

Ömer Türker and İbrahim Halil Üçer (eds.). *İnsan Nedir? İslam Düşüncesinde İnsan Tasavvurları* [What is a Human Being? Conceptions of a Human Being in Islamic Thought]. Istanbul: ILEM Publications, 2019. 566 pages. ISBN: 9786056900723.

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This book under review is one of the most remarkable Turkish-language publications to come out during 2019 in the field of Islamic philosophy. Comprising the contributions of twelve authors and edited by Ömer Türker and İbrahim Halil Üçer, it is the result of a series of activities organized by the Islamic Moral Thought Project. Carried out at the Scientific Studies Association (ILEM), this fourteen-article study “investigates the answers of different schools within different disciplines in the history of Islamic thought to the question of what a human being is and what is actually expected of him/her” (ix). Although the title may seem to be quite specific, it will inevitably involve the concept of nature and that of God. Hence, the investigation into this entity’s definition, basic components, origin, future, states, and responsibilities easily extends to the fields of physics, metaphysics, epistemology, and eschatology, as can be observed in the articles about al-Suhrawardi’s (d. 587/1191) and Mullâ Şadrâ’s (d. 1050/1641) understandings that appear at the end of the second part.

We can learn the contributors’ main motivation from the foreword, which states: “This book was born of a strong belief that the question ‘What can we expect from a free human being?’ can still be meaningfully asked. Despite all their differences, diverse conceptions about human being in the Islamic thought deliver an optimistic picture about our expectations of human beings. However, the question of how this expectation can be grounded has found different answers

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within philosophical, theological, mystical and juridical perspectives in the history of Islamic thought” (viii).

The main assumptions here, listed in the introductory part by the editors, are general characteristics that can be extended to almost all problems related to Islam, not just those limited to human beings. The work points out that a set of such characteristics, among them the demand for eternal life, need for a cause, ontological difference with other forms of being, transcendence of the material world, the effort to reach intellectual and moral perfection, prophethood, and individuality constitutes the basis of the question “What is Islamic?” and offers valuable opportunities against current challenges.

Focusing on the concept of the human being within the framework of the aforementioned assumptions, the contributors discuss the question of “What is a human being?” within the borders of almost standardized distinctions among theology, philosophy, jurisprudence, and Sufism. This preconceived classification, which seems to be useful for understanding an extensive historical accumulation, is the backbone of both the general construct in the contents and the contents’ details.

The first part, “In Pursuit of Contentment (*riḍā*), Between Physics and Metaphysics: Theological Concepts of Human Being,” deliberately relates *kalām* to the concept of contentment, beginning with the extraordinary adventure of the abstract theory of the soul (*nafs*), and then examines the breaking points and transformations experienced within the Mu‘tazili, Ash‘arī, and Māturīdī schools through selected texts of the scholars. The second part, “In Pursuit of Happiness, Between Nature and Competence: Philosophical Concepts of Human Being,” discusses philosophy with the concept of happiness. After detailing these views in various philosophical systems (e.g., the Peripatetics [being in the first place], Illuminationism [al-Ishraqī], and Akbarism), it presents examples ranging from the human being’s material bodily components to the characteristics belonging to his/her soul and substance.

The last part, “Obligation and Purpose: The Concepts of Human Being in Jurisprudence and Sufism,” brings these two disciplines together with the concepts of purpose and responsibility. In this part, which includes two articles under two headings, some general concepts and frameworks are examined in their historical contexts instead of name-centered analyses, as in the previous chapters. The work, on the whole, starting from Abū al-Hudhayl al-‘Allāf (d. 235/849-50) and al-Nazzām (d. 231/845), and continuing, respectively, with al-Ash‘arī (d. 324/935-

36), al-Juwaynī (d. 478/1085), al-Māturidī (d. 333/944), Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d. 606/1210), al-Sayyid al-Sharīf al-Jurjānī (d. 816/1413), al-Taftāzānī (d. 792/1390), al-Fārābī (d. 339/950), Ibn Sīnā (d. 428/1037), al-Suhrawardī, and Mullā Ṣadrā, represents both chronological and systematic evaluations of how they view the human being. The articles have adopted different methods, in which exploratory, descriptive, or explanatory features predominate.

From this point of view, the first article discusses the new conceptions of the human being that emerged due to Ibn Sīnā's critical interventions and creates a general framework that contains this entity's definitions in *kalām*, philosophy, and Sufism according to the criterion of accepting the abstract theory of the soul. The second and third articles compare the conceptions advanced by Abū al-Hudhayl, al-Nazzām, al-Jāhīz (d. 255/869), al-Qāḍī 'Abd al-Jabbār (d. 415/1025), al-Ash'arī, and al-Juwaynī in terms of their similarities and contrasts. Similarly, the articles investigating al-Taftāzānī's and especially al-Rāzī's understandings of the human being contain the discussions about the concept of an abstract soul. The exploratory and illustrative examples seek to present such data in a systematic way, along with the new information they contain.

As in similar studies, Ibn Sīnā's central position is immediately noticed in the contribution entitled "What is a human being?" Both the emphases on Ibn Sīnā in the first article and the two independent articles on his understanding of the human being, not to mention the references in other writings, confirm his specific determinant position here as in most matters. The analysis of his conception is also noteworthy in that it provides a contemporary example of an attempt to rethink and criticize the fundamental issues of classical Islamic thought in light of the modern sciences and methods.

The writings comprising the last section, dedicated to how jurisprudence and Sufism perceive the human being consist of more descriptive evaluations that bring together the views of selected scholars in a certain historical process. Although each of the findings and arguments presented therein, including the frameworks, concepts, schemes, maps, and information that may be useful for later studies on this topic, deserves particular evaluations and criticisms, I will only touch upon certain points.

One can assume that a representative conception of human being, one that can be imagined within the broadest limits of the history of Islamic thought, would at least take into account the following criteria: (i) to explain the whole human being's visible features and behaviors coherently and systematically; (ii) to be in line with

the frameworks of current scientific (e.g., medical, physiological, anatomical, and psychological) explanations; (iii) not to contradict Islam's fundamental sources (the Qur'an, *Sunna*, and consensus [*ijmā'*]) and the rational implications of reason, and therefore to conform with the doctrines of *al-mabda'* (origin), *al-ma'ād* (return), and common sense; and (iv) not to repeat the general explanations of ancient philosophical traditions (e.g., Greece and Egypt) and world religions (e.g., Judaism, Christianity, and Zoroastrianism), but to reveal an original explanation.

Although the questions of to whom, to what extent, and to which period these criteria can be applied are open to discussion, the book does point out that we have a rich literature of "Islamic conceptions of [the] human being" that meets the aforementioned conditions without categorically excluding the relevant body of knowledge belonging to different traditions. This comprehensive literature, which began in the period of *tadwīn* and gained a great momentum with the translation movement, ranges from the materialistic affiliation that reduced the human being to matter to the idealistic orientations that identify it with the concept of an abstract soul. The book's articles deal with almost every position found in this broad scale by linking them with high-ranking thinkers/philosophers chosen from the groups of theology, philosophy, and Sufism.

Does the title's question and promised content correspond to the book? If it does, to what extent? One can give positive answers to critical questions such as how the human being is understood and explained in terms of its physical and intellectual features during the classical period and also to the question of what are some of its distinctive features developed by Muslim scholars/philosophers. How, to what extent, and why does this conception in Islamic thought in general and in Islamic philosophy in particular differ from that of the Greek-Hellenistic culture, the outline of which was drawn by the founding names, such as Plato (d. 347 BCE), Aristotle (d. 322 BCE), Galen (d. 200 BCE), and Plotinus (d. 270).

In the light of these and similar questions, one can identify this book's main contributions and some of its gaps. Its first contribution is the attempt to create an image of an archetypal conception of the human being that brings together many schools and thinkers who seem different and even opposite in terms of the classifications of theology, philosophy, and Sufism at first glance, to their shared common ground: Islam. This effort, which is important for other concepts and problems related to the concept of the human being, contains important elements that would help one understand the general features and character of Islamic philosophy.

Second, as the articles follow an almost chronological sequence from al-Nazzām to Mullā Ṣadrā, they contain detailed information about their philosophical system in general and their conceptions of the human being in particular. They also present a quick and useful enumeration of the works of the chosen scholar around the theme of this specific conception and various helpful ways to make more detailed comparisons. Although the focus is how Islamic thought perceives the human being, the contributions also contain some important data and clues about the general understanding of this entity during the classical period, which can be traced backward and forward in other nearby cultures and geographies. Almost every study on medieval philosophy and its understanding of human being must take this general picture of how Islamic thought perceives the human being into account.

Third, through the contents presented in the book, the following critical questions gain new dimensions: What does the classical perception of the human being mean for today? What radical transformations took place in how the human being was defined and understood after the Scientific Revolution, Darwin's theory of evolution, and the Post-Industrial Age? What are the major continuities and breaks?

Can one extend the classical texts of such philosophers as Ibn Sinā, al-Gazālī (d. 505/1111), and al-Rāzī beyond the standard classification of theology, philosophy, jurisprudence, and mysticism? Can one examine those texts in more functionalist ways and reach different determinations and conclusions? Can one add a text that focuses exclusively on political philosophy in such a comprehensive edition on the human being, one that extends to physics, metaphysics, psychology, eschatology, and morality to complement this picture? Together with its questions, aims, contents, results, original aspects, and shortcomings, the book *What is a Human Being?* is a promising introduction to the rich literature of Islamic thought, particularly to the conception of the human being.