Beyond Cultural Parodies and Parodizing Cultures: Shaping A Discourse

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Contrasting Epistemics

"Why if a fish came to me and told me he was going on a journey, I should say, 'With what porpoise?'" "Don't you mean 'purpose'?" said Alice. "I mean what I say," the Mock Turtle replied in an offended tone.

(Lewis Carroll, *Alice in Wonderland*)

Consider this analogy: There was a man beneath a tree. He wished to collect his thoughts, but the sparrows disturbed him with their chirping. He would chase them with his stick and then resume his train of thought, but the sparrows would come back and he would have to scare them away. . . Eventually someone told him: "This is like being a slave at the wheel going round and round forever. If you want to escape the vicious circle, you should fell the tree".

Imām al Ghazālī,
(*Iḥyā' 'Ulūm al Dīn*)

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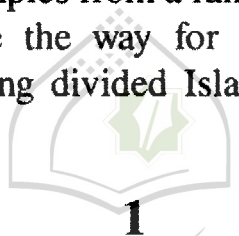
Abstract

It has been the practice for the dominant paradigm to set the terms of rational discourse and for the "Other" to defer in reverence—if it wanted to be admitted to the circle of respectability. In this case, the tables are turned

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and the dominant paradigm, which is secularist, is viewed critically through the lens of a re-emerging *tawḥīdī* paradigm. The purpose is not to engage in a test of will or vision, but to lay the ground for a discourse which can accommodate a genuine diversity-in-dignity for all, and which would include Self and Other in a re-formed world of inter-relatedness developed through new categories and points of reference. In a common human heritage rich in communicable symbols and transitive experiences, cultivating the terms of a hermeneutic of mutuality is imminent. Its objectives would be to redefine and assure worldly morality and rationality at higher levels of reality. Only then can the self-imposed constraints, constrictions, and anomalies which are inherent in the prevailing culture be transcended. The context for shaping this discourse can be as broad and encompassing or as concrete and particular as the response in the concurrent fields of the humanities and the social sciences will admit.

Following on a theme already introduced in a previous issue of *AJISS* addressing Contrasting Epistemics, we take the initiative to launch such a discourse. We select our examples from a range of options in popular culture and social theory, and pave the way for bridging the schisms and the anachronisms which have long divided Islam and the West.

1
Introduction

The prevailing secularist culture identified with modernity and with the historical Occident subverts morality to power and principles to expedience. Unchecked in its morbid dynamism, it has become a global threat as its influence spreads to englobe every other culture, and its voice rules. Into this glut, a deadly silence falls, a silence which goes unnoticed in the distraction that attends a virtual monopoly of discourse. Dominance cannot be equated with truth, although it no doubt benefits from the old confusion of right with might. What is needed is to lay the woof and warp for a new discourse, one immune to its own perversities. Minds fed on the myths of the dominant culture need to be provoked into rethinking their complacencies, and weaned to the idea that whatever the culture which might prevail at any given moment, there is always another possibility, an alternative to understanding and to virtue. The possibility for recovery and renewal, whatever the cultural givens/constructs might be, is a function of this openness and orientation which goes beyond the Self to embrace the Other.

This is where a Contrasting Episteme is advocated as an approach to and a strategy for bridging cultures and for laying the foundations for a dynamic

of critical reflection and reconstruction. It is inspired by a hermeneutic of mutuality which takes difference as a dialectic for convergence. Contrasts can be conducted at any level of discourse and within any of its strands. The purpose, however, is to launch it at a foundational level which addresses the major presuppositions of cognition and affection, and to proceed from there to see how the ground rules for a reshaping discourse can develop. There are three major assumptions which condition this premise: (1) Present civilization is at a crossroads, as it must deal with the existing chasm between its material accomplishments and its moral failures; (2) It is not enough to critique the prevailing culture, but the challenge is to transform it; and (3) The sources for meeting such a challenge cannot be reinvented from the debris of extant cultures, but must be sought in the transcendent.

Two basic culture types are projected to take their distinct stance from an outlook and understanding of the fundamental categories of existence: man, nature, and life. Are these essentially autonomous or dependent categories? In the one case we encounter a culture mode that takes its bearings from a *horizontal axis*, while in the other the bearings are projected onto a *vertical axis*. The dominant paradigm today has been shaped against the horizontal axis, whereas the *tawhīdī* episteme, which is the subject of recall and recollection from the depths of a universal and generic human history, evokes the vertical axis. Modes of thought and apprehension are projected into their socio-cultural and historical plane in terms of variants of an Oscillating Culture-type and of a Median Culture-type. One further caution should be noted here: Muslims and Islam are not interchangeable conceptual referents, and the Oscillating Culture and the West are not immutable conflates. With the predicament of modernity, the Oscillating Culture is a common but not invincible fate, and the Median Culture is the source for a wholesome recovery and renewal/reconstruction for all those with a stake in the future of humanity.

We have already explored some implications of these assumptions and have introduced certain concepts suggesting areas in which new perspectives could be developed. Social theory as a vocation was proposed to re-orient attitudes in the field.[1] A hermeneutic of mutuality was predicated on an ethos of renunciation and reconciliation that paved the way for transcending the Self/Other dichotomy. This was referred to as engaging in a co-substantiating mode of discourse.[2] In this presentation, another forum for developing these concepts is sought as the resources of a contrasting episteme and of its instrumental culture-types are further mined. The focus is on the elements of a cultural discourse that is critical of the dominant secularist culture,

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[1]Mona Abul-Fadl, "Contrasting Epistemics: Tawhīd, the Vocationist, and Social Science," *AJISS* 7(1):15-38.

[2]Mona Abul-Fadl, "The Art, the Artifact, and the Artist" in *Where East Meets West*, forthcoming.

understood here essentially in terms of a diminishing and diminished sense of value and a pervasive disorientation. Interest shifts to modes of discourse. A vocabulary for the recognition of the malaise and its articulation is sought both within the Western tradition and from Muslim sources. One lesson of an integrated and synthetic approach is to see continuities not simply within each tradition, but also among historically differentiated traditions. Another lesson is to see how enriching for the current discourse in the West it might be to become attentive to other voices. A third lesson is to suggest that in recovering a voice from the Muslim tradition in particular, that discourse can be significantly enlightened because reason in the Muslim tradition was not subverted by pretensions to autonomy or by indulgences in excess. In that tradition one could doubt without being cynical; and one could hope without abandoning reason. Above all, the alternative to rationality was not absurdity. Common sense was grounded in a *fiṭric* and empirical/pragmatic sensibility reinforced by the pervasive principled convictions in a revelation which provided the impetus to the individual and to the group at all levels of activity and creativity. This, in brief, is what commands attention to voices articulated in the Muslim tradition.

In the makings of an intercultural discourse, the parameters of rationality are implicitly invoked, as are the boundaries between the humanities and the social sciences. The implication is that social sciences must be grounded in a discourse that is morally conscious, and that the humanities must reinterpret their material and domain so as to become historically relevant. This too is a lesson which cannot be learned in isolation or deliberated upon in a presumptuous self-sufficiency. A hermeneutic of mutuality would sharpen the sensibilities of areas of complementarity and enrich perspectives on the human condition and its potential for morality. The above lessons are significant in themselves and can be demonstrated in any number of ways by recourse to sophisticated and specialized arguments. The presentation here, however, opts for a simplicity and a directness in the illustrations it selects as it moves from one plane to another to show how evolving a discourse in the perspective of a Contrasting Episteme can reveal much that is pertinent within each tradition. At the same time, it points to the direction where convergence can be a virtue, as it invites a critical reflection of the dominant paradigm. The background to this reading relies on techniques as much as on the interface of culture types and modes of discourse. Its aim is to show the range and possibilities which are inherent in such a perspective.

2
Parables, Metaphors, and Heroes Re-Membered

A Contrasting Episteme would be a timely check against the random distortions which might have occurred in cultural encounters in the past. It would also contribute significantly to re-locating the distorted elements of the misrepresented culture to the benefit of the modern encounter. An example may illustrate this point. The negative transfiguration of Ibn Ṭufayl's hero into Daniel Defoe's precursor of *homo economicus* is an eloquent testimony to what happens when one party appropriates to itself the prerogative of interpreting the tradition of the Other—and in the process manages to completely deform it.[3] Obviously, it would be naive to contend that Crusoe on his desert island was deliberately conceived in the mold of Ḥayy Ibn Yaqẓān, nor is it even adequate to speak of a reductionist *detransfiguration* of roles and images between a *homo sapiens* and a *homo faber*. This would be too crude for intellectual justice, and it would also miss the point of the nuanced readings within the respective traditions. Yet, because Ibn Ṭufayl's story could be seen to epitomize much that is significant from the perspective of a Contrasting Episteme, a brief account may yield some refreshing insights which could be followed up elsewhere.

Ḥayy Ibn Yaqẓān, the living, son of He who is ever-awake, ever-watchful (which is the literal meaning of this hero's name), found himself on an island deserted of all human habitation. His very conception and survival were a token of a providential care. (He was, it will be recalled, nurtured by a doe that had lost her cub and that had chanced upon the suckling babe just at the right moment.) As he grew into consciousness, he became steadily aware of the qualities of a divine sustaining presence until he was led, through his yearning and untiring search, into an encounter with it. In substance and in form, the story was entirely consistent with the worldview of the culture which spawned it, and it was conspicuously representative of the mood of its times. After all, Ḥayy Ibn Yaqẓān did not reach the highest truth through mere contemplation, nor through the tireless speculations of the *philosophes*.

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[3]As Will Durant observes, "Abu Bakr Ibn Tufail (1107-1185 A.C.) [the Andalusian philosopher-scholar] found time to write, among more technical works, the most remarkable philosophical romance in medieval literature . . . and (through Ockley's English translation in 1708) may have suggested Robinson Crusoe to Defoe." From *The Age of Faith* quoted in M. Fazlurahman Ansari, *The Qur'anic Foundations and Structure of Muslim Society* (Karachi: World Federation of Islamic Missions, 1977), 1:211. Very few of those working on Crusoe would recall such a possibility, as is shown by default in one of the more recent studies on the subject which is construed in a hermeneutically meaningful context. See Bernard McGrene, *Beyond Anthropology* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989).

Rather, it was through his active and practical involvement in his daily mundane surroundings that his journey began from a concrete and visible world to the reality beyond it. It began with a systematic, patient, and persistent curiosity that took him through a fascinating progression of stages in practical and intellectual inquiry, engaging him in a full-fledged exercise of first his **sensory** perceptions, and then his **rational** faculties, and leading to the ultimate discovery of the **extrasensory** with the consummation of the "theosophical." It was a journey in interiority and self-transcendence where the leitmotiv, demonstrated at every turn, was that the world of the visible pointed to a world beyond it. This in fact was the summation included in al Ghazālī's own highly original theory of knowledge, and al Ghazālī was the grand synthesizer of a tradition conceived in the pale of the Median Culture. Only by seeing the story of Ibn Ṭufayl within its cultural tradition is it possible to grasp its integrating and synthetic dimensions and bring them to bear on a retrospective reading of both modernity and the Muslim legacy.

In acknowledging the genuine intellectual contribution of al Ghazālī and his peers, it would be wrong to attribute the synthesis to their genius or to their ingenuity and to overlook its elements in the culture they breathed. The culture which became the hallmark of Muslim civilization was certainly a historical product of its times open to the spectrum of influences at play from within "constituent" and surrounding cultures as assumed in Hodgson's "Islamicate." But, what was genuine and unique about it was constituted by an ideal core in which it was originally conceived and which continued to sustain it. The *Tawḥīdī* Episteme was the node, or nexus, and sustaining mode, or operational parameter and frame, within which the divergent influences crystallized and modulated. The closer the great thinkers proximated this core, the more authentic their expression. In this sense, the ideal-typical culture that corresponded to the *Tawḥīdī* Episteme was a **median culture** favoring a proportion and measure, aversive of excess (*ḥaḍārah al mīzān, mazājuhā al i'tidāl*). The actual historical culture as it was lived and experienced at any given moment was a proximation to this "median" that might vary in degree, but not in kind. Its lapses were behavioral rather than structural, and its deviations could be addressed from within the system. The unitary sources and their homogeneity, their internal coherence and integrity, secured stability and continuity for the ideal core as a mainstay of both episteme and culture, and was ultimately reflected in practice.

The giants in that tradition were great to the extent that they were capable of articulating aspects of that core culture. Even the controversial *falāsifah* were representative of the tradition to the extent that they were conditioned by the persistent dimensions in the ideal core as they interacted within the "Islamicate." What distinguished the great synthesizers or system-builders in the cultural history of Islam, however, was their ability to identify and

formulate the elements intrinsic to that core in a manner that replicated the integrality of the whole. In this sense, in *fiqhī* jurisprudence, al Shāfiʿī became the instantiation and expression of a synthesis which was already there defining the field of action. It might have been popularized, fragmented, and diffuse, but it was nonetheless intrinsic to the habits of mind and thought engendered through the Median Culture. In the same way, a Fakhr al Dīn al Rāzī, an Ibn Ḥazm, an al Shāṭibī, or an Ibn Taymīyah, each in his own way and in his respective field of knowledge and expertise, left his indelible marks. Each brought together the elements of knowledge accumulated to his time and welded the disparate arguments into a systematic whole, thereby producing a rationalizing and integrating totality whereby the rationale and logic provided there could assure a systemic coherence to the parts.

The great synthesizers or system-builders all belonged to the same great tradition embodying a distinctive way of knowing in its sources, modes, and conceptions. Each would leave his imprint on the paths crossed, beginning with the monumental contribution to laying the foundations of a *fiqhī* jurisprudence by Imām al Shāfiʿī and ending up, five centuries later, in a science of human culture and civilization with Ibn Khaldūn. The range of rationality spanned the ethical and regulative premises that structured the bounds and solidarity of the political community to the principles that shaped its historical consciousness of itself.

A discourse shaped in the perspective of a Contrasting Episteme is deferential to the internal logic of cultures and seeks to relate the elements to the whole with an eye on ulteriority. Ibn Ṭufayl's account invoked a reinterpretation of the culture which spawned it to the benefit of recovering elements of the median (cf. *wasaṭīyah*) which could be meaningful in reassessing the culture of modernity. In such a medium, impetus is given to a range of rationality seeking comprehension/comprehensiveness within a radius set by an integrating center. Ibn Yaqẓān's ascent to interiority was not bought at the expense of negating the external: and for every step of the way the medium of access called for measure and proportion. In the same way, the growing complexity of the edifice of learning in the Muslim legacy was accompanied by its centripetal tendencies. The "mid-point" is institutionalized to assure a verticality to expansiveness and to serve as a check on fragmentation and dissipation.

3
The Oscillating Culture Refined

In launching the discourse, a preliminary distinction was made between two culture types: an Oscillating Culture and a Median Culture, with the

former identified with a secular humanist paradigm of knowledge and the latter projecting and instantiating a *Tawḥīdī* Episteme. The task is to reassess the one in terms of the other so as to highlight dimensions which might otherwise be missed. Internal reflection and criticism are reinforced by a cross-reflexive critique which is to be ultimately relegated to a higher court of appeal (history/praxis or a new discursive tradition). In the meantime, a co-substantiating mode calls for reading a culture from within, with the purpose of gaining common ground. The following illustration further clarifies this technique.

From the *tawḥīdī* premise which informs a Contrasting Episteme, the secular humanist dynamic was projected as being subject to fluctuations, animated by polarities, and given to excess. It is interesting to see that evidence for such a reading can be found from very different sources exclusively developed within that secularist culture mode. Contemporary critical self-assessments in the West perceive the force of this pendular rhythm within their intellectual tradition; they recognize the antinomies and admit the inclinations to excess. Some will even see in the irreconcilable tensions which feed that tradition a source of vitality, and will support their various theoretical predications on the purging fires of these counter-flexing surges. For those within the Oscillating Culture, it is hard to conceive of the historical process or the human condition in any other way. The scourge of a *horizontal axis* in an episteme lies in its perennial want of measure and, indeed, in a persistent elusiveness to all measure.

In the event of reading the Oscillating Culture from within, as a co-substantiating mode would require, one can take any moment to illustrate its thrust. Adorno's and Horkheimer's perspicuous reflection on the Western intellectual tradition is as authentic and original as one can get. Its force and resonance come from its context as much as from its content. *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*, where the criticism of enlightened reason is developed, was written in the 1930s in an attempt to explain how fascism could have developed in a nation that was seemingly the embodiment of liberal ideals. The fact that they were so easily displaced by giving way to irrationality seemed to be an indictment of more than a particular conception of rationality ("instrumental reason"); it seemed to be an indictment of an entire intellectual tradition. At about the same period, the Marxist humanist critic George Lukas was already wrestling with the problematic of the vulnerability of reason and the rationalization/bureaucratization processes attending it. While liberating man's productive powers, they saw man himself enslaved by being reduced to his relations of exchange ("the reification of social relations"). Adorno and Horkheimer took up this critique and radicalized it as they traced this process of reification back to a flaw at the core of the Western idea of reason. This flaw is represented in various ways, but in accounting for it, the critics

unknowingly assume the vocationist perspective. In Alford's words, it is that *Western reason finds no midpoint between idealism and realism*:

> Reason and its object are divided into two realms. Noble ideals, values, discourse over the good life . . . are removed to the abstract realm of the intellect and the spirit. Like religion, which is an instance of these ideals, these themes are often applauded in the abstract. However, precisely because these values come to be seen as an expression of our "higher" selves, they are disconnected from the everyday material world. The material world in turn is given over to crass materialism that brooks no opposition to the contingently given.[4]

Our own construct of the culture-mode associated with the positivism episteme, whether in its humanist or naturalist variants, derives from our understanding of this **schizomorphic structure** of perceptions which undergirds the Western tradition. It is hardly surprising that this structure should be projected in social theory and that it should provide the "meeting ground" among the heterogeneous elements from both the left and the right of the spectrum as will be noted below. More significant, however, is that the "midpoint" can neither be sought from a culture which deifies subjectivity, such as is the case with modernity, nor can it be secured under an order that mistakes its own shadows for objectivity. Only a *vertical axis* can assure the human psyche and the social order alike that necessary point of fixity around which the whole can cohere, and to which the parts can relate. Only then is it possible to conceive of some reliable measure which can reduce the vulnerability of "instrumental reason" that is at the root of modern rationalism.

There is a moral to maintaining the above distinction between culture-types and epistemic bearings which could be usefully drawn upon for making other inferences in social theory.[5] According to the Oxford dictionary, "moral" is an adjective concerned with character as well as a noun designating a moral lesson. It is in this latter sense that the West will need to reach beyond itself if it is to circumvent or overcome its oscillations. Clearly, opinions vary on this score. There are those who maintain the incommensurability of traditions and defend their circularity and closure.[6] Others confess to a certain obduracy

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[4]This insightful passage is abstracted by C. Fred Alford from *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. See his *Science and the Revenge of Nature: Marcuse and Habermas* (Tampa: University Presses of Florida, 1985), 16-17.

[5]See Mona Abul-Fadl, "Contemporary Social Theory: A Critique." Paper presented at the 18th AMSS Annual Conference, Detroit, Michigan, 26-28 October 1990.

[6]As with Heidegger's remarks in an interview with *Der Spiegel* 214:62 cited in David Kolb, *The Critique of Pure Modernity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 231 ff.

within the tradition which makes it difficult to communicate with the Other, whose right to differ is only grudgingly conceded in muted tolerance.[7] The periodic interest in a mystique of the Orient may well be taken to point to a hovering consciousness in the Western mind which goes beyond mere curiosity to defy its own diffidence. Admittedly, this impetus is more often associated with a romantic drive which strikes at the height of a bout of excessive rationalism, as with a Goethe in the eighteenth century or a Fritjof Capra in our own times.[8] However, unless this orientalizing compulsion takes its cue from substantative rather than spatial moorings, the search will be in vain. Failing that essential act of self-transcendence, the West will remain hostage to its own grand, but tragic, tradition.

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Back to the Lobster Quadrille and to Juḥā

In its present incarnation, this predicament is played out in the conflicting pulls between the splintering shafts of a post-modernity and the sterility of a self-eulogizing neo-Conservatism. The literature in the social sciences and the metatheoretical debates they occasion can be diagnosed in such a perspective. The essence of this conflict can perhaps be best conveyed in an idiom that draws on an elemental and unpretentious chord in the Western experience which can easily be shared by others. In the case of the flight from modernity, we remember the poor and wretched Hans of the Alsatian folktale who is forever frustrated in his elations: he knows not what he wants, yet wants it badly all the same, and spares naught in a pursuit from which he knows there can be little gain. He is the paragon of a modernity deprecated for its emptiness and directionlessness as much as for its insatiable appetite for "more and more."[9] In the case of the nostalgia for the past, we recall the perplexity of little Alice in Wonderland as she puzzled over the meaning of the Lobster Quadrille among a dozen other perplexities she encountered in her metamorphosis: she wondered whether in a world of so much

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[7]Ibid., 130-31. Kolb remarks that "We (the West) can enter into a dialogue with the other traditions, but this is a matter that requires more delicacy of intellectual touch than is typical of Western attempts to understand others." On the other hand, some critics from the "Orient" are critical of those more sympathetic attempts to read into their tradition. Cf. Claude Alvarez, "We Have Been Here Before," *Inquiry* (April 1987): 39-42, commenting on Fritjof Capra's *The Tao of Physics* (London: Flamingo, 1975, 1986).

[8]For a provocative, and perhaps somewhat unjustified critique by an avant-garde Indian intellectual of the nostalgic turn taken by Capra in his works *The Tao of Physics* and *The Turning Point*, see Claude Alvarez, "We Have Been Here Before," *Inquiry/Afkar*.

[9]*The Critique of Pure Modernity*, op. cit., passim.

"nonsensical common sense" anything would ever be normal again. Or perhaps, after all, the modern West has finally arrived with all its sequence of "ends" in history, philosophy, and metaphysics to the point where Alice found herself at the *beginning* of her journey. There she had stopped at the signposts to figure out whichever way to go, not quite knowing her destination, but hoping all the same that in the end she would get somewhere.[10]

The global nature of the modern world extends the predicament of the Oscillating Culture beyond its original bounds and confirms Heidegger's insight on the debasing potential of Westernization/modernization. Partly as a result of a universal imposition, and partly as a response to their own malleability in a manipulative global amoral economy, Muslims, like many An/Other in the Third World, are ineluctably caught in a catch-up game. In some ways, they have ended up more confounded than their counterparts in the West, who have at least come to doubt some of the virtues of their own prodigy. Entrammelled in their infatuated pursuit, they cannot venture to reflect upon the gains, or indeed, upon whether in the struggle for survival, selfhood itself has become a computable value worth its pain. The modern Muslim has more often than not turned himself/herself into a shadow chasing shadows in a breathless Monty Python shadow play.

Asked where his ears were, so the tale in the Muslim legacy goes, the simple and conscientious Juḥā heaved a sigh, caught his breath and, in painstaking precision, turned to wind his right arm around the back of his head in order to point to the lobe of his left ear. Or, again, wherever the roads or lanes run into a holy maze, Juḥā's tortuous sense of geography comes to mind. The moral is that sometimes we search far and wide to arrive at a truth or to discover our destination, when in fact it is right there before us. Juḥā was no simpleton. In fact, he was a *ḥujjah*, a learned scholar, who travelled up and down the land to entertain and instruct. There is much that can be learned from folk wisdom about the episteme, and one does not have to delve into the "serpentine windings" (Kant) of philosophy for instruction. This evokes some of the frequently missed nuances in our own intellectual heritage.

Ibn Khaldūn had contrasted the gruffness of the Bedouin culture with the refinement that was brought about in the course of civil living. In doing so, he was not deploying the contrast to demean the essential dignity and inborn wisdom that went with it. Rather, his whole point was that culture

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[10]This stance clearly evokes themes associated with the post-positivist re-turn analogous to the Voegelinian category of *anamnesis*, or the Gadamerian remembrance, the Heideggerian forgetfulness and retrieval, or what Leo Strauss addresses in his essay on "Progress and Return," first published in *Modern Judaism* 1 (1981). Lewis Carroll was clearly no ordinary author writing stories for children, and by every count, his style dealt in paradigms as the very title of his books suggest: *Through the Looking Glass* might outlast many a post-modernist tract.

could build and edify on the stock of nature but, at the same time, that culture could also become the victim of its own accomplishments and lose sight of qualities that were essential to its survival and nobility (which could be paralleled to the contemporary concern for "humanization" in the face of the threats of rationalization and bureaucratization). The intervening layers of acculturation, as we might now say, could easily come between man and his *fiṭric* nature. In this way, the cultivation of the sciences as conceived by Ibn Khaldūn in the state of *'umrān* was not simply a corollary to this state, but it was also a way of ensuring that created *insān, homo sapiens*, did not lose some of its essential insights by the inevitable distancing that ensued. Yet, there was little that could safeguard the sciences from a potentially corrupting/stultifying momentum implicit in their rationalization and institutionalization; these were conditions essential to their initial edification, but could ultimately defeat their purpose as they came between the access to knowledge and the pursuit of truth. Aspects of a *fiṭric* nature, reinforcing a basic common sense and *fiṭric* values—including primary solidarities— were more in evidence in the life of the nomads if only on account of a diminished sophistication in the conditions of their existence.

Yet, this muted note constitutes a subtle shade in Ibn Khaldūn's writing which frequently evades modern readers who tend to de-contextualize author and text alike and so distort their rationality.[11] In suggesting a relationship between the mode of thought and the material existence of the group, Ibn Khaldūn was at the same time working on his anthropological/sociological philosophy from a host of other premises about human nature and the laws of God in creation, subsuming such categories as *fiṭrah* and *sunnah*. These have no place in the reductionist grid of a materialist sensibility which pervades the Oscillating Culture at the moment of the Khaldūnist revival. A Contrasting Episteme conscious of the intrinsic and the common can highlight them for the cultural encounter.

From Culture Types to Modes of Discourse

The trouble with social scientists and most professionals who are, by definition, "modern," is that they are overtrained. In their surfeit, they have not only lost much of their humor, but also a good deal of a plain stock

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[11]An example of a recent critical reading of Ibn Khaldūn placing him in the heart of his tradition is found in Aziz Azmeh's work which is, unfortunately, marred by its own modern-ist bias in taking a stance on the question of the "historicity" of the text. In relocating Ibn Khaldūn in the context of a historical tradition, he strives to rehabilitate the thinker only to discard a culture. See his *Arabic Thought and Islamic Societies* (London: Croom Helm, 1986), chapter 1, for an interpretation of the metaphysical foundations of Arabic thought.

of common sense. The idea that a Contrasting Episteme can constitute its own approach and that it calls for improvising techniques and modes as well as concepts provides a refreshing opportunity to break out of conventional modes. At a time when rationalism itself has become a suspect category—and Janus-faced at that—there is every need to turn to alternative sources of understanding and knowledge, and to explore other modes of expression to this end.

The indirectness implicit in the recourse to parables, metaphors, and symbolism has nothing to do with the mental passes, impasses, and blind alleys which might be the privilege of the intellect as well as the bane of philosophy. Its point, as the Juḥā technique illustrates, is to induce reflection and to tap indigenous sources that stimulate rather than pre-empt reasoning. It is a mode of reasoning where a seemingly irrelevant digression can, by way of association, dissociation, and other such processes, drive home a substantial point; one is enlightened in a practical manner about the same truths in a given culture. Conversely, the philosophic mode is frequently conducive to a type of empty circular reasoning which ends up obfuscating the point it sets out to elucidate. This was what al Ghazālī discovered after his own peregrinations in the field and, not unlike Hume after him, he demonstrated how the ways of unaided human reason ended up distracting rather than enlightening the human mind.[12] The testimony of Fakhr al Dīn al Rāzī (d. 606 A.H.) to this effect is made just as poignantly as the rigorous theologian waxes poetic.[13] When, towards the end of his life, he laments the mediocrity and vanity of a knowledge sought through an "instrumental reason," al Rāzī sounds the notes which have echoed throughout a tradition before

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[12]His two classic tracts, *Tahāfut al Falāsifah* (In Refutation of the Philosophers) and *Al Munqidh min al Dalāl* (A Refuge from Straying), both containing the rational arguments which question the validity of the ways of the philosophers of his times, might stand to benefit from a sociology of knowledge perspective which would not lose sight of their general validity, but at the same time give proper due to the historical context to which they were addressed. This is an area where a re-formed social theory can have more to contribute than the conventional static approaches applied from theology, philosophy, and orientalism which are scarcely relevant to an active life-world impregnated/impregnating tradition like the Islamic. The image popularized in the orientalist litany of Islamic civilization/culture as stagnant, stylized, and moribund would in retrospect tell us more about the methodology than the subject matter.

[13]When rendered into English, the general meaning of that moment of light which arrived shortly before his death would be something to this effect: *"Reason's bold ventures at long last come to a halt/ And man's vain labors in the end come to naught/ Petty, petty is the gain indeed, of a life long ransomed to the meed (= research/ and scholarship)/ Where the end yield is little more than so it was said this and thus it was said that!"* Al Maḥṣūl, edited by Ṭāhā Jābir Al 'Alwānī, vol. 1.

him.[14] Like the intent of al Ghazālī, here too there is no foundation to disparage reason, but rather to remind us of its limits. The gist of the Muslim legacy confirms that which common sense and integrity would concede in any tradition: just as words tend to lose their meaning when they are abused, so too the abuse of reason ends up turning it into a means of distraction leading away from truth and reality. It is the task of a Contrasting Episteme being used as a strategy to alert one to the pitfalls in shaping the discourse.

A Surfeit in Reason Spells a Counterfeit

In this way, it is hardly to be wondered at how rationalism in the modern West was periodically subverted by the anti-reason it engendered—culminating in its first Nietzschean moment and now, nearly a century later, in a second incarnation. This is one lesson to be learned from a common experience: to conserve the value of reason, one must avoid its indulgence. In the Oscillating Culture, prudence counsels a restraint which can hardly be observed given the absence of a universally accepted alternative/supplement to the very reason and empirical experience upon which prudence draws. In contrast, in the Median Culture, this is a counsel that is easier heeded. Through the ubiquity of revelation, mechanisms are inbuilt into that culture to diffuse the excesses that might occur. But, what if reason is indulged to saturation and taxed beyond measure, as in modernity? It is then that the recourse to an element of playfulness, to humor, to the crude, the simple, and the primitive can serve to enlighten where the distended intellect may fail, or where the over-exposed senses have been dulled. Advocating an economy of enlightenment that taps the unconventional and assumes compactness in its mode of delivery can have a significant role to play in self-understanding as well as in the field of cross-cultural encounter. It can secure a measure of understanding and reciprocity which no amount of purely intellectual exchange could hope to secure.

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[14]The rhyming couplets have been variously attributed to jurists and 'ulama like Juwaynī and Shahrastānī, respectively, of the fifth and fourth centuries A.H. Of course, reason as 'aql in the Muslim tradition was hardly the kind of "instrumental" reason implicit in the understanding of modern rationality in a horizontal episteme. For a learned incursion into the distinctions between levels and kinds of a "transcendental" rationality, see S. H. Nasr, "Intellect and Intuition: Their Relationship from an Islamic Perspective," in The Islamic Council of Europe *Islam and Contemporary Society* (London and New York: Longman, 1982), 36-45. On the other hand, an incisive and succinct redefining of the relationship between a positive rationality and a Qur'anic rationality was summed up in Al Rāzī's *Wasiyah* (Will), which subsequently came to be reflected in the course of the debates on revelation and reason in the Islamic tradition.

This invokes a touch of irony, as the logic which questions the range of reason and searches for ways to circumvent its limits evokes the aesthetic option in the post-modernist schools.[15] How could a Contrasting Episteme evolved in the *tawḥīdī* mood converge on common grounds and lend a credibility to that with which it can ultimately share little of substance? This would be to miss the point, in much the same way as the point al Ghazālī had made in the past was missed by his contemporaries and those who followed.

To recapitulate on the example of al Ghazālī and see how easy it is to distort a tradition, one need only reflect on a few key statements which might be helpful in reconstructing the modern dispersed and fractured psyche. First, there is no question that rationality is not a rule unto itself; it is part of a kingdom whose essence is justice and measure, where every relationship must be given its due. Foremost in the world of human cognition is the relationship between human reason and divine revelation. There is a need to seek out the sources, define relationships, and avoid the confusion between means and ends. His reminder seems particularly timely to a posterity that lives the anguish of modernity and looks in vain for the elements of retrieval and renewal:

> The like of Reason is that of the sound, unailing vision, and the like of the Qur'an is that of a brilliant radiating sun; neither can do without the other, except for those who are fools. He who denies Reason and confines himself to the light of the Qur'an is just like one who exposes himself to the sunlight only to close his eyes. There is no difference between such and the blind. Reason in the presence of revelation is a light upon light, and whoever sees with only one eye is tethered to the yoke of vanity (*mutadallil bī ḥabl al ghurūr*).[16]

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[15]The prominent place given the aesthetic dimension in the modern sensibility in the West lies in its perception of the artistic as the domain to be contrasted par excellence with reason. As such, it is seen to constitute the only space where a true spontaneity, freedom, and reconciliation can be attained away from the constraints and frustrations associated with rationality. This is the strain underlying the Nietzschean periodic revival whether in its radical expression, as with Herbert Marcuse's works like *Eros and Civilization* (New York: Vintage, [1955] 1962) or with the later "anarchists" of post-modernity who are indulging in a "poetics of rejoicing" reminiscent of Zarathustra's moment of ecstatic inspiration where "Mid-day and Eternity" drown out consciousness in his "drunken song." See Lowith's comment in the appendix to his volume *Meaning in History: A Theological Implication of the Philosophy of History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957), 214-22; cf. Jean Bethke Elshtain, "Feminist Political Rhetoric and Women's Studies," in *The Rhetoric of the Human Sciences*, ed. J. Nelson et al. (Madison: University of Wisconsin, 1987).

[16]Economy/*Al Iqtiṣād fī al I'tiqād*. Various scholars in a commemorative volume on al Ghazālī address different aspects of his epistemology and ethics. The excerpts here are my translation of their Arabic original in Yūsuf Qaraḍāwī's authoritative and insightful overview

A world-affirming knowledge must be a knowledge that is as open to the transcendent as it is open to the range of time. This is what he means when he classifies types of knowledge and predicates validity on it: ". . . As for those learned in the knowledge of the Hereafter," he points out in his *Ihyā' 'Ulūm al Dīn*, "the meaning they attach to validity is acceptance, and by acceptance they mean attainment of the goal." In this sense, there is a confident note of affirmation accompanied by a knowledge of purposefulness. Rationality plays different roles according to different contexts and ranges of deployment. When it is not an instrument for discernment, it is necessarily associated with restraint and subordinated to higher values. This is what he means when he maintains that there are areas and situations which might not be commensurable with reason and where, consequently, rationality might be put aside ". . . and the natural self deflected from where its comfort lies." To all being, there is a dimension of interiority as well as externality, and this is a fact that has its implications for rationality and validity. Its acknowledgment is a condition for openness and measures, for the language of reason is not a language of renunciation and negation; rather it is one of receptivity and anticipation: "For those to whom God opens the door, the material and visible world is but the threshold of the invisible, angelic universe." Above all, in his appeal to a rationality that goes beyond externality and instrumentality, without renouncing or deprecating either as long as they occupy their space with measure, al Ghazālī takes his point of departure in an address found in his *Al Munqidh* that is inclusive, addressed to all, and not confined to its immediate audience or to its times: "Assuredly, there was in the age of the philosophers, as indeed there is in every age, a group of those godly men, of whom God never denudes the world." The kind of measured and proportioned rationality advocated by al Ghazālī is thus also shown to be a truly universal rationality that can be sought by all, although admittedly its effective appropriation remains ultimately contingent on an act of grace.

Al Ghazālī strove towards a synthesis that brought together dimensions of the abstract and the concrete, the universal and the particular, the transcendental and the immanent in a way which bears directly on the meaning of a Contrasting Episteme and which reinforces the co-substantiative mode of a cross-cultural discourse. It teaches that to admit the limits of human rationality is not to denounce reason any more than cultivating other sensibilities is to suggest its abdication.

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of al Ghazālī's thought in the context of times and tradition. M. K. I. Gaafar, ed., *Al Imām al Ghazālī on the Occasion of the Ninth Centenary of His Death* (Qatar: Qatar University, 1986), (Arabic) 17-83. A compact selection from the Master deemed to bring out the mystical dimensions is found in Muhtar Holland, trans., *Al Ghazālī, Inner Dimensions of Islamic Worship*. (Leicester: The Islamic Foundation, 1986).

In turning to alternative modes of expression by tapping other levels of communication, we seek to enhance our "communicative competencies" in a Habermasian sense. The purpose is to explore the *fields of possibility* available in the modern situation which, notwithstanding its perceived impositions and dehumanizing implications, has the merit of affording the experience of a shared globality.[17] This is the situation of a controversial modernity. In it, there is a need to expand the shared terrain between consciousnesses bred on divergent epistemes. A "*tawḥīdī* instinct" would tap such a fund of shared human experience which, while assuming a variety of forms, would nevertheless retain in its essence a commonality inferred from a residual shared sensibility. This instinct moves the evolving hermeneutic towards a new science of culture which is more aligned to a "reconstructive," rather than a "nomothetic," science. To invoke the terms and the hope echoed in contemporary philosophy of science debates is not beyond the pale, as Mary Hesse suggests in her work.[18]

Recovering the Rational and Reconsidering Its Rationale

It is this residual essence of a common *fitric* sensibility which is conserved in the more spontaneous modes of expression which pervade any culture. The "rational," as a stance or as a moment of deliberate and calculated expression, does not exhaust the spectrum of potential communication and understanding. To this extent, there is nothing ironic about the shared understanding between admittedly strange bedfellows of the human and cultural potential: an Islamic and a post-modernist stance would appear to converge. Where the *tawḥīdī* approach differs, though, is in the **ends** for which it invokes the spontaneous levels of expression. The discourse is not intended as an indulgence in an open-ended and directionless enterprise, a "purposeless purposefulness," which is simply endured to keep a conversation going, as some would propose.[19] Its *telos* constitutes a significant feature inspired by

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[17]The debate on modernity constitutes a fertile ground for a critical reflection which goes beyond the bounds of "cultures," and is often used to bring together common strands in a conversation which goes on in the East and the West. Cf. L. Binder's approach and theoretical premises in his *Islamic Liberalism: A Critique of Development Theories* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988). Also C. F. Alford, *Science and the Revenge of Nature: Marcuse and Habermas* (Gainesville, FL: University Presses of Florida, 1985), and David Kolb, *The Critique of Pure Modernity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986).

[18]"Science and Objectivity." In J. B. Thompson and D. Held, eds., *Habermas: Critical Debates* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1982), 98-115.

[19]This seems to be the position of someone like Strauss in making the case for a "return" to the Socratic Way (see below). Cf. Richard Rorty's version of "edifying philosophy" which similarly seeks to keep the conversation going as an end in itself, rather than as a means

the Qur'anic ethos, and has its attendant implications for socializing the individual to the physical and social environment and for integrating the individual psyche. The recurrent reminder in the Qur'an rules that the world, including the life-world, has not been created by God in jest.[20]

With this in mind, turning to Juḥā or to a timeless character in Alice in Wonderland can be used time and again to reinforce a point of reason, not to disparage it.[21] The limits of rationality refers to a specific kind of rationality, an instrumental, or a technical, or a positivist rationality, but it is not invoked to question a standing principle of coherence without which no sense or meaning could hold. The levity, then, and its justification as a relevant and valid medium in shaping a cultural hermeneutic, is not to entertain frivolity in a context where the stakes are decidedly high. Quite the contrary, the "playfulness" is as much an ontological as it is a psychological therapy,[22] in an age where the modern mind and temper have experienced the erosion of much of their *fiṭric* **sensibility**. The latter is a category which could be proximated to the Humean "common sense" or to a Thomistic "connaturality"—each in its own way capturing dimensions of that sensibility but not reducible to it.

In any event, it is hardly surprising that this playfulness should become a characteristic disposition in the post-modern movement to the extent that it is a genuine development—although there it understandably takes on a most cynical turn.[23] Given the conflicting sources of the tradition and its confrontational mind-cast, this profound strain of cynicism is ineluctable. It invokes the deep sense of tragedy and the untiring encounters with irony and paradox which bind the Zarathustras of modernity to their counterparts in antiquity. This is another significant qualification which sets such playfulness

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of finding an objective truth, the existence of which is anyway questioned. See his *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979). In his most recent work, he qualifies the temper of that conversation and distinguishes between its tenor in a "public" as opposed to a "private" space. Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

[20]"Not without purpose did We create heaven and earth and all between: That were the thought of unbelievers!" (38:27); "We created not the heavens, earth, and all between them in idle sport!" (44:38); "Did ye then think that We had created you in jest and that you would not be brought to Us (for account)?!" (23:115). Rather, for those of understanding and true perception, they can see the signs that are in creation, and it is those who turn to God in their devotions with the invocation "Our Lord! Not for naught have You created all this! . . ." (3:190-191); for as God reminds us, He has created everything in measure. (15:85)

[21]Cf. Edward Wakeling, *The Logic of Lewis Carroll: A Study of Lewis Carroll's Contribution to Logic* (Luton, U.K.: Edward Wakeling, 1978).

[22]Cf. Erich Franzke, *Fairy Tales in Psychotherapy: The Creative Use of Old and New Tales*, trans. Joseph Smith (Toronto, Lewiston, N.Y.: H. Huber, 1989).

[23]Garry Brodsky, "Post-modernity and Politics" in *Philosophy Today* 31 (Winter 1987).

apart from a disposition which retains its pristine innocence, unperturbed by the tribulations and trials of a changing world. In the *tawḥīdī* episteme, the world remains intrinsically unadulterated, much as an effable human nature retains its essential innocence and perfectibility.

In the above discussion, we have addressed aspects of the Oscillating Culture in a general, diffuse context, taking our examples from unconventional sources and explaining why. The point so far has been to deploy a Contrasting Episteme as a strategy for probing features of the Oscillating Culture. Pervasive elements from the *tawḥīdī* perspective have been woven into the text with this end in mind. On another plane, the dilemmas posed by the Oscillating Culture may be inferred from the current debate on modernity which, while essentially philosophical, affects the modern disciplines. In what follows, the theme of the Oscillating Culture will be traced in the echoes of this debate in social thought and in circles of modernist theosophy.

5
Projections in the Field

How can we relate a fragment to an image of the whole? In plotting the terrain of the Oscillating Culture in the modern West, we will resort to a stylized synoptic sketch of its spatial contours and allow for an oversimplification in cultural geography and substantial topography. German sociology remains at the commanding heights of a tradition which runs through Kant, Hegel, Marx, and the contemporary radicals. At the same time, some of the most engaged defense of modernity comes from it.[24] In its depth and fecundity it is unrivalled, although it is perhaps only matched in vitality by the French. Those are the great system-builders or synthesizers in the Western tradition: evidently, their "syntheses" are of a radically different variety from those we referred to above in discussing the Median Culture. Here too, the difference is due less to individual eccentricities—even in a case like Nietzsche—than to intrinsic cultural proclivities. The context is the unfolding debate in the 1930s in the Frankfurter School.[25] Its development through a phase of Negative Dialectics to its current more liberal and constructive phase with Habermas is best seen against its counterpart in a less structured parallel discourse engaging a heterogeneous breed of post-structuralists,

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[24]Brecht's perceptive account of the philosophical and "deep turn" inherent in the German tradition, as it might be contrasted with the more empiricist and pragmatist Anglo-American strains, are relevant to our account here. See Berthold Brecht, *Political Theory: The Foundations of Twentieth Century Political Thought* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1959).

[25]See above references to Adorno and Horkheimer.

anarchists, and critical genealogists in post-1968 France.[26] There, the most virulent forms of anti-humanism have found their ramified and creative expressions. The spin-off of the cataclysms on the Continent may typically be gauged at the terminal point of the Western heritage, in the American intellectual fringes of what is otherwise an essentially pragmatic and streamlined current.

In this fragment of another refracted moment, we abstract from the length and breadth of a dynamic tradition to point to the directions for identifying the forms assumed by the Oscillating Culture today and to locate the dilemmas it poses. Underlined throughout are the potentials and limitations of a culture and a tradition which take their bearings from a *horizontal axis*.

Strauss, Habermas, and the Socratic Way

Once again we will run into a sequel of such parodies which are the consistent by-product of this modal temperament. Here, we might inquire into the turn taken in an odd partnership between Jürgen Habermas and Leo Strauss. On first impulse, it could be suggested that little binds two of the great minds in contemporary Western thought other than the fact that they might both share an opposing prespective on the Western tradition; however, the very notion of sharing their differences might strike a note of anomaly. The one speaks for a critical post-Marxist tradition, while the other opines for a Classical rationalism. The one takes his position from a commitment to a materialist dialectic which strives to accommodate the non-material dimensions of existence, while the other conducts his reflections in terms which interrelate the esoteric to the exoteric. The former addresses the technological dimensions of modernity in terms of their social relevance, while the latter constructs his discourse round the antithesis of modernity and would fain take it in any context other than that of the passive interlocutor which bears correction in the light of its precursors. Yet, to confound anomalies, the most articulate and imaginative representative of the radical tradition in sociology today ends up on a par with the advocate of the return to Classicism; both see the greatest stake in any given system in preserving the techniques for an open society. The plea in the one and the other is for consolidating the tottering foundations of community in the modern West. For all the differences in points of departure and the respective structures and textures

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[26]See Luc Ferry and Alain Renaut, *La pensée 68: essai sur l'anti-humanisme contemporaine* (Paris: Gallimard, 1985) and Kate Soper, *Humanism and Anti-Humanism* (Illinois: Open Court, 1986), especially chapter 1 as a background for contrasting the different conceptions in the Continental and Anglo-American usages.

of discourse, and notwithstanding the different temperaments and approaches,[27] both end up sharing a basic ambivalence concerning the goals and purpose of social organization. Neither is demonstrably capable of covincingly grounding continuity. This inability reflects the constraints inherent in the model to which they both consciously or otherwise defer. This model is rooted in what Irving Stone has called the "Socratic Way."

The Socratic Way opens the path to a healthy skepticism in the eyes of its defendants and sympathizers, and to open sedition and amorality in the eyes of executioners and critics. But, according to Socrates' biographer, nobody really knew, to recall the Mock Turtle and Alice in our opening epigram, exactly what the "porpoise" was. "The various followers of Socrates disagreed," we are told, "often as violently as modern scholars, as to just what Socrates had taught them, even and especially on the nature of virtue."[28] The most the Socratic Way could point to was an awareness of the existence of a morality, or a source of good— "out there" or "deep within" was another matter—and it demonstrated a way, the *bios theoretikos*, to strive to discover it. There was no assurance that it would be discovered. Other than force of example, there was also nothing to compel its pursuit and, beyond that, there was no way of knowing that we knew really was. The dilemma of the Oscillating Culture then would seem to be neither in its want of virtue nor in its want of reason, but rather in its inability to temperately or otherwise define either virtue or reason.

This, nonetheless, is still the same route which Strauss and his students point to in appealing to a revival of the old humane republican rationalism and in invoking a moral awareness of the Natural Law. This, in their view, was the surety that would countercheck the assault of a moral relativism and guide society to the civic sensibility it needs to survive. It is a similar faith in another secularized version of the Holy Trinity incarnate—Reason, Science, and Progress—which would appear to have inspired the Enlightenment at its height and which, for all the discredit and abuse it has since fallen into, still continues to inspire models of rational and legitimate communities, notwithstanding their failure to materialize.[29] It is, yet again, the same source

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[27]Strauss is heavily steeped in esotericism, and it is this which accounts for the elusive quality of his work and ideas, and for the deep controversy he raises. It is this esotericism which induced J. A. Pocock's censure of Strauss. *Political Theory* 3:3 (August 1975): 384-401. For a recent complimentary interpretation of his ideas which attempts to grapple with this dimension see Shadia Drury, *The Political Ideas of Leo Strauss* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1988).

[28]I. F. Stone, *The Trial of Socrates* (Boston: Little, Brown & Co, 1988), 14.

[29]While the pagan roots of modernity have been periodically revisited, only recently is the debt of modernity to its theological wellsprings coming into focus. Among the many such reinterpretations of the founders of modern thought, one critic contends that the essential Hegel would be completely missed outside a metaphysical appreciation of its Christology. See Paul Lakeland, *The Politics of Salvation: The Hegelian Idea of the State* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1985).

and rationality which animates and drives the Habermasian search for an Ideal Speech Community, whose strategy and justification are founded on assumptions which can hardly be entertained outside a secular rational framework perennially in quest of its delusive center. As to what these values are, or as to what the standards of arbitration should be, or as to questions of moral compulsion and the obligation to act and in what interest or to what purpose, these are the questions which philosophy may raise and speculate about and for which it can well provide the rhetoric and the logic, but for which it can offer precious little beyond the shadows of a learnedly hollow speculation. Learning is no consolation for ignorance in an arena where the stakes are high, where the mortal answers are sought and found wanting. This is not because there are no conclusive answers to be had, as some would like us to believe, but because such answers are beyond the logic and rhetoric devised by human reason. The range of human rationality does not obliterate what lies beyond it; rather it confirms the necessity and the validity of an alternative mode of access to a vital and integral reality.

Philosophy is as much of a science in the sense that Sheldon Wolin and others contend.[30] It is an objective means to accessing that which is relative and, as such, it can only itself remain open and relative, without claiming to partake of the Absolute or striving beyond opening doors that might at best converge onto a higher court of appeal. Even the difference with the natural sciences might be conceived of as one of difference in domain and methodology rather than in kind. Reason, which provides the enlightenment required to know about values and goals, is paralleled by the sensory apparatus and its adjunct processes to command the physical/phenomenological world. Reason, whether of the ancients or of the moderns, remains more of an instrumental resource in the quest for reliable knowledge, rather than a substantial source for such. The moment it is transposed into a source as well as a means, then one is not far from conflating means and ends, and one is left on the verge of a new destructive transfiguration. Even reinterpreting the Cartesian meditations against the Classical contemplations might yield more in common than is supposed.[31] The Socratic Way, like the scientific

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[30]See "Political Theory as a Vocation" in *APSR* and relevant compact contouring of the scientific elements in philosophy by Ellis Sandoz, "The Philosophical Science of Politics beyond Behavioralism" in *The Post-Behavioral Era: Perspectives on Political Science*, ed. G. Graham and G. Carey (New York: David McKay Co., 1972), 289 ff.

[31]There is even more in common between classical and scholastic rationalism than there is between modern rationalism, and either insofar as reason became egocentrically reflexive in the latter rather than reflective and extended beyond itself. This deformation occurred with the Cartesian shift in the ontological premise, substituting man for God/Good at the center of the life-world, thereby launching the epochal breach with premodernity. For an overview of the genealogy of the individualist approach to the institutional problem, see Stanley Taylor, *Conceptions of Institutions and the Theory of Knowledge* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction

method, may help us ask more questions than we can answer; but even the questions call for a frame of reference which was derived from the Tradition, and hence lies beyond the Way. If the questions went beyond knowing and being to belief and action, such as a *tawḥīdī* frame of reference would entail, then the Socratic Way would have very little to say. Ultimately, it deals with the category of the Ought in a surrealized and imposed manner, while the categories of belief and action are embedded in the matrix of the life-world. It is not surprising that the oldest disciple of Socrates, Antisthenes, should have been the founder of Cynicism. Just as in the modern school, anticipating anti-rationalist currents, David Hume has deftly turned the instruments of reason to their own detriment. In a *coup de main* reminiscent of al Ghazālī six centuries earlier, he too questioned the validity of reason on its own grounds as an instrument of reliable knowledge. Significantly, Hume's philosophy arose from his preoccupation with moral questions. His position that all knowledge in the ethical sphere was ultimately a matter of opinion was tantamount to denying the possibility of ever knowing with any reliability what constituted the good and the truth. This kind of radical skepticism is the point at which two traditions diverge.

Explaining Divergencies

This divergence between two traditions is hardly due to the apparent fact that one tradition takes its bearings from human reason and the other from divine revelation. Such a formulation could mislead, and ultimately confirm the kind of antinomies which, from the *tawḥīdī* median, can only constitute misguided and self-imposed man-made constraints. Far from any presumed incompatibility between reason and faith as some authorities might claim, these antinomies result from the meaning or perception attached to each category in the respective traditions. An understanding along Straussian lines, for example, which seeks to salvage the crisis of modern rationalism by reinterpreting the framework for rationality and virtue as it does, could hardly be reconciled with corresponding conceptions in the Median Culture.[32] In seeking to accommodate philosophy to practicality, Strauss may have hoped

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Pubs., 1988), 87 ff. (Briefly, the individual emerged as a metaphysical entity discrete and independent with the Augustinian tradition. Descartes moved him to the ontological center and by the nineteenth century, he was firmly established as the rational, free, autonomous, self-sufficient fictive entity of the liberal tradition.)

[32]See above-cited excerpts from Al Ghazālī. The discussion here draws on the essays by Leo Strauss (collected and edited by Thomas Pangle in his *The Rebirth of Classical Political Rationalism: An Introduction to the Thought of Leo Strauss* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1989).

to attenuate the excesses of the *bios theoretikos* but, in undermining the eschatological plane, he was hardly insulating society from its own dispersions. Ethics cannot be exclusively the domain of reason any more than of a fickle opinion without engendering the kind of forces that degenerate into either doctrinal tyranny and absolutism or moral anarchy and nihilism. Relegating revealed religion, or "supra-rational piety," to a secondary or subordinate role in society might be a counsel of prudence in certain situations, but it can hardly prescribe a universal norm for the just society.[33] Strauss, an avid student of medieval philosophy in the Islamic world, could have learned some lessons there if he had chosen to do so instead of reproducing the Muslim tradition in the light of its Jewish reflections.[34] This is a fallacy cautioned against by a hermeneutic of mutuality on account of its distortive and obstructive consequences.

The Way of Yaqẓān: Recognition and Measure

To return briefly to the sequel of Hayy Ibn Yaqẓān's discovery of his interiority would seem apt at this point. In the wake of his renewed commitment to the Way he had come by in his autonomous search for the Truth, Ibn Ṭufayl narrates how his hero eventually came to learn of the existence of another way to the Truth. This came about through a mediated revelation, through prophets and scripture, such as he would be instructed about upon a chance visit to a neighboring island which, unlike his desert island, was inhabited territory. Upon close inquiry, he came to endorse this Way as valid and true. Despite his initial resistance and his firm conviction that there was only that one way which he had personally experienced, he retained an open mind. He had the good sense to distinguish states and contexts, and not to rush into dogmatic assertions or rash generalizations, such as would evade anyone who has not the elements of a sage within him. Even where he missed a point, he retained the openness to learn and to admit the limits and the bounds of the autonomous Way—which was assumed in reason and intellect. He conceded to the wisdom and the necessity of that other Way: that of Revelation and Shari'ah as the ultimate in the scales of an order of creation that was anchored in a providential justice and compassion.

With such encounters, we can see how there is much to be learned by example and by an engaged reflection from a legacy bred in the Median Culture. Even the controversial *falāsifah* who had so freely appropriated the legacy

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[33]Ibid., Introduction, p. xxi.

[34]See Oliver Leaman's provocative article, "Does the Interpretation of Medieval Muslim Philosophy Rest on a Mistake?" in *IJMES* 15 (1984).

of Classical Greece would have more to contribute on the relationship of reason and revelation than many a tale in the *Odyssey* or the *Peloponnesian Wars*. In the context of modernity, as this debate grows more urgent, an exposure to the Other could be particularly beneficial, provided it is conducted in the modal perspectives of a Contrasting Episteme. That such urgency is anticipated to grow is a consequence of the nature of the problems of a high modernity which simultaneously feeds on an ethic of re-membering and dis-membering as rationality and values are brought into the balance. As the leap outside the self-imposed confines is taken, those who venture forward are likely to find themselves in a more hospitable and fertile terrain with more to offer than any imaginable, or "unthought of," Archimedean point could suggest. In the meantime, however, the search for a midpoint continues within the confines of the Oscillating Culture.

6
Modernity Revisited

There is no want of valiant endeavors to reconcile science to philosophy, or faith to reason, or the ideal to the material in a culture whose history is predicated on a polarity of tensions in these very domains. The valiance is due to the realization that the tradition is perennially ensnared in a chain of self-inflicted conflicts and paradoxes where its articulation in contemporary social theory is merely a variation on a theme. Jacques Maritain, the "integral humanist" and one of the powerful influences in contemporary philosophy, is admirably qualified for the task of this reconciliation. By upbringing and training a convinced Thomist, and by temperament open and enlightened, his work lies at a vital juncture in the quest for a spiritual reconciliation within the modern West. In an objective reading of the culture he esteems, he attributes the malaise to the disproportionate growth in the dimensions of human knowledge, with progress in the "empirico-logical" dimension achieved at the cost of the spiritual and the philosophical. There would be little sense in this context to simply expound lost truths, for in a market inundated by facts, these would be hardly distinguishable from any other data on the screen. The point is to cultivate the discriminating sensibilities and to restore the faculties of an ailing vision through rehabilitating a distinctive mode of philosophical discourse and recovering the sources necessary for alimenting it. This mode would have to go beyond conventional philosophy—which is divisive and plagued with the schism it breeds—to a new conciliatory variant. This too might be another useful lesson to observe in devising the logistics for a Contrasting Episteme. But it is above all suggestive of the current temper in the Oscillating Culture.

This temper should not be obfuscated by the occasional bold and brazen

exaltations which revel in the contradictions and antagonisms that plague a culture and its conscience and see in them "the secret of the vitality of the West."[35] Going to the roots of the Western tradition brings us back to Leo Strauss, who dissects it in a more radical and ruthless manner than Maritain's temper would allow. It is instructive for what it tells us of the inherent characteristics which pertain to an Oscillating Culture, notwithstanding the typically Straussian equivocation of making a virtue of necessity and of hailing the problematic character of a tradition as its glory. That tradition is rooted in two ultimately incompatible sources: the Hebrew and the Greek, together projecting the unresolvable tension between faith and reason. It is from this problematic perspective that the prospects for synthesis dim. The whole history of the West can be interpreted in terms of an ever-repeated attempt to achieve a compromise between these two antagonistic principles. But all these attempts are doomed to failure, in this view, "because the Western tradition does not allow of a synthesis of its two elements, but only of their tension." Reading between the lines, one can see how the master of eloquent silences conflates a logic and forecloses possibilities. There is no doubt that the tensions and inconsistencies are there at the sources of the tradition, and that the repeated attempts at syntheses are sought in vain. The futility is not because of an inherent, or a categorical incompatibility between faith and reason, as the Master presumes, but because of how this misguided assumption has attended its actualization again and again in that particular historical tradition.

Notwithstanding such learned presumptions, there is that inner compulsion shared by all cultures by virtue of their human constituency, and which urges on the quest for that synthesis or "wholesomeness" represented in that middle-most ground. The question is not one of entropy, but of a kinetic balance and reconciliation. There is an intuitive awareness that a *modus vivendi* is needed, and that this calls for attenuating the polarities which fracture the inner and the outer order, the psyche and the community. Tradition, with its threshold of underlying myths and certitudes, had provided a residual matrix for this attenuation and for reducing the insecurities inherent in the nature and momentum of an Oscillating Culture. Yet, modernity has progressively barred the access to tradition and has eroded those very certitudes which have conventionally been derived from metaphysical insights and revealed religion. Only these could credibly assure the necessary reference point for effecting the reintegration within the psyche at the individual level, and within the community at the aggregate level.

The search for a "third dimension" in a formula that would go beyond the antagonisms continues. In philosophy, it is the search for "cooperation"

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[35]"Thucydides: The Meaning of Political History." See Thomas Pangle, op. cit., pp. 72-73 from which other quotations in this paragraph are also taken.

among mutually hostile and incompatible options, such as is advocated in the style of an integral humanism. In the social sciences, echoes of the end of ideology debate of the 1960s periodically resurface. The search is for a pragmatic basis of a rapprochement between socialism and liberalism as an acknowledgment of the essential historical and philosophical affinities between them as much as for a concession to the political realities of the times. Some of the more original initiatives to reinterpret modernity, and to reformulate modern society accordingly, include attempts to advance social theory itself beyond terminal and polarized categories like "capitalism" and "rationalism" to a potentially more unifying and integrated paradigm constructed on a scaffolding of "interpenetrating" categories.[36] The idea is to overcome the reductionist and materialist propensities associated with the triumphant positivism that had attended the inception of modernity. Yet, there is little in the resources of a tradition embedded in the Oscillating Culture to assure the outcome of this quest.

The momentum of an Oscillating Culture ensures it its basic patterns. It is either embattled in its persistent antagonisms, along the lines of Hume's "opposing monstrosities," or in the event it renounces reason but still maintains a faith in finding reason and value in existence itself, it has little to fall back upon other than a common sense which is rooted in a system of experience in permanent mutation. Any attempt to escape the dilemmas generated in the one degenerates into a tyranny of dogmas and absolutes. Conversely, the other option verges on an indiscriminate and irreverent amoralism which is the inevitable outcome of an absolute relativism. Neither is conducive to an enduring system of meaningful human association. This is not without its implications for social theory, as that area of the episteme immediately concerned with the life-world. In the event, social theory becomes a banal record of the status quo when it is not a futile inquiry into a sequence of quixotic, problem-provoking solutions.

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[36]Cf. Richard Munch, *Understanding Modernity: Toward a New Perspective Going Beyond Durkheim and Weber* (New York: Routledge Chapman and Hall, 1988). At the same time the more specialized accounts of the adaptation of specific religious communities to modernity are significant in the insights they provide on both the traits of an epoch as well as on the less conspicuous role of historically "interested groups" in their development. Jacob Katz, for example, highlights the role of Moses Mendelsohn in securing access for German Jews to an emergent *Geisteselite* under cover of "intellectual vindication" in his *Toward Modernity: The European Jewish Model* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Pubs., 1986), 11. Concepts like "assimilation" and "tolerance" (just as much as "emancipation" and "civic society") need to be examined in the context of a sub-tradition that emphasized exclusiveness and otherness, not only on account of its undeniable historical influence in shaping the Western tradition in general, but more particularly for its prominence in shaping "modernity" itself—not just "adapting" to it.
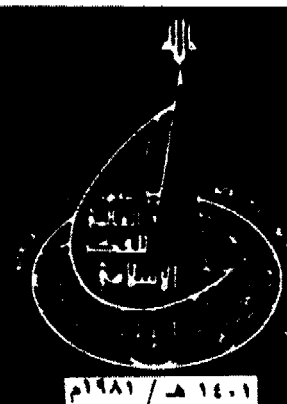
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If we were to sum up the thrust of the Oscillating Culture as it is demonstrated in the Western tradition, we would be inclined to agree with a neo-conservative reading rather than with a post-modernist one.[37] The notion of the morally good life may well be seen to unite the conversation of the West. To this extent, there is some validity in extending the critical reading of Lakatos in the history of science to interpreting culture and civilization. Unlike the Kuhnian account, it stresses continuity rather than rupture. A *tawhīdī* reading would underline the elements of morality and continuity that exist within the Western tradition, but it would see the validity of such elements as generic to a human culture/condition irrespective of its provenance. What might be conceded to the West might be more its inability to agree upon a reliable way of ascertaining what constitutes the good and what constitutes morality. The breaks and ruptures in its tradition reflect the moral dilemmas it faces, and a post-modernist account would be more representative in this case. Again, this "failing" is not specific to the West, but it is contingent on a generic culture-type which is defined by its sources and modes, not by its ethnicities and temporalities. Quite the contrary, on the strength of a Contrasting Episteme, there is more evidence to indicate that there is no want of orientation and inclination within the Oscillating Culture-type for the human response which strives toward the median option of balance and temperance under a variety of initiatives and appellations.

This option, however, remains an elusive target within that culture-medium. Thus, the crisis in social theory is likely to persist, notwithstanding the attempts to resolve it. Ultimately, it is a crisis which goes beyond sociology. Its resolution may be possible at certain levels, among constituent pockets of the culture, or at an individual level. However, as long as the Oscillating Culture is by definition pivoted on a horizontal axis, the affliction is structural. In the parable of al Ghazālī, the tree must be felled if the vicious circle is to be broken and modern man is to escape his self-inflicted exile into a state of perpetual distraction and ultimate destruction. By acceding to the authority of an external source of knowledge and by accepting the need and relevance of moral guidance from a source beyond the self and the created universe, the tradition is credibly reinforced. In renouncing its pretenses to a false and misconceived autonomy, the dominant tradition can refurbish its authentic reserves and develop its own momentum in proximating a median option in its own terms. The point, however, is not merely to make room for external

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[37]Philip Roth, "Politics and Epistemology: Rorty, MacIntyre and the Ends of Philosophy," in *History of the Human Sciences* 2:2 (June 1989).

knowledge and guidance, but also to cultivate an objective methodology of accessing its sources. It is here that the historical lessons available in the Median Culture can become an indispensable and positive wellspring of reinforcement. This latter process can serve as a catalyst to reviving tradition and become a vector to new patterns of civilization.

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