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*Al-Ghazālī & the Ideal of Godlikeness* by Sophia Vasalou  
(review)

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the last part of the book within which the author returns to the questions of normativity and whether or not Proclus's mereology, within the context of his Neoplatonic metaphysics, makes a substantial contribution to the contemporary debate (205-30). As for the first question, the author seems to me to be somewhat unjustifiably reticent to apply the Proclan distinction between part and whole to considerations in moral philosophy. In this regard, Proclus does not appear to deviate very much at all from Plato and Plotinus, both of whom make much of wholeness as a criterion of excellence. It will be recalled that Plato says that "the virtuous person becomes one out of many" where that "one" is certainly a whole. As for the second question, I would say that the present book is itself a worthy contribution to establishing Proclus's philosophical *bona fides* among those engaged in the contemporary debate about wholes and parts.

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*Al-Ghazālī & the Ideal of Godlikeness.* By SOPHIA VASALOU. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2025. Pp. xiii +201. \$100 (hard). ISBN: 978-0-19-891244-6.

Sophia Vasalou has recently made several contributions on al-Ghazālī and on virtue ethics in Islam that may not have received the attention they deserve. After *Virtues of Greatness in the Arabic Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2019) and *Al-Ghazālī and the Ideal of Moral Beauty* (London and New York: Routledge, 2022), she has now produced a monograph that deals with the ideal of godlikeness in the Islamic ethical tradition, again anchored in the writings of al-Ghazālī but also looking beyond. Al-Ghazālī is an important figure in the development of an Islamic virtue ethics, because he sits at the crossroads of two traditions. On the one hand, he is an Ash'arite *mutakallim* who throughout his oeuvre never deviated from the central metaethical tenet of that school, according to which the value of a human act depends only on what is said about it in Revelation. Lying is bad only for the reason that God describes it as such in Revelation; and there may indeed be situations when it is good (like when stormtroopers bang on your door and ask whether you are sheltering a prophet). While the deontological approach to ethical value dominates al-Ghazālī's works on Islamic law, his three most influential books on how to lead an ethical life (*The Revival of the Religious Sciences*, *The Alchemy of Happiness*, and *The Scale of Action*) hardly talk about this. They teach their

readers to develop virtues (and quasi-virtues) through habituating their souls to good actions. Bad human actions are rooted in vices which must be defeated by the conscious habituation of their opposites. Misers will become generous through ritual almsgiving (*zakāt*), and gluttonous people will shed their vice by learning how to fast (*sawm*). Where the books on Islamic law focus on concrete actions, the ones on ethical conduct deal with underlying states (*ahwāl*) that humans acquire which are the causes of actions. This perspective represents a Sufi approach to ethics. Vasalou has already analyzed the relationship of these two aspects of al-Ghazālī in *Al-Ghazālī and the Ideal of Moral Beauty* and “Ethics as Medicine: Moral Therapy, Expertise, and Practical Reasoning in al-Ghazālī’s Ethics” (*Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie* 104 [2023]: 468-508). In his three ethical works, al-Ghazālī is strongly influenced by an Aristotelian tradition of virtue ethics that entered Islam with the translation of Greek texts. The combination of these two approaches is grounded in al-Ghazālī’s conviction that the virtues of the philosophical tradition are largely identical to right conduct as it is taught by Islamic law (*sharī‘a*). This idea, which does not begin with al-Ghazālī but with earlier Arab Aristotelians such as al-Rāghib al-Īṣfahānī (d. 1031) and Miskawayh (d. 1030), remained strong in Islam for many centuries. The position of many legal thinkers in modern Islam, including even the early Muḥammad Rashīd Riḍā (d. 1935), that the newly introduced French law of the colonial era is largely identical in spirit with the rules of *sharī‘a*, must be seen as a continuation of that identification. Against this stands a tradition of thinkers such as Ibn Taymiyya (d. 1328), who point to the unique differences between *sharī‘a* law and all other legal and ethical systems. In the modern period this leads into the critique of Western secular law by the Muslim Brotherhood in the 1930s and 1940s, which has dominated the discourse on Islamic law and ethics ever since. Looking back at al-Ghazālī is almost like conducting time travel into an era when the distinctness of Islamic law from other ethical traditions was still an open question and combinations of several approaches were not only possible but widely popular.

If al-Ghazālī’s books on Islamic law represent his Ash‘arite side and his three works on how to organize one’s daily life his fascination with virtue ethics, then his commentary on the divine names, *The Highest Goal in Explaining the Beautiful Names of God (al-Maqṣad al-asnā fi sharḥ ma‘ānī asmā’ Allāh al-ḥusnā)*, may be seen as the fulcrum between these two sides. Written after the popular works on daily conduct but before his most profound book on the methods of Islamic law (*The Choice Essentials of the Science of the Methods [of Law]*), *The Highest Goal* claims full compliance with Ash‘arite legal principles and tries to teach how one can strive to become a better person. The key idea in this book is godlikeness. Based on a list of ninety-nine “names,” or rather active participles, that apply to God and that the Prophet Muḥammad is believed to have taught to his followers, al-Ghazālī explains what one can learn from those “approved” divine attributes. Embedded in that book is the idea that these

names represent virtues and hence examples for humans to emulate. Vasalou's question is: "how can we make sense of the idea that God should possess virtues, given our conception of virtue and the background conditions that support its place in our own life?" (8-9).

The problems seem obvious: our lives are constrained by limited abilities and resources from which God does not suffer. It is easy to be generous, for instance, when the means at one's disposal are limitless, so how can that be a productive example for someone living on minimum wage? Vasalou addresses this conundrum not only within al-Ghazālī's texts but also in ancient Greek philosophy and a few more Arabic authors (mostly al-Rāghib al-Iṣfahānī). The centerpiece is, however, the great Ash'arite's *Highest Goal* where the idea to "acquire the character traits of God" (*al-takhalluq bi-akhlāq Allāb*) is most vividly expressed, much more clearly than, for instance, in *The Revival of the Religious Sciences* (27). Al-Ghazālī believes that all humans are naturally drawn to beauty and to perfection. Hence the divine attributes, which are considered beautiful (*ḥusnā*) and perfect, naturally (*bi-l-ṭab'*) arouse love (29). This alone is incitement enough to emulate God and to improve our own states. Al-Ghazālī is, after all, a skeptical thinker who needs a good reason why we should act ethically. Experience shows that the promised reward for good behavior in the afterlife is not sufficient to make everybody pursue the virtues. Loving God and emulating him will also not persuade all who remain skeptical about the afterlife, but al-Ghazālī takes whatever is available to spread the virtues in society. In the *Highest Goal* emulating the divine is his thrust.

In thirteen short chapters, Vasalou looks at this project from different, mostly critical angles. She locates a theological risk that she identifies in the words of Yousef Casewit, who recently published a study on the *Highest Goal* that asked similar questions ("Al-Ghazālī's Virtue Ethical Theory of the Divine Names" *Journal of Islamic Ethics* 4 [2020]: 155-200): how does al-Ghazālī negotiate divine incomparability and comparability? (36). In their opposition to Mu'tazilite Islamic theology and to Neoplatonic Aristotelianism (*falsafa*), Muslim Sunni theologians have always stressed divine transcendence and incomparability. Ash'arites responded to most theological challenges they were confronted with by repeating that "nothing is like Him" (Qur'an 42:11) and that therefore divine unity (*tawḥīd*), for instance, may include a division between his essence and several entitative attributes. They shrugged their shoulders when pressed how such a "unity" is possible. In fact, that shrugging became their method, engrained in the so-called without-howness (*bilā kayfa*) attitude in response to questions on the divine. In his *Highest Goal*, al-Ghazālī moves into the opposite direction, trying to make God understandable to humans and showing that words like "the Patient" (*al-ṣabūr*) or "the Forbearing" (*al-ḥalīm*) have a meaning that we can relate to. In the early parts of her book, Vasalou explains al-Ghazālī's understanding of some of these names. A number of these attributes are connected to emotions, but can God

have emotions? In fact, isn't the whole project of virtue ethics grounded in the defeat of our emotive tendencies for slackness and comfort? We only have virtues when rationality makes us realize that good actions serve us better than our emotional gut-reactions. Can someone without emotions that need to be overcome even be virtuous? On the other side of this coin, some emotions call us to be virtuous. Compassion (*rahma*) is a painful feeling of pity that God is free from. Al-Ghazālī argues that God's compassion is more perfect than humans' because he receives no benefit from the compassionate act whereas we receive relief from the pain of pity (62). Similarly, we receive benefit when we overcome laziness, whereas no such relation exists in God. For Vasalou, an ethical theory of this kind is built "on brittle ground" (67). "When we posit God as our model, we get a result that looks wrong" (68). As an Ash'arite theologian, al-Ghazālī subscribes to the view that for humans, freedom from personal interest is impossible (75). Yet, those interests are looked at with deep suspicion which manifest itself, among other things, in his negative attitude to emotions. His kind of virtue ethics is grounded in the Ash'arite conviction that justice and individual human interests are different from each other, almost always contradictory. Justice needs a source that transcends individual interests, and this for the Ash'arites is divine Revelation, a neutral source with no interest whatsoever (on this see, e.g., Omar Farahat, *The Foundation of Norms in Islamic Jurisprudence and Theology* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019]).

Yet if not our interests, what motivates us to pursue the virtues? Who says that we are not *motivated* by interests? Al-Ghazālī would ask this question and point to long-term interests that overcome the slackness of the couch potato. When rationality overcomes the emotions and opts for the virtuous life, it looks at an eternity of reward for the fulfillment of divine commandments. The virtues are a mere means for that, and unlike in Aristotle, are not the reward themselves. The virtues guarantee that next time I see an old woman cross the street, I will intuitively help her and not engage in a calculation whether it will be better for me to arrive punctually at my job interview and achieve a higher salary or gain eternal reward in the next life for helping the woman. Al-Ghazālī knows that the latter reward is greater, which is why he recommends habituating myself to helping old women and defeating greed. That is the kind of thinking that dominates his *Revival*. Yet there is a second motivation, appearing more prominently in *Highest Goal*, that Vasalou had already looked at in *Al-Ghazālī and the Ideal of Moral Beauty* and that has already been mentioned: loving God includes the desire to become like him as much as possible. This desire is grounded in the tendency of humans "to gain superiority" (*takabbur*). While in many contexts that tendency can be harmful, it can also be directed toward an ethical object, namely, assuming God's character traits (85-90). "Understood in the right way hauteur is a virtue in human beings just as it is a virtue in God" (92).

Vasalou's monograph is short and at times one wishes to hear more of the voice of al-Ghazālī and read more quotations and more Arabic terminology. Vasalou highlights al-Ghazālī's list-making in a logbook, but some readers might want to know, for instance, what word he used for "logbook" (*jarīda*). It is also puzzling why Vasalou neglects to quote the full list of ten vices and ten virtues from book 39 of *Revival* (131). As with her other books, this one has no clearly identifiable thesis. It is more a series of reflections on al-Ghazālī's project in the *Highest Goal*. In the later chapters, Vasalou looks at whether teaching ethics through moral exemplars is productive and again voices the objection that even if it is, the exemplar must be significantly *like* us (112-18). "The more worthy of adoration a being is," Vasalou quotes Linda T. Zagzebski, "the less like human being it is," which adds another skeptical voice on al-Ghazālī's project (119). In one of her last chapters (chap. 12), Vasalou mitigates her skepticism and points out that this project was embedded in a different kind of society than the one we live in, which might prevent us from fully understanding—and appreciating—its value. Her overall judgment, expressed in the short conclusions of her book, is that the project is "interesting" (Vasalou herself puts the word within quotation marks), insofar as it "creates new thinking and calls our mind to meaningful new activity" (145).

That will leave some readers unsatisfied. Yet Vasalou displays a certain caution that was largely absent from many earlier books on Islamic ethics and law. Those implicitly compared premodern Islamic practical thinking to the way "we" organize ourselves and our societies and found "their" arrangements deficient. Not that this book abandons the we-and-they perspective—one might wonder whether any modern author can ever achieve that—but Vasalou remains cautious, in all her skepticism, voicing important caveats, particularly in her twelfth chapter. Like Omar Farahat's book, mentioned above, this is a different way of looking at Islamic ethics that points out differences, yet tries to remain value-free or at least allows for a contextualized understanding that we may not have fully reached. Premodern Islamic societies, particularly of the postclassical kind (which begin with al-Ghazālī), are still very much a closed book for us, and this is one contribution that helps to make them legible.

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