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### Revolt, Morality and Society in Nurettin Topcu\*

*Nurettin Topcu'da İsyancılık, Ahlak ve Toplum*



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#### Abstract

Nurettin Topcu, while being one of the most important philosophers of Turkish thought, can also be described as an ideal teacher and moralist. It is known that he developed a philosophical style, particularly influenced by the Philosophy of Action, and attempted to ground and idealize this style, especially in the field of ethics. Topcu outlines the general conception of this morality, which he describes as the "Ethics of Revolt," stating that it should begin with the individual, then extend to the family, society, and finally to the Creator, whom he refers to as the Absolute Being. According to him, the ethics of revolt is not an anarchist act against order or the system, as its name suggests, but rather a sensible action that humanity must undertake to escape its gloomy situation. The primary target of this action is humanity itself. Topcu argues that an ideal society cannot be formed without an ideal human being morally. According to him, an ideal, orderly, and harmonious society is one that must exist within the ethics of revolt. In this study, we will attempt to highlight the importance of the ethics of revolt for society.

**Keywords:** Turkish Thought, Nurettin Topcu, Revolt, Morality, Society, Movement.

#### Highlights

- To revisit Nurettin Topcu's ideas in the History of Turkish Thought.
- To clarify the concept of rebellion.
- To highlight the relationship between the concept of movement and morality.
- To reveal some of the philosophical views that Nurettin Topcu criticized.
- To emphasize the importance of the relationship between revolt and society.

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## Öz

Nurettin Topcu, Türk düşüncesinin en önemli filozoflarından biri olmakla birlikte, ideal bir öğretmen ve ahlakçı olarak da tanımlanabilir. Özellikle Eylem Felsefesinden etkilenen bir felsefi ıslup geliştirdiği ve bu ıslubu özellikle ahlak alanında temellendirme ve idealize etme çabasında olduğu bilinmektedir. Topcu, "İsyan Etiği" olarak tanımladığı bu ahlak anlayışının genel hatlarını çizerken, bunun bireyden başlayıp aileye, topluma ve nihayetinde Mutlak Varlık olarak adlandırdığı Yaratıcı'ya kadar uzanması gerektiğini belirtir. Ona göre isyan etiği, adından da anlaşılaçığı gibi düzene veya sisteme karşı anarşist bir eylem değil, insanlığın kasvetli durumundan kurtulmak için gerçekleştirmesi gereken mantıklı bir eylemdir. Bu eylemin birincil hedefi insanlığın kendisidir. Topcu, ahlaki açıdan ideal bir insan olmadan ideal bir toplumun kurulamayacağını savunur. Ona göre ideal, düzenli ve uyumlu bir toplum, isyan ahlakı içinde var olması gereken bir toplumdur. Bu çalışmada, isyan ahlakının toplum için önemini vurgulamaya çalışacağız.

**Keywords:** Türk Düşüncesi, Nurettin Topcu, İsyan, Ahdak, Toplum, Hareket.

## Öne Çıkanlar

- Çalışma Türk Düşünce Tarihinde Nurettin Topcu'nun fikirlerini yeniden gündeme getirmek.
- İsyan Kavramını açıklığa kavuşturmak.
- Hareket Kavramının Ahdakla olan ilişkisini öne çıkarmak.
- Nurettin Topcu'nun eleştirdiği birtakım felsefe görüşlerini ortaya koymak.
- İsyan Ahdakı ve Toplum ilişkisinin önemini vurgulamak.

## 1. Introduction

This study aims to evaluate the concept of revolt, which we consider to hold an important place in Nurettin Topcu's philosophy, from the perspectives of ethics and society. The scope of the study consists of the concepts of revolt, ethics, and society. The current study will focus on clarifying what the concept of revolt, which often leads to misunderstandings in the world of thought, means from Topcu's perspective. In addition, the views of various philosophers and systems of thought on ethics will be examined within the framework of the concepts of revolt and action, ideas that cause misunderstandings will be criticized, and Topcu's Ethics of Revolt will be explained.

The main purpose of this study is to emphasize the importance of the idea of the Ethics of Revolt for society by examining Nurettin Topcu's concepts of revolt and movement in the context of moral philosophy. It is believed that this study will fill an important gap in the world of thought, particularly in the field of ethics, with a special focus on Nurettin Topcu, thus leading to the fact that Nurettin Topcu will be recognized more as a moralist and a man of revolt and action than as a teacher or educator, and that his value will be better understood.

It is quite difficult to say that Topcu, about whom books and articles have been written, is sufficiently recognized and valued today. In this regard, it is extremely important to bring his ideas, especially the concepts of Revolt, Morality, and Movement, to the fore and to highlight their importance for society. Therefore, it is believed this study will make a modest academic contribution to both the Turkish intellectual world and those interested in ethics.

## 2. The Relationship Between Morality and Action

Morality refers to the fundamental laws—values, beliefs, norms, commands, prohibitions, and directives—that have entered the lives of individuals, groups, peoples, social structures, nations, and cultural environments throughout history and that will guide their actions in the future.<sup>1</sup> The discipline that examines what an ideal morality should be like and its fundamental laws is moral philosophy. In this respect, while morality expresses a state oriented towards action, moral philosophy primarily expresses the explanation of the ideal in the form of laws.

Moral philosophy involves questioning and explaining values, and attempting to establish a specific foundation for determining under what conditions human actions can be attributed as good or bad. In other words, moral philosophy is the field of philosophical inquiry that attempts to explain events, objects, and the values they represent. In this respect, in moral philosophy, the human being is at the center of actions, and the human being is<sup>2</sup> included within a moral framework through their actions. Therefore, here, the human being gains meaning not as a knowing being, but as an acting being. In this sense, whether human actions carry moral value is related to the manner in which the actions are performed, along with their purpose. Accordingly, for an action to have a moral character, it must be based on honesty, truthfulness, freedom from falsehood, respect, and adherence to right and law.<sup>3</sup> However, even if some actions are performed with moral intentions, the outcome may not always be as desired. It should also be noted that actions can give rise to different meanings depending on different perspectives. For example, what rational, logical, and natural explanation can fully answer the question of someone who sacrifices their life for justice and virtue? It is totally normal that everyone can answer such a question in a different way. In this case, it becomes difficult to rationally ground many actions that can be expressed morally, and a more universally valid and absolute criterion will be needed for evaluating actions. Here, Nurettin Topçu emphasizes the need for an absolute power as the evaluator of moral actions. As the evaluation of human actions by another human being can lead to a number of possible subjective judgments. Therefore, an absolute power, a god, is needed as the evaluator of actions. This god can emerge as both the guarantor and the fair evaluator of moral actions.<sup>4</sup>

Nurettin Topçu, while attempting to ground the idea of the Ethics of Revolt, identifies God as the moral basis and point of reference. Topçu laid the foundations of this idea during his doctoral thesis, titled “*Conformise et Revolte*,” prepared at the Sorbonne University in France between 1928 and 1934. Unfortunately, this work was only translated into Turkish approximately sixty years after its completion.<sup>5</sup>

This work, titled “*Conformise et Revolte*,” has been translated as “*The Ethics of Revolt*.” The word

<sup>1</sup> Doğan Özlem, *Etik-Ahlak Felsefesi* (İstanbul: İnkılap Yayınları, 2004), 17.

<sup>2</sup> Ahmet Arslan, *Felsefeye Giriş* (Ankara: Vadi Yayınları, 2002), 108–109.

<sup>3</sup> İsmail Tunali, *Felsefeye Giriş* (İstanbul: Altın Kitaplar Yayınları, 2010), 111.

<sup>4</sup> Aliya İzetbegović, *Doğu ile Batı Arasında İslam* (İstanbul: Yarın Yayınları, 2011), 160–161.

<sup>5</sup> Mustafa Şahin, “Evet İsyankarlı Ya Da Merd-i Mü’minin İsyancı,” *Hece Aylık Edebiyat Dergisi* 109 (2006), 68–75.

“conformise” means conformity and obedience to the times, while “revolte” means revolt. Mustafa Kök and Musa Doğan have contributed to our intellectual world by translating this work into Turkish as “The Ethics of Revolt.” Their choice to translate it as “The Ethics of Revolt” was influenced by the fact that Topçu had two separate articles titled “The Ethics of Revolt” in his works *“Culture and Civilization”* and *“The Case of Will,”* and that he possessed a rebellious spirit throughout many periods of his life.<sup>6</sup> However, this revolt is not, as is often thought, a revolt aimed at disrupting order within society, but rather a revolt against the unfavorable conditions in which humanity finds itself. Therefore, this revolt points to construction, not destruction. In Topçu's words, this revolt is: “A movement of revolt in which the will refuses to submit to the conditions in which it finds itself.”<sup>7</sup> The foundations of this revolt, which gained meaning through action, were laid in the 19th-century French philosopher Maurice, Topçu's teacher. It is based on Blondel (1861-1949). However, this movement is not an ordinary movement. For example, everyday physical movements such as eating, drinking, walking, and the like cannot be fully expressed as movement. For movement to have meaning, it must carry a purpose of consciousness and revolt. This idea of movement, originating<sup>8</sup> from Blondel, also draws our attention as a great spiritual movement.<sup>9</sup> In this context, movement: “must step into the supernatural realm. There, movement achieves its purpose; the will recognizes itself with all sincerity, thus enabling the individual to feel self-sufficient.” According to Topçu, the idea of movement is not an action that arose spontaneously; rather,<sup>10</sup> it emerged as a response to the worldly/materialist views of Positivism and Materialism, which were the powerful ideas of the time.

### 3. A Critique of the Moral Views of Some Philosophers

In the sixth chapter of his book *The Ethics of Rebellion*, Nurettin Topçu critiques the views on ethics of important thinkers and philosophers such as Max Stirner (1806-1856), Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778), and Arthur Schopenhauer (1788-1860). Topçu begins his critique by focusing on Stirner. According to him, Stirner prioritizes individual selfishness, disregarding social reality. In this case, the individual sees only their own existence as the sole truth, viewing any action outside of themselves that might affect them as an incitement to revolt. Topçu states that this revolt of Stirner is directed against nature, society, the state, humanity, morality, and religion. He argues that Stirner, through such a revolt, disregards many material and spiritual values, and even goes so far as to imagine himself as a superior being.<sup>11</sup> Mustafa Kök, picking up where Topçu left off, argues that Stirner, by disregarding everything else, actually deified himself.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Nurettin Topçu, *İsyan Ahlakı* (İstanbul: Dergâh Yayınları, 2014), 17-18.

<sup>7</sup> *İsyan Ahlakı*, 19

<sup>8</sup> Hüseyin Aydoğdu, “Ahlak Filozofu ve Eylem Adamı Nurettin Topçu,” *Türkoloji Enstitüsü Dergisi* 40 (2009), 439-462.

<sup>9</sup> Nurettin Topçu, *Felsefe* (İstanbul: Dergâh Yayınları, 2011), 29.

<sup>10</sup> Nurettin Topçu, *Varoluş Felsefesi Hareket Felsefesi* (İstanbul: Dergâh Yayınları, 2011), 56.

<sup>11</sup> Topçu, *İsyan Ahlakı*, 177.

<sup>12</sup> Mustafa Kök, *Nurettin Topçu'da Din Felsefesi* (İstanbul: Dergâh Yayınları, 1995), 75.

Another philosopher Topçu criticizes in the context of the concept of revolt is Jean-Jacques Rousseau. According to him, Rousseau opposes the social structure because he claims it dominates the human self. He argues that freedom exists in the self, while slavery exists in society. Topçu believes Rousseau rebels against the social structure because it limits human action and confines it within certain frameworks. This revolt is not an anarchist one, as in Stirner, but rather a revolt against the social structure that prevents human beings from living freely. Therefore, he believes that returning to nature, freeing oneself from that social structure, would be healthier for humanity. From Topçu's perspective, when Rousseau is considered, nature is the place where human beings can be pure and true to themselves. In this place, as there are no social constraints, people are directly generous, sincere, and happy. Therefore, the state of nature is extremely valuable for human beings because it does not contain property, which is considered one of the causes of evil among people.<sup>13</sup> However, according to Topçu, Rousseau, by accepting withdrawal from society as a solution, sought refuge in himself and went so far as to disregard social life, where human relationships emerge. Therefore, although Rousseau initially began with a rebellious movement, he failed to demonstrate the maturity to sustain this revolt, and consequently, his rebellious movement remained largely incomplete.<sup>14</sup>

The last philosopher Topçu discusses in the context of the concept of revolt is Schopenhauer. According to Topçu, Schopenhauer conceived of the world as the worst of all possible worlds, thus constructing existence on pessimism.<sup>15</sup> In this respect, Schopenhauer's revolt is directly directed at existence and life itself. According to him, to exist is to desire evil. Salvation is only possible by denying life, because life consists of pain and desires. He argues that achieving something through willpower brings satisfaction, while failing to achieve it leads to suffering. Therefore, by denying willpower, the satisfaction of the soul should be prioritized. However, here, one can speak not of the existence of man, but only of his non-existence.<sup>16</sup> Topçu states that the world Schopenhauer conceives by denying himself is real. According to him, by denying this life, man is only cut off from himself and from action; therefore, true meaning can only be found by confronting and struggling with the reality of this life.

Topçu criticizes several ethical views alongside those of these philosophers. According to him, while Rationalist, Empiricist, and Social Solidarity ethical systems contain ideas about morality, they also have shortcomings. Topçu opposes the view in Rationalist ethics that knowledge leads to moral action, stating that there is not always a relationship between knowledge and action. In Empiricist ethics, he argues that the expectation from the outcome of an action is pleasure and happiness rather than pure morality, and that this cannot be equated with morality. Finally, Topçu criticizes Social Solidarity ethics for prioritizing the happiness of society over

<sup>13</sup> Kök, Nurettin Topçu'da Din Felsefesi, 77-78.

<sup>14</sup> Topçu, *İsyan Ahlakı*, 192.

<sup>15</sup> Topçu, *İsyan Ahlakı*, 197.

<sup>16</sup> Kök, Nurettin Topçu'da Din Felsefesi, 79-80.

the individual. According to him, morality should progress along a line starting from the individual and moving towards society.<sup>17</sup> However, here, the individual is almost pushed aside, and society is placed at the center.

#### 4. The Ethics of Revolt and Society

Nurettin Topçu argues that these philosophers, whom he criticizes, misunderstood and misinterpreted the concept of revolt. According to him, Stirner, Rousseau, and Schopenhauer conceived of humanity as an anarchist, arrogant, hopeless, and selfish being. Topçu criticizes not only their ideas on revolt but also their concept of movement. While these philosophers addressed the concept of revolt, they did not offer serious ideas about movement, which is the outward manifestation of revolt as an action. However, revolt is only valuable if it can give rise to action. In other words, revolt only holds meaning for human existence insofar as it transforms into action and liberates humanity from adverse conditions.

Starting from this point, Topçu draws attention to the importance of the ethics of revolt. According to him, the most important thing needed to place both the individual and society on a moral path is revolt. This revolt expresses the fundamental characteristic of existence.<sup>18</sup> However, as mentioned earlier, this revolt is not a revolt that involves subversion or anarchism directed at the individual and society. This ethics of revolt is largely related to religion. According to Topçu, the ethics of revolt cannot be explained independently of religion; therefore, revolt must be directly and closely linked to religion. He states the following regarding this ethics : “For ethics is essentially not something separate from religious maturity. Ethics is the transition from animal life to human life.”<sup>19</sup> According to him, thanks to this ethics, the human being, defined solely by their vital aspect, makes an attempt to become truly human. In this ethical view, which is at the forefront of efforts to become human, three important points need to be emphasized in order to provide both the individual and society with a more ethical understanding. According to Topçu, these three aspects concerning humanity and society are, in order: *Respect, Compassion, and Service*. He explains the concept of respect, which is at the top of this hierarchy, as follows.

“Respect is an action that goes against base feelings in us. It saves our sensitivity from hindering our free movement. Respect is for the human being. Things are not respected. Respect is entirely separate from fear and awe. The being bows before a man of great stature. But the soul does not bow; there is no respect there. However, before an ordinary but pure-hearted person with a superior character to mine, my soul bows. That is respect. Even if I were to see the same beauty of character in myself, I would still feel respect. Even if we don't show it outwardly, we cannot help but feel its presence within us. The moment we feel respect, we find ourselves grown, elevated, capable of rising above our own being, even above all beings.

<sup>17</sup> Hüseyin Karaman, “Nurettin Topçu’nun Felsefesinde İsyancılığı,” *Muhafazakar Düşünce Dergisi* 5 (2009), 79–90.

<sup>18</sup> M. Said Kurşunoğlu, “Nurettin Topçu’nun İsyancılığı Perspektifinden Bir Varlık İsyancılığı Örneği: Şeyh Bedrettin ve Varidat’ı,” *Temaşa Felsefe Dergisi* 7 (2017), 19–60.

<sup>19</sup> Nurettin Topçu, *İslâm ve İnsan Mevlana ve Tasavvuf* (İstanbul: Dergâh Yayımları, no date), 91.

Respect is not one of the ordinary feelings. In the world of religion, it is an emotion akin to the anticipation of divine grace.<sup>20</sup>

Respect, which holds an important place in the Ethics of Revolt, appears in Topçu as follows:

“First, respect must be shown to the Quran... Respect must be shown to knowledge, which is the fruit of reason... respect must be shown to man, the noblest of creatures.” ...and finally, it is necessary to respect life.”<sup>21</sup> In this respect, since there is a belief that existence was created by the Absolute Being, it is necessary to respect it. Respecting existence is extremely important, both for individuals and society, even though there are possibilities of exploiting, eliminating, or harming it in the relationship established with existence. As the scope of existence includes humans, animals, plants, and other beings, it is known that they are also absolutely visible in human life. Therefore, respect for existence is also respect for humanity and the society formed by humans.

When it comes to respect, Topçu addresses the concept of compassion. According to him, compassion is: “A state of sudden encounter with God.”<sup>22</sup> In another statement, Topçu defines compassion as follows: “It is not pity for the weak, the poor, and the destitute. These are the crippled compassions of small souls.”<sup>23</sup> In this respect, compassion is a state of emotion that arises from a person loving all beings more than themselves.<sup>24</sup> According to Topçu, compassion also brings with it self-sacrifice. Through compassion, which is a state of love shown beyond pity to the weak, the destitute, and the needy, a person feels deeply valued within society. A society where individuals are valued can also be described as a society closely related to compassion, where the individuals within it are happy.

Topçu, in the context of the Ethics of Revolt, addresses the concept of service after the feeling of compassion. According to him, service is: “Seeking God by transcending one's ego and spreading it to other people. Every sincere and selfless service is the search for God through our actions.”<sup>25</sup> He argues that service, in a general sense, signifies a spiritual devotion from our ego towards people, along with offering them kindness. Topçu states that service is not only an action directed towards people but also involves a movement towards seeking the Absolute Being. In this respect, selfless service gains meaning as an act of kindness not only to individual existence but also to society. A service performed without any expectation, solely to gain the pleasure of the Absolute Being and to help create a more moral individual and society, becomes an important moral act. According to Topçu, revolt is extremely important because it begins with the individual, extends to the family, then to society, and from society to something more universal. Where revolt transforms into action, respect, compassion, and service, which are

<sup>20</sup> Topçu, *İslâm ve İnsan Meyvana ve Tasavvuf*, 93–94.

<sup>21</sup> Topçu, *İslâm ve İnsan Meyvana ve Tasavvuf*, 95–96.

<sup>22</sup> Nurettin Topçu, *Var Olmak* (İstanbul: Dergâh Yayımları, 2013), 40.

<sup>23</sup> Topçu, *İslâm ve İnsan Meyvana ve Tasavvuf*, 96.

<sup>24</sup> Muhammet Sarıtaş, *Nurettin Topçu'da Sosyo-Pedagojik Yapı* (Ankara: Mesaj Yayınları, 1986), 111.

<sup>25</sup> Topçu, *İslâm ve İnsan Meyvana ve Tasavvuf*, 101.

important from an ethical perspective, emerge. This moral system, which begins with the revolt and subsequently emerges as a movement, primarily aims to instill moral qualities in individuals. In a society where moral people constitute the majority, moral characteristics become clearly visible.

### **5. Conclusion**

Nurettin Topçu, in his work on the Ethics of Revolt, begins by defining the concept of revolt itself. According to him, revolt is not an anarchist or existential opposition, as some philosophers have suggested, but rather expresses the potential necessary for humanity to escape its gloomy circumstances. After stating that this revolt is closely related to religion, Topçu argues that it should not remain merely a thought but should manifest itself in action. According to Topçu, where revolt transforms into action or gives rise to action, the necessity of Respect, Compassion, and Service—qualities of paramount moral importance—is highlighted. Respect is the expression of profound reverence for all existence, while compassion represents an intense state of love for all beings. Service, starting with humanity, is a self-sacrificing act aimed at gaining the favor of the Absolute Being. When these three characteristics of the Ethics of Revolt become concrete in an individual, they will possess a quality that extends first to the family, then to society, and from society to a universal level. A person educated in the ethics of revolt will also contribute to the morality of the society to which he or she belongs. At this point, the formation of an ideal society depends on the morality of the individuals who comprise it.

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Bu makale tek yazarlı olarak hazırlanmıştır.

This article was written by a single author.