



## Philosophy and the Human Inheritance in a Post-Western World

Anthony F. Shaker\*

Received: 09/07/2020 | Accepted: 28/09/2020

### Abstract

Original Research



The dissolution of the Western-dominated Postwar Order, and the Eurocentric myths that sustain it, presents a unique opportunity to ponder an old question posed by every new generation: How can philosophy, which Islamic and ancient Greek learning traditions have long defined as the pursuit of “wisdom,” resume its millennial civilizing role? This paper looks beyond passing political events to reconsider why philosophy was viewed in this role. As different as al-Fārābī, Ibn Sīnā, Ibn Khaldūn, Mullā Ṣadrā, Hegel and Heidegger are from each other, they all approached the question of civilization philosophically by way of the fundamental question of beingness (MAWJŪDIYYA) and existence (WUJŪD). Moreover, they strove for “completeness” of thinking with the “practical,” where, however, they resisted the temptation to reduce man to his practical or biological functions. Given the magnitude of the present challenges we all face, no dialogue across cultural boundaries can ignore the caution with which philosophical tradition has laid out the terms of this completeness in being.

### Keywords

Fārābī, Qunawi, Ibn Khaldūn, Mullā Ṣadrā, Hegel, Heidegger.

---

\* Ph.D in Islamic Studies, Institute of Islamic Studies, McGill University, CA. (philosopher and a specialist in Islamicate and German philosophy) | [afshaker@aol.com](mailto:afshaker@aol.com)

---

▣ Shaker, A. (2020). Philosophy and Human Inheritance in a Post-Western World. *Journal of Philosophical Theological Research*, 22(85), pp. 51 -68. doi: [10.22091/jptr.2020.5273.2274](https://doi.org/10.22091/jptr.2020.5273.2274).

▣ Copyright © the authors



The tectonic shift in international relations during the last ten years offers a unique opportunity to look beyond the politics of an antiquated hierarchy of nations and the Eurocentric myths that have sustained it. An anomaly of history, “Western”<sup>1</sup> dominance of the world has lasted about a century-and-a-half, all told, and is well on its way to being one of the shortest imperial enterprises in history. It arrived in the last few seconds of human history on the coattails of unparalleled civilizational breakthroughs all around the world.

As the late Janet L. Abu-Lughod wrote: “The usual approach is to examine *ex post facto* the outcome—that is, the economic and political hegemony of the West in modern times—and then to reason backward, to rationalize why this supremacy *had* to be” (Abu-Lughod, 1989, 12). Her observation is quite striking, though she is certainly not the only historian to shred the Eurocentric view of history. Far from explaining the past, reasoning back from the outcome has the effect of valorizing the present—somewhat like an old magical trick. So, the question I wish to propose to the philosophical community is the following: What do the dissolution of “Western” hegemony and the possible return to a more natural course of history signify for humanity’s inheritance and civilization?

Academics now have the privilege to examine this question in a more independent spirit. There is no need here to rehash the saga of misery and chaos brought on by foreign domination in our era. Let us calmly consider instead how philosophy, which in the *Ḥikma* and ancient Greek learning traditions is defined as “the pursuit of wisdom,” may resume its millennial civilizing role. I say “millennial” because every new generation in the last fourteen hundred years has posed the question of human civilization from a philosophical perspective—in fact, since the advent of Islam.

Briefly, this paper will focus on the path of philosophic reasoning by which *Ḥikma*, and, to some extent, thinking in the German lands established themselves in this role. So, we shall have to sacrifice lengthier analysis of specific philosophical problems for a broader view of the interconnectedness of ideas across cultural traditions. Also, I shall use the name *Ḥikma* instead of “Islamic philosophy,” because this is how philosophy generally referred to itself in the learning tradition that produced it.<sup>2</sup> The word *ḥikma* means both philosophy and

---

1. “West” here refers to three core states (England, France, and US), not the whole of the European subcontinent, which in any case has never been culturally, religiously, or politically homogeneous.

2. I include in *Ḥikma* *‘ilm al-ḥikma* (the science of philosophy), *al-falsafa al-‘ulā*, *ḥikma ilāhiyya* and *ilāhiyyāt*, but also *taṣawwuf* and *‘irfān*. In view of the heavy mixing that took place from the beginning and, in the Persian and Ottoman lands, at later stages of this journey, certain aspects of *‘ilm al-kalām* also come under this general label (on those aspects, see El-Rouayheb (2017). Most of the names above designate only loosely (and sometimes rhetorically) defined fields. Cf. Shaker, 2017, 10-5, 224.

wisdom, which of course has brought the question of being into play.

## In What Sense is Knowledge Complete?

Philosophers by tradition sought “completeness” in both knowing *and* being, rather than one-sidedly according to a subjectivist view of thought or an objectivist one of the ontic world. Dr. Hao Wang, one of the most eminent Western defenders of Analytic philosophy, ranks modern philosophers’ search for a *comprehensive* view of the world alongside what he sees as a “universal wish to unify knowledge and action (or theory and practice in the political domain)” (Hao Wang, 1988, 41). Something besides internal coherence has to relate things to each other within a science or in science as a whole. He sees the abiding importance of “action” in defining this goal. Action is “a central perennial purpose of philosophy,” he says, because the task of philosophy is “achieving some measure of global definiteness.”

One has to ask, however, if the meanings he attaches to “unity” and “comprehensiveness” have any application beyond Analytic philosophy. Logical empiricists like Carnap and Quine who espouse global definiteness have, in his words, “a shared wish to adhere to the physical and other more concrete or tangible objects and experiences (such as linguistic expressions and observation sentences)” (Hao Wang, 1988, 11). But what does it mean to tie knowledge to experience, let alone the entire contents of the physical world, in this definite way for a “comprehensive” knowledge? Philosophy has no equivalent for the elusive mathematical equations by which modern cosmologists have been hoping to describe everything in the universe. Not all knowledge is inferential, empirical or quantifiable. And if a formal unification of theory and action were indeed its primary goal, then this would relegate philosophy to the secondary role of analyzing epistemological issues created by others—in this case, their scientific findings. This is where the Analytic school has taken contemporary philosophy. I am not trying to trivialize scientific activity. It is positivist analytic thinkers like Hao Wang who, never quite understood by scientists themselves, tend imperiously to apply inductive criteria to all knowing and being.

Heidegger lays bare the presumptuousness of this tendency. He maintains that *Dasein already* is a being-in-the-world (*In-der-Welt-seins*) without the world having subsequently to be joined to this being like an attribute (Heidegger, 1994, 213-14).<sup>1</sup>In other words, the in-being (*In-Sein*) of *Dasein* is grounded in its

---

1. Heidegger argues that in-being is *the* constitution of being of *Dasein* (*die Seinsverfassung des Daseins*); every mode of being of this existent is grounded in *Dasein* and takes up a

being-with (*seines Seins-bei*), by which he means a dwelling with (*wohnen bei*) things and therefore also a familiarity with (*vertraut sein mit*) them. He confesses that a mere observer would normally turn to *Dasein*—man’s mode of being—for what is familiar and can serve as proof for both the determinations of beings and the existent being (*auf das Seienden*) that man is. These determinations include what is observed about beings. But being cannot be reduced to the determinations or reflected on it, if being constitutes their ground. Otherwise, he says, being becomes no more than an afterthought to be added to other considerations about a given thing. He disputes the hollow concept of being that results when contemporary philosophy subordinates itself to the scientific investigation of the world.

Whatever their differences, Heidegger and Hegel, al-Fārābī and Ibn Sīnā, Ibn Khaldūn and Mullā Ṣadrā all approached the question of man’s being in the world, not through the beings investigated in the positive sciences but through beingness (*mawjūdiyya*) in respect to both the permanence and movements of being. Al-Fārābī was the first to work out a concept of civilization (*‘umrān*) and “human settlement” (*madaniyya*) as man’s mode of existence within the inquiry into beingness, the classic subject-matter of the First Philosophy. The purpose of human existence, he says, is the attainment of happiness (*sa’āda*) (al-Fārābī, 1408 AH, 74). Man can realize it in this and the next world through wisdom, which al-Fārābī defines as “the intellection of the best of things through the best knowledge” (al-Fārābī, 1985, 72). The good community that truly is the best (*milla ṣaḥīḥa fī [ghāyat] al-jawda*) has the ideal features of the City of Excellence, which seeks completion for its philosophical “art of reasoning” (see al-Fārābī, 1990, 153). What this means is that *madaniyya* articulates wisdom on a plane of being where man approaches completeness through God’s perfect attributes and names. Man happens to share the attribute of wisdom with the (Supreme) First Existent, who nevertheless alone intellects His Essence and thereby possesses the permanent knowledge of the best of things.

Al-Fārābī speaks of two stages of existence for man. The first stage, at which the human being becomes human, is where his or her natural faculties are receptive to the actualization of the intellect (al-Fārābī, 1985, 242). The intellectual faculty with which man is born is potential at first, insofar as its ideas are not yet fully developed. Al-Fārābī connects it to the higher, more stable stage of pure intellection. Though told in the language of intellection, this division establishes the compass of man’s reality, whereby human

---

→

“relation” with the world insofar as *Dasein* is already being-in-the-world on the ground of its being-with (*seins Seins-bei*).

existence is grounded in something deeper and more enduring than sensory experience. “The reality of a thing,” he explains, “is the existence which is both particular to that thing and the most complete existence (*akmal al-wujūd*) allotted to it from existence” (al-Fārābī, 1985, 74).

The relevance of existence here, once again, is not empirical in character. In al-Fārābī’s philosophical discussion of human settlement, the philosopher-king of the City of Excellence is *intellectively*—not empirically and passively—related to the city’s parts, a relation which al-Fārābī compares to that of the First Cause with respect to all existents (al-Fārābī, 1985, 237). Moreover, just as the health of the body is inconceivable without the self (*nafs*) that governs it, so the city needs a leader (*imām*) and the household a figurehead (al-Fārābī, 1985, 230). Political headship is necessary at all these levels: to thrive man has to cooperate, but he cannot cooperate if he is deprived of a unified community. Al-Fārābī calls the unity epitomized by headship the necessary community (*madīna darūriyya*) because its function is to provide only for what is necessary for human livelihood and survival (al-Fārābī, 1971, 45). He contrasts this rudimentary function with that of the Excellent City, where the inhabitants seek after the best of things (*afḍal al-ashyāʾ*)—namely, the “human things” in that knowledge which the community aspires to actualize in both theory and practice (al-Fārābī, 1983, 49).

Basically, man has two lives (*ḥayātān*) and thus two perfections. The first life pertains to the multiplicity of daily human needs; the second persists on its own (i.e., according to an essence) and has no need for anything external to it or multiple in character that can cause it to exist (al-Fārābī, 1971, 45). And the dynamic between them mirrors how all existents are related to the First Existent Being. The point is that man is more than just the history of his own circumstances or a product of empirical laws. He is the shadow of God under God’s oneness (*waḥda*), as al-Fārābī notes, because wisdom is articulated through the Active Intellect (*al-ʿaql al-faʿāl*) that governs man’s mode of existence in the Excellent City (al-Fārābī, 1971, 155). From a developmental perspective, the inner history of wisdom is that of man above the multiplicity of the world.

By assigning a civilizing role to wisdom and its branches of knowledge, al-Fārābī also gave voice to the unparalleled intellectual and technological developments underway in his time. Islamicate civilization went on to lay the foundations of nearly every branch of knowledge we take for granted, down to the algorithmic reasoning we need for our precious computers but which had been put to different uses. By the fifteenth century, Ibn Khaldūn had worked out an empirical framework for a new “special science,” as he called it, for which Western academics have crowned him the father of social science, that most “modern” of the sciences. His theories were premised on the familiar philosophical view that man by nature is social and political (*madanī*) (inter alia,

al-Fārābī, 1408 AH, 69), and that human society (*al-ijtimāʿ al-insānī*) is necessary because no human being can fill all his or her needs in isolation (Ibn Khaldūn, 2010, I.33). At this general level, he regarded civilization in the light of man's inner journey as told by wisdom. But it was now possible for him to study the “shadow of God”, which is not an empirical concept, developmentally but outside philosophy in the form of human civilization. In his hands, *ʿaṣabiyya* acquired the technical sense of group solidarity: the social mechanism that drives history forward (cf. Shaker, 2017, 317-27). This is the seminal link he establishes with empirical knowledge for his special science.

As an empirical interpreter of history, Ibn Khaldūn emphasizes the idea of *sedentary* culture (*al-ʿumrān al-ḥaḍarī*) as a special type of *ʿumrān* (civilization). After all, not all *ʿumrān* is sedentary. *Madaniyya* (urbanization) implies, additionally, that leadership is as intrinsic to community as cooperation. This—more than any documentary link—connects him to the philosophy of al-Fārābī. For Ibn Khaldūn, too, human community organized as a unity implies a seat of authority, short of which God's will that man inhabit the earth under the authority he is permitted in God's name (*istikhlāfihi iyyāhum*) would remain incomplete (Ibn Khaldūn, I.34).

How Being relates all beings to each other and their respective worlds has long captivated philosophers. But the unity conferred here is very different from the unification of “theory” and “action” that Hao Wang defended on behalf of the logical empiricists.

## Independence from the World of Need

A little more than a thousand years ago, Abū Ḥamīd Ghazālī (d. 1111) wrote: “Someone who loves [the world heedlessly] and someone who hates it [out of a sense of purity] are like two persons on their way to the *ḥajj*”—neither can yet see the Kaʿba while riding, feeding and directing his mount [a horse or camel] (Al-Ghazālī 2019, 8). The rider who overfeeds his mount has his back turned to the world; whereas the other faces the Kaʿba. While there is at least the hope that the one facing the Kaʿba will reach his destination, Ghazālī assures us that this person's state is still not the highest perfection. For, a person too absorbed in his aversion for the world, he says, is as heedless (*ghāfil*) of God as the one absorbed by love for it (Al-Ghazālī 2019, 8).

Higher than the state of the person who nevertheless faces in the right direction is the state where “abstaining from the world” (*al-zuhd fī'l-dunyā*) implies nothing less than the absence of longing for either the presence or non-presence of the world (Al-Ghazālī 2019, 9). The real hope is the cessation of heedlessness (*ghafla*) and the transformation of this cessation into the

experience of a vision (*shuhūd*) of the inner reality of a thing. He describes this state as *ghinā* (independence), which is another attribute that man shares with God in the relative sense accorded to the beings of this world. “Perfection,” he says, “is when the heart does not heed what is other than the beloved either through love or hate. For just as two loves cannot be combined in the same state inside the heart, so aversion and love cannot be joined under a single state” (Al-Ghazālī 2019, 8).

Still, someone strongly attached to the emotions and appetites may find Ghazālī’s moral stricture against the material world so intimidating that its basic relevance to life, let alone to life in the twenty-first century, might be lost on him. However, reading Ghazālī literally as one would a user’s manual for how to operate a car can lead to some absurd questions like: Am I, then, to throw away my computer and every comfort in life along with the world of temptation? To dispel this fear, Ghazālī insists, “The world is not blamable in itself”; it is blamable “only when it becomes an impediment to reaching God” (Al-Ghazālī 2019, 37). He reminds us that the gifts offered by God, such as the natural beauty of the world, are not for us to turn away. So, returning a gift in a show of ascetic piety just to be admired by others, or for self-admiration, is as injurious as when the person takes what does not belong to him.

The root of the word *dunyā* (world) implies nearness. Hence, “world” refers to what we imagine to be nearest to us and which we manipulate or exchange for its monetary value. This is why “world” is closely associated with the personal appetites. The “mount” in Ghazālī’s allegory is like the body, which symbolizes the matter nearest to the self (*nafs*) that governs it. Hence, when the appetites are fed too much or too little, the body—like the mount—loses its inclination to take the person to his or her destination. This is not simply good practical advice. The path to perfection and proximity with God pertains to every human activity—including the faculty of thought. But let us retain, above all, Ghazālī’s point that *independence* rests on the cessation of what impedes the path to God and, by extension, the path to a cognizance of the inner realities of things (*ḥaqā’iq al-ashyā’*). This independence demands a preponderant factor of permanence for each of the three aspects of the problem before us: personhood in moral conduct,<sup>1</sup> headship in community, and First Being in existence.

I raise the issue of independence in part, also, to underline the independent spirit with which I believe we can today ponder the resumption of our human journey after a hundred-and-fifty-year hiatus. Cultural critics often lament the short span of attention that typifies the modern lifestyle and binds us continually to the present and mere appearances. The reader will agree,

---

1. *Takhalluq* has the same radical as *khalq* (nature, creation) and *khalāqa* (to create)—hence, molding.

perhaps, that the individual and society alike need a certain degree of *experience* for the independent and judicious exercise of choice. Experience is a valuable companion to have in times of uncertainty, especially the experience embodied by our human heritage.

## The Wisdom of Experience

The concept of experience figures prominently in the works of Aristotle. In the very first passages of the *Metaphysics*, he associates the process of perception with *ἐπιστήμη* (*episteme*), which means knowledge or science. He does so to show that *σοφία* (*sophia*, wisdom) shares with *σοφός* (*sophos*, skill in any handicraft) the element of experience (*ἐμπειρία*, *empeiria*).

This is one way of saying that the pursuit of knowledge, whether in the case of an instance of wisdom or a skill, is not an idle pastime. Actions (*πράξεις*) and productions (*γενέσεις*) depend on experience because experience, philosophically speaking, is about individual things, not universals. Universals cannot be perceived with our senses. However, while people of experience meet with greater success than those who are strong in theory but have no experience, he points out, experience does not furnish everything required by wisdom: the because (*διό*), wherefore, and why something exists. It merely tells us *that* (*ὅτι*, *hoti*) something is the case—e.g., *that* the fire is hot (Aristotle, 1924, 981b 12-3). Nor are these all perceived in the same way, he says. The highest wisdom for man is only possible in *philo-sophia*, which inquires into first causes and the principles of things, not in any practical craft (Al-Ghazālī 2019, 28-9). There, the knowledge of causes culminates in the First Cause.

Hikma stipulates that only the First Cause—technically, God—*completes* the knowledge of what is best and noblest, doing so by way of the divine command. This is because only God knows the world through His knowledge of Himself. His knowledge of the world—though not His knowledge of Himself as He is in Himself—is the very cause of the world’s creation; by contrast, a person’s knowledge of a thing will not magically bring that thing into existence. At best, human knowledge is a mirror image of the former. We shall later consider how Hegel attempted to reconcile subject and object self-identically, not for philosophy as such, but for his philosophy of history.

According to Aristotle, *sophia*, which means both wisdom and the discernment or sound knowledge of a thing, “must plainly be ἀκριβεστάτη (*akribestate*)”—that is, the most *finished* mode of knowledge (Aristotle, 1926, 1141a 16-8). The word ἀκριβεστάτη (*akribestate*) combines various shades of meaning, one of which is exactness. When the exactness is inappropriate to the object of knowledge, the wisdom is incomplete. It is worth noting Hikma’s position that

knowing is to know the object's essence appropriately at a particular level (*martaba*) or from a partial perspective (*nazar*). But there was no rush to impose the further restriction that knowledge is what is acquired through the senses. Such caution is precisely why, in the expression "highest knowledge of the *highest* or *noblest* objects," Aristotle connects "highness" to the word κεφαλὴν (*kephalen*, head, what is chief) to convey the completeness or consummation of a given knowing. *Kephalen* normally signifies the governing part of the body. So, a literal reading of the Greek wording would be: "a knowledge that has, as it were, a head."<sup>1</sup> The semantics of headship clearly figured in the completion of wisdom, not just in social and political existence. That said, the practical art of politics was not directly concerned with the noblest or highest objects, let alone with what guided *all* wisdom. Only the "divine science" inquired into these objects.

Ḥikma concluded that by inquiring into them, divine science gained man proximity with the knowledge of God. This proximity depended on the realization of an attribute in the wayfarer through consonance (*munāsaba*) with one of God's attributes at a specific level of attainment. To Ṣadr al-Dīn Qūnawī (d. 1274), arguably the most important philosophical figure between Ibn 'Arabī and the Isfahan School to which Ṣadrā belonged, consonance signified the awareness or presentiment (*shu'ūr*) of a *consonance* with whatever one sought to know (Qūnawī, 1423 AH, 28). The total absence of a prior consonance implied there was no object of inquiry; whereas consonance in every respect meant that the knowledge of a thing is already so complete that it need not be delimited further, otherwise the object would have to be made identical with itself.<sup>2</sup>

The aim here is not to explain the items of the world, much less to explain them to a passive onlooker, but to open up the knowing and being in which the knowing agent is already implicated. This does not entail that theoretical wisdom (Ṣadrā, 2011b, 10-1; Qūnawī, 2010, 75) be completed through unification with action, practice or empirical science in the manner argued by the logical empiricists. Ibn Sīnā (d. 1037) held that the opinion or belief sought by theoretical science has no bearing on a specific action or of the principle of an action qua principle of action (Ibn Sīnā, n.d., 1.4). Nevertheless, Ṣadrā defended the consistency of saying that knowledge could be both theoretical and attached to the *modality* of action (*bi-kayfiyyat al-'amal*), on the grounds that the modality of action implied no attachment to any particular *action* ('amal) (Ṣadrā, 2011b, 18). But while no particular action could alone complete the

1. The same phrase appears in Plato's *Gorgias* 505d (translator's note c. in *The Nicomachean Ethics* (1926, 343).

2. The reduction of the idea-object relation to a purely logical identity (e.g., A=B) has not been widely accepted in philosophy, but identity is operationally useful in some types of proof in logic and algebra.

perfection (*kamāl*) of the theoretical faculty, action was still useful (*manfi‘at al-‘amal*) in perfecting man’s intellect, just as the practical sciences helped perfect the theoretical faculty so as to enable the soul to realize its intellect *in actuality* (*bi-ḥuṣūl al-‘aql bi’l-fi‘l*) from a state of potentiality (see Ibn Sīnā, n.d., I.4). He maintained that the lower (action) served (*khidma*) in the perfection of what was higher (the intellect), and vice versa (Sadra, 2011b, 10).

## The Predicament of Contemporary Thought

Thinking is always about something, whether that thing is real or fictional. Early modern German discourse shares with Hikma the recognition that while thinking objectifies things and distinguishes them from each other, including when one thinks about one’s own thoughts, it must somehow reconcile its objectifications with itself, whether the intended object lies outside or is the speaker. But this can lead to inconsistencies because thinking cannot resolve everything on its own. Complete reconciliation as intended in philosophy is unfeasible in the specific case where the speaker is merely a being, like any other, endowed with natural faculties of perception.

Furthermore, recognition of this state of affairs did not lead to the same or even a consistent formulation of the problem. Kant tried to reconcile the mind with its object beyond the personal “I” by purging pure reason of every trace of experience. To overcome the subjectivity entailed by this strategy, Hegel transformed the whole problem into one of self-objectification of Spirit in world history.<sup>1</sup> His main challenge was to defend the independence and prerogatives of reason enunciated by Kant and, at the same time, to guard against dissolving reason into its own particular objectifications and practical worldliness.

He finds his solution in a concept of reason which is “in and for itself the universal and the substantial” (*an und für sich Allgemeine und Substantielle*), thereby applying to history what Sadra’s motion in-substance (*ḥaraka jawhariyya*) did more comprehensively for existence (Hegel, 1848, 32). He writes that reason is the “substance of the world,” because it has to gather the infinite matter (*der unendliche Stoff*) of the natural and spiritual forms (into his system) independently of any (explanatory) connection with God (Hegel, 1848, 13). In this way, first, everything *inside* history is subordinate (*untergeordnet*) and subservient (*ihm dienend*) to reason, offering no more than the means for the manifestation of reason in the world (Hegel, 1848, 32). Second, world history

---

1. Not just “Christian” history. Interest in history had been previously limited to Christian tradition. On the Renaissance views of history as a field of study, see Schmitt and Skinner (1990, 746-61).

progresses together with the progress of its “pure final purpose” (*der reine letzte Zweck der Geschichte*). It operates (*die Arbeit*) as the process that brings the unconscious force that drives it to *conscious* existence (*zum Bewußtsey*n)—that is, in the form of a consciousness. Third, reason is immanent to historical existence (*in dem geschichtlichen Daseyn*) because it finds its completion (*vollbringt sich in demselben*) only in and through that immanence. And fourth, reason is the “sovereign of the world” and synonymous with divine wisdom (*die göttliche Weisheit*) (Hegel, 1848, 20).

The notion that reason governs the world and is discovered to have done so tells him that world history begins with its general purpose of fulfilling the Idea of Spirit (*der Begriff des Geistes*) (Hegel, 1848, 31-2). This history remains incomplete insofar as reason governs its history through the disparate manifestation of natural wills, interests, activities, and purposes. Such manifestations of “vitality,” as he calls them, serve “a higher and wider purpose” than any entertained by the countless individuals and peoples who exhibit them. When human beings know nothing of the higher purpose, they continue to realize it unconsciously, all the same. They are the “instrument and means” by which the World-Spirit (*die werkzeuge und Mittel des Weltgeistes*) “finds itself [as the object], comes to itself, and contemplates itself as actuality” (Hegel, 1848, 32).

Hegel is still able to describe reason simply as thinking freely determining itself (*die Vernunft ist das ganz frei sich selbst bestimmende Denken*) (Hegel, 1848, 17). And he defines the “philosophy of history,” accordingly, as nothing more than the “thoughtful consideration of history” (*als die denkenden Betrachtung derselben bedeutet*) (Hegel, 1848, 12). Consequently, it is unclear what exactly his historical reformulation of self-objectification solves in philosophy proper. Apart from the impetus he gave to the field of social theory, he framed the purpose of philosophy with the language of moral aesthetics, much like others who followed and criticized Kant. This is roughly the time when new doctrines on “ethics” and “modern education” gained currency in the Islamic world. The difference is that the Muslim revivalists who espoused them were not much overtaken by the philosophy of aesthetics, in which the post-Kantians saw the possibility of filling the social void left by the declining Western Church. Their strain of “Reformism” (*işlāḥ*) simply surrendered to the moralizing and raw instrumentalism associated with Muḥammad ‘Abduh (d. 1905). Despite Hikma’s advances in the issues we are discussing, its learning tradition atrophied in the colonial era, just when intellectual life was blossoming in Germany.

### **The Purification of Reason or Man?**

Although neither the historical manifestation of reason nor a Kantian-style

self-enclosure of pure reason constitutes the focal point of Hikma, one cannot ignore certain structural affinities between, for example, Kant's seminal concept of the independence of pure reason from the matters of experience and Falsafa's concept of dematerialization. *Tajarrud* (or dematerialization) refers specifically to the necessary divestment of matter from the operations of man's potential intellect. There is nothing unusual in this, especially given the interest in ancient Greek thought shared by these two traditions; the purification from matter is a ubiquitous theme in the traditions of the world.

The point is that the human intellect has to free itself of matter in a whole range of activities: logical inference as well as in the course of life and the reception from the higher intellects from the separate Active Intellect (*al-'aql al-fa'āl*). While they are not replicas of each other, they exhibit structural similarities. Dematerialization is only the passive side of knowing and being, where it pertains strictly to the negative condition of man's release from matter before reception, not to any absorption back into his own history and circumstances. The function of the potential intellect is to prepare for reception from a higher source. A similar principle has been argued in the case of empirical proofs: proving that a hypothesis is true under such-and-such a set of conditions requires an inductive leap and a calculus of probability.

That said, what is novel about modern historical interpretation is not the requirement that historians determine the probability of truth for their fact-based explanations. Ibn Khaldūn stated the same demand for his interpretive science of society (*ijtimā'*) in the most explicit fashion (Ibn Khaldūn, 2010, 1.29). The novelty is in supposing that the reason that interprets empirical facts is the same reason that governs man's mode of being. It has given rise to a Eurocentric view of history that has no factual basis yet is routinely assumed to *be* reality. The trouble is that so long as inductive inferences about history<sup>1</sup> aspire to a correspondence based on probabilities, there is no basis for presuming that an interpretation of facts gathered about an object *is* that object. The interpretation cannot be "real" *in the same ontological sense as the object itself*.

No one, of course, has actually pretended that a reference is the selfsame object—except perhaps Jonathan Swift in one of his well-known satirical tropes.<sup>2</sup> Hegel had to assume that the progression of history and the thinking that interprets its contents are both "rational" in order to establish their correspondence (Hegel, 1848, 13-4). But his assumption leaves unsettled the question of perception, on which his idea of rationality is based and which

---

1. On the inductive character of Hegel's rationality with regard to history, see Redding (April 2017).

2. Swift imagined a society where people communicated with each other using objects instead of the symbols of language.

figures prominently in his work.

## Union and System Complexity?

The faculty of perception introduces its own multiplicity into the equation. Qūnawī pointed to multiplicity as the factor that prevents the knowledge of simple things as they are in themselves.<sup>1</sup> He invoked Ibn Sīnā to the effect that multiplicity is caused by man’s reliance on sensory perception in thinking.<sup>2</sup>

In the *Ta’līqāt*, Ibn Sīnā had denied that man possessed the capacity to grasp the realities of things (*al-wuqūf ‘alā ḥaqā’iq al-ashyā’*) solely through the thinking faculty. In his famous debate with Naṣīr al-Dīn Ṭūsī (d. 1274), Qūnawī seizes upon this complication to restate the idea that knowing a thing in its completeness (*kamāl ma’rifatihi*) is conditional on a unification (*ittiḥād*) with the known thing. Technically, unification requires the cessation of every factor by which the knower is distinguished from the known. He maintains that every thing that exists (e.g., knower) has between it and the thing known, on the one hand, a *real* divine factor<sup>3</sup> (*amr ḥaqīqī ilāhī*) that implies sharing (*al-ishtirāk*) with the other thing, not difference (*mughāyira*, otherness); on the other hand are the factors that distinguish the knower from the other thing (Qūnawī, 1426 AH, 32). He considers ignorance about any given existence to be caused by the dominance of those latter factors—namely, the precepts of descriptions, levels, properties, and so on. Although these factors are the very means by which things are distinguished (Qūnawī, 1426 AH, 30, 59), a person is said to *know* completely and under a single aspect only when the precepts of distinction cease.

A “holistic” scientific rationalization like that defended by Hao Wang gives way to a very different ontology from that of the unification of knower and known, one defined more by the very multiplicity that has to be overcome. This, at any rate, is the ontology according to which the “global definiteness” he says has to ensure that something besides internal coherence relates things to each other, whether within each science or in science as a whole.

A similar objective inspired Frege to take Leibniz’s methods for tackling the problems of metaphysics to their logical conclusion. Interest in method had led Leibniz to work out an *ars combinatoria*, as his theory of arrangement is known, and the artificial language needed for a logic of discovery (*logica*

1. “The realities of things at the station of their immateriality are inclusively one (*waḥdāniyya*) and simple, and the one and simple perceives but the one and simple” (Qūnawī, 1995, 33).

2. For the quoted passages, see Qūnawī (1995, 51-3). The same passages are prominently quoted also in *I’jāz al-bayān* (1423 AH); cf. Ibn Sīnā (1984, 34ff).

3. “Real divine command,” not a metaphorical one.

*inventiva*). Sometimes describing this method as algebra, sometimes as an improved Chinese ideography, he believed that a philosophical grammar based on an artificial language would improve formal reasoning *comprehensively* enough to permit a *calculus ratiocinator*, which some historians of philosophy have described as little more than “a quasi-mechanical method of drawing conclusions” (Kneale & Kneale, 1986, 328).

The enormity of this task led Frege, the recognized founder of mathematical logic and Analytic philosophy (Frege, 1879, v-vi), to picture the development of logic as a system of arithmetic where logic and mathematics were essentially the same field (Frege, 1879, 435). He created an elaborate version of Leibniz’ *lingua characterica universalis* for expressing content in any proof through written signs, in a more precise and clearer manner than was possible through words (Frege, 1964, 98). To that end, he recognized two kinds of truth-value corresponding to the distinction between *empirical* and *conceptual* objects: respectively, the purely logical proofs and the proofs that required the experiential facts (*Erfahrungsthatsachen*) obtained through the senses (Frege, 1964, iii). This distinction allowed him to separate *actuality* from “what acts on our senses”; numbers, for instance, cannot be actual in the way that the sensed objects we count with numbers are; nor did he find any need to appeal to sense perception in proving theorems (Kneale & Kneale, 1986, 443).

These two general aspects of a single proposition or proof have allowed mathematical logic to mimic what the “metaphysicians” had elsewhere sought to complete as two existences in a single act on the old pattern of Plato’s Being and the coming-to-be.

## Ḥikma on the Two Existences

Ṣadrā summarizes the *philosophical* view that man is a being who, within the realm of creation, is fundamentally kneaded from two things: the supersensible *form* of the divine command (*ṣūra ma’ nawiyya amriyya*) and the sensory *matter* of creation (Ṣadrā, 2011a, I.31). Man’s soul seeks to attach itself to the supersensible by detaching itself from the taint of matter (*ta’ alluq wa tajarrud*). This establishes the parameters of wisdom in relation to the world without having to reduce man to his physiological functions. Ṣadrā further distinguishes two aspects of wisdom (*fannay al-ḥikma*): one is theory and detachment from the multiplicity of matter, the other is attachment to oneness and molding (*takhalluq*; for example, the cultivation of good qualities) (Ṣadrā, 2011a, I.32). They both refer to the same property “wisdom,” not to independent spheres or disciplines, and together they represent the *form* of man.

The “form” of an object is what gives shape to the material out of which a

sensory object is composed. Here he means it as the supersensible form. Therefore, the two aspects of wisdom represent man as the “exemplar” of the world of divine command (*ṭirāz ‘ālam al-amr*). One part of man is his matter, which consists of the “opaque and coarse bodies” that Ṣadrā reads into the Qur’anic phrase, “Then We cast him back to the lowest of the low” (Ṣadrā, 2011a, I.32).<sup>1</sup> This matter is said to prevail over human beings, on the other hand, “except those who are faithful,” which follows from the phrase above to indicate—as he says—the goal of theoretical wisdom (*ghāyat al-ḥikma al-naẓariyya*). The continuation of the Qur’anic verse, “and who do good works”,<sup>2</sup> then indicates the goal of *perfection* that guides practical wisdom (*tamām al-ḥikma al-‘amaliyya*). These two goals complete each other.

Finally, he calls *falsafa*—or philosophy in the broadest possible sense—the search for human self-perfection (*istikmāl al-naḥs al-insāniyya*; *lit.*, that of the “human self”) through the cognizance (*ma‘rifa*) of the realities of existing things as they are in themselves. Hence, man grasps the lower order of things in the world (*naẓm al-‘ālam*) according to a higher one he discerns fundamentally as an intellectual order (*naẓm ‘aqliyyan*). This order is indiscernible directly through the senses.

The paradox is that man should need the very multiplicity of the faculties, sensations, actions, and change, all of which he must overcome, just to be able to live in the world. He seeks knowledge of the intelligible order, above all, to achieve likeness with the attributes of the Maker. But for the structural interconnectedness of his twofold nature, man would never find completeness, maintain the oneness of his individuality, or live cooperatively as a social being. Social organization, for example, articulates a twofold existence for every individual and community. But structure in the world, including that of society, is purposefully intellectuated from the root before any building is ever erected or tool manufactured.

## Conclusion—the Passing of an Old Order

Philosophy is where learned people have traditionally come together to think, as lucidly as possible, about questions that are of vital interest to human beings, not just to a segment of humanity. Since the last century, however, the narrowing scope of philosophy has fragmented debate into a loose collection of subfields and topical subject-areas. True, today’s definitions of philosophy display greater variety than ever before. But this may reflect an underlying

---

1. Qur’ān 95.5.

2. Qur’ān 95.6.

incoherence, one that is decidedly out of step with the history of philosophy. We are told that philosophy is thinking about thinking, that its mission is to produce a comprehensive scientific view of the world, and so on. These characterizations are somehow supposed to bring under the same tent the study of knowledge, language, values, mind, and everything under the sun. But philosophy never claimed to speak about everything, let alone in the same way as empirical scientists.

It seems more productive, with the passing of the old world order, to ask *how*—not *if*—humanity may resume its natural course of thinking, as well as of history. And we should be glad to do it before the very fabric of our world is completely obliterated. Will philosophy allow us to probe further into the future than the short-range calculations typical of this order?

To my mind, the real challenge is not how to revive an imaginary golden age or to salvage relics from the past. Frustrated collective pride can lead to the same self-worshipping ideologies as those of the past hundred-and-fifty years. It is plainly not enough to resurrect wonderful old ideas, either, or to compare notes across religions and cultures merely for the promotion of tolerance, as laudable as the latter is.

The “inheritance” I referred to at the beginning is a treasure trove of collective experience. I hope this paper makes it easier to see that the full measure of this treasure is not found *in* the physical world. Everything in our world eventually vanishes with time, as indeed it should. Islam and the learning edifice built in its name see the prophetic inheritance (*al-wirātha al-nabawiyya*) as the manifestation of divine light that lifts human beings above a world in constant flux, but it does not lift them so high that they cannot find their way back to the world.

My hope is that many more of our colleagues who are knowledgeable in other world traditions will assume the tasks of philosophy in a spirit of *independence*, away from the myths and assumptions of a world that has already passed. The subject of man’s being in the world has not come down to us merely as a conceptual puzzle or out of some fleeting intellectual curiosity. What gives philosophy special urgency today is the civilizing role it has been playing all along.

## References

- Abu-Lughod, J. L. (1989). *Before European Hegemony. The World System A.D. 1250-1350*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Al-Farabi, A. N. (1408 AH). *Kitab al-Siyasa al-Madaniyya al-Mulaqqab bi Mabadi' al-Mawjudat*. (F. M. Najjar, Ed.). N.p.: Al-Maktab al-Zahra.
- Al-Farabi, A. N. (1971). *Fusul al-Muntazi'a*. (F. M. Najjar, Ed.). Beirut: Dar al-Mashriq.
- Al-Farabi, A. N. (1983). *Kitab Tahsil al-Sa'ada*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Beirut: Dar al-Andalus.
- Al-Farabi, A. N. (1985). *Mabadi' Ara' Ahl al-Madinat al-Fadila*. Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press.
- Al-Farabi, A. N. (1990). *Kitab al-Huruf*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (M. Mahdi, Ed.). Beirut: Dar al-Mashriq.
- Al-Ghazali. (2019). *Kitab al-Faqr wa al-Zuhd* [Al-Ghazali on Poverty and Abstinence]. (A. F. Shaker, Trans.). Cambridge, UK: The Islamic Texts Society. [In Persian]
- Aristotle (1924). *Aristotle's Metaphysics* (A revised text). (W.D. Ross, Intro & Commentary), 2 vols. Oxford, UK: At the Clarendon.
- Aristotle (1926). *The Nicomachean Ethics*. (H. Rackham, Trans.). London, UK: William Heinemann. [In English]
- Avicenna (Ibn Sina). (1984). *Al-Ta'liqat*. N.p.: Markaz al-Nashr-i Maktab al-Alam al-Islami.
- Avicenna (Ibn Sina). (n.d.). Al-Ilahiyyat. In *Al-Shifa'*, 10 vols. (Qanawati et al., Eds.). Cairo: Al-Idara al-Amma lil Thaqafa.
- El-Rouayheb, K. (2017). *Islamic Intellectual History in the Seventeenth Century*. Cambridge University Press.
- Frege, G. (1879). *Begriffsschrift. Eine der arithmetischen Nachbedildete Formelsprache des reinen Denkens*. Halle: Louis Nebert.
- Frege, G. (1964). *Begriffsschrift und andere Aufsätze*, edited by Ignacio Angelelli (Hildesheim: Georg Olms Verlag).
- Hao W. (1988). *Beyond Analytical Philosophy. Doing Justice to What We Know*. London, UK: The MIT Press.
- Hegel, G. W. F. (1848). *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Geschichte*, third edition, edited by Eduard Gans. Berlin: Dunder und Humblot.
- Heidegger, M. (1994). *Prolegomena zur Geschichte des Zeitsbegriffs*.

- Gesamtausgabe. II. Abteilung: Vorlesungen 1923-1944. Band 20.* Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann.
- Ibn Khaldun. (2010). *Al-Muqaddima*. In *Tarikh Ibn Khaldun*, 7 vols. Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al-Ilmiyya.
- Kneale, W., & Kneale, M. (1986). *The Development of Logic*. Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press.
- Qunawi, S. D. (1423 AH). *I'jaz al-Bayan*. Qom, Iran: Muassasa-yi Bustan-i Ketab.
- Qunawi, S. D. (1426 AH). *Al-Nafahat al-Ilahiyya*. (M. Khwajawi, Ed.). Tehran: National Library of Iran.
- Qunawi, S. D. (2010). *Miftah al-Ghayb*. Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al-Ilmiyya.
- Qunawi, S.D. (1995). *Al-Mufsiha*. In *Annäherungen: der mystisch-philosophische Briefwechsel zwischen Sadr ud-Dīn-i Qōnawī und Nasīr ud-Dīn-i Tūsī*. (S. Gudrun, Ed.). Beirut & Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag.
- Redding, P. (April 2017). Subjective Logic and the Unity of Thought and Being: Hegel's Logical Reconstruction of Aristotle's Speculative Empiricism. In D. Emundts & S. Sedgwick, Eds, *Internationales Jahrbuch des Deutschen Idealismus*. Vol. 12: *Logic*.
- Schmitt, C. B., Skinner, Q, Kessler, E., & Kraye, J. (Eds.). (1990). *The Cambridge History of Renaissance Philosophy*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Shaker, A. F. (2017). *Modernity, Civilization and the Return to History*. Wilmington, Delaware: Vernon Press.
- Shirazi, S. M. (Mulla Sadra). (2011a). *Al-Hikmat al-Muta'aliyah fi al-Asfar al-'Aqliyyat al-Arba'* [The Transcendent Theosophy in the Four Journeys of the Intellect]. Beirut: Dar al-Mahajjat al-Baida . [In Arabic].
- Shirazi, S. M. (Mulla Sadra). (2011b). *Sharh va Ta'liqat-i Ilahiyyat-i Shifa* [a commentary on the metaphysics section of Avicenna's Book of Healing]. Freiburg A.N. Germany: Al-Kamel Verlag.