Towards New Perspectives on

Ethics in Islam

Casuistry, Contingency, and Ambiguity

Guest editor

Feriel Bouhafa
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Philosophy in the Narrative Mode: Alexander the Great as an ethical character from Roman to medieval Islamicate literature

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Abstract
Histories of Arabic and Islamic philosophy tend to focus on texts which are systematic in nature and conventionally classified as philosophy or related scholarly disciplines. Philosophical principles, however, are also defining features of texts associated with other genres. Within the larger field of philosophy, this might be especially true of ethics and within the larger body of literature this might be especially the case for stories. Indeed, it is sometimes argued that the very purpose of storytelling is to reinforce and disseminate moral conventions. Likewise, the moral philosopher can be conceptualized as a homo narrans.

The aim of this contribution is to apply the approach to narratives as a mode of debating ethical or moral principles to biographies of Alexander the Great. More than any other figure of the classical world, Alexander was religiously validated in the Islamic tradition due to his quasi-prophetic status as the ‘man with the two horns’ in the Qur’an. He appears prominently in the larger orbit of Arabic and Islamic philosophy as interlocutor and disciple of Aristotle and is adduced anecdotally in philosophical literature as an example to teach larger lessons of life. As a world conqueror, he provided an attractive model for those who sought to reconcile philosophical insight with worldly ambition.

Focusing on biographies of Alexander, this article explores ethical principles which are inscribed in this body of literature and thus reads the texts as a narrativized form of philosophy. The analysis is comparative in two ways. Biographies of different periods and regions of the Islamicate world will be discussed, but comparisons with pre-Islamic biographies of Alexander (notably Roman biographies and the Alexander Romance) are included as well.

Keywords: Alexander the Great, Arabian Nights, Narrative literature, Situation ethics

Stories and Philosophy, Healers of the Soul

In an interview with the New York Times Book Review of November 3, 1957, the writer Karen Blixen famously stated that ‘all sorrows can be borne if you put them into a story or tell a story about them’. About two millennia earlier, Epicurus had made a similar promise on behalf of philosophy which could serve as medicine for the soul, one of many to make such a statement about the healing effect of thoughts. Contemporary philosophers remain concerned with the healing of the soul or its secularized cousin, our psycho-emotional state. For many, achieving such happiness is a thoroughly, even essentially ethical exercise since
it involves interactions with others as well as an internal practice of moral integrity and honesty. Such projects are often intertwined with the stories that we tell about ourselves and about others. Hannah Arendt selected Blixen’s phrase as the epigraph for her chapter on action in *The Human Condition*, a set of lectures published in 1958. But the parallels between storytelling and philosophy extend beyond a common ambition of healing the human soul. Both are used to capture the very essence of what it means to be human.

As *homo sapiens*, we are meant to be rational and logical and thus uniquely possess the preconditions for the philosophical life. Storytelling too is sometimes seen as so essential to human beings, whether in social configurations or the operations of our brains, that our species has been described as *homo narrans*. We make sense out of our lived reality by telling stories to ourselves and to others. Narratives establish biographical coherence, sequences of events implying causality. Philosophy and storytelling both identify structure in reality. They help us persuade others of the way we see the world. To some, this means imposing order where there is none. Sartre famously contrasted a life lived and a life told. To others, the two cannot be separated. When we think about ourselves in the world, it is always in narrative terms.\(^1\)

Ethics is infused with storytelling since so much of it concerns actions, especially interactions between humans. Accounts of interactions between people have sparked ethical debates and ethical deliberations often operate with narrative examples, fictional or otherwise. Likewise, storytelling is infused with ethics. Anthropologists have even made the case that one of the main purposes of storytelling is to perpetuate and negotiate moral conventions or illustrate ethical principles (GÖTTSCHALL 2012). Along similar lines, Hayden White asked, ‘could we ever narrativize without moralizing?’\(^2\) One of the moral dimensions of historiography is constituted by virtue of the fact that historians narrate. This quality of narrativity accounts for the moral responsibility attributed to both storytellers and their audiences. The storyteller’s positionality has recently come under great scrutiny in public controversies about literary representations of marginalized communities, but this is only one of several ways in which storytelling is ethically charged. Conversely, reading fiction is sometimes considered an exercise in empathy when we immerse ourselves in a story and experience the world, however superficially, from somebody else’s point of view. This relationship between ethics and storytelling is frequently discussed in terms of human universals. If we accept these terms, we can assume that significant ways in which Muslims ponder ethical issues are not specifically Islamic.

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\(^1\) For examples see FISHER 1985 and NILES 1999. For the relationship between philosophy and storytelling see CRAIG 2014 and MERETOJA 2017.

\(^2\) WHITE 1980: 27. For the purposes of the analysis in this contribution, the different modes of narrating are secondary. Narrativity is used generically in contrast to the systematic presentations of typical philosophical treatises.
Literature and Philosophy: a Reshuffle of the Analytical Toolbox

To connect literature and philosophy can be analytically fruitful in general and in specifically Islamic or Islamicate contexts. It can yield a better understanding of texts in their historical environments, result in a fuller acknowledgment of the meaning of texts and how that meaning is communicated to and constituted by readers. Apart from being embedded in the narrative turn in the humanities and social sciences, the present contribution on Alexander stories is guided by a historical interest in the presence of philosophical ideas in medieval Islamicate literature outside the field conventionally defined as falsafa. Scholarship on Arabic-Islamic philosophy tends to focus on the great minds and the systematic elaborations they produced on a range of problems conventionally recognized as philosophical in nature. There are certainly good reasons for this tendency, but philosophical ideas also existed outside of this corpus of philosophical texts. Authors classified as philosophers sometimes contributed to other genres as well—the prolific Andalusis Ibn Ḥazm (994-1064) and Ibn ʿArabi (1165-1240) illustrate this well. Philosophical ideas circulated well beyond the community of falāsifa, as the example of Ibn Taymiyya’s (1263-1328) polemical works shows. While many expressions of such ideas were philosophically insignificant, being unoriginal, superficial, fragmentary or misinformed, they are still valuable for a historical assessment. Part of the present endeavor is thus to gain a fuller picture of the presence of philosophy in the premodern Islamicate world.

Furthermore, this contribution is related to an academic interest in the literary qualities of medieval Arabic texts that had not been classified as ‘literature’, such as historiography and scholarly works of adab in general. Philosophical literature is usually not approached as literature, the prevalent categories for interpretation rather being analytical-philosophical or historical in nature. A rare exception is Ibn Ṭūfayl’s (1110-1185) Ḥayy ibn Yaqẓān, a text so distinguished in its literary and narrative qualities that it falls easily and obviously into more than one category. Common concepts of literary analysis, however, poetic aesthetics, intertextuality, narrativity, plot and character, imagery and metaphor, can be applied to a larger body of philosophical texts in order to understand their operation of persuasion and argument in a more multi-faceted manner. The stories about Alexander the Great that are the subject of the present article qualify in a more conventional fashion as ‘literature’. It is thus rather by way of crossing in the opposite direction, that is, by reading literature as an intellectual and philosophical exercise, that the following analysis seeks to shed light on underexplored issues. When we recognize in literature arguments that pertain to philosophical concerns and controversies we can appreciate these literary examples as contributions to philosophical debates. But we can also apply concepts of philosophical analysis such as virtue ethics or normative ethics in order to evaluate philosophical content in literary sources. By expanding in such ways the pertinent body of source material we typically gain a better impression of the diversity of discourses concerning an issue such as ethics in the Islamic tradition.

3 For two examples of this scholarship see LEDER 1998 and BOULLATA 2000.
Philosophy Emplotted: Islamicate Alexander Narratives as a Case Study

Islamicate stories about Alexander the Great lend themselves to combined philosophical and literary analysis since the protagonist of countless narratives and disciple of Aristotle is almost uniquely connected to both storytelling and philosophy. I am interested in the ways philosophical concerns and principles are inscribed into these stories, how they are narrativized or emplotted. Apart from looking for philosophical references, either by technical terminology or by attribution and authority, I assume that the nature of the stories has a philosophical quality, especially if we expand falsafa into a broader, diverse and contemporary notion of philosophy. In the study of premodern Islamicate contexts, philosophy is often coterminous with a very specific kind of philosophical project that involved a specific set of problems and concerns, a canonized structure of subdisciplines, concepts, doctrines, terms and authorities alongside a specific historical legacy. In contemporary parlance, philosophy is a more diverse exercise. Philosophers might still be committed to systematic thought, but we speak of feminist, Buddhist or materialist philosophers without reservations emerging from the differences between them. They all merit the label ‘philosopher’. Likewise, we speak of philosophy of history, philosophy of science or philosophy of religion, expanding on the ambition of philosophy to provide higher-level critical thought, but anchoring it in other disciplines or areas of human experience as well. To employ such a more heterogenous understanding of philosophy to premodern Islamicate texts has repercussions for the various subdisciplines of philosophy as well. ‘Ethics’ is thus not limited to technical Arabic terms such as akhlāq, but involves a broader set of philosophical problems. Even where philosophy is not discursively prefigured we can ask philosophical questions.

The present project is literary and philosophical rather than philological and historical. It is decidedly not concerned with the diffusion, transmission and translation of texts across premodern Eurasia. The approach is comparative and, to that end, as comprehensive as possible. I am treating Alexander stories as an open corpus and Alexander the Great, to use Diana Spencer’s phrase, as a meme (SPENCER 2009). What I am interested in is how Alexander as a narrative character functions as a device for communicating and constructing ethical meaning. Narrative characters have a range of ways in which they fulfil such a function. They can verbally articulate ethical principles in their speech (‘generosity is commendable’) or explain them (‘generosity is good for social cohesion’). They can exemplify them in action, e.g. by being courageous, or they can exemplify the opposite, be cowardly. They can identify ethical dilemmas and provide solutions. As narrative characters, they function in the context of plots. We can evaluate the principles they articulate or

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4 For the following see for Arabic literature DOUIFAR-AERTS 2010 and for Persian literature MANTEGHI 2018.
5 For another component of this project see AKASOY 2021.
6 For aspects of this project see AKASOY 2016a and 2016b.
7 JANNIDIS 2009: 23. By ‘narrative character’ I mean a character that is the product of narration rather than a descriptive set of attributes.
exemplify as responses to situations and we can see the consequences of actions. They allow us to think about ethical principles as situational ethics. Narrative characters can stand in for the reader and deliver our response to situations or they can model statements for us if we find ourselves in situations that resemble literary accounts. Our general assumption in the case of premodern literature is that characters who exemplify moral principles are rewarded, whereas moral weakness and depravity are punished. The difference between good and bad is thus typically clear. This binary enjoys a lasting presence in modern literature. And yet, there are examples of moral ambiguity too in premodern literature such as the successful trickster. Either way, whether we find the outcome of stories morally satisfying or not, ethical dimensions of narrative characters constitute invitations for the reader to consider ethical problems on their own terms.

Furthermore, my assumption is that while ethics always has a philosophical dimension it is not an exclusively philosophical subject. In our context, ethics as a dimension of narratives also manifests itself as a religious concern. Indeed, in the Islamic tradition, as in many religious traditions, storytelling is a prominent method of teaching and preaching. Preachers who expounded on Qur’anic narratives emulated Muhammad as the reciting storyteller of the Qur’an, but their manner of exposition and the thematic frame of their sermon defined the ethical content of the stories in a variety of ways. The story of the ‘man with the two horns’ (Dhū l-Qarnayn), the Qur’anic Alexander, illustrates this well. The quasi-prophet figures prominently in qiṣaṣ al-anbiyā’ (‘stories of the prophets’), the hagiographic tradition which is in part Qur’anic exegesis, but incorporated material from a variety of sources. To provide just one example, in a tradition attributed to Wahb ibn Munabbih, Dhū l-Qarnayn comes across a morally exemplary community. He poses a series of questions to them—the episode is reminiscent of Alexander’s encounter with the Indian Brahmins, an episode known from antiquity (STONEMAN 1995). The community does not have any kings or any rich people because they are all modest in their worldly ambitions. Their kindness and justice render conflicts moot. Their ancestors have provided them with a model of piety. While Alexander himself does not exemplify ethical principles beyond a desire for knowledge and perhaps tolerance for a very different lifestyle, he allows storytellers to describe this kind of ideal community as an imaginary frame to promote abstract principles, both philosophical and religious. To introduce new characters to audiences, to validate and amplify their voices are also ways in which narrative characters can play a role in communicating ethical meaning. The example illustrates that the line between Islamicate and Islamic can be blurry. The Qur’anic framing turns a non-Islamic Alexander into an Islamic character who coexisted with less overtly religious or Islamic variants perhaps better described as Islamicate. If we assume that they were read with a strong Qur’anic subtext, however, the label ‘Islamic’ appears more suitable.

The entanglements of the Qur’anic narrative with separate and parallel stories has significant implications for the constitution of Alexander as a narrative character. Given that the Qur’an never identifies the ‘man with the two horns’ as Alexander, a certain ambiguity

8 In general for stories of the prophets in the context of preaching see BERKEY 2001: 40-41.
9 For a focus on liturgical preaching, but short considerations of homiletic storytelling see JONES 2010.
10 For a translation see WHEELER 2002: 235-236.
attaches to this individual and stories originally connected with Alexander were later associated with other historical figures. Over the course of his Islamic career, the quasi-prophet morphed into more elaborate versions some of which will be addressed below. Alexanders sparked other Alexanders, often as the protagonist of short anecdotes. This constant and creative retelling alone challenges a general assumption of Islamic literalism. These anecdotes extracted individual actions or statements from a larger biographical or narrative context, although just how much readers connected the different elements of the Alexander corpus remains uncertain. The degree of intertextuality implied by the author or present in the reader’s mind thus emerges as another important variable in the construction of ethical meaning. A higher level of intertextuality might go along with assumptions regarding biographical cohesion where everything a person has said or done in their life matters. Such biographical cohesion involves literary as well as philosophical issues. Is the protagonist of two different anecdotes really the same character, and how much weight does a single action have in one’s life? Here too we find some ambiguity and the contrast between literalism and non-literalism does not capture differences in intertextual reading.

Just how much storytellers and audiences in the Islamicate world and beyond were aware of the educational and reforming function of narratives is also obvious from the Arabian Nights where Shahrazad uses stories to great psycho-emotional effect. Storytelling here is a form of communication, negotiation and argument, but also of healing. The story of Alexander is one of the many she tells murderous king Shahriyar, according to Yuriko Yamanaka drawing on al-Ghazālī’s Naṣīḥāt al-mulūk (YAMANAKA 2006). Incidentally, it is a variation of the very story referred to above, but in Shahrazad’s version Alexander functions as a more active interlocutor. The encounter begins in the same way, with Alexander enquiring about the humble lifestyle of the people who, again, are wary of material attachments and mindful of their mortality, a common theme in the Arabian Nights. Then, however, Alexander is presented with two human skulls, one of an unjust king who has been condemned to hellfire, the other of a just king who enjoys paradise. Alexander despairs, full of uncertainty about his own status, and asks the local leader to join him as an advisor. The man declines, explaining that because of Alexander’s wealth, all humankind are his enemy (ARABIAN NIGHTS 2008: II, 325-326). Shahrazad may have borrowed this anecdote from someone else, but within the logic of the Arabian Nights it made sense to tell this story to a king who had brought great misfortune over his subjects. This example illustrates how ethical meaning is created by context, the audiences of stories or the reader. The analytical appeal of the Arabian Nights is that we can ask such questions at the level of the frame story where Shahriyar is the audience, but also at the level of the audience of the Arabian Nights where ever new audiences listen to Shahriyar listening to a story. As a king, Alexander serves more obviously as a role model for Shahriyar, but he speaks potentially to all human audiences.

11 VAN LEEUVEN 2007. – See also the contribution by Enass Khansa in this issue.
Comparative Perspectives: Roman and Medieval Islamicate Alexanders

In contemporary research, the legendary Alexander of medieval times is often considered separately from the historical Alexander who emerges from the earliest preserved literary sources. For comparative purposes, however, it is worth reading a medieval Islamicate Alexander alongside the much earlier Roman texts which date mostly to the earlier Principate, from the mid-first to mid-second century CE. In what follows my example will be primarily Plutarch (c.45-120). Philologically, the connection between Roman and Islamicate biographies is tenuous at best—they ultimately all speak of the same man, of course, but in between them stand the powerfully imaginative Alexander Romance of late antique Alexandria, its Syriac Christian adaptations and much less well-preserved Middle Persian material. Muslim authors did not mention many of the elements that are prominent in Roman literature because they were simply unfamiliar with them. There was nothing particularly Islamic about that reduction, although the result allowed for a greater harmony between the Alexander stories and various religious messages embedded in them. Comparing the traditions, however, serves to bring into sharper relief the distinctive features of each and to facilitate the analysis of narrative means which constitute Alexander as an ethical character. In which areas of human life, in which dilemmas, decisions, thoughts, observations, achievements, failures and relationships in general does one emerge as an ethical character, for example? And is there a hierarchy between them? Does generosity to our friends compensate for stinginess to the unknown poor? Is it fine to tell petty lies to our neighbors if, independent of this, we defend a just social order for our polity? Or is moral excellence a holistic and comprehensive project which does not allow for such inconsistency?

Having benefitted from recent scholarship on Roman exempla literature I am following the path of these classicists in focusing not only on texts, but on putative readers, leaving authors and their patrons for another occasion. In this analysis, the putative reader describes any person who reads the text. This analytical construct allows us to identify conflicts, frictions and challenges implicit in the text that an alert reader might consider, although expectations of consistency might admittedly vary across times and audiences. That the putative reader is a construct in the singular should not distract from the fact that reader-centric analyses often disclose ambiguities inherent in texts. But while we all know that two different people can read the same text in very different ways, a certain overlap between the putative and the present reader is impossible to avoid. Observations about auctorial intentions in the sense of secret hints are not implied in this analysis, although this possibility is not meant to be dismissed either. An author-centric approach would require a more extensive engagement with the individual writers, their works and historical contexts, more than what can be accomplished in a single article. Finally, a reader-centric approach allows us to recognize how a text of non-Islamic origin can qualify as ‘Islamic’, that is, by virtue of having a Muslim reader.

Before delving into legend, a reminder is in place of what are nowadays considered historical facts. Alexander the Great was born in 356 BCE to king Philip of Macedon and his

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12 For this literature see SPENCER 2002.
wife Olympias. By the time Alexander died at the age of 32 in Babylon, presumably from poisoning, he had taken his armies to modern-day Afghanistan, Pakistan and the Punjab. In an effort to explain this feat in terms other than almost superhuman charisma, historians often credit Philip with preparing Alexander’s success, notably by paving the way for uniting the Greeks under Macedonian leadership and turning them against the Persian empire his son was going to defeat.\(^\text{13}\) That Alexander went so far north and east of the Achaemenid empire is to some measure what made him ‘great’, but it was also the source of conflicts with his companions who had not expected to march that far for so long. Being used to the egalitarian tradition of Macedonian kingship, they also resented Alexander for emulating the Persian emperor. When he tried to introduce the Persian ritual of bowing to the king (proskynēsis), internal opposition became more vocal. Alexander’s response was swift and violent. According to the accounts that have come down to us, there were several iconic confrontational incidents and Alexander appears to have grown increasingly susceptible to conspiracy theories. A prominent victim was his biographer Callisthenes who became implicated in a conspiracy known as the pages’ revolt and died in jail. (The Alexander Romance, a product of late antique Alexandria, has been inaccurately attributed to Callisthenes and is known as book of ‘pseudo-Callisthenes’.)

Roman authors were very interested in these issues. They were familiar with the extensive personnel that populated Alexander’s life. They understood conflicts between Macedonians and Athenians. Against the backdrop of their own political debates, they were concerned about leaders who knew no moderation, who led an excessive lifestyle and turned into tyrants. Alexander, though admired for his strategic genius and military prowess, was a deeply ambiguous figure. He illustrated as much what one should be beware of as he provided a model for emulation, whether for one’s political leaders or for oneself. The Roman Alexander demonstrates that literary characters can have complex ethical functions. As much as they exemplified or even personified virtues, their weaknesses, failures and vices also offer opportunities to communicate ethical lessons. Ethical complexity is what we tend to appreciate in modern fiction as well, which is measured against empirical reality with its moral dilemmas and irreconcilable tensions. Characters in premodern literature are for this reason often not very engaging for modern readers. They strike us as flat with their simple psycho-emotional, moral and personal profile. Paul Ricoeur conceptualized literature as the laboratory of the imaginary in which we can test out ethical solutions.\(^\text{14}\) To some extent, Roman Alexander stories fulfill this function because they give us good and bad political leadership in one and the same person. Diana Spencer speaks of a ‘seductive combination of fascination and horror’ (Spencer 2009: 251). This relationship between the good and the bad is a critical aspect in any use of Alexander for ethical deliberations, or for any ethical deliberations in general. Prominent premodern contributors to practical philosophy such as al-Fārābī presented their readers with clear ethical binaries, even if they were conceived as ideals—the good polity on the one hand and the bad polity on the other. (In chapter fifteen of his Mabādi’ ārā’ ahl al-madīna al-fādīla, for example, al-Fārābī distinguishes excellent

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13 For a survey of select recent debates see ANSON 2013. For a survey of the later traditions in different cultures see MOORE 2018.

14 RICOEUR 1992: 164. ‘The thought experiments we conduct in the great laboratory of the imaginary are also explorations in the realm of good and evil.’
from ignorant and wicked cities.) The underlying structure of a virtue ethics which pits virtues against vices likewise is based on the proposition of ethical dichotomies. To be sure, since the Arabic translation of the Nicomachean Ethics, the idea of the golden mean and that there can be too much of a good thing may have been familiar to philosophically informed readers in the Islamicate world.\footnote{For a brief survey see Akasoy 2012.} The notion of excessive piety, as in excessive praying or fasting among some ascetics, conveys a similar understanding that exaggeration in fulfilling an obligation is negative. The stories around Alexander, however, allow us to see how such principles are operationalized in imaginary practice and where ethical lines might become blurry. They allow readers to contemplate how much of a given virtue is excessive in a particular situation as well as the cost at which we may pursue another virtue. Indeed, a complex narrative does not present virtues in isolation. The fact that Alexander the Great remains to the present day an admired, but deeply ambiguous figure illustrates that to many, his ethical qualities are rather kaleidoscopic and often situational.\footnote{This observation is not necessarily limited to Islamicate Alexander versions but extends to medieval Christian representations as well. Discussing these is beyond the scope of this discussion.}

In the Islamicate tradition, very generally speaking, Alexander assumed in many respects a rather different guise than in ancient Rome.\footnote{In ‘Umāra’s Arabic biography of Alexander, preserved in a British Library manuscript, Olympias is presented as an expert in astrology and philosophy. See Qīṣṣat al-Iskandar, Add. 5928.} He remained ambiguous, but in different ways. As alluded to above, it was through the Christian Syriac Alexander Legend that Alexander found his way into the Qur’an as ‘the man with the two horns’. Theodor Nöldeke and more recently Kevin van Bladel have argued the case conclusively (Nöldeke 1890; Van Bladel 2007). The ‘man with the two horns’ is on a fairly generic divinely supported mission, moves far across the world and has some kind of access to the upper spheres. Predigested by the redactors of the late antique Alexander Romance and the Christian narrator, who wrote during the time of Heraclius, himself a new Alexander, this Alexander was much reduced in ethical complexity and ambiguity, especially as a political leader. The Alexander Romance turned the conqueror into a figure of miraculous qualities, beginning with the astrologically guided moment of his birth. The negative protagonists in this story transformed as well. In addition to the conventional and historical antagonist of Alexander, the Persian emperor Darius, there is now what the Alexander Romance presents as Alexander’s actual father: Nectanebo, last pharaoh of Egypt. It is he who deceptively gained access to Olympias, Alexander’s mother, by way of magical means. This genealogical reworking is one of the main reasons why the origins of the Alexander Romance have been located in Alexandria, but then again, Nectanebo is not an unambiguously positive character. His ruse seems morally dubious, although Olympias is sometimes complicant (Müller 2008). More doubt is cast on his occult inclinations when Nectanebo dies during an astrological expedition as Alexander pushes him into a pit. He seemingly deserves this end. Insofar as genealogy predetermines us, the Alexander of the Romance is thus the product of an ambiguous union, even more so than the Roman Alexander.

Alexander’s antagonists involve a whole set of questions and variables which invite more general observations about the significance of negative characters for the moral dimension of narratives. Such antagonists fulfill an important instrumental function for the positive
characters as contrasts and opponents. Such is the case with Gog and Magog, the violent tribes who were locked behind a wall by Alexander. A burden upon their neighbors and representing the future mayhem at the end of times, they allow Alexander to appear as a brave and effective, if only temporary, protector of civilization. Antagonists also provide readers with a model what not to do or offer a contrast which allows them to appreciate others. Against the imaginary backdrop of a femicidal Shahriyar, for example, one’s own ruler might seem acceptable. At the same time, it is true distinguishing the different contexts in which antagonisms can emerge and characters are revealed as morally negative. They allow us to see strategies how virtues can be operationalized in hostile interactions. They also allow us to see where open conflict is warranted and where silent disapproval is preferred. Some of Alexander’s conflicts were more specific than others. Gog and Magog are enemies of all humankind, but to Persian or Indian readers, Alexander’s enmity may have made him more rather than less ambiguous.

The version of Alexander’s exploits in the Qur’an is characteristically sparse in detail which made the ‘man with the two horns’ a very adaptable character. Critically, among commentators and other authors he was recognized as a figure of history. The scriptural account allowed for multiple identifications that prevail until the present day. Elements of the Alexander legend are sometimes inscribed into different ‘national’ myths, as already happened in the Alexander Romance. Some Persian authors took the ‘man with the two horns’ to be the son of the Persian king, whereas South Arabian writers, notably Ibn Hishām (d. 828 or 833), claimed on onomastic grounds that Dhū l-Qarnayn was really a Himyarite (AKASOY 2009). Like others, Ibn Hishām claimed the controversial character on religious grounds, presenting him in his Book of Crowns as a monotheist who marches across the world with his armies (IBN HISHĀM 1979: 91-102). As in the Alexander Romance and indeed the classical tradition, the difference between insider and outsider is thus key to the function of Alexander as an ethical character. It was presumably already the historical Alexander himself who operated with such binaries, in particular the Greek ingroup and Persian outgroup. As the embodiment of military power, Alexander’s authority is essentially violent. He lays siege and breaches walls. In most ethical systems, violence is ambiguous, its moral qualities depending on the circumstances under which it is perpetrated. An Alexander claimed and embraced by way of ethno-genealogical or religious appropriation was violent on behalf of the in-group. The ambiguity of ethics is thus partly resolved as a consequence of the unambiguity of belonging. This accounts for the ambiguity of Alexander in the Persian tradition where he belonged both to the ingroup and to the outgroup (YAMANAKA 1999).

18 Especially in Iran, Alexander did not fully become a positive Islamicized figure. The negative image as Persia’s antagonist and destroyer of Persepolis endures, although recent scholarship has made a case that it coexisted since pre-Islamic times with a positive image. To consider these narrative strands is beyond the scope of this discussion. See also MANTEGHI 2018.

19 There was no agreement concerning the status of Dhū l-Qarnayn as a prophet. See WHEELER 2002: 227-237 and THA’LABĪ 2002: 609.
Plutarch and Niẓāmī

As mentioned above, Alexander often appears as the protagonist of anecdotes. While these clearly constitute a very important ethical function of this character, in what follows, one of my main sources is going to be the first of Niẓāmī’s (1141-1209) two Alexander books, the Šarafnāmeh. This text is closer to the Roman tradition with its sustained biographical narrative and emphasis on battles. It offers greater opportunities for comparison than the second Alexander book, the Iqbālnāmeh, which describes Alexander’s spiritual graduation and death, but also contains a wealth of wisdom material.

Like Plutarch among the classical authors, Niẓāmī covers the childhood years of the future conqueror. It is worth dwelling on this for a moment. Early on in the text, readers learn that even before he was born, Alexander was extraordinary. The Alexander Romance makes the same point without discussing Alexander’s childhood in much detail. The implications for Alexander as an ethical model are again ambiguous. For while he may be gifted with exceptional ethical insight, his greatness may also excuse actions and attitudes considered unethical for a more ordinary person. Moving from nature to nurture, Plutarch and Niẓāmī both describe Alexander’s education. These passages set up the reader’s expectations as to what Alexander was trained to become and constitutes the transition from external formation to agency. They describe the essence of Alexander’s character and provide the backdrop against which we can understand all his subsequent behavior.

In Islamicate literature, Alexander was prominently known as a student. That he was the disciple of Aristotle is the principal reason why readers may have associated him with philosophy, notably as the addressee of pseudo-Aristotelian treatises such as The Secret of Secrets. The connection with Aristotle was also made in classical literature and is presumably historically factual, although not much is made of the connection in recent scholarship. Plutarch dwelled more than other early biographers on Alexander’s youth. Having realized that his son was headstrong, but susceptible to reason, Philip appointed Aristotle as his tutor who, according to Plutarch, taught him ethics and politics, but also esoteric studies. Having later learned that Aristotle had committed the latter to writing, Alexander complained, but Aristotle responded that without proper initiation readers could not understand the Metaphysics anyway. Plutarch also attributes Alexander’s interest in healing and medicine to Aristotle. He thus invites the philosophically inclined reader to evaluate Alexander as a master of such knowledge—this might be the strongest argument for reading Alexander in the context of ‘philosophical ethics’. Niẓāmī tells us that Alexander did not even roast a chicken without consulting Aristotle.

But then, there is a twist in Plutarch. Aristotle, as it turns out, was related to Callisthenes, whose opposition against Alexander inspired the conqueror’s hostility towards his former tutor—so much so, Plutarch tells us, that rumors circulated according to which Aristotle himself was behind the fatal poisoning of Alexander. A disciple-murdering Aristotle is out of sync with the philosopher’s standing in the Islamic tradition. It is for two reasons at least
that such a scenario would have been alien to Muslim authors of Alexander stories. The first reason is formal in nature. As indicated above, compared to the classical stories, the Islamicate Alexander prosopography was dramatically deflated. Anybody who leaves through Helmut Berve’s two-volume opus where any person with the slightest connection to Alexander is listed, will find an ocean of names (BERVE 1926). Waldemar Heckel’s more selective version still offers eight hundred biographies (HECKEL 2006). The list of names in Islamicate Alexander biographies is comparatively short, and in these versions, the connection to Callisthenes had disappeared. This is one of several episodes of internal conflicts significant to the classical tradition which never made it into Islamicate accounts, not having been taken into account by the redactors of the earlier Alexander Romance. Furthermore, Aristotle poisoning Alexander made no sense against the cultural logic that informed the stories. Alexander could not have turned into a tyrant deserving assassination because his violence was ultimately too consistently and unambiguously religiously validated. Shahrazad offers a good counterexample with the story of king Duban and the sage Yunan. Yunan cured the king from an illness but fell victim to a conspiracy of the king’s jealous vizier. Just before being executed, Yunan presented a book to king Duban who then died from the poison on the pages. The posthumous triumph of the scholar is clearly warranted by the gullible cruelty of the king, but Alexander constitutes a different and more ambiguous type of ruler.

In addition to that, Aristotle personified philosophy more than for Roman authors who knew many other philosophers too. A dramatic falling-out with Aristotle would have made the association between Alexander and philosophy problematic. The world conqueror, to be sure, is a man of extraordinary worldly ambition, but it does not seem to make him slip into tyranny. In al-Kindī’s Means of Dispelling Sorrows, even Alexander’s excessive interest in the material world is given a positive spin when on his deathbed he decides to go out with a bang rather than a whimper (al-KINDĪ 2007: 27-28). The conqueror wisely advises his mother to found a city in his honor after his death and to invite only people who have not suffered misfortunes to celebratory events. When nobody shows up, Alexander’s mother is consoled by the fact that she is not alone in her sorrows. Elsewhere, such expressions of excessive ambition were re-written. Al-Shahrazūrī (d. after 1288) records an anecdote in his biographical collection Nuzhat al-arwāḥ according to which Alexander forbade proskynesis because only the divine Creator should be worshipped (DOUFIKAR-AERTS 2010: 119-120). What made Alexander ambiguous for Romans was thus resolved in Islamicate adaptations and some issues—such as the cultural foreignness of Persia—were never an issue in the first place.

Epic and Dramatic Alexanders

In order to shed more light on Alexander as an ethical character, I would like to return at this point to Arendt’s notion of action in The Human Condition. Arendt distinguishes between

22 Most Arabic versions of the Alexander story even maintained that he died of natural causes. See DOUFIKAR-AERTS 2003: 24.
‘what’ and ‘who’ somebody is. Speech and deeds underlie the ‘who’ and according to the philosopher, among works of art, it is drama, or rather tragedy that allows the ‘who’ to be put on display through the mimesis of action. To my mind, an ethical evaluation typically requires knowledge of the ‘who’, hence my focus on narratives as accounts of actions, although there are clearly limitations in the case of literary characters. Opinions are divided about their ontological status and whether literary characters are words or individuals. Either way, I would like to adapt Arendt’s observation for a distinction between dramatic and epic as characteristics of narratives. The line between them is somewhat permeable. Brecht, after all, speaks of epic theater, where drama allows the viewer to critique the machinations of capitalism, and the novel is dramatic literature with the added benefit of introspection. Drama I understand here as narratives focused on human action, epic on human history.

Alexander stories tend to have an epic flavor. Alexander is always larger than life. He allows readers to locate themselves in deep time on the historical map of human culture. In Nizāmī’s Shārafnāmeh as well as Ferdowsi’s (d. 1020) Shāhnāmeh, Alexander’s conflict with the Persian Darius is one that involves age-old human civilizations, a very common notion to account for this confrontation, going back to Alexander’s own time. At the furthest extend of his conquests, ‘India’ too signifies a civilization rather than Porus’s much smaller kingdom, its strength and zoo-cultural alterity iconographically represented by elephants. The descriptions of battles are also quite epic, including the involvement of the natural world and prominent heroes, commonly understood as features of epic literature. Alexander’s exploits evolve in a wide-ranging, malleable and potentially all-encompassing geography. Empirically implausible, he can be everywhere. By Arendt’s standards, we may thus never learn much about ‘who’ Alexander was as opposed to ‘what’ he was, namely, a world conqueror rather than a world renouncer, to use a contrast often made in Buddhist contexts. Furthermore, Arendt stipulates that the ‘who’ requires ‘human togetherness’, from which she excludes conditions of war. These, she suggests, are overly determined by the dichotomy between allies and enemies. Alexander, of course, is almost in a permanent state of war. His wars prefigure our relationship to him: exceptions, notably in Zoroastrian Iran, notwithstanding, we typically root for him, a partisanship which often complicates ethical evaluations. This is even more so with the prosopographical deflation of the Islamicate traditions—the less we know about the contentious interactions between Alexander and his own followers, the harder it becomes to judge him as an ethical character. The amorphous mass of supporters and soldiers makes it more difficult to recognize his qualities and flaws as a political leader.

Despite these reservations, Alexander might function well and in a complex manner as an ethical character precisely at the point where readers identify with him. In other words, his nature as an ethical character gains substance and nuance in a reader-centric analysis despite the reduction in moral complexity resulting from partisanship and despite Alexander’s epic character as a ‘what’. Fotis Jannidis distinguishes three aspects of identification with a literary character: sympathy, empathy and attraction (JANNIDIS 2009: 24). But, while one can think of examples of all three aspects in responses to Alexander stories, how much can anybody actually ever identify with Alexander the Great? The demand of diverse readers for equally diverse protagonists who allow for identification may be a distinct phenomenon of twenty-first-century western societies, but the discrepancy in circumstances between character and readers has relevance for much earlier periods as well. The moment
where we learn about his unusual conception and childhood may be the moment where we decide that too much separates us from Alexander. We may rather identify him with the political and military leaders of our own time, especially if they publicly identified with Alexander.\textsuperscript{23} As Teresa Morgan has pointed out, a critical crux of Roman popular moral literature is its focus on great men. The rather ordinary readers thus need to carefully consider individual circumstances in order to choose the right exemplum in the right way.\textsuperscript{24} In Arabic philosophy, the Christian Yahyá ibn ʿAdí (893-974) may very well have been mindful of the conundrum ethical recommendations for rulers presented to the ‘average’ reader. He prevented confusion by making explicit distinctions between socio-political strata, explaining that certain moral obligations applied even more to rulers than to their subjects.\textsuperscript{25}

The underlying logic of mirrors for princes with their royal addressees is the same and it may not surprise much that The Secret of Secrets constitutes pseudo-Aristotle’s advice to Alexander in such a format. To what extent, one may then ask, should we or did readers of the premodern Islamicate world separate Alexander as the distinguished recipient of this advice from Alexander, the moral agent of his own biography? And what did either imply for a more regular reader of Alexander stories?

Then again, considerable gaps in moral potential and perfection between model and seeker need not be an obstacle. Among other individuals distinguished by religious and political status, the Islamic tradition prescribed the emulation of none but the prophet Muhammad. What Linda Jones refers to as ‘the compartmentalization of Muhammad’s charisma’ resolved problems and risks involved in this emulation (Jones 2010: 21). According to Sunni consensus, there could not be another prophet, after all, much less a divine human. Such compartmentalization was socio-political and assigned different tasks to different communities such as rulers and scholars. In a more general sense, it helped to distinguish areas where emulation was possible and indeed required and others where that was not the case. Likewise, for an even wider gap between model and seeker, key virtues such as justice are divine qualities in the Islamic tradition which recognized, indeed stressed, the difference between human and divine modes of justice.

Along somewhat similar lines, adducing Cicero’s distinction of four personae, Rebecca Langlands illustrates how we can separate various aspects of a potential role model in Roman exempla literature: their general humanity, their specific qualities, both given by nature, their social role by circumstance and their chosen social role. It is probably fair to say that most of us are pretty modest in comparison with these great men in several respects. Langlands discusses another problem too, which is that the great men of Roman exempla literature tend to break the rules. She adduces the concept of situation ethics to resolve this problem, where again one has to take specific circumstances into account. Alexander clearly breaks the rules in Nizâmî’s biography when he is violent and decides to conquer the world despite advice not to do so. As much as he might be perpetrating his violence on behalf of the ingroup, that violence too has limitations. Islamic law, after all, has rules of war which regulated violence (Vanhullebusch 2015). Not everything was allowed. An elder sage tells Alexander that

\textsuperscript{23} For examples of such emulations see Fues 2008 and Bâcì 1999.

\textsuperscript{24} For a discussion see Langlands 2011.

\textsuperscript{25} See especially sections 5.18 to 5.25 on ‘the perfect king’ in Ibn ʿAdî 2002.
violence only begets violence. Alexander assents, but does not change his ways. His moral high ground is thus mostly presupposed or asserted rather than demonstrated. It is only at the end of the Sharafnāmeh and in the Iqbālnāmeh that Alexander experiences moral graduation.

One might say that just as experts in Islamic law were able to apply principles to new circumstances, to translate universal into particular and particular into universal, readers of Alexander stories may have been able to tell when the breaking of the rules was recommended to them as well, although it might be anybody’s guess what if anything a sixteenth-century reader of Niẓāmī would have made of the chronological gaps between Alexander, Niẓāmī and himself. In contemporary depictions, Alexander serves as a representative of history, his cultural alterity reflecting change over time. As such, he can facilitate ethical deliberations based on such historical change and cultural difference. It can happen that precisely because the people of his time were different from us in so many respects that we can feel inspired or shamed when they embody values important to us in more impressive ways than we do.

Alexander as a Device for Self-Contemplation

To be sure, Alexander has qualities we can try to embrace for ourselves and I find it plausible to think that historical readers would have responded in similar ways. Niẓāmī brings up the mirror which was invented under Alexander. Because Alexander was the first to look into a mirror, whenever we look into a mirror, we see some Alexander in ourselves. Alexander might thus be best understood as an aspirational figure. Our Alexandrian reflection might be how we want to see ourselves. Bravery is perhaps his most important quality, although throughout his literary manifestations, he did not exactly represent the golden mean. During the Mallian campaign in the Punjab, the classical tradition tells us, Alexander became so impatient during a siege that he himself climbed the walls of a fortress before anybody else. The confrontation ended with a Macedonian victory, but Alexander was severely injured. If Aristotle taught him ethics, the lesson of avoiding excess was thus never learned.

Apart from representing Alexander as an ascetic ideal of bodily ethics, Niẓāmī also describes him as just and generous, although his justice is personalistic and depends on labelling opponents as tyrants. This is a good illustration of Arendt’s reservations concerning war. Alexander does not act under conditions of ‘human togetherness’, but in a binary world of friends and foes. Curiously, another element of Aristotelian ethics never made it into Islamicate Alexander biographies—friendship. Hephaistion, Alexander’s Patroclus, was basically unfamiliar to Muslim readers, having barely made it into the Alexander Romance. If Alexander has any friends in the Islamicate tradition, it appears to be the angel Raphael or Aristotle. The two men tend to entertain a longer-lasting and more significant relationship than in the classical tradition and presumably historically attested, involving more extensive exchanges of letters. And yet, given that the two individuals in question find themselves on different levels of hierarchies of knowledge or political and military authority, other terms than ‘friends’ seem more appropriate to capture their connection, primarily teacher and disciple, or king and advisor. They are a far cry from the emotional attachment to Hephaistion or the close connection imagined by modern authors such as Annabel Lyon in her historical novel The Golden Mean (2009). This observation leads to a more extensive set of questions
about the areas of ethical life which are theorized in Arabic philosophical literature and those which are narrativized. Not least due to their Aristotelian model, authors such as Miskawayh (932-1030) wrote in systematic terms extensively about friendship. The concept of friendship is certainly not absent from medieval Arabic literature, but examples of stories about individuals we might primarily classify as friends, where friendship constitutes a prevalent topic, seem altogether much rarer. Put differently, to conceptualize friendship and affirm its value is one thing, to express and exemplify these thoughts imaginatively in form of a story is another.

There are, however, other qualities of Alexander apart from these conventional classical virtues which have ethical implications. What has been problematized in Roman literature as excess can also be read as exploration of human limitations. If we think about self-improvement, ethical or otherwise, we might think about our potential as well and recognizing our potential means identifying limitations. Alexander certainly did. He went as far as he could within the limitations imposed on him. That is true of the classical tradition with its political, military and cultural framework. The limitations this Alexander explores concern geography—how far can I go—as well as political and military leadership—how do I secure the loyalty of my men and lead them to defeat our enemies—and cultural identity—if I adopt Persian traditions of kingship, am I still Greek? In the Islamicate and medieval European traditions, which seem more epic than drama, the framework becomes cosmological and theological. Even more fundamental questions appear to be at stake. Alexander is divinely sent, almost a force of nature, and explains why the world is as it is. Alexander travels in a diving bell to the bottom of the sea and with a flying device into the heavens, mapping and delineating the world accessible to humans. His story becomes ontological and anthropological. He ventures into the land of darkness to find the source of eternal life, but falls short. Curiously, much of Arendt’s *Human Condition* (1958) is concerned with strikingly similar issues. Taking as her starting point the launch of the first satellite in 1957 and still under the impression of the nuclear bombs, she contemplates the potential of human endeavors to transcend the limitations of our condition, including mortality. (The satellite in question was Sputnik, its surprising launch causing the ‘Sputnik crisis’ in the West.) Just like the authors of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Arendt’s verdict is one of deep skepticism and an emphasis on the political. Alexander stories can be usefully read in this context; Adorno and Horkheimer included a lengthy section on the *Odyssey* in their book, after all. It may have taken modernity to produce Sputnik, but Alexander too used reason in order to transcend human limitations. In all these considerations, however, reason is complicit in great violence insofar as these efforts were part and parcel of a life lived in military campaigns.

Some time during World War II, the American theologian Reinhold Niebuhr (1892-1971) composed the serenity prayer. ‘God’, it says, ‘grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, courage to change the things I can, and wisdom to know the difference.’ Where we see our limitations determines the way we see ourselves, the way we see others and our interactions with them. The wisdom of telling the difference between limitations we should challenge and those we should accept is thus also ethically significant. Premodern Muslim readers of Alexander stories may not have articulated it in such ways, but the prominence of narrative elements concerned with human limitations suggests that this was one of the major ethical components of such works. On the one hand, the medieval
Alexander, Islamicate or European, seems even more distant from readers than the classical Alexander was to Romans. He was further away in time and culture, but also enjoyed miraculous or near-miraculous abilities. He was further removed from his own historical environment too, especially for those unfamiliar with classical Graeco-Latin literature, turning from an epic to an almost mythical character. The reduction of *dramatis personae* in Alexander biographies is another aspect of this transformation. Alexander the archetype was a ‘what’ rather than a ‘who’. At the same time, being removed in such a way from particular circumstances opened up possibilities for Alexander as a universal aspect of humanity. While Alexander as a historical individual, the ‘who’, was thus perhaps too poorly understood to serve as a prism for ethical deliberations, what Alexander signified, the ‘what’, served this function very well.

### Conclusion

To conclude with a few thoughts about our own contemporary approaches to such stories, I would like to return to Blixen’s statement that ‘all sorrows can be borne if you put them into a story’. Alexander’s story must have involved fear—fear of the unknown, fear of defeat, of pain, loss and death, of limitations he could not transcend. And yet, especially as postcolonial readers, we might consider the price at which Alexander conquered his fears. A contemporary philosophically engaged reading of both the historical Alexander and later adaptations of his legend might pay closer attention to those who were vanquished, exploited and humiliating. Identifying with Alexander the conqueror might be all too easy. His violence—like a lot of the violence that occurred in Islamic history—was culturally productive and it is these cultural products that provide our daily bread as academics. Just as we have become critical of empire in modern times, we might consider stories about Alexander with critical distance. As readers of his many biographies and the many representations that cherish him for any number of achievements, we might be careful when immersing ourselves in somebody else’s life, but rather remain engaged in a dynamic project of ethical contemplation. Nizāmī’s pacifist elder who warns Alexander of the violent outcomes of violence may have already served in the author’s own time as an alienating element for readers too easily swept up in narratives of victory. This reading is admittedly indebted to Brecht’s use of such alienating elements that take the audience out of the world of the play and allow them to consider the critical implications of what they have seen. Reader-centric approaches explain another way in which premodern texts too may have functioned as ethical texts by requiring a reader’s distance and self-awareness, even though authors of course may not have formulated it in such ways. In recent historical novels inspired by Alexander’s campaigns, efforts appear to have been made to avoid a glorified image of violence. Steven Pressfield, for example, presents the violence perpetrated by Alexander’s soldiers as traumatic even for the victors. There are other values too that are associated with Alexander and might be critically reconsidered. As scholars explore the connections between cultures in the premodern world and acknowledge Alexander’s role as a catalyst for cross-cultural encounters, not unlike Oliver Stone’s portrayal of Alexander as a hero of multiculturalism, the violent circumstances of these changes deserve to be debated as well.
There are thus several layers of ethical meaning in stories such as that of Alexander, both classical and Islamicate. There is the way he appears anecdotally, as an illustration or even personification of the principles of virtue ethics, mostly generosity, bravery and justice, but also vices of excessive material attachment. There is the narrativization where we can see the implication of ethical features play out in a sequence of events allowing us to imagine ethics in the context of biography. But if we shift our attention from text to reader, other dimensions too become obvious, especially for the Alexander of Islamicate literature who had become so malleable. Readers can contemplate Alexander’s limitations and failures in their own exercise of situation ethics, because that is typically what we do when we look in the mirror. To recognize both the Alexandrian other and the Alexandrian self in ourselves may aid the self-reflection required for ethical improvement. My assumptions about premodern readers here are admittedly speculative, but there are enough grounds in premodern literature itself to assume that premodern audiences too partly identified with Alexander and partly considered his limitations and frustrations a lesson to endorse for themselves. And finally, we can consider all this from a metalevel of an ongoing and open-ended philosophically engaged reading. Alexander may have lost some of his ambiguity on his way from the classical to the late antique tradition and regained some with Niẓāmī, but in determining just how ambiguous he ultimately is, the reader too has a role to play.

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