

Ömer Mahir Alper, *Ottoman Philosophy: Selected Texts [Osmanlı Felsefesi: Seçme Metinler]*, Istanbul: Klasik Publications, 2015. 503 pages. ISBN: 978-605-5245-65-8.

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Studies regarding Islamic thought have previously focused on the early period of Islamic history due to the classic Orientalist presumption of regression and declension after al-Ghazālī. Recently, there has been an evident increase in studies concerning both kalām in the late period and the philosophical tradition of Iran. However, we must say that studies regarding Ottoman thought are still at the beginning stage for many reasons, among them mental apathy, lack of methodologies, the periodization problem, the political obstacles, and the non-publication of an important section of the texts.

Ömer Mahir Alper, who is known for his studies on such philosophers as al-Kindī, al-Fārābī, Ibn Sīnā, and Ibn Kammūna, as well as his *Existence and Man: The Reconstruction of a Vision within the Context of Kamāl Pashazāda*,¹ has now issued another important study: *Ottoman Philosophy: Selected Texts*. In addition to the texts, the majority of which he translated into Turkish, are translations by Mustakim Arıcı, Mehmet Özturan, and Yasin Apaydın.

This book includes the chronologically ordered biographies of eleven philosophers, starting with Dāwūd al-Qayşarī, the founding educator of Ottoman madrasahs, and ending with Çerkeşizāde Mehmed Tevfık Efendi, one of the last representatives of this philosophy. It also presents the Turkish translations of some Arabic-language texts. All of the translated texts deal with metaphysics, epistemology, existence, history, politics, and moral philosophy. In regard to metaphysics, the Introduction's first part features *Maṭla' Khusūş al-Kalim fi Ma'ānī Fusūş al-Ḥikam* (Introduction to Special Remarks on the Meanings of Ibn 'Arabī's The Ringstones of Wisdom), which was written by al-Qayşarī, representative of the unity of existence (*waḥda al-wujūd*) thought, and one chapter of Molla Fanārī's *Mişbāḥ al-Uns*.

1 Ömer Mahir Alper, *Varlık ve İnsan: Kemalpaşazāde Bağlamında Bir Tasavvurun Yeniden İnşası* (Istanbul: Klasik Yayınları, 2010).

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The two other translated texts, which discuss existence, belong to As'ad al-Yanyawī, an eighteenth-century scholar, and were chosen from his *Al-Risāla al-Lāhūtiyya*. Along with discussing Ibn Sīnā's problems of existence, it also includes a composition of late-period philosophies, including the unity of existence. Ontological discussions, which are discussed under the heading of "general concepts" in Islamic theoretical traditions, were not selected, except for al-Qayṣarī's epistle *Asās al-Wahdāniyya wa Mabnā al-Fardāniyya* (*The Nature of Oneness and Plurality*).²

On the topic of cosmological matters, the author has chosen texts regarding the anteriority of the universe from Khojazāda's *Tahāfut al-Falāsifa* and Kamāl Pashazāda's *Risāla fī Taḥqīq al-Ḥaqq fī al-Mas'ala al-Qāila Hal Yajūzu an Yastanida al-Qadīm al-Mumkin ilā al-Muaththir am lā* (*An Inquiry Regarding the Possibility of a Eternally Contingent Being Resting on an Efficient Cause*). *Nihāya al-Bayān fī Dirāya al-Zamān* (*On the Nature and Essence of Time*), also authored by al-Qayṣarī, is among the texts.

A glance at the chosen translated texts reveals that the two major topics are psychology and epistemology. In addition to discussing the influence of Ibn Sīnā's view on the soul and essence on later periods, several texts that are important in terms of featuring such topics as explaining of the Illuminationist philosophy and Sufism are:

Dāwūd al-Qayṣarī: *'Ayn al-A'yān* (*An Admonition Regarding the Essence, Categories, and Ways of Perception*)

Kamāl Pashazāda: *Risāla fī Bayān Ma'nā al-Ja'l wa Taḥqīq anna Nafs al-Māhiyya Maj'ūlatan* (*On the Explanation of the Meaning of Creation and Regarding the Inquiry of Whether or Not Essence is Created*), *Fī Shakhṣ al-Insāni* (*On the Structure of the Human's Existence*), *Risāla fī Bayān al-'Aql* (*On the Explanation of Intellect*).

Tashkoprizāda: *Risāla al-Shuhūd al-'Ayni fī Mabāḥith al-Wujūd al-Dhihni* (*The Determination of the Essence and Truth in Discussions Concerning Mental Existence*)

Çerkeşizāde Mehmed Tevfik Efendi: *Risāla fī Kawn al-Māhiyya Maj'ūlatan* (*On Whether or Not Essences are Created*) and *Risāla fī al-'Aql* (*On Intellect*).

The two logic and methodology texts are Mehmed Emin Şirvāni's *Sharḥ 'alā Jiha al-Wahda li al-Fanāri* (*Aspect of unity*) and a chapter concerning the description and classification of sciences, named "Ta'rīf al-'ulūm wa taqṣimuhu" ("On the Definition and the Division of Sciences") from Kātip Chalabī's *Kashf al-Zunūn*.

One of the intriguing selected texts is the translation of Kāfiyeci's book *Al-Mukhtaṣar fī 'Ilm al-Ta'riḥ* (*The Method of the Science of History and Its Matters*),

2 The expression within the parantheses is the translation of the aforementioned text's name, which is the heading within *Ottoman Philosophy: Selected Texts*.

which has the distinction of being the first text written on historiographical theory in the Islamic world. The translated texts regarding political philosophy are Hasan Kāfi Akhisārī's *Uṣūl al-Ḥikam fī Niẓām al-ʿĀlam* (*The Bases of the Causes That Ensure Order in the Universe*) and a section from Mehmed Emin Şirvānī's: *Al-Fawā'id al-Ḥāqāniyya* (*The Beneficial Notes for Khaqan*) on practical philosophy. A chapter concerning Illuminationist philosophy, also from Şirvānī's book, is included as well.

The book also includes encyclopedic information regarding the original authors. However, the book's claim as to the content and qualities of "Ottoman philosophy" is to a certain degree undetermined because these translated texts were not evaluated by an individual or a group in a collective manner. However, it seems possible to make some inferences based on the book's title and preface and the qualities of the selected texts.

In the words of Alper, "Ottoman philosophy," as "the name of every type of activity regarding philosophy that came about within the Ottoman period" and that consists of certain characteristic qualities, is not a baseless philosophy without a tradition. Alper is aware that Ottoman philosophy cannot be approached separately from the Islamic tradition of thought, especially Sufism, theology, and philosophy. He rightfully thinks that Ottoman philosophy, due to the Islamic theoretical tradition, presents continuity and perpetuity and that this continuity indicates the difficulty of researching this field as well as the power that stems from its tradition:

Ottoman philosophy forms an inseparable part of general Islamic philosophy; it is in tight connection with this philosophy within the context of subject, issues and principles. Therefore, it does not seem possible for Ottoman philosophy to be examined independently of Islamic philosophy which came before itself. In that case, delving into Ottoman philosophy makes it necessary to gain knowledge, as a whole, of the traditions of Islamic thought and philosophy. (pp. 6-7)

Alper also holds that the obstacles connected with accepting and researching the concept Ottoman philosophy are multi-dimensional and, in part, technical. However, one must also be aware of the attitude of classical Orientalism toward Islamic philosophy in general, and toward Ottoman intellectual history and the attitude of local followers of this discourse. While this attitude does bring the discourse of regression and declension to the forefront, it does not view post-twelfth-century philosophies as worthy of examination due to their writing technique (commentary and gloss). In other words, they linked the value of such philosophies to their writing techniques instead of their contents.

Moreover, this attitude becomes even clearer within the context of the Ottoman period, for not only is the history of philosophy neglected, but so are the history of other intellectual fields (e.g., Qur'anic exegesis and theology). At this point, Alper

asks whether it possible to consider Ottoman philosophy as even being a philosophy; he replies that such a philosophy does exist.

The naming and periodization, not to mention the determination of the content and characteristic qualities of views produced in a vast and long-lasting empire, are certainly important matters; however, which schools were found therein is just as important because its thinkers benefitted from other sources, such as Ibn Sīnā, al-Rāzī, Ibn Taymiyya, Ibn al-‘Arabī, and al-Qunawī. Therefore, Ottoman philosophy must consist of various traditions and schools to the extent that one cannot view it as being reducible to an ordinary and singular tradition. Thus, as far as what is understood from the selected texts, understandings have been put forth by subjecting traditions to new readings, just like texts that represent the sub-branches of theological, mystical, and philosophical traditions within the Ottoman world of science (e.g., the Peripatetic, Illuminationists, and Unity of Being [*wahda al-wujūd*]) traditions. For example, Tashkoprižāda epistle’s on the matter of mental existence seeks to analyze mental existence by taking into consideration the Peripatetic and Sufi traditions.

Another example is seen in As‘ad al-Yanyawī’s analysis of necessary existence. Here, he opens the issue in the way presented by Ibn Sīnā but then tries to reach a conclusion by arguing the views of scholars belonging to very different traditions, such as Ibn al-‘Arabī, Naṣīr al-Dīn al- Ṭūsī, al-Ghazālī, Dashtakī, Dawwānī, and Shahrazūrī. In summary, even though further study is required to determine the degree to and from which traditions Ottoman philosophy benefits and is similar to, the selected texts show it benefitted from various traditions and, as a result, developed several orientations.

This book of texts on different topics gives an idea about the boundaries of research as regards Ottoman philosophy. Recent studies conducted in Turkey regarding Ottoman thought have so limited this field that it came to be categorized as practical philosophy and the philosophy of Sufism. Along with focusing on epistemological texts, Alper’s inclusion of texts dealing with existence, ethics, politics, history, logic, and method makes an implicit claim that should be considered: Ottoman philosophy cannot be restricted to just practical philosophy.

One of the book’s most important claims is undoubtedly the use of *Ottoman Philosophy* in its title, because it indicates that the author accepts its existence despite the fact that readers, and even researchers of this field, are not accustomed to this reality. Given this, a list of questions may be asked in relation to the analysis of theoretical structure and historical context of this phrase. Although Alper remarks at the beginning that he did not say that he would answer these questions, he did refer to the development of the term Islamic philosophy, which appeared at the

beginning of classic Orientalism. According to him, despite its obscure aspects (e.g., when it began, who were the philosophers, which problems were debated, and its time periods), today this term, despite the ongoing nature of its various drawbacks, now identifies a particular semantic world.

In summary, Alper's analogy of "Islamic philosophy" shows that "Ottoman philosophy" can, with the passage of time, also acquire a full conception. However, it seems that further studies will be needed to realize this goal. As mentioned above, the topics of this philosophy's theoretical structure, historical context, and which solutions it provided to solve which problems, in other words, the nature of the content and orientations, need to be researched. Within the context of the analysis of theoretical structure, the following topics must be addressed: naming the thought; the nature, content, orientation, differentia of those points that it does and does not share with other traditions of thought; the determination of its historical course (e.g., its formation, development, change, and transformation); the determination of the schools; and the solution to many similar matters.

We hope that all of these will be found in further studies conducted researchers who will follow the lead of this book. Yet another necessary undertaking is to research the identities of those who produced philosophies within the analysis of the historical context, their social situations, relationship with society and ruling powers, and especially with traditions of science existing in different areas. If Ottoman philosophy is going to continue to exist with its essence and content, as opposed to just being a name, by breaking the mental chains that have been placed upon it within Turkey, then such studies must be conducted.

As the title of this book indicates, it includes the selected texts of Ottoman thinkers and thus can be used as a textbook for certain fields within the social sciences, such as philosophy and theology. Also, for those readers who wish to follow the progression of Islamic theoretical traditions after the fourteenth century within the Ottoman Empire, this book is an important, in fact the only, source that includes texts that show Ottoman philosophy adequately.