

Conclusion

The Future Can Only Be Averroist

Human thought is an uninterrupted dialogue between the past and the present, between the present and the future. Any “solution” to the problems of the past, on the theoretical level, implies the knowledge of how to resolve, on the “practical” level, those of the present and the future. We have addressed the question of the relationship of our ancestors to Greek philosophy. But how do we today define our relationship to our ancestors’ philosophy, i.e., the Arab-Islamic philosophy?

This question takes us back to the initial problem: the search for a workable method to assume our relationship to *tradition*. In the first part of this essay, we discussed the problem at the level of method and of vision, i.e., the understanding of our *tradition* that we needed to construct for ourselves. We must now pose the problem anew, but at the level of “theoretical practice,” that is to say the investment of tradition in our intellectual activity today.

It goes without saying that these two aspects are linked: the type of understanding of tradition that we construct will directly determine the type of investment that we will make of it. Similarly, the function that we would want to ascribe to it will in turn affect the way we construct our conception. Yet, there are limits beyond which we cannot go in this investment process. What we can invest in today’s intellectual activity is not *tradition* as a whole but rather tradition as survival. Let us then ask ourselves what has survived from the Arab-Islamic philosophy.

Problems are never more complicated and more abstruse than when they are ill-posed. Contemporary Arab thought, for which the problem of the relationship to tradition has always been an essential



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element, has never been able to go beyond this problematic because it has always ill-posed the problems that are associated with it.

To pose the problem of the relationship to tradition while asking “what there would be to take or to leave” from this totality which is tradition, as a body of knowledge, of information, of ideas, of debates, of interpretations that are consigned in the ancient books, printed or handwritten, is an erroneous approach, lacking in objectivity and in historical perspective. For tradition is not a merchandise produced at once, outside of history. It is indeed a part of history and it is thought in motion, made up of thought momentums at given stages of its development. It is thus made-up of successive moments that eliminate or complement each other; moments of thought that reflect a reality, express it and act upon it, positively or negatively. The scientific treatment of tradition must hence operate on two levels: understanding and investing. On the first level, we must effectively ensure that we can assimilate our tradition as a whole, in its diverse trends and throughout its historical stages. On the investing level, however, we must concentrate more on the highest moment of its progress. To wonder what there is to borrow from the Mu'tazilites, the Shi'ites, the Kharijites, the Ash'arites or the philosophers is an ahistorical attitude that locks those who adopt it inside their own vicious circles. The gains from tradition with which we want to interact—perhaps the only ones with which interaction is possible today—are not the ones our ancestors experienced, which are currently preserved in books, but rather what has survived from them, i.e., that which can still answer some of our present concerns and can be developed and enriched so as to take us into the future... Authenticity (*asala*) for us is just that.

But what has survived from our tradition?

It is no longer that difficult to clearly answer this question after our discussion of the components of our philosophical tradition, which enabled us to emphasize the need to distinguish between the cognitive and the ideological contents. The cognitive content of Is-



lamic philosophy, like that of any philosophy from before the contemporary era, is in a large part a dead subject incapable of reviving. It is a different matter for the ideological content, which is capable of having "another life" that goes on throughout the ages, in different forms. The cognitive content of a philosophy, no matter which one, lives only once, then dies forever, without any hope of resuscitation. Moslem philosophers, like all medieval philosophers, founded their philosophy upon the physical sciences of Aristotle. The cognitive content of this entire philosophy collapsed with the advent of modern science. Descartes thus founded his philosophy upon Galileo's physics, to the shaping of which he had himself contributed. But the cognitive content of Cartesianism ceased to be operational with the advent of Newton's physics. Then Kant founded his own philosophy upon the latter, which philosophy became in turn outdated when Newtonian physics became outdated with the advent of the quantum theory, the theory of relativity, etc. The cognitive content is science and science has its history. Yet, the history of science is, as Bachelard said, the history of the errors of science. That is why the cognitive content of any philosophy dies once and for all, and forever: because it enters history as a sum of "errors." It collapses and dies without hope of resuscitation, because error has no history.

It is quite another thing for the ideological content of philosophy: it is in itself an ideology, and the time of ideology is the "possible-future," a future which ideology lives in the present, but in the form of a dream. By nature, dreams ignore the parameters of space and time, contrary to science, whose time is the "current present," which it [science] lives in its present. When its present expires, it eliminates itself to be born again in a new current present. This is why we, people of the twentieth century, can be in agreement with certain ideological aspirations of philosophers from the past, but not necessarily with the cognitive subject matter they brought into play in their philosophy. This subject matter disturbs us and prevents us from adhering to their discourse, ideologically and philosophically.



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After these theoretical considerations, let us analyze the ideological content of the Arab-Islamic philosophy, in order to establish the distinction between what is permanently dead within this content and what is likely to relive “another life.” We previously stated that the time of ideology was the “possible future,” having placed the future between quotations marks. Now, we must lift the siege from around this future. The future of ideology is not univocal: there are ideologies that live their “future” (their dream) in the past; and others that live it in the time to-come. Only the latter ideology is likely to experience another life, because it is in itself a momentum toward this life.

How do we differentiate between these two types?

Here again, we must call upon historical vision and historical consciousness. Tradition is an integral part of history and, hence, of historical “becoming”. If we previously stressed the fact that only the ideological content had a history—to the exclusion of the cognitive one—, it is because the ideological content partakes of the process of society’s evolution. Thus in general, it reflects “becoming” upon the specific domain of thought, which will consequently acquire its own autonomy of “becoming,” its own process of eliminating past moments by subsequent ones. Therefore, an ideology living its “future” in the past is an ideology still living one of those moments already eliminated by the process of a “becoming” that is specific to the thinking with which this ideology is associated. On the other hand, an ideology that aims its future toward the time-to-come is one that lives one or several moments not yet eliminated by the process of “becoming.”

As we consider our philosophical tradition in light of these remarks, it will be easy to recognize what has survived from it. Having irrevocably discarded its cognitive content, let us now consider “becoming” from its ideological content. We noted two moments for such “becoming”, the second one having eliminated the first and broken with it. The first moment is that of al-Farabi’s dream experi-



enced by Avicenna in his own way. The second moment, expanded by Averroes,¹ is that of Avempace's dream. What survives from our tradition cannot possibly be associated with the first moment, since the latter was historically eliminated by the second moment. It is history which tells all this. Hence, any person having lived, or still living, the Avicennian moment after the advent of Averroes is condemned to live intellectually on the margin of history. Consequently, we, post-Averroes Arabs, have lived on the margin of history (in inertia and decline), because we kept clinging to the Avicennian moment after Ghazali granted it currency within "Islam." As for Europeans, they went on to live the very history that we had exited, because they knew how to appropriate Averroes and how to keep living the Averroes moment to this day.

The survival of our philosophical tradition, i.e., what is likely to contribute to our time, can only be Averroist. Let us examine then in the following passages the remnants of Averroism that are likely to be invested in our intellectual activity today.

1. Averroism entered history because it broke with that Avicennianism of "oriental" philosophy that Avicenna himself had chosen and that was then adopted partly by Ghazali and partly by Suhrawardi of Aleppo. The scholars and jurisconsults who firmly espoused Islam's original character, its Arab character, always rejected Sufism, in which they saw a foreign commodity imported from Persia and incompatible with the Muslim religion, which was based on a simple and spontaneous belief. When Avicenna reconstructed the pagan-based Harranian emanationist metaphysics, and coated it with an Islamic varnish, Ghazali borrowed it from him to make of it an alternative to Aristotelian philosophy. But as a partisan of the Ash'arite doctrine, Ghazali spread this Avicennian "oriental" commodity as "Sunni Sufism." That was an incoherent and contradictory appellation since the notion of Sufism was absent from the hadith. The Prophet never was a mystic; instead, he lived a normal life, and the

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norms upon which Islam was based during his time were by no means in favor of “gloom” or esoterism, but rather in favor of a reasonable realism. The discourse of the Koran was one of reason and not one of “gnosticism” or illuminism.

Averroes knew how to break with Avicenna. Therefore, let us borrow this “rupture” from him—since one has to use this word—and in turn break with Avicenna’s gnostic spirit decisively and definitively, and launch a decisive battle against it.

2. Averroes not only broke with the Avicennian and gnostic spirit. He also broke with the manner in which theoretical thinking—both theological and philosophical—had addressed the critical relationship between religion and philosophy. He rejected the theologians way of reconciling between reason and transmission, just as he rejected the way of the philosophers who sought the fusion of religion into philosophy and vice versa.

Why is that?

Because the theologians had appropriated the hereafter (religion to their segmentarist-atomist reason, and from that conception of religion that they had constructed, they fashioned for themselves certain idea of reason. Hence, they conceived the invisible world by analogy with the tangible world. As a result, they produced innovative interpretations and projected on the tangible world element that allowed them to produce analogies with their idea of the invisible world, thus distorting reality and obstructing the activity of reason.

Philosophers had appropriated religion to “science”—represented during their time by the metaphysical cognitive legacy of Greece—and they had reduced science to the conception of religion that they had constructed for themselves. They had thus narrowed science down to the level of their understanding of religion, instead of making the latter evolve in tandem with scientific evolution.

Averroes broke with that conception of the relationship between religion and science and the one between religion and philosophy. Let us then reconsummate this break—since we definitely have to use the term—and let us cease wanting to explain religion through science and abusively link one to the other; because science is in constant mutation, incessantly contradicting and surpassing itself. And let us by the same token cease wanting to subordinate science to religion. Science needs no external restrictions whatsoever because it sets its own limits for itself.

3. Averroes did not limit himself to “rupture.” He also offered the possibility of a “carry-on spirit.” Rupture—the way we mean it herein—comes about only through efforts to carry-on with a spirit that is likely to abrogate and eliminate the old one. The “carry-on spirit” proposed by Averroes as far as the relationship between religion and philosophy is concerned, is likely to be re-invested so as to establish a dialogue between our tradition and universal contemporary thought, a dialogue that would bring us the authenticity and contemporaneity to which we aspire. Averroes preached a religious understanding of a religion that did not draw from beyond the very data of religion, and a philosophical understanding of a philosophy based exclusively on the principles and the intents of philosophy. It is this method that, according to Averroes, was to generate the renewal of both philosophy and religion. Let us again borrow this process from him to identify a way to assume both our relationship to tradition and our relationship to universal contemporary thought, which represents for us what Greek philosophy represented for Averroes. Let us assume our relationship to tradition by understanding it in its proper context, and let us assume our relationship to the universal contemporary thought in the same way. This would enable us to have a scientific and objective understanding of both and would help us invest them jointly along the same perspective: to give a basis to our authenticity within modernity and to give a basis to modernity



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within authenticity. Averroes did indeed pose the problem of the relationship to the "Other," which, for us today, is the problem of "contemporaneity" (while to Averroes in the past, the "Other" were the sages of ancient Greece). He approached the problem in a scientific way that should inspire us greatly today. Averroes established a distinction, within the Other's reason, between the instrument it may represent and the subject matter which it constitutes, i.e., between method and theory. He said about the instrument:

(...) it is clear that for our purposes (i.e., the rational study of beings) we must resort to the theses of our precursors in this field, irrespective of whether or not the latter were of our own faith. One does not ask the instrument, e.g., the knife used in the ritual sacrifice whether or not it belonged to one of our fellow Muslims in order to make a judgment on the validity of the sacrifice. One asks of it only to be of suitable use. By those who are not fellow Muslims, we mean those among the ancient ones who had pondered over these questions long before the birth of Islam. Under the circumstances, since all the laws of reasoning (logic and method) have already been perfectly laid down by the ancient ones, we ought to draw from their books by the handful, to find out what they have said about that. If it happens to be correct, we shall welcome it with open arms; if it were to contain something incorrect, we shall make sure to note it.

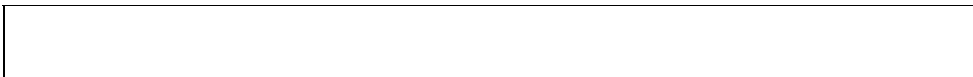
We must not therefore accept the instrument (the method) as imitators but as careful critics. As for the "subject matter," i.e., the theory, we must construct it by ourselves and for ourselves: "We must undertake the study of the beings according to the order and the manner that the theory of demonstrative syllogisms would teach us," but since it is neither possible nor conceivable to simply repeat the experiences of the predecessors and to rediscover what they discovered before, "[and] when we find among predecessors from the ancient nations a well thought-out conception of the universe—consistent



with the conditions required for demonstration—we must examine what they said about it and what they stated in their books. If these things happen to correspond to the truth, we shall gladly welcome them and be grateful to them. If they do not correspond to the truth, we shall make a note of it, warn people against them while excusing their authors...”

Well aware of the universality and historicity of knowledge, Averroes set out to define the way to act when addressing the “the sciences of the ancient ones,” which at that time represented science par excellence. This method is worthy of serving as a model. We can reinvest it to define our relationship to tradition and to universal contemporary thought, knowing how to recognize what is universal in both—and that it is possible for us to reinvest in order to re-establish our specificity—and what is particular, what is circumstantial to an era or to a people, which we must know to enrich our experience and our vision of the world.

These are in my opinion the main elements that survive from Averroism, which we can reinvest to address today’s problems. I shall summarize them in one phrase: the Averroist spirit. In my call to recover the Averroist spirit, I simply mean this: it must be made present in our thought, in our esteem and in our aspirations in the same way that the Cartesian spirit is present in French thought or that the spirit of empiricism, inaugurated by Locke and by Hume, is present in English thought. Indeed if we were to ask about what is left of Cartesianism in France, or of Locke and Hume’s empiricism in England, we would be bound to answer that only one thing has survived in each case. We could refer to it as the Cartesian spirit in France—providing specificity to French thought, or the empiricist spirit in England—providing specificity to English thought. Let us therefore construct our specificity upon what is ours and is particular rather than foreign to us. The Averroist spirit is adaptable to our era because it agrees with it on more than one point: rationalism, realism, axiomatic method and critical approach. To adopt the



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Averroist spirit is to break with the Avicennian “oriental” spirit, a gnostic one that promotes *gloom* thinking.

Some Arab intellectuals, who seem to maintain much closer ties with European culture than with the Arab-Islamic tradition, have wondered about how to make Arab thought assimilate the benefits of liberalism “before the Arab world even reaches, let alone undergoes the liberalism phase.” Liberalism, for them, is “that school of thought that prevailed in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and by way of which the rising European bourgeoisie fought feudal regimes and ideas.” Such is the problematics posed by Abdallah Laroui, Zaki Naguib Mahmoud, Magid Fakhri and others, some following the French and Cartesian point of view, the others following the Anglo-Saxon empiricist and positivist point of view, each according to the type of European “tradition” that represents his own cultural and intellectual frame of reference. We think that it is totally erroneous to pose the problem this way. Because when we ask the Arabs to assimilate European liberalism, we are in effect asking them to incorporate into their consciousness a legacy that is foreign to them with the themes that it raises, the problematics that it poses, and the languages in which it is expressed; a legacy which therefore does not belong in their history. A nation can only bring back to its consciousness a tradition that belongs to it, or something that pertains to that tradition. As for the human legacy in general, with its universal attributes, a nation always experiences it within its own tradition and not outside of it.

I believe that we ought really to set the problematics as follows: how can contemporary Arab thought regain and reinvest the rationalist and the “liberal” gains from its own tradition—in a similar perspective to that within which they were invested the first time: the struggle against feudalism, gnosticism, fatalism, and the will to found a city of reason and justice, to build the free, democratic and socialist Arab city?



This is not a narrowly nationalistic position. We do not in any way want to minimize the great accomplishments of [hu]mankind. We simply think that those accomplishments will always remain foreign to us if we do not invest them following a scientific method that is well-suited to the needs of our historical conditions, in order to solve our own problems. To that end, we must first provide a basis to those great accomplishments within our thought by comparing them to similar accomplishments in our tradition. Here, as elsewhere, our only chance to read our future no longer in the past—or the present—of others, but to construct it from our own reality, from the specificity of our history and the constituents of our personality, is historical consciousness.

¹ The parallel established by the author between Al-Farabi's "dream" and Avempace's must be understood as follows: in his *Tadbiir al-mutawahhid* (The Regimen of the Recluse), cf. footnote 28, chapter 5), Avempace had somewhat laid the foundation stone for a philosophical "city" in Al-Andalus, comparable to Al-Farabi's "virtuous city" in the East. But that city belonged to the "solitary" philosopher, as philosophy in his time was both marginalized and persecuted in the Muslim West. It was Averroes who brought it out of isolation and made it emerge to the world, thus founding the city of reason, a reason under whose aegis this world and the hereafter, philosophy and religion, should be placed. Al-Farabi's philosophical city of the East met an opposite fate. Founded for this world, it was replaced by the "illuminist" Avicenna under the aegis of a spiritualism that governed this world as well as the hereafter.