

## CONSTRUCTIVE ENGAGEMENT DIALOGUE (2.3)

### **SPIRITUALITY IN THE PERIPATETIC PHILOSOPHICAL TRADITIONS OF ISLAM**

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It is a daunting experience to attempt to reflect on spirituality, or on spiritual matters and exercises, from the standpoint of philosophy. This is especially difficult in an era that calls into question the validity of philosophical thinking altogether in the age of modern techno-science. It is precisely this burden that is boldly shouldered by Mohammad Azadpur in his *Reason Unbound*, whilst his reflections on the question concerning spirituality are mediated via the channels of interpreting the Peripatetic traditions in the intellectual history of Islam. The scope of his endeavour is not restricted to historiography and philology, which are usually transformed into projects of documentation within the mediaevalist division of the broad area of Islamic Studies, even when approaching the investigation of philosophy in pre-modern Islamic civilization. After all, the academic methodologies that dominate the conventional approaches of mediaevalists in studying the history of ideas in Islam are predominantly archival in scope. Azadpur avoids these traps by offering us interpretations of philosophical thinking in Islam that are informed by contemporary philosophical reflections, and particularly by those that have been orientated by the perspectives of the so-called 'Continental Thought', and more specifically from the viewpoint of Martin Heidegger's fundamental ontology and its critique of the history of European metaphysics. This approach in studying the philosophical legacies of pre-modern Islamic civilization is rather rare. Such pathway in interpretation runs along the trails of an intellectual landscape that I journeyed through elsewhere in reading the metaphysics of the eleventh-century polymath Ibn Sina (Avicenna) from a phenomenological vantage point that was guided by Heideggerian ontological leitmotifs. The resistance to such approaches in the academic and scholarly circles of Islamic Studies is poignant. The strictures are ultimately executed on the grounds of avoiding anachronism, and in the name of maintaining authentic expressions of fidelity to the ancient texts and their original authors. In general, this outlook

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censors original critical thinking, and at times, it also arrests the impetus of hermeneutic and exegetical interpretations, which aim at surpassing the confines of the prevalent archivist practices in Islamic Studies. It is refreshing and informative to witness another attempt by a kindred thinker to undertake the pathways of contemporary philosophy in securing new channels of accessibility to renewed interpretations of the history of philosophical ideas in Islam, and the exploration of their relevance to modern thought and culture. This refined undertaking is furthermore strengthened by serious reflections on the spiritual legacies that animated the corpus of *falsafa* (Islamic Philosophy), and running by this the risks of alienating most modern philosophers and academic thinkers who are unaccustomed to such uncommon modes of philosophizing, which seek the revival of spirituality in a sapiential quest within philosophy.

Azadpur's *Reason Unbound* critically re-assesses the modern receptions of Peripatetic Islamic philosophy through convincing surveys. He also examines the role that this pre-modern intellectual tradition can potentially perform in inspiring the possible emancipation and resolution of the elements of crisis that compromise modern naturalistic rationalism. This endeavour is situated within the broader cultural critique of the quandaries of Orientalism, which originated with Edward Said and was furthermore accentuated in the context of studying the intellectual history of Islam by Muhsin Mahdi (1). Azadpur aims at going beyond the doctrinaire stances of Orientalism and the methodological strictures of philosophical rationalism in the reception and interpretation of Islamic philosophy within contemporary academia. He seeks to reveal the centrality of the practice of what he refers to as 'spiritual exercises' in pre-modern Islamic Peripateticism (Aristotelian and imbued with Platonism motifs), while partly building his case on Pierre Hadot's interpretation of ancient Greek philosophy (8-11) as being primarily a mode of praxis that rested on spirituality and aimed at cultivating self-transformations as prerequisites for the acquisition of theoretical knowledge and the attainment of wisdom. However, unlike their Greek predecessors and counterparts, the Peripatetic thinkers of Islam assigned a great importance to the monotheistic exemplar of Prophethood, while also picturing it as an ultimate aim behind the philosophical-spiritual nurturing of the soul. This pre-modern outlook is reinforced by Azadpur's reading of Henri Corbin's oeuvre in conjunction with phenomenological analyses that were inspired by Heidegger, especially in the context of the latter's fundamental ontology and its existential analytic of *Dasein*, as principally set in *Sein und Zeit* (Being and Time). Azadpur's critique targets what he refers to as the 'limited scope' of the rational impetus in philosophizing, which censors the imaginative, poetic, and intuitive modes of thinking. He notes that the phenomenological surpassing of the divide between mind and world constituted an insight that was already anticipated by Muslim Peripatetic philosophers (4). Azadpur places a special emphasis herein on the symbolic order of Prophetology, which on his view underpinned the significance of the practice of spiritual exercises in the modes of thinking of the Peripatetic philosophers in Islam; and that it demarcated by this a distinctive trait in thought that was not witnessed before within the antique Greek legacies. Philosophy is pictured in this context as a

way of life, and not only as the kernel of demonstrative reasoning, which merely seeks the rational discursive production of knowledge in the composition of theoretical and logical treatises. Philosophy also becomes phenomenological in the way it calls for getting to *things themselves*. This maxim, which was announced by Edmund Husserl in articulating the agenda of phenomenological research and its directives of method, is presented by Azadpur from the perspective of Heidegger's analysis in *Sein und Zeit*, and as mediated also by the radical divergence from phenomenology that we witness with the esoteric turn in the thought of Corbin who eventually cultivated a mystical mood in thinking. Self-awareness and the promise of an elevated mode of sapiential metamorphosis is embedded within the Socratic evocation of the Delphic injunction of Apollo: 'Know Thyself!' This call destines the seeker to excellence in nurturing the virtues in the quest for wisdom that overcomes the reductive construal of philosophizing as a theoretical mode of thematic abstract rationalistic deliberation. This antique outlook, which accentuated the primacy of virtue-ethics, had resonances within Islamic mysticism; which, on Azadpur's view, ought to be restored as a prolegomenon to philosophical thinking.

Azadpur argues against the modern academic interpretative emptying of Islamic Peripatetic thought from its spiritual content (16). Based on the fuller logical unfolding of the bearings of such perspective, one would uphold the view that Islamic philosophy was inherently a religious mode of thinking, which focused on the practice of spiritual transformative exercises that severed the attachment to worldly things and withdrew from being caught in the thicket of vain desires. Philosophizing in Islam would therefore be destined on the straight path of the beckoning messengers of divinity in leading a God-fearing way of life that is also motivated in faithfulness by piety. Azadpur's authorial mood belongs in this regard to the genre of literature and prose that marks the works of traditionalists such Seyyed Hossein Nasr and William Chittick. Philosophy is depicted through the lenses of esotericism and asceticism, in seeking the realization of self-purification and self-perfection, by emulating or aspiring to reach the station of prophecy by way of approximations in the nurturing of the soul within the quests for wisdom. Azadpur aims at resuscitating a *Sophia perennis* that discloses truth through self-discovery. His endeavour is inspired by rethinking of the significance of prophecy in the reflections of Alfarabi and Ibn Sina (18-19). Self-cultivation is not only paramount in ancient Greek wisdom or in Islamic Peripateticism, it is also witnessed in phenomenology of the Heideggerian variety as it was adaptively assimilated within the syncretic symbolisms of Corbin's teachings. Ethics becomes a gateway to theoretical investigation, and religious mysticism is posited as an intrinsic trait of philosophizing in the Islamic Peripatetic *milieu*, which applies to the thought of Alfarabi and Ibn Sina. Azadpur sees parallels therein with phenomenology in saving the appearance by way of unveiling the hidden that self-shows itself beneath it. This calls to get to the things themselves (22-23) as mediated via the authenticity of *Dasein* (27), specifically in being away from the distraction, comfort, and idiosyncratic public possibilities of being-in-the-world (*In-der-Welt-Sein*) under the influence of the neuter *Das Man* (They). Azadpur detects in this the workings of ethics. He also appeals herein to

McDowell's reflections on the actions of the righteous persons who supposedly get things right due to the impress of virtuousness on their character traits (33). The authenticity of *Dasein* is grasped as an autonomous dwelling amongst entities and beings in the world; namely, of being at home amidst things by which we dwell. This Heideggerian picture is judged by Azadpur as being restricted, or possibly truncated, since the Peripatetic thinkers in Islam aimed further at executing spiritual exercises, which seemingly opened up experiential vistas and unveiled intellectual horizons that surpassed the inner-worldly limits of Heidegger's take on *Dasein*'s solitary authenticity (39-40). Cultivating virtue and the struggle for excellence in character belong to the propaedeutic practices preceding theoretical inquiry (41). This state of affairs points to the perfection of practical reason in aiming at the realization of the image of the perfect human being as a philosopher-prophet-lawgiver, which gives prominence to the prophetic exemplar in Peripatetic Islamic thought (51-52), whilst being inspired by the Platonist outlook on the *polis*. However, the attainment of happiness and the quest for this prophetic idealized paradigm can be optimally mediated via the conduits of a political life that is conducted in a virtuous city. Excellence and virtue necessitate the social context for their practice in deeds and comportments, instead of being nurtured in solitude (53), or by fleeing our time-consuming everyday commitments and the dutiful attending to our responsibilities. This inclination in thinking is not far removed from the Aristotelian take on ethics, albeit the emphasis on being guided by the prophetic legacy in enacting spiritual exercises is distinctively Islamic.

The practice of spiritual exercises purifies the self from its worldly attachments by curtailing appetites, passions, desires, and ambitions (77-78). Whilst such exercises are continually mentioned in connection with Islamic Peripateticism, it is unclear how these were manifested in concreteness. Did they necessitate acts of worship and supplicant invocation, or the enactment of canonical ritual prayers, of fasting, or of meditative contemplation in prolonged periods of solitary silence, or the resolute training of the mind to empty thoughts from anything but the remembrance of God, or the kinaesthetic motion of bodily limbs in whirling cyclic revolutions? For instance, we witness detailed descriptions of such spiritual exercises in allegorical terms with Ibn Tufayl's tale of *Hayy ibn Yaqzan*; and yet it is not too clear what Azadpur meant by *spiritual exercises* in relation to the Peripatetic philosophers in Islam.

Azadpur indicates that the spiritual exercises aim at enhancing the quality of the potential connection with what pre-modern Peripatetic Muslim thinkers referred to in an antique Neo-Platonist *parlance* as the: 'Active Intellect'; namely, the source of practical and theoretical intelligibility. Disciplined imagination was seen herein as a pivotal faculty in the unfolding of the workings of prophecy and philosophy (63). Azadpur mediates his analysis of this phenomenon in Chapter 4, by way of reflections on the beautiful and the sublime in Kant's *Critique of Aesthetic Judgement*, and also through a brief appraisal of Hegel's *Aesthetics*.

Azadpur aims all along at showing that Islamic Peripateticism offers a *genuine* form of rationalism that is not constrained by an excessively narrow construal of reason (81). The intellect is not restricted to discursive and demonstrative reasoning,

or to dialogical deliberation. Imagination and dream carry cognitive and epistemic weight in the way imageries are transmitted into the soul from the heavenly spheres and the separate [disembodied] intelligences (84-85). Whilst Azadpur evokes the poetics that are suggested by this classical picture, it remains unclear how this mythic cosmology of Neo-Platonism can still be sustainable, even at an inspirational suggestive level, in our age of modern techno-science.

It is accepted as a convention in the esotericism of modern traditionalist writing to use the symbolic devices of rhetoric and poetics in view of retaining the Neo-Platonist leitmotifs that animated Islamic Peripateticism within the current promotion of mysticism, gnosis and Sufism. However, such forms of traditionalism tend to be reactionary towards modern science or in the interpretation and reception of the history of the exact sciences in Islamic pre-modern civilization and material cultures. Scenes of instruction can indeed be derived from these pre-modern cosmologies, epistemic paradigms, and onto-theological outlooks. Nonetheless one has to be guarded against the impress of the mythical-poetical modes of picturing reality, without necessarily losing sight of the importance of the practice of spiritual exercises. One can still evoke the significance of virtue-ethics and stress its primacy in preceding intellectual inquiry (104) or scientific research. This aim does not anymore require the continuation hitherto of conversations about an Active Intellect within our contemporary intellectual settings. It is not also a well-founded critique to level against Heidegger that he was reductive in his approach by doing away with the notion of a separate intelligence, and by following the footsteps of his predecessors that went down the route of Thomism (105-107).

Heidegger's thought unfurled against the background of his preoccupation with the question of the meaning, truth, and place of being in a scientific age that is marked by the unfolding of the essence of modern technology. His fundamental ontology, his call for thinking, his existential analytics of *Dasein*, and his reflections on *Ereignis* (as appropriative event?) all required a disciplined approach in freeing thought from its doctrinal bondage to metaphysics, and from its non-philosophical commitments to what was handed down over from the past regions of *mythos*. Having said that, one ought to indeed reflect on the phenomenon of the spiritual incapacitation of philosophy (108); albeit, this can be done by accentuating the primacy of ethics over ontology, over cosmology and epistemology, without retaining a nostalgic poetizing imagery at the roots of one's own thinking, or promoting reactionary or relativistic commitments to Peripatetic or Neo-Platonist pictures that are no longer sustainable in our epoch.

Azadpur composed his book with the principal aim of re-interpreting Islamic Peripateticism from the standpoint of accentuating the centrality of the practice of spiritual exercises within its teachings and sapiential quests. However, his complementary and intriguing task of appreciating how such endeavour can be furthermore applied to a resolution of the problematic crisis that underlies the fissures of modern naturalistic and rationalistic philosophizing remained underdeveloped and ambiguous. Azadpur gravitated in this aspect towards traditionalist literature, which poetizes the pre-modern cosmological doctrines.

Peripateticism in Islamic thought avoided the pull of irrationality, by moderating the mind's reflections, with reasoned balance, on the randomness that can be detected in causal worldly and cosmic irregularities, and by eschewing blind faith and dogmatic superstitions. Its moderation reflects nonetheless the particulars of its epistemic pre-modern age and its associated worldviews. As Azadpur convincingly noted with eloquence, we can possibly liberate modern philosophy by taking unprejudiced looks at the pre-modern conceptions of philosophy; in his case, he gazes at Islamic Peripateticism (112). This calls for thinking about the prospects of grasping philosophy not merely as a production of rational discourse, but also as essentially consisting of a practice of spiritual exercises, which assist in gaining access to things themselves (112). If Islamic Peripateticism intersects in this regard with the maxims of phenomenology, this may grant our reflections on it a viable path of accessibility into contemporary philosophical thought; at least in the so-called 'Continental' modern division of philosophy. Emmanuel Levinas might have been a potential thinker to be considered herein in the accentuation of the primacy of ethics in philosophizing, which would have presented Azadpur with another voice besides that of Corbin to articulate an informative critique of the limitations in Heidegger's thought.

In all of this, the notion of spirituality and the nature of spiritual exercises remain ultimately obscure, and the same applies to the sphere of their praxis in modern academia. Should it not be the case that prior to exploring the lessons that modern Continental and Analytic rational philosophy can learn from pre-modern Islamic Peripateticism, one ought to focus the initial foundational efforts on renewing the impetus of philosophical thinking in contemporary Muslim thought? Is the call for spiritualizing philosophy a modern form of mysticism, or of the implementation of Sufi ethics, or of advocating gnosis? In what way would the modern expressions of spiritualism differ from those of past traditions while surpassing the mythic pronouncements of traditionalists and the superstitious randomized eclecticism of new age spirituals? What is spirituality, and what constitutes spiritual exercises? These notions were presupposed throughout the propositions of the book without being explicated in concreteness. Nonetheless, Azadpur initiates the interrogations that establish the preliminary conditions for further disputations around them.

In retracing some of the steps that we have undertaken earlier, Azadpur's conception of a transcendent and separate Active Intellect was not only sustained in the context of his reflections in historiography or within the parameters of historical analyses, he rather advanced an implicit suggestion that aimed at presenting this notion as a valid image, which may inspire contemporary philosophizing in the cultivation of the intuitive faces of thought. Azadpur's endeavour became obscured by this traditionalist penchant. What is pictured as a crisis in modern rationalism turns also into a mirrored predicament that shows traditionalism as reactionary and seemingly relativistic in our age of techno-science. Heidegger's existential analytic of *Dasein*'s mode of being-toward-death is approached from inner-worldly experiential manners, but being-toward-beyond-death, as pronounced by Corbin, remains a mystery of the future, which is marked by its utter *otherness* that cannot be

determined in affirmations nor surpassed by negations. The poetizing turn in philosophizing becomes thusly confusing.

Azadpur tacitly calls for a philosophy that is inspired by prophetology, which he sees its relevance today in the (mystical?) prolongation of Heideggerian phenomenology and in the extension of the teachings of the schools of Isfahan and Tehran up till the present day, as these are primarily embodied in the curricular activities of the seminaries in Iran. This is a noble aim, but it does not yet accomplish the promised task of overcoming the gapping divide between religion and science, between theology and philosophy, faith and reason.

Azadpur's *Reason Unbound* is a preparatory work that paves the way for future inquiries that will be driven by the cultivation of the cognitive powers of imagination. This book reveals excellence in historiography and textual interpretation, but nonetheless its thought-provoking thesis remains to be debated in terms of rethinking the end of philosophy in relation to sapiential pursuits that are animated by spiritual leanings in the quest for wisdom. It therefore remains unclear how Islamic Peripateticism offers an antidote to some of philosophy's current universal problems, and how philosophizing needs beforehand, or at least in parallel, to be actively resuscitated by Muslim thinkers from within the unfolding of modern Islamic thought.

In the poetizing turn in thinking, and like Azadpur, I have been at home amidst the same constellation of texts. The territory that he partly surveyed is the landscape that is being traversed in our shared pilgrimage journeys. The more we travel through its regions and dwell in it, the more we relegate our tales about its locales and the promise of unearthing its riches. This enhances our experiential rooted familiarities with its features, with the hope that one day it may indeed become again a fragrant abode of orchards to be safeguarded by posterity, and to be cultivated by those who are yet to come...

## REFERENCE

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