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*Modernity, Tradition, and Renewal in Arab Thought:
A Review Essay of Saud M. S. Al-Tamamy's
Averroes, Kant, and the Origins of the Enlightenment*

Saud M.S. Al-Tamamy, *Averroes, Kant, and the Origins of the Enlightenment: Reason and Revelation in Arab Thought*, I. B. Tauris, 2013, 304 pp., \$90.00 US (hbk), ISBN 9781780765709.

I

The debates surrounding the connections and distinctions between modernity and tradition have introduced various theoretical hypotheses within the humanistic disciplines, the social sciences, and the arts since the nineteenth century. The conceptual and applied domains of thinking about the relationships between modernity and tradition were not restricted to philosophical disputation, the development of social and political theories, or the refinement of method in historiography, but also emerged from within the visual arts and architecture in avant-garde movements and manifestos. Furthermore, such discourses and their applications in material culture were not circumscribed within the bounds of the unfolding of European ideas (including the influence these had in their own historical evolution within the intellectual circles and academe in North America), they were also expressed and debated within non-European societies that were being colonized or threatened by the prospect of colonization. This state of affairs had its impact on traditional societies that had Muslim demographic majorities, as exemplified by territories that were under Ottoman rule or were destined, subsequently in post-Ottoman eras, to colonialism coupled with modernization through advancements in technical knowledge and industrialization. Such predicaments were manifesting themselves clearly since the nineteenth century within communities in the Levant and Iraq, in Egypt, and stretching over to Anatolia and the Indian subcontinent. Many thinkers in the Arab milieu began to articulate various conceptual positions regarding emancipatory reforms, revivalism, and modernization versus traditionalism, while also critically reflecting on the relationships

between religion and science, as well as Islam and European visions of modernity. The thesis concerning the realization of renewal, while being rooted in tradition, was aimed at accomplishing a synthesis between conservative traditionalisms and the inclination towards Europeanization as a form of modernization. The disputations and institutional practices that were associated with such questions in theory and praxis continued to evolve with the coming of new generations of thinkers who were marked by the subsequent epochs of colonialism, independence, post-colonialism, the Cold War, and the various stages of pan-Arabism and its conflict with narrower regional and local identities. The aftermath of the Arab-Israeli war of 1967 dealt a significant blow to the worldview of Arab modernists and rekindled concealed leanings towards Islamism in seeking radical reform, revival, and promised emancipation.

The grand discourses about civilization, tradition, and modernity, which resulted in political activism, institutionalization, and state-building projects, were gradually replaced by scholarly, more academic modes of inquiry that were focused on conceptual interrogations of the essence of modernity and the possibility of rooting it within tradition. Such debates rested on modern methods of studying the history of ideas in Arabic and Islamic contexts, and critically questioning the approaches of Orientalism. The pre-modern philosophical legacies that marked Arab and Muslim intellectual history were viewed by some as sources of inspiration for thought in the modern era. In other words, select classical philosophers in the Arabic cum Islamic intellectual histories became attractive to modern Arab and Muslim thinkers, revivalists, and academics. Ibn ‘Arabi, for example, was seen as a principal source of inspiration in modern-age spiritualism, be it within Sufi circles or in broader cultural receptions. Mulla Sadra’s oeuvre became illuminating for many traditionalist scholars and seminarians in the Twelver Shi’i milieu, especially after the Iranian revolution. Avicenna (Ibn Sina) continued to be pivotal in studies on the history of philosophy in Muslim settings. Ibn Taymiyya’s views were retrieved in Wahhabist and Salafist contexts and continue to be central to their outlooks in confronting the modern world. As for Averroes (Ibn Rushd), many Arab thinkers from the non-religious and religious spectrum of modernizers and traditionalists alike saw in him a figure akin to one of the Muses.

II

One of the latest attempts to delineate and evaluate the methodological trope of appealing to pre-modern thinkers in view of inspiring modern thought is embodied in Saud M. S. Al-Tamamy’s book, *Averroes, Kant, and the Origins of the Enlightenment: Reason and Revelation in Arab Thought*. Al-Tamamy’s exposition is clear and his argumentation is sound. He is especially adept in his discussions of political philosophy, as well as when examining pre-modern Islamic intellectual history comparatively with early-modern European thought. Al-Tamamy engages his readers from the start with a survey of the main trends in thinking that dealt with the question of the relationship between modernity and tradition in Arab thought, whilst also situating it within the wider context of Islamic reformist doctrines.

The principal issue that Al-Tamamy treats in this book is the revivalist role that is assigned tacitly or openly to the philosophical legacy of Averroes (Ibn Rushd) within variegated expressions of modern Arab thought. This is set against the background claim that posits Averroes as “an enlightener” who predates Kant and the European Enlightenment. As Al-Tamamy shows, Averroes has been viewed, until recently, as a

possible philosophical resource who might prove instrumental to modern Arab thinkers dealing with the questions concerning the supposed binaries: modernity and tradition, reason and revelation. In the end, through comparative philosophical analysis, communicative hermeneutics, and historiography, Al-Tamamy demonstrates that Averroes was not an Enlightenment figure and that his thought is ultimately incompatible with Kantianism. He also convincingly argues that the social, cultural, political, geographical, and historical determinants of the European Enlightenment simply cannot be mapped, anachronistically, onto the milieu of Averroes.

Al-Tamamy's investigation belongs to a body of Arab literature that deals with questions similar to those handled by Mohammed Abed al-Jabiri, George Tarabishi, Hassan Hanafi, and Mohammed Arkoun. However, he does not take the Arabic and Islamic heritage as a platform for launching a reform in modern Arab thought. Al-Tamamy avoids the political ramifications of sacralizing tradition as well as its dialectical counterpart of devaluing it, whether by granting tradition political legitimacy or denying it. Also, he avoids the disputations surrounding Orientalism. Instead, his comparative inquiry focuses on problematizing the phenomenon of going beyond the transmission of traditional knowledge or its reproduction by way of seeking epistemic and philosophical renewals in thought. To this end, Al-Tamamy is guided by the hypotheses of Quentin Skinner in contrast to those advocated by Leo Strauss.

Skinner aimed at recovering "speech acts" from the "illocutionary" propositions of previous political thinkers with a contextual focus in interpretation, while also countering the view that political classics are monolithic in character.¹ His historicist contextualizing approach criticizes the anachronistic distortion of texts as often occurs within modernizing readings. His method contrasts with Strauss's application of pre-modern political thought to contemporary theory. Strauss called for understanding Martin Heidegger's critique of the history of metaphysics as a prerequisite for modern political theorizing. His anti-historicist directives distinguished between "exoteric" and "esoteric" meanings in pre-modern texts, which he saw as being a stratagem that heterodox thinkers used to protect themselves from political retribution or religious persecution. A hermeneutic exercise is therefore needed in order to disclose the hidden message behind a given text and the way it calls for understanding the problems it tackles obliquely through its rhetorical structure. Strauss saw in contextualism a risk that could compromise universality. According to him, philosophizing can take the form of an ahistorical theorizing, and modern thought can be inspired by tradition while transcending its relativism.²

Ultimately Al-Tamamy's investigations aim at critically countering the "ideological" claims that underpin attempts to identify Averroes as an "Enlightenment figure." To achieve his objective, he focuses on comparative textual analyses of the philosophical works of Averroes and Kant. Skinner's influence is evident in Al-Tamamy's analytic reading, especially in his efforts to derive meaning through an account of the nature of linguistic usage in the

¹ See for instance: Quentin Skinner, *Visions of Politics, Volume 1: Regarding Method* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), esp. 7, 74, 115, 119, and 121; Quentin Skinner, *Meaning and Context: Quentin Skinner and his Critics*, ed. James Tully (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), esp. 29-32, 38-41, 57-64, and 109-111. Refer also to his earlier article: Quentin Skinner, "Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas," *History and Theory*, Vol. 8, Issue 1 (1969): 3-53, esp. 12-13 and 16.

² For example, refer to: Leo Strauss, *Persecution and the Art of Writing* (Glencoe, IL: The Free Press of Glencoe, 1952), 24-25 and 30-31; Leo Strauss, *What is Political Philosophy and Other Studies* (Glencoe, IL: The Free Press of Glencoe, 1952), 10-14 and 17-18; Leo Strauss, *The City and Man* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964), 1-8.

source texts, as well as understanding the “illocutionary force” of these writings. Thusly, Al-Tamamy identifies the pitfalls of prolepsis; i.e., those readings of classical Arab cum Islamic thinkers that locate the meaning of the text in its future unfolding and independently from the original author’s intentions. Likewise, he points out the drawbacks of parochialism in generating similarities with a text across different and distinct locales or cultural contexts. Furthermore, Al-Tamamy reassesses the reformist outlooks in modern Arab thought and their appeal to “authenticity” instead of focusing on discourses that emphasize cultural “ruptures,” whether in their doctrinal character or pragmatics. He rightly shows how the European Enlightenment was not simply a philosophical school or intellectual movement, as much as it was a social, cultural, and political development within Europe that had continuities with novel ideals that were rooted in philosophy and the evolution of scientific inquiry.

Al-Tamamy is a political theorist and not a scholar of medieval philosophy or a specialist in Kantianism. Not surprisingly, then, he seeks to determine the political horizons of Averroes’ and Kant’s philosophical legacies. While taking into account their respective interpretations of the relationship between reason and revelation within their respective cultural contexts and historical epochs, Al-Tamamy demonstrates that Averroes does not depart from the general Islamic attitude toward giving higher authority to the revealed text. In fact, Averroes uses politics and ethics in elite circles as a means to serve philosophized religious ends. As for Kant, he gives priority to the rational origin of the moral law over revelation, and takes it to be synonymous with freedom, while identifying the universal divine truth and the highest good with the rational progression towards a religious faith that is embodied in moral and political values within the public domain.

Al-Tamamy’s demonstration that Averroes was not, therefore, a figure who professed ideals akin to those of the European *Aufklärung* (*Les lumières*; *al-Anwar*) takes Kantianism as its benchmark in the critical rational grounding of the natural sciences, religion, and ethics, along with the requisite rethinking of the foundations of metaphysics. Identifying the ideological prisms through which the interpretation of Averroes’s thought has been undertaken in modern Arab thought is constructive indeed, and Al-Tamamy’s reasoning is pertinent and advances a substantiated thesis. However, this should not, in my view, curb the contemporary penchant to draw inspiration from past intellectual legacies in the unfolding of modern thought. The history of ideas can still be of value for renewing philosophy, and philosophical thinking can be rooted in intellectual traditions from the past without betraying fidelity to the original authors or projecting ideological normative frameworks in interpreting their oeuvres.

From the standpoint of reigning academic conventions within medieval Arabic cum Islamic studies, *falsafa* should not be examined through the prisms of contemporary concerns in epistemology, ontology, or critical theory. This is principally due to the fact that *falsafa* is appreciated merely as a historical tradition that is ultimately disconnected from modern thought. However, if the Arabic cum Islamic intellectual heritage can be an inspiration at the philosophical level it should not be accounted for through traditionalism, relativism, or national and religious revivalisms; rather, it should be viewed from a broader perspective—as having universal value—and hence it may also inspire renewals in contemporary philosophy per se, or at least in some of its areas of inquiry. The sense of universality I employ here does not imply that ancient or medieval ideas are timeless and valid across historical epochs. Moreover, it should not be taken to imply that pre-modern concepts normatively agree *a priori* with the intentions and aims of the modern exegete or

commentator, despite the hermeneutic foresight or prejudice that underpins the derivation of meaning from reading a text.

This state of affairs calls for thinking about the centrality of the methods of historiography, philology, and codicology in examining pre-modern Arabic-Islamic intellectual history. Such methods of inquiry, which are dominant in medievalist studies (including scholarship on the pre-modern Arabic cum Islamic history of ideas), ought not remain insulated and isolated from recent developments in hermeneutic theory, phenomenology, the philosophies of history and religion, or meditations on the metaphysics of time. If the conceptions of the relationships between modernity and tradition in Arabic thought need overhauling, such a line of thinking necessitates a critical and analytic reassessment of the methodological directives that orient the investigation of the histories of ontology and epistemology. This is vital if we are to move beyond the domineering perspectives that solely focus on archival documentation, antiquarian archiving, literalism in translation, and the presupposition of a detached “objectivity” in the self-professed “controlled contextualization” of research within medievalist studies on the history of philosophy. Such methodological approaches can also benefit from epistemic orientations that involve critical interpretation and analytic speculation about the conceptual relevance of pre-modern science and philosophy within contemporary theoretical debates.

A focus on the situational character of the production of knowledge, its adaptive transmission, communication, and canonization can overcome the epistemic obstacles of a presumed cultural incommensurability and generate a sense of rootedness in the continuity of the rationalities of tradition, albeit from within the unfolding of the abstract universalized principles of modernity. Such a line of analysis takes into account broader social-cultural influences in the way a community receives a textual and intellectual heritage, and canonizes it as a tradition.

III

Traditionalisms emerge in reaction to modernity, and yet they are also situated within the realms of the unfurling of the essence of modernity’s technological machinations and of associated novel concepts that lead to transformative globalized domains of praxis, which become gradually mediated, domesticated, and localized. This aspect is illuminated by Heidegger’s reflections on the essence of modern technology (*Wesen der modernen Technik*), which reveals truth by way of “enframing” (*Gestell*) and turns beings into a “standing-reserve” (*Bestand*) of stored energies and powers that respond to command in the way nature is questioned by techno-science.³ Tradition is inescapably *enframed* by modernity’s technological determination of the being of beings and of the manner truth is revealed. However, this does not do away with the cultural and historical differences between traditions or the fact that rational inquiry, especially in the context of moral thought, continues to be rooted in arguments and positions that are immanent in given traditions and

³ This question concerning technology was discussed in: Martin Heidegger, “Die Frage nach der Technik,” in *Vorträge und Aufsätze*, ed. F.W. von Hermann, *Gesamtausgabe Band VII* (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 2000), Chapter 1, 5-36; see esp. 17-21. The English translation is included under the title “The Question Concerning Technology” in Heidegger’s *Basic Writings*, 2nd Edition, ed. David Farrell Krell (New York: Harper Collins, 1993), 311-341; esp. 322-328.

get redefined and reinvented interpretively from within them, without this descending necessarily into incommensurability or relativism.⁴

The past acquires its meaning in our lived experience from the present since it is no longer in existence but as a trace in physical concrete entities. Such objectivities in the ontology of time have to be taken into account when assessing the methods by which we gain access to what is taken to be the past; namely via objectively present and ready at hand entities and *apophantic* meanings that are depicted historically. This involves meditations on the ontological structure of time, which is already a philosophical undertaking that is frequently overlooked in the methodologies of medievalists and scholars of Arabic cum Islamic intellectual history. History writing and historical consciousness are not spheres of praxis that are simply determined in terms of the past; they are present activities aimed essentially at posterity. It is precisely this aspect of temporality that results in historicism and thus gives rise to the need to instate methods of research in historiography. The historian aims at approximating the originary past milieu from which a given historical extant text or physical object presences in our world in the form of being that which has been handed down over to us as a *heritage* across time. Historical analysis seeks to disclose what the inherited thing gathers of elements that belong essentially to its originary world by way of modeling its context. This sets the background for archiving and documentation, be it in curatorial terms or in scholarly commentaries. However, the inherited text or thing does not solely belong to the origin from which it emerged, but in its originary character as what presences with us, it is also destined communicatively towards us by virtue of being in our world. This becomes even clearer in the manner an old manuscript, a classical text, or the propositions that constitute its *logoi*, all speak to us in a meaningful way as what is objectively present and at hand within our lived experience. In all of these situational disclosures, time is not to be disclosed as a linear series of past, present, and future. Temporality gathers the three-dimensions of time in lived experience. The historian of philosophy ought to sometimes rise philosophically above historiography in examining the ontological and epistemic conditioning of the depiction of history, writing it via an awareness of the metaphysics of time. What survives as a trace from a past origin in our *life-world* belongs essentially not only to the context from which it originated, but is also what gathers and communicates constellations of meaning that inhere in our own world, and by virtue of our handling of such traces, whether textual or “thingly,” we destine them towards posterity. It is in this sense that the oldest of old can indeed meet us as a future! If an inherited textual legacy is meaningful to us, we already place it within the sphere of our *life-world* and render it as such open to the way we integrate it in our lived experience and our anticipation of posterity. I do not only preserve an inheritance, but also learn while handling it how to situate myself as a mortal with regard to those who passed as ancestors, to the ones I encounter face to face as contemporaries, and to others who are yet to come as descendants.

An academic analysis of revivalist discourses in modern Arab thought requires a critical philosophical consideration of the question of method and of its epistemic and ontological presuppositions when studying the Arabic cum Islamic history of ideas, and the possibilities

⁴ Such aspects preoccupied the thinking of the philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre who rooted his moral philosophy in the tradition of Aristotelian Thomism; see for example his book: *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988), esp. 11-13 and 360-363. Refer also to his take on biology in dealing with ethics from the standpoint of Thomistic “virtues of dependency” as applied in the connections between rational beings, and as argued in: *Dependent Rational Animals* (Chicago: Carus Publishing, 1999), esp. 1-6 and 126-128.

of drawing intellectual inspiration from it. Al-Tamamy's book is a welcome addition to such lines of inquiry, especially in terms of its theoretical engagement with the recent treatments of the debate over tradition and modernity, revivalism and rupture, and the continuity or discontinuity with heritage, and by questioning the validity of received notions and revealing their ideological penchants.

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