
III. BÖLÜM / CHAPTER III

TIP

MEDICINE

The Manuscript of al-Balḥī's *Masāliḥ (al-abdān) wa-l-anfus* According to Fuat Sezgin and Its Present Evaluation

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ABSTRACT

Fuat Sezgin (1924–2018) had already made Abu Zaid al-Balḥī's manuscript *Masāliḥ al-abdān wa-l-anfus* available in 1984, when one of its two copies, which are preserved in the Ayasofya Library in Istanbul (Ayasofya No. 3741), was reproduced in the facsimile series of the Institute for the History of Arabic-Islamic Sciences in Frankfurt/Main. In his Introduction, Sezgin leaves it to specialists in the field to have his high estimation of the work verified. Since then, very interesting research has been finalized, especially by professionals who deal with the material discussed in the manuscript. Özkan (1990; 2019) has already made clear in her dissertation in 1990 that al-Balḥī has exceeded the level of his contemporaries and of his early predecessors or successors in many respects. Surveying the prevailing opinions and practices, he criticizes the inadequate treatment of disorders by neglecting either the soul as a physician or the body as a philosopher, in this way disregarding the bond between these equally important parts of a human being. He opposes this fundamental error with a new, complex system which exhibits characteristics of today's psychosomatic medicine. Further examinations from the angle of practicing specialists on psychological health, e.g. psychologists and psychiatrists, detected parallels in al-Balḥī's treatise which reach into the present. They even reveal conceptual structures established in modern diagnostic recording systems, like the DSM-5, as well as therapeutic strategies applied in psychiatry and psychosomatic medicine today.

Keywords: Abu Zaid al-Balḥī, *Masāliḥ al-abdān wa-l-anfus* (Sustenance for the body and soul), psychosomatic medicine

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Introduction

Maşālih al-anfus, or *Sustenance for the Soul*, is the second treatise of Abū Zaid al-Balḥī's (850–934) manuscript *Maşālih al-abdān wa-l-anfus*, or *Sustenance for the Body and Soul*. It is focused on mental health, dealing with the soul's relationship with the body. According to Fuat Sezgin's evaluation in his Editor's Introduction in 1984, the work is outstanding and characterized by innovative and progressive qualities. Sezgin's theses about al-Balḥī's *Maşālih al-anfus* are summarized as:

“Al-Balḥī is the first to devote to this theme an independent study. His treatise is the first attempt to collect the various topics of the branch of medicine which treats mental diseases, together with ... psychosomatic and psychotherapeutic treatment.”

To what extent is his assessment confirmed by modern research? What methodological features can be detected in his manuscript? In order to process this question, the works of Özkan-Rashed (1990; 2019), Malik Badri (2013), Rania Awaad and Sara Ali (2015; 2016) are consulted.

1. Al-Balḥī's *Maşālih al-anfus* in Comparison with Some Ancient Works

In her dissertation in 1990 (extended edition in 2019), Zahide Özkan chose five well-known ancient writings with regard to Sezgin's postulation of the exceptional position of al-Balḥī's *Maşālih al-anfus*.

This first is *A treatise on melancholy* (*Maqāla fī l-Mālḥūliyyā*), written by Ishāq Ibn 'Imrān (d. 903-7) who worked as a physician in Kairouan. In Ibn 'Imrān's book, melancholy is considered to be mainly caused by black bile, i.e. as a somatic disease. Although a primarily psychic cause is also cited, the book pays more attention to the bodily causes. Consequently, special foods and medicaments are predominant in the suggested therapy, other treatments such as talk therapy and music are mentioned briefly.

In “*Love sickness*” and *melancholy* in the third book of the *Kitāb al-Qānūn fī ṭ-ṭibb* of Ibn Sīnā (379/980-428/1037), as well as similar topics found in his didactic poem “*Canticum de medicina*,” Ibn Sīnā presents examples for how the body is affected by the psyche on the basis of a dynamic interrelatedness of body and soul. However, he does not pay particular attention to this recognition in the way that he treats it as a thematic entity. His statements on this matter are dispersed throughout his writings; he does not devote a separate section to it.

The third work is *About the Healing of the Diseases of the Soul and the Body* (*Risāla fī ṭ-ṭibb wa-l-aḥdāt an-naḥsāniyya*) by Abū Sa'īd b. Buḥtīšū' (died after 450/1058), a Christian physician who lived in Maiyafariqīn. Using the example of passionate love (*işq*) Abū Sa'īd b. Buḥtīšū' demonstrates that excessive emotions also affect the physical organism, which can become ill. He assigns the responsibility for dealing with psychological disorders to physicians in contrast to the prevailing doctrine that philosophers are in charge of mental concerns. Physicians can only treat physical disturbances when the associated psychological dimension is simultaneously considered. However, he only deals with one “disease” and does not encompass other items of a complex system.

The fourth work is *Guide to Good Health* (*Regimen Sanitatis*) (*Maqāla fī Tadbīr aṣ-ṣiḥḥa al-Aḥdālīya*) by Moses Maimonides (Abū 'Imrān Mūsā b. Maimūn b. 'Ubaidallāh al-Qurṭubī, 1135–1204), a Jewish scholar who is known in the Occident as the “Chief of the Jewish Nation.” This most famous treatise was written at the personal request of the sultan al-Malik al-Aḥdāl who suffered from depression. It contains important statements about mental hygiene and psychosomatic matters. Compared to al-Balḥī, his elaborations are not as differentiated and systematic (to be mentioned in parenthesis is his social discriminating attitude, idealizing male persons with a certain intellectual and educational level).

Kitāb Surūr an-naḥs wa-muḥarriḥuhā by Ibn Qāḍī Ba'labakk (Badr ad-Dīn al-Muẓaffar b. Qāḍī Ba'labakk), a physician from Syria who lived in the 13th century, was the fifth work discussed. While Ibn Qāḍī Ba'labakk's work reveals a holistic

dimension, his therapeutic approaches to psychosomatic disturbances do not sufficiently take into account the psychological aspects. It concentrates on externally administered agents (psycho-stimuli), considered by al-Balhî in his first treatise.

In their investigation about *Obsessional Disorders in al-Balkhi's 9th century treatise*, Sara Ali and Rania Awaad (2015, p. 188), two psychiatrists in the USA, referred to the following works of ancient scholars:

- *Kitāb al-Ḥāwī fī ṭ-ṭibb*, by ar-Rāzī (Abū Bakr Muḥammad bin Zakariyā, 865–925)
- *Kitāb al-Qānūn fī ṭ-ṭibb*, by Ibn Sīnā (980–1037)
- *Firdaus al-Ḥikma (Paradise of Wisdom)*, by aṭ-Ṭabarī (Abū l-Ḥasan ‘Alī ibn Sahl Rabban, 805–870?)
- *Al-Asbāb wa-l-‘alāmāt (Book of Causes and Symptoms)*, by Najīb ad-Dīn as-Samarqandī (Abū Ḥāmid Muḥammad b. ‘Alī b. ‘Umar, d. 619/1222)

They came to the conclusion that: “Certainly, none of these texts describe obsessional disorders in as much depth or with as much clarity as al-Balkhi’s manuscript; *Sustenance of the Body and Soul*. The topic of obsessions in the texts of al-Razi, Ibn Sina, at-Tabri and Najab Uddin was discussed as either a symptom of melancholy or as part of love sickness disorder.” Consequently, their main therapeutic focus was “medications, ointments, and bloodletting.” (Awaad; & Ali / *Journal of Affective Disorders* 180 (2015, p. 188)

2. Al- Balhî’s Manuscript in Comparison with Modern Psychology, Psychotherapy and Psychiatry

Al-Balhî’s pioneering role in many respects is supported by the examinations of today’s scholars who are specialists in the field of psychology and psychiatry and actively engaged in their profession.

In his book *The Cognitive Behavior Therapy of a Ninth Century Physician by Abū Zayd al-Balkhî* (2013), Malik Badri (1932-2021), a Sudanese author and professor of psychology, draws a direct connection to *Sustenance of the Soul* in the established concept of modern cognitive and rational therapy as a basis for behavioral therapy. In Özkan’s dissertation from 1990, al-Balhî’s rational focus in prevention and therapy had already been emphasized.

Badri also identifies further interesting deductions from al-Balhî’s statements, e.g. the categorization of disorders in neuroses and psychoses. From the perspective of psychiatrists, Rania Awaad and Sara Ali examined phobias and OCD (Awaad; & Ali, 2015; 2016), being equivalent to *faza*‘ (anxiety/panic) and *wasāwis* (*aş-şadr*) (obsessive thoughts) as specific components in al- Balhî’s classification of disorders. In their article which was published in the renowned *Journal of Anxiety Disorders*, they explain that the scholar is the first to present phobia (*faza* ‘) as a distinct mental disorder and to assign it its own diagnostic entity in psychiatry and thus in medicine.

In a tabular comparison, Awaad and Ali draw attention to many similarities between al-Balhî’s concept of phobia and the modern definition according to the *Fifth Edition of Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, DSM-5, the American classification system of mental disorders. They similarly compare the description of obsessional disorders (*wasāwis*) in al-Balhî’s manuscript with the description of Obsessive–Compulsive Disorder (OCD) in the DSM-5. Here, too, the scientists identify striking similarities which they present in a table (Awaad; & Ali, 2015, p. 187).

3. Methodological Considerations

Abū Zaid al-Balhî’s work echoes his highly-developed explorer’s spirit which proves sovereignty, commitment, and a creative intelligence, using a complex and multidimensional view. He was also an excellent teacher; thanks to his didactic competence, he succeeds very well in conveying the contents of which the various components are classified according to major and minor categories. In this very complex system, he presents thematic concepts which serve as a theoretical textbook for the transfer of knowledge, as well as a practical manual for its application.

He combined his abilities of differentiated observation ability with empirical knowledge, which he processed by way of a ratio system. In doing so, he employed different perspectives and criteria for differentiation and categorization. His longitudinal perspective enabled him to consider time-dependent determinants, such as genetic and early- or late-onset-impacts, e.g. in the case of obsessive thoughts (Özkan-Rashed, p. 67, 214) or of depression (Özkan-Rashed, p. 63, 198), which cause different courses and necessitate different therapeutic options. This long-term view also promotes the elaboration of preventive strategies.

His cross-sectional perspective is revealed in his perception and analysis of the existing circumstances of his time, taking into account societal aspects. As an example, al-Balḥī illustrates the potential consequences of anger when it is acted out by a ruler (king) against a subordinate (Özkan, 1990; Özkan-Rashed, 2019, p. 53, 152). At the same time, he transcends social, economic, and educational barriers for the favor of universal principles, which he embeds in philosophical and ethical reflections. He also mentioned the example of a king who is simply seen as a human being, equal to a lowly subject in social regards, as they are both God's creatures and share a common purpose to live a virtuous and conscientious life (Özkan-Rashed, 2019, p. 55).

5. Discussion and Conclusion

Based on the present state of knowledge, we can see that Sezgin confirmed particular aspects of al-Balḥī's treatise *Masāliḥ al-anfus*, which is unique for an autonomous or "independent" study. He overcame existing beliefs and convictions which are found in professionals and scholars, as well as the preconceptions of lay people. Al-Balḥī propagates the integration of mental concerns into the competence and the responsibility of physicians, who have to consider them together with the physical aspects. Philosophers cannot do justice to man if they turn their attention only to the soul and disregard the body, of whose functioning they have no knowledge.

Al-Balḥī also advises physicians to not underestimate the psyche as an equally significant and potent aspect of man when applying diagnostics and treatment strategies. As to Sezgin's assumption that al-Balḥī has "collected the various topics of the branch of medicine which treats mental diseases, together with psychosomatic and psychotherapeutic treatment," though al-Balḥī does not cite the writings and teachings of other scholars, he argues in a way that suggests his knowledge of them of which he claims to be incomplete and also subject to fundamental error. Al-Balḥī saw this gap of knowledge as an opportunity to write a new textbook on holistic psychosomatic medicine, uniting the psychological and physical aspects of illness. His book serves as a compendium for human health, not only for professionals but also for laymen.

The current workings on al-Balḥī's treatise reveal that he was not only far ahead of his time, but also that his radius reaches into the modern era. His work deserves further studies, focusing on different themes and perspectives.

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Declaration of conflict of interest

It does not exist any conflict of interest.

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