

## REVIEWS

**Patterns of Wisdom in Safavid Iran: The Philosophical School of Isfahan and the Gnostic of Shiraz. Janis Esots (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2021). 263 pp. ISBN 9780755644919**

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The School of Isfahan (*maktab-i falsafī-yi Isfahān*), retroactively inaugurated by Henry Corbin and Seyyed Hossein Nasr, was one of the philosophical “schools” of Safavid Iran. However, such a paradigm has not been met without criticism. Janis Esots observes that work on Safavid thought is typically vitiated by the tendency to read Qajar realities into the Safavid past, including reading Mulla Sadra’s (d. 1641) system of thought known as Transcendent Wisdom (*al-ḥikma al-muta‘āliyya*) and the philosophical School of Isfahan, more broadly, as dominant intellectual trends of the era. In *Patterns of Wisdom in Safavid Iran*, Esots seeks to correct this skewed view, providing what he describes as “an attempt to draw a more precise picture of the philosophical landscape of the 17th-century Iran” (p. 3). His introduction enumerates several objections to the existing schemata, mostly on the basis of marginality (Mir Findiriski), misattribution to philosophy (Shaykh al-Baha’i), and assimilation to previous (Shiraz) or subsequent (Tehran) supposed philosophical schools. Esots distills the School of Isfahan—previously characterized by Corbin as featuring up to twenty thinkers—into a tripartite roster of Mir Damad (d. 1631), Mulla Sadra, and Rajab ‘Ali Tabrizi (d. 1669–70), whose respective conceptual foci feature Platonism, existentialism, and apophasis.

Esots’s central thesis outlines the three circles of thought that emerged in seventeenth-century Iran: the first was *‘irfān*-focused, concentrated in Shiraz, and initiated by Mulla Sadra; the other two were *falsafa*-focused, concentrated in Isfahan, initiated by Mir Damad, and succeeded by Tabrizi (p. 12). In other words, there were three particular patterns of thought and two broad philosophical schools, the latter of which conforming to Esots’s definition (the existence of a teacher, disciples, and an established doctrine emblemized in core texts), whose priorities and principles diverged.

Between *Patterns of Wisdom in Safavid Iran*’s introduction and conclusion are four chapters. The first three function as detailed encyclopedia articles, chronicling each thinker’s life, students, works, and doctrines, while the fourth provides a comparative assessment of the three thinkers and offers reasons for Sadra’s ascendancy over the others.

In the first chapter, Esots convincingly shows how Mir Damad’s “perpetual inception” (*ḥudūth dahrī*) was inspired by Jalal al-Din Davani’s (d. 1502) understanding of relation (*intisāb*), where an entity receives existence through the Necessary Existence, passing from a state of hypothetical (*taqdīrī*) quiddity to another of accidental, though real, existence. Esots illuminates several unresolved problems with Mir Damad’s perpetual inception, including the relation of essences to that of God, the conundrum of essential contingency, and the notion of the hypothetical in perpetuity. He is also unafraid of peppering in his own speculations, suggesting that the use of *kalāmī* terms, such as *qaḍā’* and *qadar*, was

but a means to, imperfectly, preserve the more important intellectual philosophical tradition in which they were integrated. Esots even suggests that Mir Damad possessed this cynical awareness himself, in view of the doubtful relation of perpetuity (or being) and time (or becoming), in addition to *kalām*'s standing as "the reasoning of the commoners," a supposition he neglects to corroborate with any evidence (p. 47).

In the second chapter, Esots surveys the three elements that comprise Sadra's philosophical doctrine: the principality of existence, systematic ambiguity, and substantial motion. He additionally details Sadra's eschatological vision, underscoring eleven premises for Sadra's theory of corporeal resurrection, which Esots claims mostly derive from Ibn Sina (p. 137). His overview of Sadra's body of work, spanning approximately thirty pages (p. 79–112), is thorough and up to date, as are his descriptions of their multifarious contents. This section may be an especially useful resource for Sadra specialists for its detailed summaries of some of his many treatises, the various lithographical editions, and his *awjibāt al-masā'il* (answers to questions). Esots reproduces several actual inquiries to which Sadra responded, giving readers a taste of the kinds of matters open to philosophical exposition and debate during this time. Overall, these sections of the text provide enhanced overhauls of the available encyclopedic entries, while interlacing important insights into Sadra's influences.

In the third chapter, Esots encapsulates Rajab 'Ali Tabrizi's philosophy in the latter's firm commitment to the *ishtirāk lafzī* premise, as well as his curious denial of mental existence. The interaction of Tabrizi's premises prove combustible, leading to several contradictions and absurdities evinced by Esots (p. 182–83). It would be up to Tabrizi's disciples to resolve their discrepant consequences. Among these disciples, Esots turns his attention to 'Ali Quli b. Qarachaghay Khan (d. ca. 1685), described as the "perfector of Tabrizi's Doctrine" (p. 184). 'Ali Quli's assent to apparent simulacra (*ashbāh*) between the Necessary One and contingencies allows aspects of God, in the descent from their unitive non-delimited mode to external reality, to be perceived by individual minds. By this Plotinian pivot, 'Ali Quli significantly amends Tabrizi's treatment of the relation of Creator and creation, so that the former—or at least the first emanation of the Intellect—is the single paradigm of the many latter.

The comparative fourth chapter of *Patterns of Wisdom* highlights Esots's strong suit in distinguishing intersections of thought while identifying misconceptions that either overemphasize or underemphasize differences between the Safavid thinkers. All of them, Esots reasons, are responding on some level to Ibn Sina's works. None are inventing the constitutive rules of metaphysics whole cloth, but instead operate at the interpretive omphalos of those unsettled or ambiguous. Esots succeeds most in delineating the development of certain ideas, tracing the main conceptual patterns of his book's three figures to their forebears. He demonstrates, for instance, Mir Damad's process of divine decree and determination in the formation of the cosmos as an elucidation of Nasir al-Din al-Tusi's theory.

Both Tabrizi and 'Ali Quli, we discover in Chapter Four, were dismissive of Sadra for different reasons. Tabrizi was a critic of Sadra's theory of substantial motion, contending that the substrate of motion cannot move itself, but is rather the catalyst of motion, among several other discrepancies noted by Esots (p. 211). For Tabrizi's commentator, 'Ali Quli, Sadra's doctrines were also defective, unsuccessfully attempting gnostic solutions for philosophical problems. These disagreements over doctrine, combined with the absence of *ijāzāt* for teaching philosophy provided from Mir Damad to Sadra and the subtle criticism of the latter by the former, lead Esots to conclude that Sadra was not part of any philosophical school of Isfahan. Rather, Sadra's *al-hikma al-muta'aliyya* reveals a gnostic tendency, prevalent in Shiraz, that was viewed with suspicion by adherents of "post-Ṭūsian Avicennism," including Mir Damad and Tabrizi (p. 219). In spite of these criticisms, the proliferation of commentaries on Sadra's works, such as those of Mulla 'Ali Nuri (d. 1831) and Mulla Hadi Sabzivari (d. 1873), and the subsequent "irfānization" of the Shī'ī wisdom tradition equated Sadra with a broader audience in the eighteenth–nineteenth centuries (p. 226–27).

The frequent philosophical taxonomies in *Patterns of Wisdom in Safavid Iran*, presenting the mechanics of each intellectual approach, are often insightful but sometimes bewildering. In

particular, the chapter on Tabrizi contains exceedingly obtuse explanations (for example, p. 186–87) and appears underdeveloped. This Esots acknowledges in the final pages of the work, describing his study's conclusions as “tentative” and “provisional” (p. 228–29). *Patterns of Wisdom* is still a rigorous, well-researched, and enthralling work that enhances understanding of Safavid philosophy and is certainly an apt and important contribution to The Institute of Ismaili Studies' *Shi'i Heritage Series*. Assuming acquaintance with the philosophical grammar of Esots's luminaries, those interested may benefit from reading Chapter Four alone. This section provides a long-overdue comparison between the work's three central figures, analyzing their points of accord and departure in marvelous commentarial strokes.

The addition of Rajab 'Ali Tabrizi and his commentator, 'Ali Quli b. Qarachaghay Khan, to Esots's study is refreshing given the dearth of information available about them in English sources. Nevertheless, Esots's embrace of the Mir Damad/Tabrizi classification hardly represents a challenge to the School of Isfahan's prevailing paradigms that typically include Sadra. One may still aver that, despite their disparate conclusions over certain matters of philosophy, members that include Sadra were conversant with one another, face-to-face and through their works, and at times occupied a geographic space important for its incubation of Shi'i thought. Arguments over the precise combination of scholars and those that count as the most definitive or representative of the school are likely to remain abound, despite Esots's best efforts to set the record straight.

*Patterns of Wisdom in Safavid Iran* is not a radical departure from the typical course on Safavid thought; it is an augmentation of the current curriculum, supplementing the touchstone contributions of Corbin, and more recently those of Sajjad Rizvi and Sayeh Meisami, while integrating many others often neglected. Too frequently are the most credible Persian-speaking voices overlooked entirely. Against this regrettable pattern, Esots incorporates contemporary Iranian scholars such as 'Ali Karbasi-zada Isfahani, Muhammad 'Ali Mudarris Mutlaq, Dawud Husayni, and the late Sayyid Muhammad 'Ali Rawzati. Esots's own translations of Sadra's works into Russian are a crucial contribution to the scholarship of Islamic philosophy, introducing early modern works to a fresh epistemic audience and breathing new life into the Anglo/Francophone-dominated body of current literature. The sudden severing of this transmission line in the recent death of the author is a cruel circumstance. Esots's loss is only magnified by the degree of his scholarly achievement so early in his career, yet already extraordinary.

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**The City as Anthology: Eroticism and Urbanity in Early Modern Isfahan. Kathryn Babayan (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2021). Pp. 260. \$65.00 hardcover. ISBN: 9781503613386**

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Scholars interested in exploring Safavid Iranian society are faced with a number of challenges, not least of which is the paucity of documentary and archival sources. While neighboring empires to the east and west, notably the Mughals and Ottomans, left behind