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Arab-Islamic Philosophy
A CONTEMPORARY CRITIQUE

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Author's Introduction

To Seek Our Modernity by Rethinking Our Tradition (*turath*)

Voices are clamoring here and there to question, in one way or another, the Arab researchers' concern over tradition: why all the interest in tradition? Is this not an intellectual regression? Some even go as far as referring to a pathological phenomenon, a "collective neurosis" that suddenly hit Arab intellectuals following the 1967 debacle, and caused them to turn backwards in the direction of "tradition." Those who hold such an opinion raise the objection that the interest in the topic of "tradition" diverts minds from the exigencies of modernity. Under their delusion, they believe that the Arab-Islamic tradition, and for that matter any other tradition, is nothing but an object from the past that should be conveniently relegated into the past, and its study carefully reserved—if ever deemed useful—for the sole care of those rare scholars who specialize in things of the past. Interest in tradition should in this case remain cloistered within the walls of academic institutions or the pages of specialized journals. In other words, the "superfluous" interest in tradition of Arab intellectuals would inevitably express itself at the expense of their interest in "modernity."

But I believe that this point of view does not sufficiently take into account the specificity of those problems posited within Arab culture. Indeed, what makes the latter quite distinct, from the time of "codification," or recording, (*ʿasr al-tadwin*)¹ to the present time, is the fact that its internal dynamics does not express itself in the production of new discursive forms but rather in the reproduction

of the old. Beginning in the seventeenth century of the hijra, this reproductive activity was interrupted, giving way to a state of inertia, of withdrawal and of repetition. Since then, a certain notion of—what I have called—“an understanding of tradition confined within tradition” settled into the Arab-Islamic culture and is prevalent to this day. Under these conditions, modernity would perhaps consist in going beyond this understanding of tradition that is confined within tradition, in order to establish a modern understanding and a contemporary view of tradition. Modernity, therefore, is not to refute tradition or break with the past, but rather to upgrade the manner in which we assume our relationship to tradition at the level of what we call “contemporaneity,” which, for us, means catching up with the great strides that are being made worldwide. True, modernity must find the substantiation of its theses within its own discourse, the discourse of contemporaneity, but must not be a “fundamentalism” that clings to some inspiring sources/foundations. Alas, modernity in contemporary Arab thought has not gone that far yet. It remains limited—in the conception of its theses—to getting its inspiration from European modernity, from which it draws the rationale and the “foundations” to its discourse. Now, even if we admit that European modernity currently represents “universal” modernity, its very membership within the specific cultural history of Europe—even as a figure of opposition—makes European modernity incapable of analyzing Arab cultural reality, whose history was shaped far away from it. European modernity is foreign to Arab culture and to its history and could not possibly establish a dialogue that is likely to trigger a movement in its midst. Since European modernity can only engage Arab culture from the outside, it thus pushes its adversary into withdrawal and confinement. This is why our aspiration toward modernity must by necessity base itself on those components of the critical mind that are present within the Arab culture itself, in order to trigger an internal dynamics of change. Modernity, therefore, means first and foremost to develop a modern method and a modern vision of tradition.

We could thus rid our conception of tradition from that ideological and emotional charge that weighs on our conscience and forces us to perceive tradition as an absolute reality that transcends history, instead of perceiving it in its relativity and its historicity.

What is going to ensure the specificity of our modernity will therefore be that part which it will play within contemporary Arab culture. It is indeed its ability to fulfill this part which will make of it a truly "Arab modernity." In fact, there is not *one* single absolute, universal and planetary modernity; rather, there are *numerous* modernities that differ from era to era and from place to place. In other words, modernity is an historical phenomenon, and as such, it remains conditioned by the circumstances within which it manifests itself, and confined within the space-time limitations defined by its *becoming* throughout history. Modernity must therefore differ according to each space and each historical experience, e.g., European modernity is different from either Chinese modernity or Japanese modernity. If in Europe they have come to speak of post-modernism, it is because the very phenomenon of modernity had ceased by the end of the nineteenth century. Modernity was an historical stage born of the Age of Enlightenment (the eighteenth century), which was itself born following the Renaissance (the sixteenth century).

The situation in the Arab world is quite different. Here, the Renaissance, the Age of Enlightenment and modernity are not successive periods that surpass one another; rather, they are intertwined and coexist well within the contemporary era whose beginnings go back about one hundred years. When we speak of modernity, we must not therefore understand it as do the European intellectuals and researchers for whom modernity is a stage that represents the transcending of the Age of Enlightenment and of the Renaissance, the latter having in fact flourished thanks to the "resurrection" of the "tradition" of Antiquity and thanks to a particular way of subscribing to this tradition. Modernity, as it manifests itself in our present situation, is at the same time the Renaissance, the Age of

Enlightenment and the *transcending* of these two periods. All expressions of modernity will have to be centered around rationality and democracy. These two principles are not merely borrowed objects but concrete practices that answer to specific rules. As long as we have not applied rationality to our own tradition, exposed the sources and denounced the manifestations of despotism in this tradition, we will most assuredly remain incapable of building a modernity of our own through which we can engage in the "universal" modernity, no longer as patients but as agents.

A number of people who extol ^{or have believed} modernity may object that, as far as they are concerned, "universal modernity" as such is like a presence that derives its norms from itself. Though I doubt very much that such a situation, i.e., that of an intellectual who would live a modernity that would only derive its norms from within itself—is even possible, we would conceivably allow such a thesis if the question was only to resolve individual problems. Speaking in this fashion, this intellectual is thinking according to his own criteria and is narrowing down the problem to the data of his personal experience. Some might judge this position to be in effect a modernist one in so far as modernity consecrates individuality as a value in itself, that } modernity is "individualistic." Unfortunately, this is a false conception of modernity, for if it were the case, these intellectuals would not even feel the need to criticize the interest of others in tradition. They would have no need for the "other" if modernity were in fact purely individualistic.

In fact, modernity can be an individual position only in as far as it is tied to a rise of the critical mind and of creativity within a given culture and in so far as these two activities are performed by individuals as such and not as representatives of the group. By the same token, modernity is not a negative attitude, nor is it an attitude of withdrawal and retirement within oneself. Despite the status it confers on the individual as a value in and of itself, modernity is therefore not an end in itself. It happens of necessity for the sake of some-

one other than the self and in view of all the phenomena of the culture from which it has emerged. Modernity for the sake of modernity is an absurd idea. Modernity is a message and an impetus of change aimed at reviving mentalities, the norms of thinking and of appreciation. Now, since the dominant culture with which we are confronted is a traditional culture, it is above all towards tradition that the modernism discourse must be directed, so that we can effect a rereading of it and from it create a modern-day vision. Only in this way, will the modernist discourse be able to affect the large majority of the educated population, perhaps even the population as a whole, and thus fulfill its mission. As to the narcissist retirement within oneself, it can only lead to a suicidal exile and to self marginalization.

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Some of our local intellectuals who claim "modernity" invoke democracy but they manage to reduce its magnitude to the mere demand of individual freedom. Simultaneously, these very persons reject rationality because it imposes "order" and puts limits on freedom. By so doing, they simply imitate certain trends of the European modernity, unaware, or pretending to be unaware, of the enormous gap that separates our condition from that of the West. It is true that in the industrialized West, rationalism has invaded and taken over all facets of individual and collective life, singly dominating human relations, the conception of the world, thought and behavior. The effects of a rational organizing of the economy, the bureaucracy, the state-apparatus, and the institutions ended up being reflected in the totality of the individual and the collective existence. The technological and computer revolutions have imposed their systematic character on all aspects of human life, thus seriously infringing upon the ethical specificity of man, perhaps even his specificity as a free being, or rather, of a being whose freedom is conditioned by his performance. Furthermore, Western rationalism has, in numerous domains, gone beyond the bounds of its own principles. It provided science and technology—which from the very



rationalist point of view should have been made to serve human freedom and the right of nations (human rights)—with incredible tools for mass destruction and for the extermination of individuals, and further enabled these tools to increase and diversify their performance. Hence, the natural and justifiable human reaction, from the viewpoint of modernity, was to rise against this irrational absurdity that culminates at the (of) peak of modern rationalism. This revolt led some, very often for personal reasons—such as their failure of self affirmation within society—to drift away with mystical, religious or atheistic currents which made them adopt hostile positions against all forms of rationality.

Among those of us who have claimed modernity, some have espoused this irrationalist position, for the same reasons previously given, while nothing in the Arab reality can justify it. Today, the Arab world indeed suffers from the hegemony of another type of irrationality, one that is totally different from Europe's irrationalism that resulted from the European rationalism. It is a medieval irrationality, with all the consequences it implies, namely the persistence of the relationship of governor-governed where the latter, reduced to the condition of a herd, proceed with their intellectual and social lives under their shepherd's staff. Only rationalism can stand, as an effective weapon, against this backward irrationality. How do we achieve modernity without the help of reason and rationality? How do we achieve a renaissance without the help of a renewed reason? Hostility to and attacks against rationalism, in a situation like ours, can only be inspired by an irrational obscurantism. He who engages in such obscurantism inevitably condemns himself to blindness. Reason is a beacon that we must not only light in the middle of darkness but also learn to carry around well into broad daylight.

This is the conception of modernity that we ought to define in light of our present. Modernity is above all rationality and democracy. A rational and critical approach to all aspects of our exist-

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dition emerges as one of the aspects that is most rooted in us—is the only true modernist option. Tradition is therefore dictated by the necessity to reach to tradition to the level of modernity, in order to give it a foundation within our “authen-

period (AH second & third centuries/ AD eighth & ninth century) when scholars took to the systematic codification (*tadwin*) of knowledge, e.g., prophet's sayings (*hadith*), juridical tradition, *fiqh*, pre-Islamic and Islamic historical traditions, etc.



PART ONE

A DIFFERENT READING OF THE TRADITION DISCOURSE

Chapter I

The Present Shortcomings

The Fundamentalist Reading

“How do we regain the greatness of our civilization? How do we resuscitate our tradition?” These two questions closely overlap and, in their interference, make up one of the three major axes around which revolves the problematics of modern and contemporary Arab thought.

The dialogue surrounding this axis and the dialectical order that it implies are set between the past and the future. As for the present, it is not present, not only because we refuse it, but also because the past is very much present to the point that it infringes upon the future and absorbs it. Acting as the present, the past is conceived as a means to affirm and to rehabilitate one's identity.

The main reason that modern Arab consciousness affirms itself in this way is perfectly known and acknowledged. It concerns the challenge of the Western world in all its shapes. This identity affirmation, as would be the case for any individual or any society, has taken the form of a retreat to backward positions that would serve as ramparts and as defense positions. Such is the attitude held by the fundamentalist view of modern and contemporary Arab thought. This view, more than any other, sets out to resuscitate tradition, which it invested within the perspective of an heavily ideological reading, which aims at projecting a “radiant” future—fabricated by ideology—upon the past and, by the same token, “demonstrating” that “what took place in the past could be achieved in the future.”

Originally, this view appeared as a religious and political movement—both reformist and tolerant: that of Jamal al-Din Afghan^① and of Muhammad ‘Abduh² This movement called for renewal (*tajdid*) against “imitative conformism” (*taqlid*). The rejection of imitative conformism must be herein understood with a particular meaning: i.e., “to eliminate” a whole apparatus of knowledge, of methods and of concepts inherited from the “era of decline” while being careful not to “be caught in the toils” of Western thought. As for “renewal,” it was meant to create a “new” interpretation of the dogma and of the religious laws that rest directly upon the foundations of Islam. It was a question of actualizing *religion*, to make it contemporary and to make of it the substance of our renaissance.

It is this fundamentalist movement that brandished the banner of “authenticity” (*asala*), of one’s attachment to the roots and the defense of one’s identity, notions that must mean Islam itself: “the true Islam,” not the Islam presently practiced by Muslims.

We are, therefore, concerned with a polemical ideological reading that was justifiable at the time when it was indeed a means to affirm one’s identity and to reestablish confidence. It is an expression of the usual defense mechanism and would perhaps continue to be legitimate, provided it remained a part of the global effort of catching up with the times. In fact, quite the opposite occurred. The means became the end: hastily reconstructed to serve as a jumping board to “glory,” the past became the *raison d’être* for the renaissance project. Henceforth, the future would somehow become subjected to a reading that used the past as a tool of interpretation, not the past that actually took place, but “the past as it should have been.” But since such past existed nowhere else but in the imagination and the affective domain, the concept of the future-to-come was always unable to distance itself from the representation of the future-past. The fundamentalist lives in this representation with all his heart, not just as a romantic ideal, but also as a live reality. We would thus find him resuscitating ideological tensions from the past and implicating

himself in them body and soul with the fervor of a militant. Not satisfied with adversaries from the past, he goes looking for some even into the present and the future.

The fundamentalist reading of tradition is an ahistorical one and can only provide one type of understanding of tradition: an understanding of tradition that is locked inside tradition and absorbed by a tradition that it cannot in return include: it is tradition repeating itself.

The reading of the religious fundamentalists proceeds from a religious conception of history. This conception treats history as a moment that is expanded into the present, a time that is stretched inside the affective life, a witness to the perpetual struggle and the eternal suffering endured for the sake of affirming one's identity. And since we are told that it is both faith and religious conviction that define this identity, fundamentalism posits the spiritual factor as the sole engine of history. As for the other factors, they are considered as secondary, depending upon the spiritual, or disfiguring the "true" course of history.

The Liberal Reading

"How do we live our era? How do we assume our relationship to tradition?" These are two other questions that equally overlap closely to make up, through their interference, the second axis around which revolves the problematics of modern and contemporary Arab thought. The debate around this axis and the dialectical order it implies *are set* this time between the present and the past. Not at all our own present but the Western European present which asserts itself as a "subject-ego" through which we view our era and all humankind, and therefore constitutes the "substance" of any possible future. This course of action ends up being projected on our very past and imprinting its mark on it.

The Arab liberal perception of the Arab-Islamic tradition stems from the present that it lives in, i.e., that of the West. The liberal reading is therefore European-style, which means that it adopts a European frame of reference and hence sees in tradition only what the Europeans see in it.

It is this group that espouses the orientalist discourse whose influence has been far reaching among certain Arab academics and has instilled in them an orientalist *habitus*. Its followers claim to support the scientific method, objectivity and "strict" neutrality. This reading insists that it is "disinterested" and "without any ideological intentions whatsoever."

The upholders of this *habitus* claim to be interested only in understanding and in knowledge: if indeed they do borrow the "scientific" method from the orientalists, they firmly reject their ideology. But when they say this, they forget, or pretend to forget, that along with the method they also adopt the vision. After all, are vision and method not inseparable?

The viewpoint of the orientalist method consists in confronting cultures, in reading one tradition through another. Hence the philological method which claims to bring everything back to its "origin." When it comes to reading the Arab-Islamic tradition, we would simply reconstruct it back to its Jewish, Christian, Persian, Greek, Indian, (and other) "origins."

The orientalist reading claims to want only to understand, nothing more. But what does it really seek to understand? Does it seek to understand to what extent the Arabs have "understood" the "glorious heritage" of their predecessors? Why? Is it because the contribution of the Arabs, who were the intermediaries between the Greek and the modern (European) civilizations, had no value other than having played this role? The future in the Arab past having consisted in the assimilation of a foreign past (mostly Greek Culture) into the Arab past, hence by analogy, the future in the Arab "be-

coming" should consist in its assimilation into the European present-past.

The modernist theses of the contemporary and modern Arab liberal thinking thus voice a dangerous identity alienation, not only that identity which is deep-rooted in a backward present, but also, and this is even worse, the identity that carries history and civilization.

The Marxist Reading

"How do we achieve our revolution? How do we restore our tradition?" These again are two questions that closely overlap and constitute, through their interference, the third and last of those main axes around which revolves the problematics of modern and contemporary Arab thought.

The debate around this axis and the dialectical order that it implies are set between the future and the past. But this is true only because both are still at the planning stage: i.e., the plan for a revolution yet to be achieved and the plan to restore a tradition capable of prodding the revolution and of becoming its foundation.

The relationship here is a dialectical one: we expect revolution to enable us to restore our tradition, and we expect tradition to contribute to our revolution. The thinking of the modern Arab left still wanders inside this vicious circle, searching for a "method" and attempting to come out.

Why?

Because it does not follow the dialectical method as a method *to be applied*, but as one that is *already applied*, whereby the Arab-Islamic cultural heritage "would have" to be the reflection of class struggle, on the one hand, and an arena of confrontation between materialism and idealism, on the other. The task of the leftist reading would hence consist in pointing out the parties involved in this double conflict and in defining their (respective) positions. Realiz-

ing its inability to accomplish its task as it "should," the leftist thinking, worried and troubled, begins to blame the situation on "the absence of a true narrative of Arab history," or to rationalize the difficulty to analyze the extreme complexity that characterizes the events of our history. Nevertheless, if some adherents to this movement insist on arbitrarily minimizing these difficulties, it is at the price of tracing historical reality over theoretical schema. Thus, unable to detect traces of a "class struggle" within this history, they invoke "historical conspiracy" and when they cannot find any scientific "materialism" in it, they then speak of an immature materialism.

This reading of the Arab-Islamic tradition by the Arab "left" leads, as a result, to a Marxist fundamentalism. It is an attempt to borrow from the founding fathers of Marxism their ready-made dialectical method, as if the goal were to prove the soundness of the ready-made method instead of applying it.

This is the reason why this reading has proven to be hardly productive.

¹ Jamal al-Din Afghani (died 1897). Born in Asadabad, Iran. After pursuing traditional religious studies, he went on numerous voyages throughout the whole world. He lived in Egypt where he exerted a major influence over the local intelligensia among whom he counted a disciple by the name of Muhammad 'Abduh. He was the founder of a reformist and modernist trend that was dedicated to the emancipation of the Muslim world. This movement came to be known as the *salafi* (or those who go back to the forefathers). According to him, the ultimate "takeoff" [of this movement] was to result from a combination of the positive contributions of European modernity and a purified Islamic tradition.

The Present Shortcomings

² Muhammad 'Abduh (1849-1905). Born in Mahallat Nasr, Egypt. After studying at the religious university of Al-Azhar, he launched his reform movement at the instigation of Afghani. He stood against the reactionary theologians and gathered many disciples around him. He became grand mufti of Egypt and reformed the religious instruction at Al-Azhar by introducing modern disciplines.

Chapter II

For a Scientific Critique of Arab Reason

In this brief overview of the most widely known readings of tradition within contemporary Arab thinking, what is important to us is not so much the defended "theses," whether adopted or "conceived" by these or those parties, but the mode of thinking that they all follow, i.e., the unconscious "mental act" that governs them. A critique that is unfamiliar with the cognitive ground upon which its subject stands remains an ideological critique of ideology and cannot therefore produce anything but ideology. What would meet the requirements of a scientific option would be a critique that would address the theoretical mode of production, i.e., the "mental act." It is a critique that would pave the way to a detached scientific reading.

If, within such perspective, we consider the three readings succinctly discussed above, we will find that from the epistemological point of view, i.e., from the point of view of the theoretical mode of functioning where all three originate, we can fault them for two major weaknesses: a weakness in method and a weakness in vision.

From the point of view of method, these readings lack the slightest necessary objectivity. From the point of view of vision, they suffer from a lack of historical perspective.

The lack of historical vision and the lack of objectivity are two closely related characteristics which influence any thought that is subjected to the tutelage of one element of the equation that it is attempting to pose: indeed any thought which, because it is incapable of becoming independent, seeks to compensate by delegating to some of the questions with which it is concerned the yardstick-role for evaluating the others. The subject then becomes absorbed into the object and the object takes the place of the subject. The

latter, or what is left of it, rushes to take refuge in a remote past, seeking support from a founding ancestor, through whom and thanks to whom it can recover some self-esteem. Modern and contemporary Arab thought is part of such thinking and that is why it remains on the whole fundamentalist in its leaning, and its various schools and tendencies are in fact distinguishable only by the type of "founding ancestor" behind whom they take refuge.

Why does the fundamentalist movement permeate the whole of contemporary Arab thinking?

Thanks to the reading proposed here, we are able to observe this tendency and to trace its origins, so true is it that the rigorous and methodical examination of a subject of reading may have as its primary outcome inciting readers to revise their working tools. Let us then state what we have remarked as an indispensable introduction to the reading we are proposing.

The three readings that we have just discussed are fundamentalist, and as such they do not differ much, epistemologically speaking. All three are based upon the same reasoning mode, which the ancient Arab scholars called "analogy of the unknown after the known" (*qiyas al-gha'ib 'ala al-shahid*). And so, no matter what framework is being considered, be it religious, nationalistic, liberal or leftist, each one possesses a "known" (*shahid*) over which it will trace an "unknown" (*gha'ib*). The *unknown* in this case is the "future" as it is conceived or dreamed of by the adherents to these schools. The *known* is the first part to the double question that they all ask (e.g., for the fundamentalist movement "the greatness of our civilization", etc.).

How does this analogy work? We have no doubt that the use of analogy of the *unknown* after the *known* was once a scientific method, as long as it satisfied certain validity conditions. This method was indeed used by grammarians and jurists in their prodigious scientific work that led to the codification of the Arabic language and of the religious laws. It was borrowed by theologians who further en-

riched it, thanks to their debates and their terminology. It was also used by physicists who, by incorporating it in their experimental work, further added to its rigor and to its fruitfulness. In the Arab-Islamic context, it stands out as the scientific method par excellence. Scholars of all disciplines contributed to its formulation and to its codification and defined its limitations and its validity conditions. The essential conditions that guarantee the validity of analogy, as they were decreed by these scholars, may be narrowed down to the following two principles:

- analogy between two terms is only valid if they are of the same nature;
- analogy between two terms is only valid if both terms, being of the same nature, share some common element that is considered primarily a component of one and the other.

To find this "substantial component," we must resort to "detailed examination" (*sabr*) and to "analysis" (*taqsim*). Analysis consists in analyzing each one of the terms separately, i.e., enumerating all their qualities and characteristics so as to note what they possess in common. As for detailed examination, it consists in reviewing these shared qualities and characteristics so as to establish which ones are components of the substance and of the reality of both terms. Analysis represents an analytical procedure while detailed examination is a method of review and verification that somewhat corresponds to Francis Bacon's "crucial experience."

That methodological approach was thus a rigorous and, as much as possible, a cautious one. But, because of the preponderance that it acquired and of the great predilection with which it was utilized, it ended up being popularized to the point where people became progressively less careful about its validity conditions. And so, the casual use of an expression like "deduce the rest..." ultimately resulted in a dispensation from any depth in research. That technique in analogy

remained so deeply anchored in the exercise of Arab reason that it became the sole "mental act" on which the production of knowledge has rested.

For example, within jurisprudence (*fiqh*), scholars tended to abuse analogy to the point where it became impossible for them to strictly abide by its validity conditions: case-applications (cases-in-point) of the sources/foundations¹ became adopted as sources from which new case-applications (cases-in-point) were deduced and in turn transformed into sources. This way, analogical reasoning became a mechanical operation such that it was difficult, if not impossible, to submit it to the exigencies of "detailed examination" and to "analysis." In the area of dialectical theology (*kalam*),² as far as the theologians were concerned, what they called "analogical reasoning" (*istidlal bi al-shahid 'ala al-gha'ib*) remained always unfounded. Jurists were able to base their practice of analogy on a common rule—stating that the finality of any legal opinion (*hukm*) had to be "the consideration of the common good and the removal of prejudice"—a practice that allowed them to share a common base for their debates and their controversies. Theologians, on the other hand, who were unable to agree on a comparable rule, singly resorted to their own ways to justify their respective analogies. Each one then abusively assigned to "*in praesentia* referents" (known) certain qualities for the sole purpose of justifying their analogical connection with "*in absentia* referents" (unknown), thus altering, according to the circumstances, the "contents" and the manner of "how to contain." The result of this was to prolong the polemics ad infinitum without any benefit whatsoever. As for grammarians, even if, to justify their procedures, they were able to agree on a common rule affirming that the Arabic language is essentially characterized by a "fluidity of expression," they too accumulated analogies. All things considered, their work became an end in itself, therefore deviating from its primary function, i.e., to codify the language, and in the process complicating to

excess this language which was originally "simple" and "spontaneous."

Indeed, during the final stages of its development, the practice of analogy by grammarians, jurists and theologians ended up "snowballing" and becoming deeply rooted in the structure of the Arab reason, both as a mode of thinking and as a principle of "activity," thus giving way to the mechanical and unconscious practice of analogy. And if on top of this we consider that the cultural activity at the time of the "decline" was almost exclusively limited to rolling this "snowball"—since the only scholarly practices left were those of grammar, law and the "science of oneness" (theology)—we would understand how analogy became a mental operation that was practiced unconsciously by the Arabs and therefore without any attention whatsoever to its validity conditions. Subsequently, every unknown object became some analogy's *in absentia* term to which one had to relate an *in praesentia* term (known) at any price. And since the supreme "unknown" is most assuredly the future, and the past alone is known (or at least we believe that it is), the mental activity that sought to resolve the questions of "present" and "past" was limited, almost exclusively, to seeking those elements from the past that could be analogically related to the present. Thus, the practice of "analogy from the known to the unknown"—this scientific method that had been the logical-methodological basis for the Arab-Islamic sciences—turned into a practice that related the new to the old by analogy. Knowing the new would therefore mean "discovering" an old to which we could relate the new.

The influence on the thinking by this mental device, which had become the *modus operandi* within the productive activity of the Arab reason, subsequently produced major consequences:

- the suspension of the notions of tenses and of evolution. Every present became systematically related to the past, as if past, present

and future were in fact a smooth stretch or an immobile time; hence the absence of historical perspective from the Arab thinking;

- the absence of disjunction between the subject and the object. By abandoning "detailed examination" and "analysis," they turned the analogical process into a mental device incapable of focusing on the analysis of analogical terminology or on the examination of its components in order to draw similarities. Analogy was therefore used mechanically, without research or analysis, without examination or critique. The *in praesentia* referent settled in as a witness that is permanently present inside reason and emotions; hence the absence of objectivity from the Arab thinking.

The entirety of modern and contemporary Arab thought is characterized by a lack of historical perspective and objectivity. And that is why it was never able to offer from tradition anything but a fundamentalist reading that treats the past as transcendental and sacral while seeking to extract from it ready-made solutions to the problems of the present and the future. If such a remark perfectly applies to the Islamists, it is no less applicable to the other schools of thought all of which claim their own founding fathers with whom they can find "salvation." All the schools of Arab thought seem to borrow their prospect for renewal from a past-related (or past-based) model: the Arab-Islamic past, the European "past-present," the Russian experience, the Chinese one...and one could extend the list. When facing a new problem, this kind of thought resorts to the mechanical mental exercise of seeking ready-made solutions, relying on a rather poor "foundation."

But this mental exercise is part of a whole, even if it is an essential part of it. This whole is the structure of the Arab reason. It is therefore this reason that we ought to submit to careful analysis and to rigorous critique, before proposing its renewal and its modernization. The Arab reason can only be renewed through a serious questioning of the old and through a global and in-depth critique, to

which I hope to have made a modest contribution with my work:
*Naqd al-'aql al-'Arabi.*³

Methodological Questions of a Disjunctive-“Rejunctive” Reading

(a) About the necessity of a break-away from an understanding of tradition that is locked inside tradition

The foregoing remarks were meant to draw the attention to the fact that the first methodological question that contemporary Arab thought would have to deal with, in its attempts to conceive an “adequate” method of assuming its relationship to tradition, would be—rather than knowing how to choose between such or such ready-made method—examining the mental operation that directs the application of a method, whatever it may be. Before we set out to practice our reason in any fashion, we must submit to a critique.

Today’s Arab reason is a structure within which many components come to play, namely the type of “theoretical practice” (grammatical, juridical, theological) prevalent during the “era of decline,” and the constituent order of which was [the use of] analogy of the unknown after the known as it was practiced without any attention to its conditions of scientific validity. This irresponsible practice of analogy has become the invariable element (the constant) that regulates the movements within the structure of Arab reason. This element stops time, suspends evolution and creates a permanent presence of the past inside the game of thought and inside the affective domain, thus feeding the present with ready-made solutions. The “renewal of Arab thought” or the “modernization of Arab reason” are in my opinion condemned to remain a dead letter as long as we do not volunteer, first of all, to break the structure of this reason that we inherited from the “era of decline.” The first object to de-construct—by means of a severe and rigorous criticism—will have to be the structural constant of this reason, the mechanical practice of anal-

ogy as we described it. To renew Arab reason is, from within our perspective, to effect a decisive epistemological break from the structure of the Arab reason of the "era of decline" and its extension in modern and contemporary Arab thinking.

But what do we mean by "epistemological break"? Let me make it clear right away that the epistemological break by no means takes place at the level of knowledge itself. It has therefore nothing to do with those pernicious theses that call for locking up tradition inside museums or for confining it in a "remote" historical past where its place would be limited. This automatic rejection of tradition is a nonscientific and an ahistorical attitude. It is even paradoxically a residue of the thinking on tradition during the "era of decline." The epistemological break takes place at the level of the mental act, i.e., the unconscious activity that is practiced inside a given cognitive field, according to a given order and by means of given cognitive tools: the concepts. Knowledge remains there. It is the way we treat knowledge that changes; the mental tools utilized; the problematics dictated by this activity and the cognitive field where it becomes organized. When change proves to be too profound and too radical so that we can say that a point of no return has been reached, a point from which we can no longer return to the earlier way of treating knowledge, we will then speak of an epistemological break.

I am by no means calling for a break from tradition—in the usual sense. Rather, we are calling for renouncing traditional understanding of tradition. In other words, we must eliminate in our way of understanding tradition the residues of tradition that have settled within us, and especially that grammatical-juridical-theological analogy—practiced irresponsibly in a nonscientific way. That practice consists in establishing mechanical relationships between the parts and contributes thereby to disrupting the cohesion of the whole and to subtracting the different parts of the whole from their historical-cognitive-ideological setting, in order to move the parts of

this whole into another whole: the field to which belongs the practitioner of analogy, causing a fusion of subject and object. That fusion will lead either to distorting the object, or to unconsciously implicating the subject into the object, and very often to both at the same time. *A fortiori* when it comes to tradition, the consequence of this will be the complete fusion of the subject into the object-tradition.

But it is another thing for the subject to blend in with tradition, another one to go along with tradition; another one to become absorbed by tradition and yet another one to assimilate tradition. The break that we wishfully call for is not one from tradition but from a certain kind of relationship to tradition. This break must transform us from those beings "taken by tradition" to those beings who have embraced their tradition, i.e., personalities with a tradition that happens to make up one of their own components, which will enable the person to find his/her membership inside a larger personality, that of the community which has inherited this tradition.

The question of method does not face us in terms of a choice between a historicist, a functionalist, a structuralist or other method... In fact, each could be perfectly valid in one area without necessarily being so in another. But all remain useless so long as we have not established the necessary disjunction between the object and the subject, so long as the object does not enjoy its own (relative) independence, so that the subject and the object do not interfere in each other's geneses in a direct way. *A fortiori* when the object that we are treating is as eminently a part of the subject—and the subject is as eminently a part of the object—as tradition, the methodological challenge to be noted as a priority is therefore to find the means to disjoin the subject from the object and to disjoin the object from the subject, in order to allow for the rebuilding of their relationship on a new basis.

The question of method is therefore, first and foremost, a question of objectivity.

(b) About disjoining the "read-object" from the "subject-reader": the problem of objectivity

How do we create an objective understanding of tradition? This is in our opinion the essential methodological question that faces contemporary Arab thought in its attempts to devise an adequate scientific method to assume its relationship to tradition. Here, it is not only a question of "objectivity" in the normal sense of the term (the absence of implication of the subject, with its desires and its impulses, into the object). The kind of relationship that exists today between the Arab self and its tradition requires that we understand the problem of objectivity from these two frameworks:

- the framework of the relationship of subject versus object, in which case objectivity shall consist in disjoining the object from the subject;
- the framework of the relationship of object versus subject, in which case objectivity shall consist in disjoining the subject from the object.

The first of these disjunctions is conditioned by the second one.

In the reading of tradition that I am proposing, why do I insist so much on disjunction between subject and object? Because the contemporary Arab "reader" is restricted by his tradition and overwhelmed by his present, which means first of all that tradition absorbs him, thus depriving him of independence and of freedom. From the day of his birth, we have not ceased to instill tradition in him, in the form of a certain vocabulary and certain concepts, of a language and a thought; in the form of fables, legends and imaginary representations, of a certain kind of relationship to things and a certain way of thinking; of certain types of knowledge and certain truths. He receives all this without the slightest critical reaction or

critical mind. It is through these instilled principles that he will conceive of things, and on them will base his opinions and observations. The practice of thought under these circumstances becomes more a game of reminiscence. When the Arab reader pores over the texts of tradition, his reading of these texts will therefore be evocative, rather than exploratory and reasoned.

It is true that a nation cannot think the world except through its tradition. But it is one thing to think through a tradition that has known a continuous evolution into the present, a tradition of which the present is an integral part, a tradition that has been continuously renewed, revised and critiqued. And it is another thing to think through a tradition whose evolution was interrupted centuries ago, a tradition that is removed from the present by the deep gap that progress and science have dug between it and the present.

Let us consider, for example, the relationship of the Arab reader to the Arabic language, which happens to be at the same time the material of the old text and the tool used by the reader to read. This language, remaining the same for over fourteen centuries, has shaped culture and thought without being in return shaped by them. And thus it has continued to be the element most rooted in tradition and in authenticity. Hence its sacral character.

The Arabic language absorbs the reader because it exerts on him a sacral influence and because it is part of his taboos. When, as an adult, he reads an Arabic text, he will read the language rather than the text. What is more shocking for an Arab reader than a discourse where the meaning does not blend in with the style, and where the style does not blend in with the language? Only the usual "abundant" and "eloquent" discourse can guarantee his peace of mind and the satisfaction of an easy enunciation. He likes this fluid discourse where the meaning blends in with the style; this discourse which is easily assimilable because its significance obtains from its musicality.

Furthermore, the Arab reader is overwhelmed by his present so he goes searching, inside his tradition, for some guarantors upon

whom he could project his hopes and his aspirations. As he mistakes dream for reality, he hopes to find in tradition "science," "rationality," "progress," etc., in a word everything that neither dream nor reality can offer him in his present. Because of this reason, we see him rushing the meaning of the words in the direction of expectations. By picking certain things along the way and turning his back on the others, he therefore breaks the unity of the text, perverts its meaning and moves it out of its cognitive and historical contexts.

The contemporary Arab reader lives under the stress of having to be abreast of his times. But the more his era escapes him, the more he seeks to reinforce the affirmation of his identity and to seek magical solutions to his numerous problems. Although he may be absorbed by tradition, he makes every effort to adjust its absorption in such a way that its "reading" will flash him back the image of everything he was unable to fulfill. He makes the text tell about his own concerns before reading what the text says.

To disjoin the subject from his tradition is therefore a necessary operation. This operation represents the first step towards an objective attitude. The methodological achievements in the field of modern linguistics can provide us with an objective method to distance ourselves from the texts, a method that we could sum up through the following golden rule: "One must avoid interpreting the meaning of the text before grasping its material (material as a network of relationships between the units of meaning, and not as a set of units of isolated meanings)." We must free ourselves of any understanding built upon biases derived from tradition or upon our present-day desiderata. We must put all of this between parentheses so as to devote ourselves to the sole task of noting the significance of the text within the text itself, i.e., within the network of the relationships that are created among its elements. Treating the text as a network of relationships and devoting ourselves to determining the interplay of these relationships will enable us to stop the "fluttering of those countless threads" that reduce the words of the Arabic language, in the

eyes of the reader, to some melodies, some pure sensitive forms or some receptacles for all sensations and all passions. In other words, in order to free ourselves of the text, we must submit it to a meticulous dissection that will turn the text into an object for the subject-reader, a material with a reading.

Disjoining the subject from the object is perhaps necessary, but this operation is only a first step that will enable the subject to regain its dynamism in order to rebuild the object in a new perspective. The second step that we must take towards objectivity is the one that consists in disjoining the object from the subject so that the object can in turn regain its independence and its "personality," its identity and its historicity.

This process is made up of three phases:

- *The Structuralist Approach.* It consists in treating what was produced by the author of the text as a whole that is governed by certain constants and enriched by those transformations supported by the author's thinking around the same axis. The author's thinking needs to be basically focused around a prominent problematic that is willing to accept all those transformations within which the author's thinking moves, so that every one of his ideas finds its natural place—i.e., justified or justifiable—within the whole. This may be a difficult operation, but if care is taken to link the author's ideas together, if attention is paid to the expressive devices that are put forth and if note is made of the discourse recipients, we can manage to tackle it with more ease.

- *The Historical Approach.* It essentially consists in linking the author's thinking, whose internal organization would have already been restored, to its historical context in its cultural, ideological, political and social dimensions. This "inclusion in history" is indispensable, not only to acquire a historical understanding of the thinking under study, but also to test the validity of the structuralist model

offered in the previous approach. By "validity" we do not mean, here, the logical veracity (the non-contradiction) of the model—in fact this has already been established, partially at least, by the structuralist approach—but rather its historical possibility, i.e., that which guarantees to us what a given text can or cannot contain. This way, we will be able to conceive what the text could have said but did not reveal.

• *The Ideological Approach.* The historical analysis could remain an incomplete and purely pro forma work without the recourse to the ideological approach of the text, i.e., to the updating of the ideological (sociopolitical) function that a (given) thought fulfills, seeks to fulfill or that someone wanted to make it fulfill, within the cognitive field of which it is a part. We must now lift the parentheses within which the structuralist analysis had for a while confined—by synchronizing it—the historical period of which the text is a part, in order to give its life back to the era. To note the ideological content of a thought is the only way indeed to make it contemporary to itself, and to link it to the world to which it belongs.

Disjoining the subject from the object and the object from the subject are two interdependent operations; we have only dissociated them for the sake of exposition. Together, they represent the first methodological concern, that of objectivity.

But is it enough to be objective in order to read tradition? The read-object is indeed our tradition. It is not simply and solely to get rid of it that we have just extirpated this part from ourselves, nor is it to enjoy—as an ethnologist would—the spectacle of its cultural or architectural achievements, nor is it to behold its abstract conceptual edifices—as a philosopher would—but rather to re-join it to us in a new form and under a new relationship, so that we may make it contemporary to us.

But how do we bring about such "rejunction"?

(c) *About rejoining the read-object to the subject-reader: the problem of continuity*

Tradition is not only a product of history, shaped only by history and society. It is also the sum of personal contributions that we owe to certain persons who have marked history because they knew, at least in part, how to free themselves of the shackles of history and society. But more often than not, these contributions do not reveal themselves in a direct manner. The moral or material pressures exerted by society present just as many shackles to the contributions of certain people who hold new ideas and "seditious" aspirations. They prevent these people from expressing themselves openly and directly. Their ideas press on and rush behind the predominant schema of thought and modes of writing, settling in a deep zone, beyond speech (beyond logic). Therefore, we can only reach these ideas when we cross the limits of speech and of logic.

This can only be achieved through intuition, the only thing capable of making the read-self embrace the reading-self, of making the former participate in the problematics and concerns of the latter and of making it interested in its aspirations. The reading-self will seek to find itself inside the read-self, yet fully conserving the identity of the latter. This way, the reading-self, on its own, will be able to entirely maintain its conscience and its personality. The intuition we are talking about here is by no means that of the mystics, nor is it Bergsonian or personalist, nor a phenomenological one, but a particular kind of intuition, a mathematical intuition of sorts. It is about the immediate and exploratory representation that unlocks evidence, provides an anticipated understanding in the course of a dialogue between the reading-self and the read-self created on the basis of objective data that emanate from the first one of our methodological concerns.

It is this kind of intuition which enables the reading-self to unearth what the read-self had silenced. To this end, intuition must decipher signs within the text—*undoubtedly* folded inside the game

of thought—that are hidden by the strategy of discourse. We must not suspend logic. On the contrary, we must push the logic of the text to the end, in order to draw the necessary conclusions resulting from the premises and the combinations that it supports.

At this level, conclusions are what enables reading to imagine the premises; the future is what enables reading to imagine the past; what *was supposed to be* that enables reading to imagine what *was*. Hence, the positiveness of what *was* blends in with the ideological of what *was supposed to be*, and the future-past to which the read-self aspired becomes the future-to-come that the reading-self pursues. Hence, the read-object which is contemporary to itself becomes contemporary to the subject-reader. ↗

Why must we resort to this kind of intuition in the reading of our philosophical tradition, and why worry about having access to the un-said? It is within tradition itself and among our thinkers that we can find an answer to our question: Ghazali⁴ mentions a book that he had supposedly written under the title: *What We Never Divulge to Those Who Are Not Apt for It*. This particular work has not reached us and it is even highly probable that he never wrote it. Avicenna,⁵ himself, had also spoken of a book entitled *Oriental* (Eastern) *Philosophy*, in which he claimed to have presented his true doctrine. But this book never reached us, either; and it seems that the philosopher may have kept it in his possession like a secret that “we never divulge to those who are not apt for it.” As for Averroes,⁶ he evokes a certain “demonstrative wisdom” that—in his words—we must attempt “only to acquire in the appropriate places.” Access to this wisdom must be limited only to those who are apt for it and it cannot be spread among the masses. This wisdom was also one of those which “we must never divulge to those who are not apt for it.” Well before these, al-Farabi⁷ had already spoken of a “truth” and of “allegories of truth” and advised that we decipher the truth from beyond its allegories. Other thinkers, such as Jabir Ibn Hayyan⁸ and the physician Rhazès⁹ mentioned similar things. All our phi-

losophers, therefore, kept some ideas to themselves, which they would not divulge to those who were not apt for them, if not by allusions, by symbols, or "from behind a veil."

"What we do not divulge to those who are not apt for it?" therefore occupies in their texts the space of a "that" which we must try to unveil. And we can only do this by deliberately engaging in their problematics and in their intellectual pursuits. But are we free to reveal publicly today what our ancestors made sure not to divulge to those who were not apt for it, perhaps even what they could not reveal to themselves? To realize all that this question implies enables us to become their contemporaries and to make them contemporary to us on the level of a spirit aware of its historicity. It is through such "inter-contemporaneity" that continuity is achieved: continuity in the evolution of consciousness through a quest for truth.

Elements of a Vision, Principles of a Reading

Whether we want it or not, every method necessarily proceeds from a vision. In order to validly implement a method, it is imperative to be aware of the perspectives of the vision from which it proceeds. This is because vision represents the framework of the method and defines its perspectives, in the same way that the method contributes to enhancing and readjusting vision.

After having described our methodological approach, let us unveil at this time the different components of our vision. They are the ones that shape the constancies upon which is based the reading that we propose and through which our reading finds direction. We will summarize them here under three aspects.

(a) Unity of thought: unity of the problematics

I proceed from the principle that theoretical thinking in a given society at a given time constitutes a particular unity endowed with



its own armature inside of which the different movements and tendencies blend in, so to speak. From this point of view, it is the whole which is significant, and not the components. The latter are mere aspects of a homogeneous whole.

It is with this in mind that we can speak of, say, Greek thought despite the multiplicity of tendencies that shape it, or of contemporary Arab thought, despite the diversity of its schools. And it is also with this in mind that we can speak of medieval Arab-Islamic thought in spite of the apparent plurality and the apparent differences that characterize it. We thus consider these great moments of Arab thought as irreducible units, likely to be studied as such, each as a whole. But what constitutes the unity of this whole?

The unity of a system of thought, from our perspective, is not defined according to its authors' belonging to the same community (national, religious, linguistic, etc.) , or according to the identity of the studied topics, or the membership in such a thought system within a common spatial-temporal perimeter. Unity of thought simply means *unity of the problematics*. Whether or not the authors of such thought dealt with identical topics, whether or not they reached the same conclusions, whether or not they lived in the same period, under the same sky or in different geographical regions, is not at all significant, in my opinion, since this is not a decisive factor in creating unity of thought. What determines and creates unity of thought, at a given historical period, is the unity of problematics within this thought.

But let me clarify this statement by making the meaning of the word "problematics," in this context, more explicit. A problematics is a network of relationships, inside a given thought system, woven around a set of problems that interact in such a way that it is impossible to resolve them in isolation and that—on the theoretical level—can only be resolved globally. In other words, a problematics is a theory whose conditions for its creation are not yet met; it is a theory in the making, a propensity towards the stabilization of thought.

Let us illustrate this definition with a familiar example: the example of what is called "modern Arab thought", i.e., that of the "Arab Renaissance" (*nahda*). This thought system indeed constitutes a unity because it deals with one and the same problematic, the problematic of Renaissance (*nahda*). We are speaking of a problematic of Renaissance rather than a problem of Renaissance. In fact, what preoccupied Arab thinkers of the "Renaissance period" was not a single problem, but rather a web of overlapping problems that are impossible to resolve in isolation, or even to analyze each singly without linking it to the others (e.g., European invasion, Turkish despotism, poverty, illiteracy, education, language, the status of women, the lack of national unity, etc.)

When dealing with these problems, Arab thought during the Renaissance period perceived them globally. When raising one of them, it necessarily had to raise all the others, or at least deal with some of their aspects. For within a given problematic, it is less the problem in itself which is of importance than is the function served by this problem as an element of the problematic. Let us consider, for example, the way Qasim Amin¹⁰ dealt with the problem of the status of women. What concerned him more was not the "woman" as an isolated entity but the promotion of the woman as a Renaissance factor, where emancipation represented a stake within the problematic of the Renaissance; when he had to analyze the status of Arab women, he was forced to deal with the problems of education, democracy, tradition and customs, language, in short, to deal with the global problematic of the Renaissance.

The unity or the universality of a thought system can be noted both in the global production of the authors of this thought and in the work of a single one. In other words, the unity of thought, in so far as it is determined by the unity of the problematic, fashions itself in the same way on the level of the era—which represents the specific historical field where the work of all the period's thinkers had been produced—as it does on the level of the *oeuvre* of any one

of these. That is why it is necessary, when reading the *oeuvre* of an author, to think of it as a part of the intellectual output of the historical period-field of which it is a part.

We must further add that the problematics of a given thought system generally goes beyond the borders of its actual output and extends to the totality of the possible ways of thinking within the field of this thought. A plurality of views does not necessarily mean a plurality of problematics. Different thinkers who are members of the same problematics might ask different questions, but their answers to these questions will likely be identical, similar or complementary. Conversely, the questions might be identical, but the answers offered will be divergent. Sometimes, there will be questions that no one will answer, and someone will answer questions that have not been asked. By no means do all these phenomena cut into the unity of the problematics; on the contrary, they reveal its fecundity, its coherence and its power of integration of a great number of ways of thinking. In other words, the field of a problematics is not limited only to the problems that it expresses but includes all its unexpressed potentialities. And this why a problematics does not necessarily remain confined inside a spatial-temporal perimeter; it remains open to taking in any subsequent output that has not gone obsolete. (We can say, for example, that the problematics of conciliation of transmission [*naql*] and reason [*ʿaql*], inside which the medieval Arab thinking fit, has remained open to this day, or rather that it was reopened at the time of the Arab Renaissance, since up to now, a number of persons still persist in thinking of it under the same conditions as medieval people did.)

(b) Historicity of thought: cognitive field and ideological content

The previous remarks lead us to the tackling of the second constancy of vision which informs our reading of the philosophical output within Islamic thinking: historicity of thought, i.e., its relationship



to the political, sociological, economical and cultural realities of which it is a product, or at least in the midst of which it evolved.

When we make the statement that a problematic is not confined inside a spatial-temporal perimeter, that it remains open to taking in any subsequent output that has not become obsolete, we are made to question ourselves about the relationship between thought and reality and, therefore, between thought and history. Indeed, there exists between these two phenomena a complex relation, not that it is unanalyzable but because it remains irreducible to preconceived schema and that it requires that we adjust its analysis so as to fully understand the relation. The historical field of a thought system does not necessarily correspond to a period-based history, i.e., according to dynastic successions, economic mutations, wars or other non-necessarily determinant factors to the evolution of this thought. The relative—but nevertheless very often real—independence of this thought vis-à-vis these factors compels us to resort to those components that are inherent to the thought itself in order to grasp its historical field. What we mean here by “historical field” of a thought system corresponds in fact to the “duration of the life of a problematic,” or to its “era”: it is a period during which the same problematic persists in the history of a given thought.

The historical field of a thought is defined according to two criteria:

- *the cognitive field* which circumscribes the movement of a thought and is made up of a homogeneous “cognitive material,” hence of a homogeneous conceptual apparatus (notions, concepts, method, vision, etc.);
- *the ideological content* which this thought carries, i.e., the ideological function (socio-political) to which the author or authors of this thought subordinate the cognitive material.

To be able to define the kind of relation that exists between these two criteria and, therefore, the links that one must create between thought and reality, one must conceive that the theoretical problematics—which makes up the unity of thought—is fundamentally of a cognitive nature, insofar as it is the result of the coexistence of contradictions inside a given cognitive field. Thus it will persist as long as the positive epistemological conditions that determine this cognitive field remain in place. Whereas the ideological contents, in view of which this cognitive material is used, are not the result of this type of contradictions, but of another type of contradictions and of (ideological) conflicts that do not take root/originate in the degree of evolution of a cognitive apparatus, but in the stage of evolution of a society. And since the evolution of knowledge does not necessarily follow the same pace as that of society, the cognitive and ideological contents that are articulated by the same thought are not necessarily concomitant. In most cases the pace of one is either slower or faster than that of the other. In other words, to be a part of the same problematics and a part of the same cognitive field does not *de facto* imply a commitment to the same ideology, or that the material offered by this cognitive field is used for the same ideological goals. Often, it is even the opposite, the same cognitive system, perhaps even the same idea, can articulate opposite ideological contents.

Consequently, if it is relatively easy to associate one philosopher's thinking with the cognitive field of which he is a member—with the help of data provided by the history of science and knowledge in general—we cannot, on the other hand, when pointing out the ideological content promoted by the thinking, consult nothing else but this thought alone. Indeed, the social or political ambitions, reflected by a given ideology, do not on the whole coincide historically: neither with the cognitive material handled by this ideology, nor with the evolutionary moment of the society in which it manifests itself. Furthermore, if we think that philosophy is by nature one of the most abstract ways of thinking possible, that it has a tendency to



“purify,” to the maximum the material provided by the cognitive field, we will readily understand to what degree the relationship of philosophical thinking versus socio-historical reality can prove to be a complex one. It is very often an indirect relationship, borrowing the way of other forms of consciousness—religious or political—and reflecting aspirations that are conceived outside the spatial-temporal perimeter, either ahead of or behind their time. It is according to these aspirations that the thinker will use the cognitive material at his disposal to finally represent them in the shape of an output that aims at being purely scientific.

(c) Islamic philosophy: readings of Greek philosophy

Our insistence on the necessity to distinguish between cognitive and ideological contents that are articulated by the same thought does not stem only from a methodological necessity. It is the reality of philosophical thinking in Islam that dictate it to us. All the Muslim philosophers' creative activity centered around one problematic, which is usually referred to as the problematics of “reconciling reason and transmission.” First the Mu'tazilites¹¹ raised this question by launching their credo: “Reason takes precedence over the transmitted data.” Then came the school of the Eastern philosophers, which reached its peak with the person of Avicenna,¹² whose spokesmen never ceased to work at incorporating the structure of “scientific” (Greek) thinking to that of (Islamic) religious thinking, driven by the conviction that the first one represented the rational and “scientific” conception of man and the universe, and the second one represented “absolute” truth, as well as cultural identity.

The possibilities of innovation in the hands of the Muslim philosophers were therefore very limited. Philosophers did not read their predecessors with the perspective of completing the work of the latter, or to go beyond them. Being all of them readers of yet other philosophers, the Greek ones (particularly Plato and Aristotle), they

in fact give an outside observer—who would restrict his study of their output only from the standpoint of the cognitive material it disseminates—the impression of simply repeating one another. In other words, what we call “Islamic philosophy” did not enjoy a continual and renewed reading of its own history like Greek philosophy or like the European philosophy from Descartes until now. Philosophy in Islam has always been based on individual readings having a foreign philosophy (Greek philosophy) for object. These readings have vested the same cognitive material with diverse ideological aims.

We ought to distinguish between the ideological content and the cognitive content in Islamic philosophy to be able to detect the variety, the dynamic and the expanse of this thought, and to replace it within the context of its socio-historical commitments. Those who—following the example of the majority of observers—limit themselves to looking at it from the standpoint of the cognitive content (scientific and metaphysical) will only find ever-“rehashed” opinions and discourses that may differ only in the way their authors present them, focus on such or such theme, or in the extent of their brevity. Whether they admit it or not, they will ultimately acknowledge the sterility of such thinking. But if we were to consider philosophical thinking in Islam from the standpoint of the ideology that it articulates, we would realize that we are dealing with an evolving thought, governed by its own principles and its own problematics and full of fertile contradictions.

The biggest mistake made by historians of Islamic thought, be they from the old days or from the modern era, be they orientalist or Arabs, was to always look at it strictly through its cognitive content. That is why they never found in it enough material to write a living and dynamic history. In his *kitab al-Milal wa al-Nihal*, Shahrastani¹³ saw in philosophy a mere succession of repetitive discourses; consequently, he presented the doctrines of philosophers through one single book, Avicenna's *kitab al-Najat*. Most of the orientalist, for their part, saw in it nothing but “Greek philosophy

written in Arabic characters." Even those among them who wished to avoid the judgment formulated by E. Renan¹⁴—though void of historical logic—in the end showed the history of Islamic philosophy as a mere repetition of the history of Greek philosophy, restaging the division among the schools of the latter and retracing the various phases of its evolution. It was thus decreed that there had been Islam's very own "naturalists," "Pythagoreans," and adepts of Plato and Aristotle who were reread by neo-platonists of the likes of T. J. De Boer¹⁵ who remained nonetheless one of the best orientalists to have written on the subject. As for some contemporary Arab researchers, they followed Shahrastani's path by rereading Muslim philosophers through only one of their representatives (either Avicenna or Farabi), if not by simply imitating DeBoer in the way he assimilated Islamic philosophy to Greek philosophy, and often for that matter without as much intelligence as their master or his translator-commentator Abu Rida. Though there may have been a few recent attempts to go beyond the method of the old scholars or beyond that of the modern orientalists and their students, these have remained confined inside the preconceived schemas and have used the dialectical method as an "already-applied-method" rather than as a method to-be-applied. These attempts led to a writing of history of Islamic thought that blindly reproduced the general evolution of human thought, blending the particular with the general; a history where the specific no longer had any other vocation but to serve as a justification for the validity of the method.

All the mistakes made about the history of Islamic philosophy are nothing but the result of the confusion between the cognitive and the ideological contents of this philosophy. And since it is the cognitive content which is expressed with most immediacy in the texts, and since it is the one directly borrowed from the Greek philosophy and sciences, those responsible for this confusion could not help but present philosophical thinking in Islam as an inert body and its contributions as faded copies of the Greek "originals" or of

the originals of universal thought. After all, those who wanted to read a semblance of dynamics in these copies could not do it without closely copying Islamic thought after the preconceived schema that made up their credo and after whose model they redrew reality. Generally speaking, the cognitive and the ideological contents in Greek philosophy experienced a parallel evolution; for the former thanks to scientific progress, for the latter thanks to the evolution of society. From the time of Thales to the time of Aristotle, so many stages went by in which scientific consciousness and ideological consciousness had evolved hand in hand. This parallelism is even more striking in modern European thought. By contrast, throughout the Greek antiquities and throughout the medieval era, in Christendom as in Islam, the cognitive material vested in philosophical thought remained unchanged. The only thing that changed was the ideological use that was made of it.

That does not mean that science did not evolve at all during the era of the Arab-Islamic enlightenment. The formidable advances made at that time (e.g., in the field of mathematics thanks to Khawarizmi,¹⁶ to al-Karkhi,¹⁷ and to Samaw'al al-Maghribi,¹⁸; in the field of astronomy thanks to Battani¹⁹; in the field of medicine thanks to Rhazes,²⁰ Avicenna, and others) indeed enabled science throughout the Arab-Islamic history to go through some essential evolutionary stages. These advances—because they could not—did not impact the predominant conceptions of that period's philosophers.

There are two reasons that explain why philosophers did not have to undergo the influence of these scientific advances:

(1) the fact that the advances in scientific research made at that time never truly went beyond the inherited cognitive field within which these advances were no more than the extension of a prior scientific knowledge ;

(2) the fact that Muslim philosophers concerned themselves, priority-wise, less with producing conceptions based on new substance, than with reconciling the religious conception of the world to reason, and to justifying rational conception from a religious standpoint. This is why Islamic philosophy was continually an ideological discourse and why those who remain deaf to such a discourse, looking at Islamic philosophy with the same eye as they would Greek philosophy or European philosophy, are doomed to remember from it only an "immobile" void of progress and of dynamics.

Islamic philosophy was never the subject of a sustained and renewed reading of its own history, its own epistemological and metaphysical gains. It was always based upon various readings of a foreign philosophy, i.e., the Greek philosophy. Therefore, the contributions of Islamic philosophy to renewal must not be sought in the cognitive gains it has vested and spread, but in the ideological function that each philosopher assigns to this knowledge. It is there that we can find a meaning and a history to Islamic philosophy.

¹ At the time when the various juridical schools were created, jurists would relate by analogy the new cases that arose from concrete daily life to principles articulated by the Qur'an and by the Prophet's sayings. The first ones are called *far'* (cases in point, case applications) and the second ones are called *asl* (foundation/source). After these juridical schools became established, each group of adherents started to relate "new cases" from their own era to "new cases" from the era of the treat as foundations/sources those "new cases" previously considered as "cases in point" and deduce new analogies after them.

² The rationale behind *kalam* was the defensive vindication of the Muslim religion. The origin of the practice of *kalam* is tied to various political-religious debates over the legitimacy of the regime, free will and predestination during the second century (AH), eighth century (AD). *Kalam* began to develop in Baghdad under the Abbassids when classical Greek philosophy and science were introduced. As schools of *kalam* (first the Mu'tazilits, then the Ash'arits) began to take

shape, one noted the active participation of the ruling caliphs who, at times, adopted very harsh positions. On the theoretical level, the science of *kalam* gave rise to the development of metaphysical notions and a discourse over the relationship between God, man and the universe: oneness of God, divine transcendence, the question of divine justice, the question of the Qur'an being "created" or "non-created," the *ex nihilo* creation of the world, etc.

³ The translation of this important work is forthcoming.

⁴ Abu Hamid Muhammad al-Ghazali (450-505/1059-1111) was known in the medieval Western World under the name of Algazel. He is one of the most representative thinkers of Islam, as suggested by his honorific nickname of *Hujjat al-Islam* (the proof, the guarantor of Islam). He was born near Tus in Khurasan (eastern Iran), twenty-three years after the death of Avicenna. His training as a youth was marked by his contacts with the great schools of thought of the time: philosophy, esoterism, theology. He was a disciple of Juwayni, the most prominent Ash'arite theologian of his time who was nicknamed *Imam al-Haramayn*. He was called to the court of Nizam al-Mulk, vizier to the Seljukid Sultans whose dynasty (of Turkish origin) had taken over the Abbassid Caliphate under the cover of protecting it from the Fatimid expansion. Ghazali was charged with instructing Ash'arite Kalam in a teaching institution founded by Nizam al-Mulk in Baghdad, the *Madrasa Nizamiyya*. In his intellectual "autobiography," entitled *Al-Munqidh min al-Dalal* (Deliverance from Deviation), Ghazali tells of the inner crisis caused by his "doubts" towards all the knowledge that he had acquired and which he was charged with teaching. "Deliverance is said to have come to him from Sufism, from the spiritual realization which he later tried to accommodate to the dogma of Sunni Islam in its Ash'arite formulation. This project became the topic of his masterpiece, *Ihya' 'ulum al-din* (The Revivification of Religious Sciences). Ghazali's work marked the period as one of theological-mystical reaction against the reason of the hellenistic philosophers, as seen in his *Tahafut al-falasifa* (The Incoherence of the Philosophers).

⁵ Abu 'Ali al-Husayn Ibn Sina, the Avicenna of the Latin scholars (370-428/980-1037). He was born in Afshana in Tranoxiana (northern Iran), lived in the court of several Samanid and Iranian Buyid princes and died in Hamadan. He was the greatest name of neo-platonist Islamic philosophy and of medieval medicine. He had Farabi as a master to whom he owed his understanding of Aristotle's *Metaphysics*. His major treaty of philosophy is *Kitab al-Shifa'* (The Book of Healing). It is an encyclopedia of Greco-Islamic knowledge in the fifth/eleventh century, covering anything from logic to mathematics. Avicenna himself wrote a summary of this book which he called *Kitab al-Najat* (The Book of Salvation). His great *Al-Qanun fi al-Tibb* (The Canon of Medicine) remained the basis of medical studies



in the West for centuries and in the East practically to this day. His other major work *Kitab al-Isharat wa al-Tanbihat* (The Book of Remarks and Admonitions) inaugurated a gnostic-“illuminist” trend in Islamic philosophical thinking.

⁶ Abu al-Walid Muhammad Ibn Ahmad Ibn Muhammad Ibn Rushd (the Averroes of the Latins). He was born in Cordoba in 520/1126, a descendant of a long line of prominent jurists in Muslim Spain. He received a complete training in theology, law, medicine, mathematics, astronomy and philosophy. In 565/1169, at the initiative of the Almohad caliph Abu Ya'qub Yusuf, he started a series of commentaries on the work of Aristotle. In 578/1182, he became personal physician to the Caliph and Qadi of Cordoba. He later enjoyed the same favors with the Caliph's successor, Abu Yusuf Ya'qub al-Mansur. But his philosophical opinions drew skepticism from the legal scholars. He fell in disgrace; his books were burned and had to suffer attacks from the theologians of the populace. He died in Morocco in 595/1198 after being finally pardoned by the Almohad caliph. The three major areas in Averroes' thought were (i) his commentaries and his interpretation of Aristotle; (ii) his criticism of Farabi and Avicenna which called for an Aristotelianism free of the misinterpretations that had been inflicted on it by the Eastern philosophical tradition; and (iii) his proof of the essential agreement between philosophy and revelation as two distinct expressions of one and the same truth. With the revival of Aristotle's thinking (Aristotelianism) in Western Europe at the end of the twelfth century, he was soon hailed as a major authority in Jewish and Christian thinking.

⁷ Abu Nasr Muhammad Ibn Muhammad Ibn Turkhan al-Farrabi, the Abunaser of the Latins (died 339/950). Originally from Farab in Transoxiana (northernmost of Iran), he grew up in Damascus where, according to traditional biographies, he devoted himself to reading philosophical books while working as a garden-keeper. He then went to Baghdad where he followed the teachings of two prominent logicians, Mata Ibn Yunus and Yuhanna Ibn Haylan. He then lived in Aleppo, in northern Syria, in the court of the Hamdanid Sayf al-Dawla (cf. footnote 5 in Chapter 4) and died in Damascus. He was nicknamed *al-Mu'allim al-thani* (*magister secundus*) because he exposed the science of logic founded by Aristotle, the *magister primus*, then commented and wrote treaties on it while logic, before him, was nothing but translations from Greek. His *Ihsa' al-'ulum* (The Enumeration of Sciences) was to contribute to determining a durable conception of the relationship between philosophy and the other sciences and the relationship between the Greek sciences and the Islamic sciences. He is the author of a voluminous philosophical work where he clearly expressed the will to integrate Aristotelian thinking into a neo-platonist, emanacionist, world vision, as is seen in his *Jam' bayna ra'yay al-Hakimayn* (Accord between the Opinions of the Two Sages), in which he

attempts to reconcile the spiritualist philosophy of the "divine" Plato with the Aristotelian concepts of the forms that are inherent in matter, by citing the so-called Aristotle's theology (cf. footnote 12 from chapter 5). In his political-metaphysical treaty called *The Opinions of the Virtuous City's Inhabitants*, he tries to give credit to the idea of a unifying force, ideally of a prophetic nature, but in fact reserved for sages, and founded on reason.

⁸ A distinguished man from the second/eighth century whose historical existence was contested by some orientalists. A large corpus of hermetist alchemy is credited to his name. He was known to the Latins as Geber. He was the supposed disciple of the Imam Ja'far al-Sadiq, in whose circle he was supposed to have been initiated to the "esoteric" sciences. He is said to have lived a while in Harun al-Rashid's court and died around 200/815, under the reign of al-Ma'mun.

⁹ Cf. footnote 20.

¹⁰ An Egyptian journalist and man of letters (1865-1908). He was a disciple of Muhammad 'Abdu and became famous for his positions in favor of women's emancipation.

¹¹ A rationalist school of dialectical theology (*kalam*) that expressed the official doctrine of the Abbassid state from 211/827 to 232/847. The Mu'tazilite thinking revolved around the questions of (divine) oneness and justice. By developing the idea of absolute transcendence of God in relationship to the world, they opened a larger forum for the interpretation of the text by reason and asserted the notion of responsibility of man for his own acts. At that time, the Mu'tazilite attitude reflected the aspirations of an enlightened élite vs the attitude of the traditionalist majority, represented by the person of Ibn Hanbal, the great hadith scholar.

¹² Cf. note 5.

¹³ Muhammad Ibn 'Abd al-Karim al-Shahrastani (469-548/1076-1153) was born in the city of Sharastan in Khurasan (eastern Iran). He was an Ash'arite theologian mostly known for his *kitab al-Milal wa al-Nihal* ("Book of Religions and Sects") which was a classic work in doxology generally recognized for its precision and rigor. The author surveys all the religious and philosophical systems that he knew by classifying them according to their relative remoteness from Islamic (Ash'arite) "orthodoxy," from the Mu'tazilite to the Hindu beliefs by way of the Shi'ites, the Batinists, the "people of the Book", etc.

¹⁴ Ernest Renan (1823-1892) was a French writer, thinker, Semiticist and philologist. He devoted himself to researching the history and origins of religions (Jewish and Christian) from the perspective of understanding the religious phenomenon through a philological approach. He is the author of a work entitled: *Averroes and Averroism*. His assessment of the Arab-Islamic intellectual output is founded on a racial theory that opposes the Semitic genius, mythical and religious, to the Aryan



genius, rational and scientific. According to him, philosophical thinking by the "Semites" could only be a sterile imitation of Greek thought.

¹⁵ A German orientalist who authored a history of Islamic philosophy that appeared in 1901 under the title *Geschichte der Philosophie im Islam*. This book is the first synthesis of the history of Islamic thought written in modern times. It was translated into Arabic and annotated by M. A. Abu Rida in 1938 and became an ongoing reference for numerous Arab academicians.

¹⁶ Muhammad Ibn Musa al-Khawarizmi was born around 184/800 and died 232/847. A mathematician and an astronomer, originally from Khawarism, Iran, he was one of the scholars who were called to Baghdad by the Caliph al-Mamun. He is the author of the *Astronomy Tables* which were translated into Latin. He is mostly known as an algebra theoretician because of his *al-Maqala fi Hisab al-Jabr wa al-Muqabala* which was translated into Latin in the twelfth century under the title of *Liber Algebrae et Amucabola*.

¹⁷ Abu Bakr a-Karkhi (also al-Karaji), who died after 409/1019, was one of Baghdad's mathematicians and the author of books on algebra and arithmetic, e.g., *al-Kafi fi al-Hisab*, which was a compendium of arithmetic, algebra, and cadastre.

¹⁸ Samaw'al Ibn Yahya al-Maghribi (died around 570/1174) was a Jewish logician, mathematician, and physician with origins in the Maghreb. He resided in Baghdad and converted to Islam. He is also the author of a treatise on medicine called *al-Mufid al-Awsat* and of various books on geometry.

¹⁹ Abu 'Abdallah Muhammad al-Battani, known to Latin scholars as Albategnius (244-317/858-929), was an astronomer of Harranian origins. He lived in Raqqa (northern Syria). His family practiced the Sabeian religion (cf. note 27, Chapter 5). He is the author of a book on astronomy called *Al-Zijj* (A Treatise and Tables in Astronomy).

²⁰ Abu Bakr Muhammad Ibn Zakariyya' al-Rhazi, known to the Latin scholars as Rhazes (236-313/850-925), is sometimes mistaken for his homonyms: Fakhr al-Din al-Rhazi, a sixth/twelfth-century theologian and philosopher and Qutb al-Din al-Rhazi, an eighth/fourteenth-century Avicennian illuminist thinker. Rhazes was a renown physician and a philosopher of Pythagorean-leaning who defended some very bold theses. He was the hospital director of his native Rayy (a city south of present-day Teheran), then later held a similar position in Baghdad. His greatest medical work *Al-Hawi*, also known as *Al-jami'*, or compendium of medicine, was translated into Latin in 1279 under the title of *Liber Continens* and was widely circulated among the medical community until the sixteenth century. His works dealt with, in addition to all aspects of medicine, philosophy, alchemy, astronomy, grammar, theology, logic and other fields of knowledge.

PART TWO

PHILOSOPHICAL THINKING AND IDEOLOGY

Chapter III

Historical Dynamics of the Arab-Islamic Philosophy

No great moment in human thought has, without doubt, been—and remains—more unfairly treated by philosophical historians than the moment of Islamic philosophy. The ancient historians and doxographers consider it like a foreign object and like a set of “imported sciences” against which they protested, and treated it like an orphan child, perhaps even like an illegitimate one. Some contemporary Arab authors, while rehashing past conflicts in their writings and while consciously or unconsciously engaging in them, continue to echo such judgment and take the same position against Islamic philosophy as the ancient theologians did, sometimes assuming the persona of a Ghazali¹, sometimes that of an Ibn Taymiyya², but very rarely the less partial persona of a Shahrastani. As for the orientalist and those Arab scholars who followed their path, they merely consider it as a continuation of Greek philosophy during the Hellenic era which amounts once again to making it a foreign “body” totally isolated inside the Arab-Islamic society. Some of these orientalists themselves do not hesitate to resuscitate, in their own way, the tensions amongst Medieval Arab thinkers, accusing Islamic thought of inconsistency and sterility, and taking a partial stance with theology and with Sufism. As for the leftist Arab intellectuals, their research in the end only stands out by the way it rechannels the broad outline of the theses that inspire historical materialism. They sometimes speak of class struggle, other times of “historical conspiracy,” and yet other