

Taha Abderrahman's Moral and Spiritual Foundations of Dialogue

A Review Article by

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The Question of Ethics: A Contribution to the Ethical Critique of Western Modernity

By Taha Abderrahman

Casablanca, Morocco: The Arabic Cultural Center, 2000a. 240 pp.

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The Islamic Right for Intellectual Difference

By Taha Abderrahman

Casablanca, Morocco: The Arabic Cultural Center, 2000b. 320 pp.

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The Spirit of Religion: From the Straitness of Secularism to the Width of Trusteeship

By Taha Abderrahman

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Language, dialogue, and ethics are issues that lie at the heart of Taha Abderrahman's intellectual interests. The attempt to weave through these elements in a holistic construct from an Islamic perspective is an enterprise, which preoccupied him for decades. As a self-proclaimed Muslim philosopher, Abderrahman consciously constructs his thought against the background of the disenchanted epistemology of separation that is characteristic of Western modernity. With a focus on his conception of the ethics of dialogue, I undertake a brief excursion into three of Abderrahman's books *The Question of Ethics: A Contribution to the Ethical Critique of Western Modernity* (2000a), *The Islamic Right for Intellectual Difference* (2000b), and *The Spirit of Religion: From the Straitness of Secularism to the Width of Trusteeship* (2012). My aim is to highlight and evaluate his attempt to found inter-communitarian dialogue on spiritual ethics.

Following J. B. Grize and others, Abderrahman argues that speech is by origin dialogical, and dialogue is concomitant with difference. As a philosopher who is trained in the philosophy of language and modern logic, he devoted his earlier intellectual efforts to the study of the dialectic between natural language, logic, and rhetoric. In this regard, he invests his knowledge of modern logic and rhetoric to revive the interest in the ancient genre of scholarly debates in the Islamic civilization. In parallel with his theorization of the logical conditions of a valid rational dialogue, Abderrahman puts premium on the moral function of dialogue and of human interaction at large. While he values the recent ethical turn in rhetoric and philosophy, he believes that only a communicative action that combines logical thinking with spiritual ethics could restrain the interlocutor's inherent will to justify their interests and desires in a rational and logical way.

In *The Question of Ethics*, Abderrahman undertakes a radical, and in my view, not unbiased, critique of Western modernity. Owing to its disenchanting spirit, the modern West embraced a narrow conception of rationality, which embraced a reduced and impoverished form of ethics. Abderrahman pejoratively circumscribes the West as a "civilization in crisis" whose malaise, in his view, is engendered by its logo-centric nature. To Abderrahman's mind, the interlocked relationship between reason and logical articulation—the Janus faces of the Logos—in the Western philosophical discourse is problematic in two respects. First, it "elevates the theoretical discourse over moral action". Second, it caused the "realm of ethics to shrink" in almost all the spheres of the human activity.

Abderrahman ascribes the recession of ethics in Western modernity to the domination of three discourses in the West: logic, law, and politics. To begin with, Abderrahman criticizes the interlocked relationship between speech and rationality much at the expense of ethics. As a result of the reign of the Logos, a logical and systematic discourse is regarded as the ultimate expression of rational thinking. In other words, the more systematic and logically structured a proposition is, the more rational it is. Abderrahman of course does not so much undervalue logic and systematic thinking as he laments the exclusion of ethical considerations from the requirements of logical propositions. In a gross exaggeration, Abderrahman's claims that the Western philosophical discourse is constructed in accordance with the maxim "there should be no ethics in the theoretical discourse" (2000a: 78). His sweeping generalization seems to ignore the efforts of a number of Western philosophers—Charles Taylor is one example—who challenged the positivistic legacy in the philosophy of language on ethical grounds.

Law is another discourse that expands at the expense of ethics in modern societies. Abderrahman is not the only one to lament the fact that under modernity, the rule of law has come to fill the space that it used to share—relatively harmoniously—with morality in pre-modern times. Since in the logic of modernity, the "legal discourse is more akin to the organization of the actions of the community than ethics", law exclusively takes over the public sphere to the detriment of ethics, which have been "frozen in the private sphere" (2000a: 78). Abderrahman echoes the criticism of Western philosophers such as Max Weber and Jürgen Habermas of the tight juridification of modern societies. Abderrahman disturbingly criticizes the heavy legalization of modern societies without explaining how his conception of the communitarian and spiritual ethics—which he conceives of as the outcome of the dialectic between the divine law and the embodied and engaged human experience—would be applied in an increasingly multicultural public sphere.

The third discourse, which, in Abderrahman's view, has expanded at the expense of ethics in modern societies is politics. Abderrahman argues that modern societies become

“flooded” by the media, political speeches, rallies, slogans, and other manifestations of political discourse. The danger of the rise of the political, Abderrahman argues, lies in the fact that the human will is much less motivated by the moral discourse than by the political discourse. In other words, the human will under modernity is dislocated from the moral to the political, which is always already coterminous with “interest, egoistic drives and the will to domination” (2012, 92, 101) Wael Hallaq (2012) makes a similar argument about the paradigmatic rise of the political in Western modernity in his book *The Impossible State: Islam, Politics, and Modernity's Moral Predicament*.

Abderrahman acknowledges the significance of the Western philosophical contributions, which put premium on ethics, but he judges them as inadequate and disproportionate with regards to the massive and profound crises in the modern world. Secular philosophical ethics, he thinks, are less capable to fully address and deal with the powerful and psychological base that drives of the human self. These challenges require what he calls the “ethics of profundity”—or ethics of purification—which he contrasts to the “ethics of the surface” (2000a: 26). It is with this conviction that Abderrahman critically engages with the Frankfurt School philosopher Jurgen Habermas about his discourse ethics. Abderrahman briefly discusses Habermas in his book *The Question of Ethics*, but engages with him in fairly greater detail in *The Spirit of Religion*, a book that he devoted to the entangled relationship between religion and politics.

In *The Spirit of Religion*, Abderrahman strives to make the case for this claim: human beings exist in a dual plane of existence, material and spiritual, and their forgetfulness of the latter inevitably unleashes the political in its Schmittian sense. In light of this claim, Abderrahman evaluates in the third chapter of the book Habermas' communicative action. The inter-subjective thrust of Habermas' theory of communicative action, Abderrahman argues, transcended the defects of both the pure and the instrumental reasons, but exaggerated the capacities of both language and reason in grounding ethics and settling social conflicts. Left to their crude nature, human beings fall in the grip of “passion” (al-hawa) and the concomitant desire to possess, appropriate, and dominate. These instincts are much so powerful and ingrained in the human self than the power of the rational discourse could overcome. Abderrahman, partly agreeing with the Belgian political theorist Chantal Mouffe, argues that the human nature is holistic and cannot be reduced only to the rational aspect despite its crucial significance. In a word, human interactions are much more complicated than the rational proof alone could handle.

Abderrahman finds Habermas' procedural conception of ethics equally problematic. Habermas conceives of ethical norms not as objective truths, which tell people what to do, but as formalistic and procedural ways that stipulate how people should agree on what to do. This move, argues Abderrahman, is diminishing of morality. First, ethics is far broader to be deduced solely from discourse! Second, the “consensus of the participants in a debate does not prove the truth of what they have agreed on” (2000a: 5; 2012: 174). Third, the agreement on the rules of discourse does not ensure the establishment of justice, neither does it guarantee that the agent would abide by these ethics. Philosophers have screened off the spiritual-moral dimension from the picture, and he thinks that the answer for the problematic of human communication lies there.

The kernel of Abderrahman's book *The Spirit of Religion*, and indeed of his oeuvre in general, is the idea that the antidote of the political—a la Schmitt—is spiritual purification, which he identifies as the spirit of religion. Thus, by analogy to Habermas' “idealizing pragmatic presuppositions” of discourse, Abderrahman introduces the notion of the “ideal political agent” (2012: 165). The latter does not—or rather should not—rely solely on the rational proof in human interaction, but combines it with the proof of testimony. In a Heideggerian manner,

Abderrahman explores the etymological, the semantic, and the pragmatic significations of the Arabic word “a-shahada” (testimony) to come up with a concept that is at once open to the epistemological and the moral horizons. Epistemologically, testimony is a “source of knowledge” that human beings commonly use in their everyday as well as professional lives to settle disputes, which the rational proof alone cannot. From an epistemological point of view, Abderrahman’s insights ring with the interest in testimony in recent epistemological studies. Nevertheless, Abderrahman does not explain how testimony could be applied or be of use in debates between social and political agents in the public sphere, an issue that concerned Habermas in the first place.

It is the moral implications of testimony, which has drew particularly the interest of Abderrahman. Unlike the rational proof, testimony is closely related to the notion and “institution of justice”. While a defective rational proof undermines the validity of the argument, a flawed testimony undermines the justice and the credibility of the person himself. Since the testimony is always delivered in a community, the person does not only testify to him/herself that their testimony is just and credible, but also “has others testify on his testimony” (2012: 167). In other words, “there can be no justice in the democratic society without the justice of the agents themselves” (2012: 174). From the perspective of spiritual ethics, testimony, according to Abderrahman, acquires an even crucial moral and spiritual significance since the person constructs their argument or delivers their testimony while attesting to the credibility of what one is saying not only to him/herself or before people, but before one’s Creator. Understood in this spiritual and moral way, the horizon of testimony in social and political interaction, Abderrahman says, is necessarily demarcated by the “rights of the others” and the “interest of the others”.

As I noted above, the breath of Abderrahman’s thought is both spiritual and postcolonial in the militant sense of the term. In his book *The Islamic Right for Intellectual Difference*, Abderrahman resumes his reflection on the issues of dialogue and difference with the aim of fracturing what he calls the “univocal thought” of Western modernity, which masquerades under universal human values.

In this book, Abderrahman tries to make space for the Islamic intellectual contribution by rethinking the conditions of an egalitarian cross-communitarian dialogue on moral and spiritual grounds. For a dialogue to be fruitful and rewarding, Abderrahman argues, it should be upgraded from mere “collaboration” (a-ta’awun), to the will to “know each other” (a-ta’aruf) (2000b: 20-21). Abderrahman distinguishes between these two modes of communication—collaboration and mutual knowledge or understanding (a-ta’aruf)—on religious and spiritual grounds. In his view, the latter mode—that is, “a-ta’aruf”—constitutes the essence of the “Islamic response” to the problematic of civilizational dialogue.

In the terminology of Abderrahman, intellectual “collaborative action” often has a worldly character. Thus, it does not always reflect a genuine interest in knowing and understanding the other. It might adopt noble and praiseworthy ethical norms of dialogue, but they remain flawed because they are not ingrained in a genuine moral and spiritual action. Thus, it is likely that such an inter-communitarian dialogue degenerate into a one-way dialogue whereby one community holds that only its views and values to be valid or universal. Abderrahman identifies and criticizes three principles, which regulate the collaborative mode of intellectual communication between communities.

The principle of tolerance: It has the value of tolerating the other, but it can be accompanied with the feeling of superiority over the different other.

The principle of recognition: It is good to recognize the other, but the recognized community might take advantage of and abuse this recognition, which turns it into an insolent community.

The principle of charity: Both parties condescend and ascribe validity to each other's views and values, but this might also turn into hypocrisy and arrogance.

Abderrahman's representation of these principles is simplistic and does not take into account the intricate ways in which they have been presented and revisited by the philosophers of rhetoric and argumentation.

To transcend the flaws of these principles, Abderrahman proposes three alternative "morals", which are predicated on Islamic ethics, but that also have explicit sufi overtones. The first of these is the moral of al-haya (an Islamic concept that combines both the senses of modesty and decency) whereby the community is "ashamed before God, before the others and before itself to do something which is wrong and wicked" (2012: 153). The second moral that should regulate the intellectual dialogue among communities is "moral jihad", which is the constant "spiritual perseverance" to rid oneself of egoistic drives and to communicate with the other in "accordance with the noblest of morals and virtues" (2012: 174). The third moral is "wisdom", and it is attained when the reflection on the world of phenomena, is founded on the reflection on the world of signs—or vestigia dei. In other words, a rich and flourishing human existence should be connected with spiritual meaning and demarcated by ethical boundaries.

I agree with Abderrahman on certain claims, particularly on the shrinking of morality in modern societies and the need for a genuine morally grounded dialogue with the different other. To be sure, Abderrahman discloses the inadequacy of reason and rational ethics to address a complex problematic such as human communication. His emphasis on the ethics of the purification of the self (*akhlaq a-tazkia*) might be a dissonant tone, but it does nevertheless ring well with the recent resurgence of the spiritual. The lesson of Abderrahman is that by experiencing and internalizing God's witnesses that we cannot only behold the rights of the different other, but also look forward to "know" Him. In this sense, Abderrahman transcends both the epistemic arrogance of rationalism and the rigidity of religious legalism. However, one also wonders whether Abderrahman is raising the moral bar too high. One wonders, for example, how a communicative action, which is based on the principles of *ta'aruf* or testimony—with all their moral, religious and spiritual prerequisites—could be applied in a reality, which is configured by power relations.

About the Reviewer

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