

**Mustafa Akman. *İbn-i Arabî: Kelami Tartışmalar, Sorular, Şüpheler*  
(İstanbul: Ekin Yayınları, 2017)**

**Reviewed by**

**Emrah Kaya \***

**Abstract**

The book, *İbn-i Arabî: Kelami Tartışmalar, Sorular, Şüpheler*, consists of six sections: “İbn al-‘Arabî”, “philosophy of waḥdat al-wujūd”, “approach to Jesus Christ and Pharaoh”, “approach to women, religion and the hell”, “[İbn al-‘Arabî’s] resources of thinking and relation with philosophy”, and “İbn al-‘Arabî and critiques against him in the history.” According to Akman, it is a requirement to make readings on philosophy, mysticism, and theology to understand the thinking of Sufi-philosopher, İbn al-‘Arabî. The author, according to himself, has read İbn al-‘Arabî through these fields, but he assesses İbn al-‘Arabî’s teaching in the context of theology (kalām).

**Keywords**

Islamic Philosophy, Sufism, İbn al-‘Arabî, Critiques, Book Review

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## Öz

Değerlendirmemize konu olan İbn-i Arabî: Kelami Tartışmalar, Sorular, Şüpheler başlıklı kitap altı bölümden oluşmaktadır: “İbn-i Arabî”, “Vahdet-i Vücûd Felsefesi”, “İsâ Aleyhisselam ve Firavun’a Yaklaşım”, “Kadın, Din ve Cehennem Yaklaşım”, “Fikir Kaynakları, Şîâ ve Felsefeyle İlişkisi”, “Tarih Seyrinde İbn-i Arabî ve Tenkidi”. Yazara göre sûfî-filozof olan İbn-i Arabî’yi anlamak için felsefî, tasavvufî ve kelamî okumalar yapmak gerekmektedir. Kendisinin de İbn-i Arabî’yi bu alanlardan okuduğunu fakat kendi çalışma alanıyla ilişkisi nedeniyle kelamî meseleler bağlamında İbn-i Arabî’yi değerlendirmeye çalıştığını belirtir.

## Anahtar Kelimeler

İslam Felsefesi, Tasavvuf, İbn-i Arabî, Eleştiriler, Kitap Değerlendirmesi

*İbn-i Arabî: Kelami Tartışmalar, Sorular, Şüpheler*, which we evaluate here, was written by Mustafa Akman, who had completed his Ph.D. with the thesis about Jalāl al-Dīn Dawwānī's kalām system in 2016, and has published numerous articles and translations. This book consists of six sections: “Ibn al-‘Arabī”, “Philosophy of waḥdat al-wujūd”, “Approach to Jesus Christ and Pharaoh”, “Approach to women, religion and the hell”, “[Ibn al-‘Arabī’s] Resources of thinking and relation with philosophy”, and “Ibn al-‘Arabī and critiques against him in the history.” According to Akman, it is a requirement to make readings on philosophy, mysticism, and theology to understand the thinking of this Sufi-philosopher. The author has read Ibn al-‘Arabī through these fields, and he has assessed Ibn al-‘Arabī’s teaching in the context of theology (*kalām*).

It is simply reasonable to see traces of the Eastern religions, Judaism, and Christianity in the Islamic thought, which was born and grew up in a very broad cultural and geographical area. Many thinkers and schools of thought have been influential in shaping the Islamic thought in general and particularly Sufism. Thus, seeing some foreign thoughts in the teaching of Ibn al-‘Arabī is not something to be condemned.

On the other hand, contrary to the development and nature of the history of thinking, Ibn al-‘Arabī and his followers persistently claim the uniqueness of his teaching by emphasizing the terms “unveiling” (*kashf*) and “inspiration” (*ilhām*). As for his opponents, they defend that his works are not worth more than being a human product.

The book that is subject to our review is very voluminous and touches many different points of the teaching of Ibn al-‘Arabī. First, I should enounce that the author’s approach to Ibn al-‘Arabī is very critical. This attitude may be seen in the preface of the book through the expression of “Ibn al-‘Arabī is not untouchable and unquestionable (*lā yus’al*)”. Certainly, none of the followers of Ibn al-‘Arabī defends his unquestionability. However, it would be a contradiction to believe that all of his works are products of divine unveiling and inspiration and to criticize his opinions at the same time.

I partly agree with the author’s claim regarding that Ibn al-‘Arabī is considered to be an unquestionable Sufi in some circles. On the other hand, in the academic platforms, Ibn al-‘Arabī like everyone else, who made history of science and culture, should be criticizable. Thus, the author’s critical attitude is important. This is not to say that all of the author's critiques are congruent and acceptable. Alongside the content of

his critiques, we have the right not to approve the author's phrasing that may be perceived to be disrespectful at times.

At the beginning of the book, the author mentions Ibn al-ʿArabī's life and spiritual development. On his spiritual development, some of the friends of God (*awliyāʾ*) like Abū al-ʿAbbās al-ʿUryabī, who is an illiterate peasant, Shaykh ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz al-Mahdawī, and Abū Madyan were influential. According to the author, Ibn al-ʿArabī without any proof and witness claims to have taken advantage both in the material and spiritual worlds from those people (p. 20). Besides, the author highlights that these kinds of claims, which are without proof, are abundant in Ibn al-ʿArabī's works. The author also criticizes Jalāl al-Dīn Suyūtī (d. 1505) and ʿAbd al-Wahhāb al-Shaʿrānī (d. 1565) because they spread Ibn al-ʿArabī's unsupported claims.

According to Akman, the most important feature distinguishing Ibn al-ʿArabī from previous Sufis is the different method used by Ibn al-ʿArabī in the Islamic sciences. The previous Sufis considered Sufism to be a subfield of theology and jurisprudence, which is based on mostly external forms. However, Ibn al-ʿArabī thought about Sufism to be a kind of metaphysics, which encompasses all sciences (p. 32). As a result of this difference, Ibn al-ʿArabī did not consent to restrict himself to the external forms and principles of these disciplines. On the contrary, he tried to adopt some of the principles of these disciplines to the understanding of metaphysics that he has.

Another critique put forward by the author is that Ibn al-ʿArabī's method is not consistent. For example, Ibn al-ʿArabī claims that the Prophet Abraham misinterpreted his dream when he attempted to sacrifice his son. The dream had a symbolic meaning and had some other meaning. According to the author, as for the dreams of Ibn al-ʿArabī, he did not need to interpret his dreams symbolically, and he understood them literally. For instance, when he was told in a dream that he had to go to the East, he went to the East without interpreting this instruction symbolically. Or, when he was told in a dream that he had to go to Anatolia, he went there in the same way. The author, by referring these kinds of examples, propounds that Ibn al-ʿArabī does not have a method or criterion to interpret dreams. He thinks that the works of Ibn al-ʿArabī are full of such inconsistencies.

The author thinks that Ibn al-ʿArabī was conscious of those inconsistencies. He agrees with Abū al-ʿAlā al-ʿAffifī's statement that Ibn al-ʿArabī presented his mystical thoughts under the mask of Islam successfully. The success of Ibn al-ʿArabī in using the mask of Islam to present his thought is relative to the concepts of unveiling and inspiration. Ibn al-ʿArabī underlines that he wrote all of his works through the divine inspirations and communications with the prophets. Furthermore, he claims to have written, for example, *Futūḥāt al-makkiyya* with certain knowledge bestowed by God when *Rūḥ al-amīn* (Gabriel) descended over his heart. According to the author, these kinds of assertions do not belong only to Ibn al-ʿArabī. The culture of Sufism is full of these assertions. As happened in the classical time of the Islamic thought, in modern times there are many Muslim thinkers, like Said Nursi, who have such assertions. Such thinkers predicate their knowledge, which is based on books and human reason, on the divine sources. In this way, they gain legitimacy in the sight of people and scholarly circles. In addition to gaining legitimacy, they authorize themselves to interpret the Qurʾān as they wish, and to find a narration to support their argument when they need it.

As for the science of hadith, which is based on the isnād system, the author propounds that Ibn al-‘Arabī’s approach to this matter is problematic and psychiatric. Ibn al-‘Arabī claimed to have received confirmation from the Prophet in their spiritual connections, even though he lived five centuries later. The author harshly criticizes Ibn al-‘Arabī for underestimating the scholars, and for establishing a thinking world where human intellect has no place (p. 124). Moreover, some people, who focus on the works of Ibn al-‘Arabī, prove the author’s statements right. For example, even though he read it a few times, Tahsin Bey claims to have understood the meaning of *Futūḥāt* after Ibn al-‘Arabī explained to him in his dream. Also, as Mahmut Erol Kılıç has narrated, a commentator of Ibn al-‘Arabī sees the spirituality of Ibn al-‘Arabī in his dream. Ibn al-‘Arabī made him write a commentary, and correct some points. Those examples prove that on the matter of knowledge, mystical ways play a more significant role than human reason in this approach (p. 127).

On the other hand, the author’s critique regarding the reliability and bindingness of unveiling and inspiration is understandable. But saying that any rational interpretation, which is based on human intellect is not knowledge or science, is not a firm base for this kind of critique. It is because all interpretations, even the interpretations of the Qur’ān, are based on human intellect, and are subjective. If so, we should not take them seriously as a kind of knowledge. Therefore, this kind of critique of the author is very problematic and contradictory.

Even though the book consists of various chapters, the central objection is for Ibn al-‘Arabī’s epistemology. Apart from this main objection, the author has other rejections on some specific subjects, as *waḥdat al-wujūd* (the unity of being), the comparison of prophets, and friends of God. In this regard, the author claims that the origins of Ibn al-‘Arabī’s statements are in the Neo-platonic philosophy and Christianity even though he presents those as a product of the divine inspiration (pp. 259-274).

Finally, I will summarize my review with some words.

The school of Ibn al-‘Arabī and the teaching of Sufism, in general, are predominant in Turkish academia. Notwithstanding, the author’s courage to criticize both the culture of Sufism and the teaching of Ibn al-‘Arabī is valuable. Therefore, the book would be helpful for those who want to find some alternative thoughts on this subject.

I should express that the critical attitude of the author is not relevant to Ibn al-‘Arabī only. Even though thinking about the author to be a Salafi or a follower of Ibn Taymiyya (d. 1328) is possible, the author criticizes Salafism and Ibn Taymiyya as much as possible. This attitude of the author undoubtedly is significant in terms of his endeavor for being objective. Moreover, while the author criticizes Shia, he criticizes also Ahl al-Sunna. For example, according to the author, although the scholars of Ahl al-Sunna wait for an opportunity ambitiously for criticizing Shia in the fields of theology, Qur’ānic commentary (*tafsīr*), hadith and jurisprudence about Sufism, they have no words to say against Shia. Furthermore, some researchers among Ahl al-Sunna prefer to ignore the intimate relationship between Shia and Sufism when Ibn al-‘Arabī is in question.

Although the author knows well the epistemology of Ibn al-‘Arabī, who claims to have had all the knowledge through unveiling and inspiration, he criticizes Ibn al-‘Arabī’s statements for they are not compatible with the Qur’ān. This kind of critique propounded by the author is not firm because Ibn al-‘Arabī

does not think of that he had to restrict himself to the outer meaning of the Qur’ān. Therefore, saying that his thought is not compatible with the outer meaning of the Qur’ān is not a valid argument.

Moreover, the method of referencing followed in the book is a bit confusing because it is difficult to understand whether the secondary sources support the author or not. Besides, the lack of rational coordination of the chapters has been another defect of the book. Also, the abundance of unnecessary repetitions distracts readers’ attention from the main arguments of the book. Lastly, although I like the critical attitude of the author, I sometimes think that his wording violates academic rules and overshadows the significance of the subject.

To sum up, as the author argues, Sufism with time has been privileged, so that none of the critiques is tolerated not only in the view of people but also in academia. Those who claim to attain true wisdom through unveiling and inspiration have had a feeling of elitism, and criticize most of Muslim scholars as exterior scholars. In such an atmosphere, writing this kind of critical book is crucial. But, while writing such a book, an author should avoid the deficiencies I have mentioned before. In this way, the quality of academic works regarding a meta-human field, which Sufism perpetually emphasizes, can develop day by day.