

Philosophy And Culture

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Al-Islam.org

Al-Tawhid Vol 15 - no. 3

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Philosophy And Culture

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Al-Tawhid Vol 15, No. 3, Autumn 1999

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1. Among the essential principles of the world today is that everything must be of some use. If the uses of a thing are not known, then the thing could be interpreted to be a useless and idle entity. But up to this point in time, philosophy has claimed neither to be of some use in everyday life, nor to improve the sustenance of man. Aristotle used to say that the most noble branch of knowledge was theology because through it no profits were gained.

Our great philosophers too would not use the superior in the service of the inferior, nor would they choose to utilize the noble in the pursuit of the ignoble. In their opinion, philosophy was the highest form of knowledge, the creme de la creme of all sciences, with which man would journey through all levels of being and would become one with the world of intellect. Hence, when we say that being useful is not a parameter in philosophy, we do not want to imply that philosophy is useless.

In our era, there are those who are eagerly seeking to make religion conform to the modern world. They might refer to a saying by the Master of the Monotheists, Imam Ali ('a), who said that one should seek refuge in God from a knowledge that does not have any use. They might infer from the statement by Imam Ali ('a) that knowledge is merely the knowledge of earning the means of livelihood and that since philosophy hardly has any use in our everyday life, it is in the same category as the knowledge from which one must seek refuge in God.

The reference by Imam Ali ('a), though, was to pieces of information with deleterious effect. Imam Ali ('a) was pointing to a set of data that is the result of neither thinking nor dhikr (recollection), nor is it gained through man's search for a form of livelihood: trivia reached through mere curiosity or snooping. This idea that knowledge must be man's ladder to power and his weapon for conquering the whole world became prevalent only during the modern period.

The Sophists in Greece indirectly and implicitly preached the idea that knowledge must have some dividends and that it should empower the individual. They were opposed to philosophy because they believed it had no utility. Socrates and Plato opposed the Sophists. Instead of engaging in direct debates, they both tried to show the baselessness of the Sophists' Claims. For example, when Callicles criticized Socrates for pursuing the useless philosophy in his old age, the latter did not defend himself and merely mocked the former. But in the court of Athens where philosophy itself had come under attack; Socrates defended philosophy that he had chosen as his vocation.

There, Socrates said, "If there are people who are offended by my words, they have to know that I have no intention of hurting their feelings. I am the gadfly of all the Athenians. I can see that these people are neglectfully living in a dangerous time. I bite them so that they would wake up from their stupor. I intend to force them out of their dreaming state before the catastrophe arrives."

Socrates did not say that philosophy has dividends. He said that, in times of afflictions and calamities, it serves to protect man. He said that if you feel irritated because of philosophical statements, if the discourses of a philosopher sound harsh, it is because the time is not right for sleeping. As a rule, the people who are not worried about the future and who live in their own dream world, are easily hurt by any statement that might disrupt their sweet dreams. The people of the city of Saba, provide a good example. Because they were bent on continuing their life of debauchery, they used to criticize the prophets sent unto them, the very prophets who warned them of the impending doom.

Philosophy is not merely devoted to abstract discussions. It is the science of the beginning and the end. But this beginning and the end do not become possible without abstract arguments. The one, who has not entered the realm of philosophy and is looking at it as an outsider, sees nothing but the words, the terms and abstract concepts and ideas. He calls philosophy an absurd undertaking.

If he takes the concepts out of their own contexts and if he relates them to others in a non-philosophical language, it is quite possible that the people would consider his statements unpleasant and opposed to

common sense. But it has never been the intention of philosophers to speak in such an awkward and abstruse manner that the lay people would find it difficult to understand. Philosophy by nature is difficult and this difficulty is not limited to its phrases and terms.

Strictly speaking, the world of a real philosopher has no resemblance to the world of everyday life. It is true that the philosopher lives as all of us do and observes the same social customs and rites, but during contemplation he journeys to another world to which most people have no access.

Molla Sadra has quoted Aristotle (from one of Plotinus' works ascribed to Aristotle) that doing philosophy would entail going from the First Nature to the Second Nature. We are all living in this world with, and in, our First Nature. We all have similar interests, fears, sorrows and hopes. As long as we are in this mode of existence, our insights are limited. Within the confines of this limited First Nature, we work, learn and try to find solutions to our problems.

Within this mode of existence, we can talk about what constitutes good, bad, expedient or base. We can talk about how we should do what is good and avoid what is bad. Of course, on his journey to the Second Nature, the philosopher does not give up the mores and traditions of the First Nature. Rather, he is liberated from them. He opens his eyes to a world that provides the bases for customs and traditions of the First Nature, a world which provides the foundation for the vices and virtues of our everyday life.

So the difficulty of philosophy is not limited to the problem of terminology and jargon. Rather, since the philosopher is reporting from a world that is beyond our familiar world, we tend to label his words as "unusual", "unrealistic" and "not even remotely connected with reality". We imagine that the First Nature is self-supporting and self-sufficient, and that all the things in this world are organized by an intellect that is suitable for this world.

On the contrary, the First Nature is dependent on the Second Nature: (There are others besides philosophers who take the journey to the Second Nature because one of the capabilities of man is his ability to move towards his Second Nature. Among people who reach the different stages of this Second Nature, one can mention prophets, men of God, saints, poets, philosophers as well as great reformers and revolutionaries.) In other words, if man did not have a Second Nature, his life would be in total disarray; there would not be any order even in his everyday life. Can't you see that whenever and wherever there are great thinkers and teachers, the people's life, too, is blessed with order and people enjoy a decent life, and on the contrary, wherever there is dearth of thought, or wherever the idle talk has been mistaken for thinking the result is confusion, discord and corruption?

The West, whose scientific and technological achievements have mesmerized the whole world, is itself an outcome of philosophy. Modern science and technology claim to be substitutes for philosophy. But one should not panic upon hearing this claim. Even if this replacement has to happen, it should be noted that philosophy has to be there before science can replace it. Undoubtedly Galileo, Kepler, Newton, Lavoisier, Bichat, Claude Bernard and Adam Smith have important roles in the history of the West, but

actually the West emerged as a result of the achievements of men such as Plato, Aristotle, Francis Bacon, Galileo (as a philosopher), Descartes, Kant and Hegel.

If the scientists and engineers are the present administrators of the West, then the philosophers are the architects of the very edifice that the scientists and engineers have built. A modern city should be lit with electric light bulbs. The existence of the electrical power is among its prerequisites. But the modern city does not suddenly come into being with the mere invention of the electrical light bulb. The founders of modernity are Thomas More, Francis Bacon as well as Descartes and eventually Kant, Baudelaire and Hegel. If one were able to circumvent Western philosophy and still gain access to Western science and technology, the Japanese would not translate all the classics of Western philosophy into their language and would not do any research on philosophy. If it were so, they would only translate, and write, books on science and technology.

It is said that philosophy has reached its end in the West. I confirm the truth of this statement in its deepest sense. But the end of philosophy does not mean the end of thinking. For example, when it is said that philosophy began to emerge in Greece, it does not mean that before Socrates and Parmenides, there was not any form of thinking. Philosophy is an inextricable part of the Western history.

As long as this history exists, philosophy, too, exists. Therefore, it really does not matter, say, in what areas Descartes and Kant have differed with each other, and in which areas they have been right. While immersed in thinking, and with plenty of thought, they devised the plan for the modern world, a world that has science, technology, humanities, economics and the human rights. As a result, hundreds of worldviews and ideologies have sprung up in the West. These worldviews, ideologies and the resultant social, political and cultural systems are not independent of philosophy.

2. It is a rule among the philosophers that they question, argue, prove and refute views and doctrines. It is clear that in so doing, they end up accepting some of the views as correct while rejecting others as baseless and invalid. But if science, technology, the human rights and modern social sciences are founded upon philosophy, all the people in the world, at least through the systems of work, consumption and daily sustenance would be connected to philosophy. This connection is so subtle that it may not be acknowledged by many pundits within the domain of philosophy.

The Greek philosophers, Muslim thinkers as well as the theologians and philosophers of the Middle Ages did not see any necessity in formulating elaborate proofs of the unity of knowledge or in founding minor disciplines on the major discipline (philosophy). Actually, the separation between man and other creatures, or between knowledge and action had yet to be articulated. In the modern age, man's perception of nature began to change. Francis Bacon defined the task of knowledge as "conquest of nature." But Descartes, who had proved the separation of mind and matter and that of man and nature, tried to prove the unity of knowledge.

He viewed the sciences as the branches of a tree whose root was metaphysics. But the difficult question remained: How would physics and ethics be founded upon metaphysics in a world that was no longer united? This was the problem before the Western philosophy. David Hume and Immanuel Kant did not try to hide this quandary. They even tried to explain the nature of this problem. Kant decided to resolve this problem. David Hume did not accept Descartes' search for certain and indubitable knowledge. Hume considered knowledge tantamount to a healthy suspicion that was merely beneficial for man's conquest of nature. In Hume's view, one could not derive ethics or ethical imperatives from knowledge. This was, in effect, the expression and manifestation of a crisis.

David Hume and Kant rejected formal metaphysics. The former remained a skeptic but the latter found answers for the twin questions of "What can we know?" and "What ought we do?" It was in such answers that Kant saw the weakness as well as the strength of man. The philosopher who came after Descartes and Hume, and who would not reject ethics and knowledge, would have to study how knowledge would become possible. In his studies, Kant concluded that man's knowledge had its limits. He concluded that we do not know the truth and the thing in itself and that knowledge was not the reflection of the form of things and their relations in our perception.

Even that impression, which Hume used to say we receive from outside, constitutes, in Kant's view, the matter for our sensible faculty. As long as man has not given it a spatial and temporal form, it cannot be perceived. Perceptions are ordered and organized when our understanding gives them form. So, we see that the work order exists only in our understanding. In and through knowledge, man arrives at a sort of unification with nature. But this unification is a form of conquest. If we see in Kant's philosophy that knowledge is predetermined and that freedom has no meaning in it, it does not mean that we discover the laws of nature.

Causality and determination are the laws of our understanding and they apply to knowledge, not to the nature of things. We do not know anything about nature. But the relationship between us and the world is not limited to a scientific relationship. In Kant's view, we are related to the world in another way. In this relationship, it is neither causality nor determination that are at work. The relationship is one of freedom. Freedom does not belong to knowledge but to action. It is with this freedom, however, that the understanding begins to work.

Descartes and Kant were able to turn philosophy into a way of life, or rather they found that philosophy was a way of life. There is no need to mention here that Kant denied metaphysics. Even though it is a well-known fact that Kant denied metaphysics, we should not lose sight of the fact that he started constructing a form of metaphysics of metaphysics. In effect, he contended that the realization of man's true nature would not be possible without the development of critical reason. In his view, the individual who has not reached this stage, does not know his status and limitations. He does not know that he is separate from nature. He does not comprehend that there is no end in nature and that it is man who is an end in himself. It is toward this end that all the dispersions and deformities will transform to create

some sort of unity. Here, I do not say anything about Hegel who argued that the world without philosophy was similar to a temple without a deity to be worshipped.

In the twentieth century, another situation began to emerge. Philosophy which had to be the guide for science and technology had accomplished its task. Apparently, the way had been paved so that science would dethrone philosophy and would declare itself the king. Neo-Positivism appeared on the scene in order to confirm and strengthen the sovereignty of science. With a fervour and an ideological rhetoric similar to that espoused by the members of a political party, the proponents of Neo-Positivism defended the supremacy of science, instead of that of metaphysics. This is one of the oddities of history that, in order to replace philosophy, science was itself in need of a philosophy and that the administrator of this short reign was philosophy itself. But since science could not replace metaphysics, the Neo-Positivist fad soon began to die out, and philosophy's crown of power and sovereignty was left unused. In the world today, technology is a king without a throne, without a crown. It rules with an iron fist.

Some of the greatest men of philosophy have defended philosophy against this dictatorship of technique. It was a defence motivated neither by any hatred of science and technique, nor out of prejudice in favour of philosophy. Husserl in his article "The Crisis of the West" has expressed his concern that Europe may fall into the abyss of hatred and ignorance and might eventually annihilate itself as a result of abandoning the principles of reason and philosophy. In this article, he has claimed that Europe and philosophy were one and the same.

3. How can one consider Europe to be the same entity as philosophy? I do not want to concern myself with the principles that Husserl followed. But I agree that the European project has been a philosophical odyssey which has materialized in the past twenty-five hundred years and especially in the past five hundred years. This project began with Plato's Republic, reaching to The City of God of St Augustine. Such trajectory for philosophy covers the harsh terrain which leads to Sir Thomas More's Utopia, to Francis Bacon's The New Atlantis, and from there to the Enlightenment of Kant and the freedom of Hegel, finally arriving at a Nietzschean perspective over an ever-expanding wilderness soon to encompass everything.

We can compare the history of the modern philosophy with the history of the political and cultural developments in the West. Descartes and Kant were not sages who merely had the spiritual perfection of man in mind, but they showed the paths for the domination of science, freedom and modern politics. Europe would not come into existence were it not for philosophical thought. In other words, if philosophy did not exist, there would not be any science, technology, the human rights and modern politics.

4. If technology, science and modern politics are established upon the foundation of philosophy, at least we too should partake of the Western technique and science. We should tend the tree of knowledge to which Descartes used to refer. It is possible that statement of Descartes regarding the relationship among philosophy, science, technology and ethics is viewed merely the opinion of a philosopher--and a questionable one at that. It is also possible that some would say that I have overstated the case of the

influence that philosophers can wield and have considered them as those who reign supreme in history.

Here I would like to make two points. The first point is that philosophy is not a collection of views held by individuals. Philosophy is the Logos. The philosophers are the messengers of Being. They are not speaking their own words. In the Second Nature, man steps out of himself and his selfish interests. (Philosophers were devoid of any egotism even when they laid the foundation of subjectivism.) Another point that should be raised here: Can we not see that the projects of Galileo, Bacon and Descartes have been materialized exactly as they had envisioned them? Isn't Kant considered the teacher of modernity? While learning philosophy, we tend to concentrate on the details, the problems and the ways for solving them. We study the details. We prove and refute. We hardly get to know the effects that are left behind by the truth and the essence of a certain philosophy. Kant is undoubtedly the founder of the critical philosophy. But this critical philosophy is a momentous event in human history. It is in this sense that philosophy serves to transform history.

Of course, scholars have a right to question the details of a philosophy. They have to do that; otherwise, we would not know the depth of a philosopher's thought. But after analysing and studying a philosophy in detail, one should ponder on the substance of that philosophy to see what have been the main questions that are at its root. The question that should be asked is: Concomitant with what transformation or revolution in man's views have these questions emerged? It would be very easy to reject Descartes' statement that Cogito, ergo sum. One can even imagine that the statement was a joke. But Descartes' statement that Cogito, ergo sum signifies the emergence of the modern man. The statement meant that man is the same as thinking.

The existence of man is his thinking; thinking is nothing but doubting. Considering that philosophy inevitably turns into critical philosophy--and taking into account that with knowledge becoming limited to critical philosophy, "the will" takes precedence over knowledge and constitutes the essence of man--how would man, who must transform the world and build it in his own image, not be identical to will power and freedom?

Whenever I think about these issues, I regret the fact that in the beginning of our contact with the West, the philosophers of the Islamic world and our country did not set out to study the works of the Western philosophers and to understand the real import of their philosophy. I wonder why they did not engage in debates with Western philosophers using the language they had adopted for their philosophy?

Perhaps some would say that we have such luminaries as Farabi and Avicenna and therefore we would not need to read St. Thomas Aquinas, Francis Bacon and Descartes. When we can read Masha'er, Shawahid-ur-Rububiyya and Asfar Arba'a, why would we need to read Critique of Pure Reason, Critique of Practical Reason, The Phenomenology of Spirit, The Will to Power and Being and Time? The first translator of Descartes' Discours de la methode into Persian has written in the introduction that a European philosopher before an Islamic sage is like a candle before the sun... and it is obvious that if they ask me to name some of the great men of thought in history, I would certainly include some of the

great men of Islamic thought at the top of my list.

I very much respect and honour Avicenna, Jalal-ed-Din Mowlavi and Sadr-ed-Din Shirazi. But if we are expected to repeat their statements everywhere and advise others that they should learn what these sages have said. and should search in their statements the solutions to all the problems, we have, in effect, closed the doors to thinking. Even though Being remains the subject matter of philosophy and despite the fact that the problems of philosophy are the problems related to the essential attributes of Being, the discussion of historical issues in the modern age have been added to the examination of these attributes, in such a manner that today's philosopher is expected to answer such questions as What is the meaning of "human rights"? What is the relationship between philosophy and politics? What are the intellectual and moral obstacles on the path of development? Is there any connection between religion and development? There are some ambiguous concepts such as value and counter-value which have entered the language, concepts that, if left unclarified, can lead to blocking of thought. Only philosophy can help clarify these concepts.

At the moment, the problems before us are the issues of religion, freedom, tradition, modernity, etc. If the great men of our philosophy do not concern themselves with these issues, the wrong people would enter this arena. The same people who would write a few pages on, say, how Islam has recommended the pursuit of development. Actually, development does not need any defence because it is inevitable in the domain of politics. Finding points in support of development in the old traditions and religious works or the past, has no point. Being redundant, such a pursuit is also harmful because it promotes naiveté and a sort of carelessness in thinking. Islam is a religion that dates back to fourteen centuries ago. In other words, it is, in a sense, an absolute religion. If Islam had supported the idea of development, such a support should be evident in our authoritative books. Moreover, if it were so, We should have beaten the West in the race for development at some point in the past so that we would not have to imitate them now.

Sometimes I am told, "How can you be amazed before Ibn-e Arabi, call Mawlana Rumi a deep ocean of meaning, and love Molla Sadra and yet, at the same time, talk of Nietzsche, Husserl, Max Scheler, Heidegger, Jaspers, Merleau-Ponty, Gadamer, Foucault, Derrida and postmodernism? My answer is: among the philosophers these are the greatest and the most important symbols of modern age. These are the spokesmen of this phase in the history of the West. Without studying their works, we can hardly understand how this world is faring and what will be its end.

5. At the moment, there are debates and polemics taking place over issues that are not of theoretical nature. A group of intellectuals and academicians are participating in these debates. In their discussions, they sometimes make references to Islamic theological schools and the scholars teaching in those schools. At any rate, one of the issues that they have raised is that our history in the past two hundred or three hundred years has degenerated. A group of people propose that the salvation is in the temporal interpretation of religion and in the establishment of democracy. Still others believe that as long as we do

not realize the extent of our misery, we cannot find a way out of our own decadence. Both groups defend the modernity.

Even though they both oppose “ideology” in their words, they have chosen modernity and the Western ways as their goals, the yardsticks with which they evaluate religion, tradition, morality, consciousness and thought. They probably do not know that this is ideology, and a bad one at that. As opposed to these writers, an American Muslim professor in a seminar which was held in Tehran last year, referred to the fondness for development and modernity as a form of shirk (ascribing partners to Allah).

Aside from these two groups, there are those who refrain from judging modernity and development. Instead, they ask: What is modernity? What is development? Is the whole world headed towards development? In other words, can we envision only one history for man? Would the history of non-Western societies have to go through the same process that the West has experienced? Have we done our research and have concluded that development is a form of perfection, which requires us to pursue the goals of development?

Those who are less concerned with politics say that the time is not ripe for these discussions and that we have yet to reach a phase that would demand such discussions. They say that we have not reached the phase of development and that we have yet to experience the side effects of development. So, they say, why would it be necessary to ask such questions that might weaken our resolve in treading the path that leads to development? The other group whose discussions are markedly ideological say that these questions are emanating from a reactionary spirit and will lead to the same position that says development is a form of shirk and unbelief. At best, they say, these questions lead to a position that would accept development only as a historical necessity.

Far from being in opposition to progress and development, the inquiry into modernity is actually one of the preconditions for the realization of modernity. Such a study might concern itself with the following questions: What is modernity? What are its roots? What phases has it undergone? What is development?

Such a study would be necessary because one could not blindly follow a path to some imaginary destination. I said before that Western philosophy was both the teacher and the pioneer of modernity and that Kant defined and explained, in the most explicit manner, the Enlightenment which is, in one sense, the same thing as modernity. (Of course, development is not the same as modernity. Development is an ambiguous and hitherto undefined concept. It is suitable for a world which has been subsumed under the history of modernity.) But the important point is that even though modernity appeared in a conceptual form in philosophy, such ideas as progress, freedom and the human rights turned into ideological principles starting with the eighteenth century.

It was with these principles that the West has moved on its historical path for the past two hundred years. Having taken into account the changes that have taken place in religion, tradition, customs, laws

and ways of thinking and philosophy of the Europeans, they want to overhaul the vehicle of the society, the very society which, they say, has become afflicted with decadence in such a manner that it would move forward on the same path that Europe found itself

I do not intend to discuss these issues in detail. I just wanted to show how the most elementary problems in the domain of politics, society and culture are tied to philosophy. The very issues that were considered merely political or social, with no link to philosophy, have acquired philosophical dimensions and are being explicated in the language of philosophy or pseudo-philosophy. Many of these issues are truly philosophical and one cannot discuss them but in the domain of philosophy. But if in certain cases resorting to philosophy has been done artificially, one should once again refer to philosophy to explicate the criteria or to re-formulate a question that was not posed rightly.

The problem is that the issues of philosophy which belong to the Second Nature and could be expressed in the states of freedom and affinity for truth, are now mixed with the street talks and have been mixed with the problems of the First Nature. Among the results of this error is that the very people, whose conversation in essence invites others to imitation, are the ones who deplore imitation. They bemoan the superficiality, decadence and the vulgarization of the present situation, but if someone suggests that it is possible that decadence and vulgarization would also occur in the West, they would call him a reactionary and a fascist.

It is also possible that they may accuse the person of wrongful and criminal deeds, after they have themselves recommended others to be polite and to respect the rights and freedom of others. But the other group do not see it fit that any one should discuss the issue of the West and its problems. They merely suggest that the discussion should take place in an opportune moment. But who is to say which time is ripe?

Apparently, the philosopher and thinker, is the person who is familiar with the time. Time manifests in his conversation. If such a philosopher appears, how can we tell him what to say, what not to say? It is not good that without becoming philosophers, we would see ourselves as the self-appointed arbiters of what is good or what is bad, as the ones entrusted with the mission to teach, guide and lead the philosophers, thinkers, the jurists and exegetes. These claims are not altogether bad and disheartening signs. It is hoped that those who promise to become men of contemplation will learn lessons from these.

In conclusion, philosophy is not a pointless activity. As we have said it before, the West, according to some European philosophers, is the same as philosophy. Before the beginning of the Western history, the civilizations and histories had no connection with philosophy. But the main axis of the world today is philosophy. On a routine basis, we can gain information about cultures, the way the ethnic groups and peoples of different regions of the world live, but it would be impossible to understand this world and what goes on it, if we do not utilize philosophy. In order to understand the West, it would be necessary to immerse in its philosophy.

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