermeneutical circle between the horizon disclosed in Mohamed's text and our modern horizon of meaning signifies the deepening of our own historical consciousness on moral conceptions and ideals.

It seems that a rarely used conception – "Islamization" – in the text establishes perhaps the most critical cornerstone of Mohamed's *The Path to Virtue*. Anyone familiar with how medieval Muslim philosophers thought can realize that they did not see the historical time (and cultural) differences between ancient philosophers, such as Plato and Aristotle, and themselves as a kind of abyss in front of their basic notion of truth. Rather, they accepted ancient philosophical views as something that enlightened a timeless truth for themselves. Muslim philosophers also criticized some ancient views on the grounds that when were unacceptable from the Islamic viewpoint; however, this critical approach did not prevent them from looking at those texts as something revealing a truth "here and now."

In view of this, how should we understand the most critical notion of "Islamization," which rarely occurs but perhaps determines the whole meaning-structure of Mohamed's text? Is this merely an application of recently coined term anachronistically, or does this term bring forward a historical truth of al-Isfahani's time?

These questions have more of a hermeneutical than an epistemological character, since Mohamed's work deserves to be a link between medieval ethical projections and our own modern ethical views. Should the author want us to revise our shortsightedness of modern moral discussions as regards the character ethics of al-Isfahani, then should we, say, modernize, Christianize, or secularize al-Isfahani's moral view in order to render it acceptable for modern western life? Do the conceptions of Islamization, modernization, secularization, or Christianization merely represent a mode of application (appropriation) of historically or culturally alien ideals or conceptions to the interpreter's own condition, or do they signify a modification or transformation of knowledge according to a pre-established set of truths?

It seems that the conception of Islamization in Mohamed's text takes us to a different path of thought. When he claims that al-Isfahani and other Muslim philosophers accepted the ancient Greek ideals of Plato and Aristotle in their Islamized form, he appears to explore their fundamental hermeneutics as follows: The Islamization of Greek knowledge is not a form of the politics of knowledge, but rather a process of bringing the essence of truth by locating it within the living language of Muslim culture. In other words, according to their fundamental hermeneutics, truth is not something to be alienated by arresting or confining it within its original historical context; rather it is something to be rescued from every confining activity. This is so because the freedom of thought depends upon the freedom of truth from every confining activity.

When we read the fundamental critical conception of Islamization in Mohamed's work from this viewpoint, we can better realize that the hermeneutical circle established between the classical medieval moral ideals of al-Isfahani and others and our own horizon of morality can be a space of mediation of moral truth as the final stage of every form of morality. In my perspective, Mohamed's work becomes a hermeneutical text when it discloses the urgent need for rescuing moral truth from every kind of confining, restricting, or shortsighted activity.

Burhanettin Tatar
Professor of Islamic Theology, Faculty of Theology
Ondokuz Mayis University, Samsun, Turkey