

## CONSTRUCTIVE ENGAGEMENT DIALOGUE (2.5)

### **THOUGHT-SPACES, SPIRITUAL PRACTICES AND THE TRANSFORMATIONS OF *TA'WĪL***

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In *Reason Unbound*, Mohammad Azadpur provides an engaging and thought-provoking study of medieval Islamic philosophy, finding in the pages of such thinkers as Alfarabi, Avicenna and Averroes grounds for dissolving a number of problematic modern philosophical dualisms between intellect and imagination, imagination and spiritual practice, intellect and spiritual practice, and philosophy and mysticism.

In reflecting on Azadpur's project, I offer three considerations:

First, I address Azadpur's opening question of Orientalism, and ask us to put that into conversation with his closing consideration of Corbin's critique of Aquinas' critique of Avicenna. In particular, I ask us to consider the possibility that there is a tacit Christian (Thomist or other) orientation to the Western Academic "thought space" that can limit the way we read texts and tell the history of philosophy within the Western academy. Thinking more broadly about the question of limiting lenses, I also question the role of Heidegger in Azadpur's project.

Next, I examine Azadpur's classification of spiritual practices throughout his project and I ask for clarification about the precise nature of and relationship between such practices in medieval Islamic philosophy.

Lastly, I address a *prima facie* difference between Azadpur and Corbin on symbolic transformation's relation to reason, highlighting what appear to be their two competing senses of *ta'wīl* (the interpretive act of "returning a text to its origin" which Azadpur addresses throughout his study).

#### 1. FROM ORIENTALISM TO AQUINAS?: APPROACHING ISLAMIC PHILOSOPHY FROM WITHIN THE WESTERN "THOUGHT SPACE"

In the opening pages to his study, Azadpur reflects with Muhsin Mahdi and Edward Said on a problematic sense of Orientalism according to which Islam "has been fundamentally misrepresented in the West" (Said 1979, 272) itself as a result of

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...Orientalist discourse [being] the systematic academic discipline of dominating, controlling, and managing the so-called Orient for the sake of the Western imperial political agenda.... (Azadpur 2011, 1)

Said goes on to describe:

...a dynamic exchange between individual authors and the large political concerns shared by the three great empires—British, French, and American—in whose intellectual territory [various Islamic writings] were produced. (Said 1979, 14-15)

Along these lines, Azadpur highlights Mahdi's further elaboration that

Oriental studies of Islam and Islamic civilization have been founded on a mixed bag of religious, cultural, ideological, ethnic (in some cases even racist) and scientific prejudgments and practical political interests. (Mahdi 1990, 96)

Azadpur adds Mahdi's further sense that studies of Islam have been "guided by irrational motives and political interests" (Mahdi 1990, 96).

It is partly in way of counteracting this kind of trend in the study of Islam that Azadpur puts forth his own study of medieval Islamic philosophy, in particular following through on Mahdi's own hint that a close study of "pre-modern" Islamic rationalism can lead us to a more integrated and complete sense of "reason."

At the very end of his project, Azadpur turns to Corbin's critique of Aquinas' rejection of the Islamic philosophical theory of Active Intellect. Corbin reads Aquinas' critique through a religious lens, unpacking Aquinas' dissatisfaction with Avicenna in terms of Aquinas' own tacit Christian sense that it is the church—not a cosmic separate intellect—which mediates between God and human being. Corbin in this way contrasts a personal sense of salvation at the (tacit) core of Avicenna's Islamic theory of Active Intellect with a more social sense of salvation—rooted in Catholic views on the church—at the (tacit) core of Aquinas' rejection of Avicenna's theory of Active Intellect.

While Azadpur does not overtly ask his reader to link together this closing consideration with his opening reflection on Orientalism, I wonder if there is an important link here worth considering. Leaving aside Mahdi's and Said's political approach (i.e. their sense that misreadings of Islam are rooted in political interests with political implications), here I ask us simply to consider the possibility that certain Christian conceptual schemata have (at least at times) exerted tacit influence over the way that many of us read texts within the Western academy, including the way that many of us read and interpret medieval Islamic philosophy. I have in mind a certain Thomist methodology (practiced tacitly—or overtly—by some scholars and students) according to which a text of Islamic philosophy is criticized (or, is approached in a negative critical spirit) simply because (a) it is a text that was critiqued by Aquinas, or even because (b) it is a text that is not identical to Thomas' own writings. The worry here is not that some Thomists don't like Avicenna as much

as they like Aquinas; the worry here is that sometimes these scholars wind up writing versions of the history of philosophy that are informed by such preferences (without expressly stating that they are informed by such preferences), and then the students and other scholars who read these materials wind up being tacitly disposed to approaching Avicenna with some general sense that his philosophy is wrong. In this way, a lens of failure is tacitly applied to a text of Islamic philosophy, making it impossible for neutral readings and interpretations of these texts to take place.

Prompted by Azadpur's bookending his *Reason Unbound* with critiques of Orientalism and Aquinas, we might ask: Is it possible that Islamic philosophical concepts are sometimes overlaid by Thomist intuitions? Is it possible that textual misreadings (leading to misrepresentations) can occur when scholars and students tacitly (or overtly) approach texts of Islamic metaphysics already convinced that Aquinas' metaphysics are better?

My concern about the possible interference of Western methodological lenses in the study of Islam also leads me to question Azadpur's own recourse to Heidegger in the project: While the introduction of Heidegger allows Azadpur to engage readers of medieval Islamic philosophy with questions of human authenticity, it does seem—as seen even in Azadpur's emphasis on Corbin's own surpassing of Heidegger—that Heidegger is perhaps very much a lens that Islamic philosophy can do without. To be sure, Azadpur invokes Heidegger to help us approach Islamic philosophy: Azadpur uses Heidegger to help us focus on self's authentic move away from the "them" to the space in which things reveal themselves, itself linked by Azadpur to *phronesis* in Islamic philosophy. That said, Azadpur also emphasizes that Corbin dramatically goes beyond (and in this sense, we may say, goes against) Heidegger in replacing the end term of "being towards death" with the end term of "being towards beyond death" (35-7). But after introducing Corbin's own religious modification (and in some strong sense, rejection) of key elements of Heidegger, it seems that Azadpur might not even want to invoke Heideggerian ideas as any kinds of benchmarks against which to measure Islamic philosophy; for in the context of Corbin's rejection of a key Heideggerian insight, it seems that to the extent that something is truly Heideggerian, it will be devoid of precisely the kind of religious spirit that Azadpur's study is out to capture. In that light, perhaps it would be best for Azadpur to resist the Western academic temptation to use Heidegger at all in his project. Perhaps Azadpur's picture of Islamic philosophy, as rationalism-with-spiritual-practice, is precisely a picture which does not shine brighter through Heideggerian analysis; perhaps Islamic philosophy has more to offer Heidegger than vice versa, in which case we must ask Azadpur: Why invoke Heidegger in this project at all?

## 2. ON THE NATURE AND KINDS OF SPIRITUAL PRACTICE

I turn next to Azadpur's discussion of spiritual practices. One of the key goals of the project is to show the intimate link between philosophy (as an exercise of knowledge) and spiritual transformation. Extending Hadot's reading of ancient philosophy into the Islamic philosophical realm, Azadpur argues for Islamic rationalism as more than

just narrow theory construction or dry, disembodied knowledge acquisition; rather, Azadpur shows how in the very contours of their acts of mind philosophers such as Alfarabi, Avicenna and Averroes are able to manifest a rich engagement with deep wisdom, and as such, deep theological devotion.

Reading *Reason Unbound*, one can find at least five different senses of ‘spiritual practice’. It is worth thinking more about how these all work together for Azadpur, as it is worth thinking more about whether one (or more) is the more primary sense of ‘spiritual practice’ that Azadpur has in mind.

1) - 2) The first two senses of ‘spiritual practice’ are related to two different ethical points of emphasis, viz. (a) the importance of ethical training as preparatory for philosophizing, and (b) the Aristotelian notion of phronesis – a particularly context-sensitive (and as such, not simply theoretical) focus on ethics. Highlighting the first ethical emphasis, Azadpur notes:

According to Avicenna, the ethical training of the philosopher provides a gateway to the intellectual fulfillment of the individual by curtailing the appetites and passions.... (59)

Highlighting the second ethical emphasis, Azadpur goes on to explain that in so curtailing the appetites and passions, ethical training allows the soul

to achieve practical wisdom (i.e., to recognize the objective good and act for the sake of it). The practically wise soul perceives the relevant moral intentions enmattered in a situation and engages in action for their sake, rather than for the sake of values imposed on one’s actions external to that situation. Therefore, practical wisdom results in actions that have as their ends the unconditional good perceived in that situation of action.... (59; see too 76)

While Azadpur is clear on how the ethical training leads to the phronesis, I would ask him to clarify whether the initial training or the resulting phronesis is more properly illustrative of the spiritual practice that he has in mind when he emphasizes that Islamic rationalism is itself deeply tied up with spiritual practice.

I would also ask Azadpur to clarify how the ethical training and phronesis connect up with Islamic Law. To the extent that this ethical training is linked to the guidelines for living prescribed by Islamic Law (as emphasized, for example, in his analysis of Averroes at page 92), does this not in some sense trump the Aristotelian emphasis on phronesis? In other words, if the source of the ethical training is itself a divinely revealed Islamic Law, does that not put a kind of Divine Command Theory at the foundation, and does such a foundation not risk overshadowing the fluidity of Aristotelian phronesis with a more rigid mode of “following God’s law”? How would Azadpur advise us to think of revealed Islamic Law in a way that avoids having it (a) overshadow the fluid sense of an “ethical spiritual practice” with a system of rule-following, and (b) overshadow the very notion of rationalism with faithful devotion to a set of revealed guidelines?

3) A third sense of ‘spiritual practice’ seems to emerge from the integration of imaginative and intellectual endeavors, a point highlighted throughout the project but

seen succinctly in Azadpur's pointing to Mahdi's identification of the "harmony of the rational and imaginative aspects of the human life" as having "spiritual dimensions" (4). If we focus on the integration of imaginative and intellectual endeavors (as Azadpur shows is the spirit of a range of Islamic rationalists), do we have the core of the spiritual exercise, or just a spiritual byproduct of the above ethical preparations and / or outcomes? In other words: Does Azadpur see the integration of imagination and intellect as the core of the spiritual practice in Islamic rationalism, or are one or more of the above ethical points of emphasis the crux of what makes an Islamic rationalist's rationalism a spiritual practice (with the integration of imagination and intellect either as preparatory for one or more of the above ethical-as-spiritual modes of being, or perhaps as just an outcome of one or more of the above ethical-as-spiritual modes of being)?

4) A fourth sense of 'spiritual practice' seems linked to the philosopher's (or prophet's) ability to come closer to God's own reality through various activities of intellect and imagination. Is the capacity to draw nearer to God (or perhaps to God's truth) the core of what, for Azadpur, makes the Islamic rationalist's rationalism a spiritual practice, or is ethics (in one or both of the above mentioned senses) more primarily the marker of the spiritual practice? In other words, which is more foundationally a case in point of the kind of spiritual exercise that Azadpur has in mind: the phenomenology of experiencing God's reality or the reality of being ethically engaged in the marketplace with other people?

5) Lastly, a fifth sense of 'spiritual practice' seems linked to the exegetical activity of *ta'wīl*. I end with some further questions about *ta'wīl* below, but for here, I would ask how this exegetical activity fits in with the other elements already mentioned in connection with rationalism as spiritual practice: Is *ta'wīl* preparatory for and / or an end-product of one or more of the above spiritual practices?

### 3. SYMBOLIC SPACES OF THE *TA'WĪL*: AZADPUR AND CORBIN ON TRANSFORMATION AND REASON

Closing our reflections on Azadpur's study, we turn to the *ta'wīl*, and in particular, to Corbin's sense of that activity as a transformative opening to a renewed self. As Azadpur shows in his study, Corbin has a unique phenomenological and hermeneutical approach to human subjectivity. Along these very lines, Corbin (in his study of what he calls Avicenna's "visionary recitals") describes the hermeneutical possibilities in the very act of textual exegesis in terms of a reader being transformed through an encounter with the symbolic, mythic, imaginative space of a text (Corbin 1960). Upholding this kind of "symbolic" (as opposed to allegorical) approach to Avicenna's "recitals," Corbin seems precisely to see Avicenna as moving *beyond* philosophical engagement to a spiritual self-awakening beyond intellect. In this spirit, Corbin classifies these works as Avicenna's transformational-spiritual writings, and he explains how such writings employ image, imagination and symbol to open onto an experiential reorientation that goes beyond the confines of reason. Since, for Corbin, this transformation is precisely *not* a function of intellectually moving from

symbol to idea, and since, as such, for Corbin the ultimate spiritual transformation seems linked to a state of being beyond reason, I wonder if Azadpur's own sense of Islamic-rationalism-as-spiritual-practice might have a more robust sense of intellect's role (in harmony with imagination) than can be found in Corbin's own analysis.

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