

SPIRITUAL PRACTICE IN ISLAMIC PHILOSOPHY
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INTRODUCTION

ISLAMIC PHILOSOPHY AND THE CRISIS OF MODERN RATIONALISM

1. This work examines the modern reception of formative Islamic philosophy and its importance for modern philosophy. Muhsin Mahdi, an eminent scholar of Islamic political philosophy, in an essay titled “Orientalism and the Study of Islamic Philosophy,” relates the academic crisis identified and labeled by Edward Said as “Orientalism” to its roots in the inadequacies of modern rationalism. Said identifies Orientalism “as a dynamic exchange between individual authors and the large political concerns shared by the three great empires – British, French, and American – in whose intellectual territory the writing was produced.”¹ This so-called dynamic exchange is, according to Said, rather “the corporate institution for dealing with the Orient – dealing with it by making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it, ruling over it.”² In other words, Orientalist discourse is the systematic academic discipline of dominating, controlling, and managing the so-called Orient for the sake of the Western imperial political agenda. The Orient, in this account, is not the Far East only; rather, it refers primarily to what we call the Middle East, and Said’s concern, throughout his work, has been principally the *Islamic* Orient. His conclusion is that, as a result of the Orientalist discourse, Islam “has been fundamentally misrepresented in the West.”³ In chapter one, I identify the Orientalist moves of some of the prominent modern scholars of Islamic philosophy, but this is not my main concern. My central concern is what Mahdi astutely

identifies as the underlying philosophical predicament of Orientalist discourse, the discourse that succumbs to Imperialist pressure. Mahdi admits that recent literature critical of Orientalism has shown that “Oriental studies of Islam and Islamic civilization have been founded on a mixed bag of religious, cultural, ideological, ethnic (in some cases even racist), and scientific prejudgments and practical political interests.”⁴ In other words, “these studies are guided by irrational motives and political interests.”⁵ However, Mahdi claims that these studies also show that there is no escape from this predicament and that there is an underlying crisis of rationalism tainting modern scholarship. In this account, the so-called modern rationalism is “in many ways ... dogmatic and irrational.”⁶ Edward Said also acknowledges the philosophical root of the Orientalist quandary: “The real issue is whether indeed there can be a true representation of anything.” Said denies that such a representation is possible; therefore, “we must be prepared to accept the fact that a representation *eo ipso* is implicated, intertwined, embedded, interwoven with a great many other things besides the ‘truth,’ which is itself a representation.”⁷

Rejecting the possibility of true representations jeopardizes Said’s attempts to diagnose “Orientalist” symptoms of Oriental studies, as it would be impossible to accuse such studies of falling short of truth. Said is aware of this problem and circumvents it by arguing that we should aim for methodological self-consciousness.⁸ In other words, we should acknowledge the complexity of “irrational” factors that constitute a representation and refuse to camouflage our representations as “truths.” I agree with Mahdi that Said’s “methodological self-consciousness” is only a beginning and “must lead to a search for a genuine form of rationalism.”⁹ He writes: “Understanding the reasons for the limited scope and humanly unsatisfying character of modern rationalism, and the search for a more wholesome unity that satisfies both the rational and imaginative or poetic aspects of man’s life, are tasks that are still before us.”¹⁰ These are tasks

which Mahdi himself does not carry out. However, he does provide a clue as to how to proceed in performing them; he maintains that the study of pre-modern rationalism, including Islamic philosophy, can “be of some use” in dealing with the development of a full and complete account of rationalism.¹¹ Thus, in this work, I draw from the formative period of Islamic philosophy in order to challenge the boundaries of modern reason. As a result, some of the false dualisms afflicting Modern philosophy, e.g., reason vs. imagination, reason vs. nature, and reason vs. spirituality, will lose their grip on us.

2. The formative period of Islamic philosophy (*al-falsafa*)¹² spans the ninth to the eleventh centuries and includes chief Muslim Peripatetics (*mashshā‘iyyūn*), Abū Nasr Muḥammad al-Fārābī (Alfarabi) (d. 950) and Abū ‘Alī Ḥussain ibn Sīnā (Avicenna) (d. 1037). In the formative period, as the name suggests, the main edifice of Islamic philosophy is constructed. Following Michael Marmura, I maintain that Alfarabi was, properly speaking, the architect of this edifice.¹³ I also agree with Roger Arnaldez when he calls the early period of Islamic philosophy “Avicennan,” presumably due to the realization and completion of this edifice in the work of Avicenna.¹⁴ Therefore, in this work, by “formative Islamic philosophy” I mean the philosophy of Islamic Peripatetics, specifically that of Alfarabi and Avicenna. I also consider the debate initiated by the influential theologian, Abū Ḥāmid Muḥammad al-Ghazzālī (Ghazali) (d. 1111), in critiquing Alfarabi and Avicenna, and the rebuttal of Ghazali offered by the twelfth century Muslim Peripatetic Abū al-Walīd ibn Rushd (Averroes) (d. 1198).

3. In the first chapter, I ground my search for the boundaries of reason in formative Islamic philosophy by questioning the received account of philosophical activity as the

production of abstract rational discourse. For this, I draw from Pierre Hadot's insightful readings of Greek philosophy. To put the point briefly, Hadot advances the view that, for the Greeks, philosophy was primarily the practice of spiritual exercises aimed at the transformation of the self and the acquisition of wisdom.¹⁵ I accept this account, which flies in the face of the dominant yet sterile understanding of philosophy as rational discourse, and propose that Hadot's thesis (about the nature of philosophical inquiry among the Greeks) provides a novel way of interpreting Islamic philosophy as an inheritor of the Greek philosophical tradition.

A corollary to the account of philosophy as the practice of spiritual exercises – one which I plan to develop in some detail in chapter two – is an overcoming of the modernist's divide between mind and world through an account of moral knowledge as involving a cultivated sensitivity to relevant features of the world.¹⁶ In this account, claims to knowledge, as active exercises of our acquired concepts, are answerable to a world that is experienced by means of a passive operation of those same concepts. This account of knowledge can be generalized and contains important consequences for the crisis-ridden modern foundationalism (and its opponents who deny the rational bearing of the world on the mind).¹⁷ I contend that Heidegger's phenomenology also embraces a version of this overcoming of the divide between mind and world,¹⁸ and it was this aspect of Heidegger's view that led his disciple, Henry Corbin, to Islamic philosophy. I draw on the relevant writings of Corbin and Heidegger to illuminate this phenomenological insight.

In the third chapter, I propose the thesis that a refined version of the phenomenological debunking of the mind-world dualism is available in the texts of the formative period of Islamic philosophy. In their concern with philosophy as a practice of spiritual exercises aiming at the things themselves, Islamic philosophers and their European counterparts are in alliance with the

Greeks in their focus on the emulation and realization of a human exemplar as the standard of excellence.¹⁹ This relationship to an exemplar is not a mere moral discipleship; rather it is constitutive of the philosophical activity as such – the transformation of the self for the sake of knowledge. However, the Muslim philosophers of the formative period differ from these others in the importance they assign to the power of prophecy in the psychology of the philosophical exemplars and their disciples. This unique Muslim Peripatetic account of the philosophical exemplars is a development of the Islamic tradition’s explanations of the revelations of Prophet Muhammad. Prophecy bridges the divide between the human and the divine, the rational and the super-rational; it is also responsible for what Mahdi identified as the harmony of the rational and the imaginative aspects of human life. Prophecy, in this context, has legal, ethical, intellectual, and imaginative dimensions, the first three of which I discuss in chapter three. In chapter four, emphasizing the spiritual reach of Islamic philosophy, I offer a critique of Heidegger’s phenomenology. I show that Islamic philosophers extend the domain of the practice of spiritual exercises beyond “authenticity”; as a result, they unfold new vistas of theoretical experience and endow the philosopher with exceptional dignity and freedom.

In chapters five and six, I explore the Islamic theory of imagination and its place in the prophetology distinctive of Islamic philosophy. In developing the details of the cultivation of the imagination advanced by the Islamic philosophers, I will also delineate the poetic appropriation of the art of spiritual hermeneutics (*ta’wīl*), which I will have utilized to account for the cultivation of the theoretical dimension of the intellect (chapter three). Beginning with Avicenna, a significant moment in the Islamic cultivation of the soul involves the interpretation of imaginative symbolism. This hermeneutics aims to free the interpreter from the grip of the mundane and culminates in an experience of the divine. I relate this aspect of Islamic

philosophy to the modern European philosophical exploration of the faculty of the imagination and the analytic of the concept of the sublime. In this analysis, I consider the seminal aesthetic writings of Kant, Hegel, and Heidegger as well as the work of their readers and commentators.²⁰

The modern accounts of the sublime approach that of which that of which this term is predicated either as beyond the reach of imagination (for Kant and his followers) or as a relic of an era that failed to recognize the full capacity of human imagination (and therefore the Hegelian sublation of the sublime in the beautiful). I maintain that Islamic philosophers, following Avicenna, develop an engagement of the sublime which bypasses the Kantian paradox (imagining the unimaginable) without succumbing to the historicizing of the sublime (*pace* Hegel). Shihāb al-Dīn Yaḥyā Suhrawardī, a prominent expositor of this alternative, which is the subject matter of my conclusion, advances the Avicennan account of the poetic imagination by assigning to the perfected imagination the role of a cognitive faculty that brings into view the objects of an imaginal realm (*'ālam al-mithāl*), between the spiritual and the physical. It is to the imaginal realm that many of the later Islamic philosophers direct their attention and make original contributions to the philosophical enterprise advanced by their formative predecessors. To illustrate this point, I discuss the salient work of the greatest of the later Islamic philosophers, Ṣadr al-Dīn Muḥammad Shīrāzī (Mulla Sadra), and the schools and the traditions that trained him and those that were subsequently influenced by his contribution.

NOTES

¹ Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage, 1979), pp. 14-15.

² *Ibid.*, p. 3.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 272. Said's critique originates in French literary criticism. See, for example, Maxime Rodinson's "The Western Image and Western Studies of Islam," in *The Legacy of Islam*, ed. Joseph Schacht and C. E. Bosworth, 2nd edn. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974), pp. 9-62.

⁴ Muhsin Mahdi, "Orientalism and the Study of Islamic Philosophy," in *Journal of Islamic Studies* 1 (1990), p. 96.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 97.

⁷ Said, *Orientalism*, p. 272.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 326.

⁹ Mahdi, "Orientalism . . .," p. 97.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 97.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 97. In chapter one, I explore and evaluate Mahdi's unique contributions to the study of Islamic Philosophy.

¹² With Michael E. Marmura ("The Islamic Philosophers' Conception of Islam," in *Islam's Understanding of Itself*, ed. R. G. Hovannisian and S. Vryonis, Jr. [Malibu, CA: Undena, 1983], p. 87), I am adopting W. Montgomery Watt's phrase, "the formative period of Islamic thought."

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 88.

¹⁴ R. Arnaldez, "Falsafah," in *The Encyclopedia of Islam*, Vol. II (Leiden: Brill, 1960), p. 71.

¹⁵ See Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, trans. Michael Chase (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995) and *What is Ancient Philosophy?*, trans. Michael Chase (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004). See also Michel Foucault, *History of Sexuality*, vol. 2 & 3, trans. Robert Hurley (NY: Vintage, 1985-86) and his 1980-82 lectures titled *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, trans. Graham Burchell (NY: Picador, 2006).

¹⁶ Here I draw upon John McDowell's reading of ancient ethics in his "Virtue and Reason," reprinted in *Mind, Value, and Reality* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998). This is a view that he also develops in his other ethical writings, such as "Are Moral Requirements Hypothetical Imperatives," and "Values and Secondary Qualities" (reprinted in the same volume).

¹⁷ In his Locke lectures: *Mind and World* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994) and his Woodbridge lectures: "Having the World in View: Sellars, Kant, and Intentionality" [*The Journal of Philosophy*, 95: 9 (1998)], McDowell has attempted to steer a course between the Myth of the Given (e.g., the empiricist's appeal to sense-

data) and the efforts to recoil from the Given into an epistemological coherentism (advocated by philosophers like Rorty and Davidson).

¹⁸ I draw from McDowell's recent debates with Hubert Dreyfus on the importance of Heidegger's phenomenology for contemporary debates in analytical philosophy. The exchange was occasioned by Hubert Dreyfus' presidential address to the American Philosophical Association, "Overcoming the Myth of the Mental: How Philosophers Can Profit from the Phenomenology of Ordinary Experience." *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association* 79: 2 (November, 2005). McDowell's reply and the rest of the exchange is available in *Inquiry* 50: 4 (August 2007).

¹⁹ Hadot and Foucault also pursue the pedagogical dimension of (ancient) philosophy and a concern for the status of exemplars, such as Socrates.

²⁰ I mean scholars such as Jean-François Lyotard, Slavoj Žižek, Jean-Luc Nancy, and Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe.