The Possibility, Meaning and Importance of Comparison between Islamic and Western Philosophies

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Abstract:

Contemporary Islamic philosophy, which is not in the direction of dead end of Ghazzali's approach and Averose's unfollowed philosophy, has had more improvements in Shi'ites Iranian cultural background. These active philosophical thoughts that have been encountered some of contemporary problems in philosophy and other problems are rarely known by Western thinkers.

In this paper I will review the possibility, meaning and importance of comparative studies between Western and Islamic philosophies. Although there are some increasing activities in this field, there are some obstacles in this comparison (and other comparisons) that must be overcome for a true one. These difficulties arise from hermeneutical meanings of the problems and the cultural diversities and the different approaches in the same problems. These matters bring the suspicion of impossibility of comparative philosophy. But if it would be so then all kinds of mutual understanding would be meaningless and absurd. I believe that all comparative studies must be aware of those obstacles and try to overcome them more and more to reach a more true comparison. Then, I will examine five meanings of comparative philosophy between Western and Islamic philosophies that some of them cannot result fruitful consequences and some others are closer to upgrading mutual understanding and more cooperation for some better philosophical views.

I will also point to the importance and necessity of such dialogues for a more global intercultural relations and solving the apparent conflicts that have some deep misunderstandings.

I. What is Contemporary Islamic Philosophy?

In contemporary Muslim territories we can find a great diversity of attitudes towards Philosophy. Hence, before dealing with the particular situation of Contemporary Islamic Philosophy, we would like to enumerate a few trends in the context of which the special identity of contemporary philosophical activity can be recognized. We shall then try to explain the main characteristics of Islamic philosophy as it is practiced in Iran. In the first place, however, we must deal with the fact that the different approaches to Philosophy in the Islamic world have essentially to do with different interpretations of the relation itself between Islam and Philosophy. Among these interpretations we find the following[i]:

1. The rejection of philosophy and of any rational approach to religious teachings with the emphasis placed on the ordinary meanings of Quran and *hadith* (*vahhabi* approach).

2. The Ghazzalian approach, i.e., the one that we might call the philosophical rejection of philosophy. This is a common view in Malaysia and Indonesia, but with important similarities to the *tafkik* (separation) movement in Iran.

3. The mystical approach in Turkey and countries of North of Africa like Morocco and Tunisia.

4. The revival of the Islamic philosophical heritage as it was instituted during the period going from the 9th to the 13th centuries. The thinkers interested in this revival are more commentators than philosophers in their own right. This position is particularly strong in schools and departments of Islamic philosophy in the Arabian countries that reject the *vahhabi* approach.

5. The westernized contemporary approach to philosophy in Islamic countries and other parts of the world. Among the representatives of this approach we find thinkers like Muhammad Arkun, Hassan Hanafi, Nasr Hamed Abu Zaid, Ali Mazroui, Abdolkarim

Soroush. They all have in common a rather secular approach based on different Western concepts of philosophy.

6. The more ideological approach represented by thinkers that attempt to find solutions for the practical problems affecting the Muslim world based on the premise that the best way of proceeding is to promote the return to the traditional doctrines of Islam.

7. The approach of traditionalist thinkers like Rene Genon, Schowan, and Nasr.

8. The approach of the Sadraian transcendental philosophy (philosophy of Mulla Sadra) in Iran, as well as in Pakistan and India.

II. The background of contemporary Islamic philosophy

In the past, the interest of the Western world in learning about Islamic Philosophy was mainly centered on the question regarding the active influence of Muslim thinkers upon the historical formation of Christian scholasticism in the Middle Ages. For example, it is clear that in order to study the philosophical contribution of thinkers like Thomas Aquinas and Duns Scotus in their correct historical perspective we must also become acquainted with the thought of at least Avicenna (980-1037) and Averroes (1126-1198). Any adequate history of medieval Western philosophy should include in consequence an important chapter on the history of Islamic philosophy[ii].

This distance between the western intellectuals and Islamic Philosophy may have to do with the rather common view in the West that Islamic Philosophy came to an end with the death of Averroes (1126-1198) and/or ceased to exist when Ghazzali (1058-1111) produced his major attack against philosophical thinking in his influential book *Tahafut al-Falasifat*. But in reality what came to an end was nothing more than what shall be considered the first phase in the development of the whole history of Islamic Philosophy. It is true that with the death of Averroes, Islamic Philosophy ceased to be alive in the West, but this does not mean that it ceased to be alive in the East. It is also true that the Islamic philosophy did not develop in all Muslim

countries after Ghazzali and Averroes particularly among Sunni Muslims, so that in the Arabian countries there was no longer a large interest in developing philosophy. The fact that the Sunni Muslims were the majority in terms of population and the Arabian countries were the ones with closer ties to the West explains why the generalized assumption grew in the West that there was no longer Philosophy in the Muslim countries. Moreover, this assumption became necessarily an obstacle for the deepening of any relations between Islamic and Western Philosophy.

We must also add that even "histories" of Islamic philosophy written not as a chapter in the history of Western philosophy but independently and for its own sake were largely shaped by the idea that the golden age of Islamic Philosophy is to be found in the period of three centuries extending from Farabi to Averroes, and that after Averroes, in the ages subsequent to the Mongol invasion, and with the exception of a few isolated prominent figures (like Ibn Khaldun, for example), the Muslim world did not produce, when it comes to Philosophy, anything more than commentaries and commentaries of commentaries in a long and tedious series of lifeless and mechanical repetitions, without any spark of real creativity and originality.

That this is not a true picture of the historical facts has amply been made clear by the remarkable work done by scholars like Henri Corbin and Seyyed Hossein Nasr concerning the intellectual activity of the Safavid Dynasty. At any rate, it is only very recently that Orientalists have begun to realize that philosophical thinking in Islamic context did not irretrievably fall into decadence and fossilization after the Mongol invasion, as it was commonly believed.

Indeed, we think that the kind of philosophy that deserves to be regarded as typically and characteristically Islamic developed much more after Averroes death than before it. We are talking about the typically Islamic philosophy that arose and matured in the periods subsequent to the Mongol invasion and found the culmination of its vigorous creativity in the Safavid period in Iran. This peculiar type of Islamic

philosophy, which grew up in Iran among the Shiites, has come to be known as *hikmat* or "wisdom". We can trace the origin of the *hikmat* back to the very beginning of the above-mentioned second phase of the history of philosophy in Islam.

Hikmat is structurally a peculiar combination of rational thinking and Gnostic intuition, or, we might say, rationalist philosophy and mystical experience. It is a special type of ontological philosophy based on existential intuition of Reality, a result of the philosophizing applied on the Gnostic ideas and visions attained through intellectual contemplation. Historically speaking, this tendency toward the spiritualization of Philosophy finds its origin in the metaphysical visions of Ibn 'Arabi and Suhrawardi. In making this observation, however, we must not loose sight of the fact that *hikmat* is also endowed with a solid and strictly logical structure and as such it goes beyond Ibn 'Arabi and Suhrawardi and, as such, comes back to Avicenna and the first stage of development in the history of Islamic Philosophy.

Hikmat, having as it does these two distinctive aspects, must be approached from two different angles, if we are to analyze properly its formative process: (1) as a purely intellectual activity, and (2) as something based on trans-intellectual, gnostic experience – *dhawq* "tasting" as the mystics like to call it –of the ultimate Reality.

The most famous and important philosophers of the second phase of Islamic philosophy is Mulla Sadra (1572-1640). He had many innovative ideas in the realm of Philosophy (especially ontology) and became one of the brightest stars in the sky of Islamic philosophy. As a matter of fact, his novel ideas mark a turning point in Islamic Philosophy so that the philosophers that came after him were significantly affected by his views.

The appearance of an intellectual figure like Sadr al-Din Shirazi during the Safavid period is a clear indication of the presence in his own time of a strong intellectual tradition whose deepest currents he was able to so brilliantly bring to the surface.

Mulla Sadra is a metaphysician and sage of outstanding stature who cannot be taken in isolation and separated from the tradition that produced him.

Something to be mentioned, however, is the revival of Islamic intellectual life in the eastern lands of Islam, especially in Persia. During the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, this was made possible by the establishment of new intellectual schools by Suhrawardi and Ibn Arabi, followed by the resurrection of Ibn Sina's teachings during the middle decades of the thirteenth century by Khwajah Nasir al-Din Tusi. The background of Mulla Sadra must be sought in these schools as well as in the Sunni and shi'ite schools of *kalam* as they developed from the thirteenth to the sixteenth centuries[iii].

The four classical schools of the post-Mongol period, namely, the Peripatetic *(mashshai)*, the Illuminationist *(ishraqi)*, the Gnostic *('irfani)* and the Theological *(kalam)*, with all the inner variations contained in each of them, developed extensively during the four centuries preceding Mulla Sadra and also approached each other, preparing the ground for the major synthesis brought about by Mulla Sadra. Therefore, in order to understand the background of Mulla Sadra, it is necessary to delve into the development of each one of these schools as well as into the interactions that occurred between them during this very rich and at the same time most neglected period of Islamic intellectual life, from the thirteenth through the sixteenth centuries.

III. The Characteristics of Sadraean Philosophy

The Sadraen Philosophy can be characterized by the recognition of the following aspects:

1. intrinsic compatibility between Religion and Philosophy;
2. necessity of a serious rational study of the religious doctrines to the point of bringing together the views of Reason and the views proper to Religion;

3. need for a combination of the four traditional schools present in the Islamic world, namely mysticism, peripatetic philosophy, illuminationist philosophy and *Kalam*;

4. importance of studying Western approaches to Philosophy as well as other sources of human thought;

5. need to proceed to a comparative study of the different philosophical views in order to explain the strengths and the weaknesses of transcendental philosophy;

6. evolving character of Islamic Philosophy as a whole;

7. philosophical primacy of ontology over epistemology and of reason over experience;

8. influence of theoretical philosophy on other dimensions of human thought and activity, namely politics, economy, education, aesthetics, ethics, etc.;

9. importance of the attention to Quran and of the *hadith* and prayers –as an important source of knowledge- for a philosophy that tries to argue her own views based on reason alone and not on revelation;

10. importance of the dialogue among philosophers from different perspectives in order to achieve better ideas of how to promote the future of the human family.

IV. The difficulties of having a comparative philosophy

Although we confront a lot of topics that have been studied in different philosophical schools and have been discussed by various philosophers and it seems that those are different answers to the same questions, there are some difficulties in accounting similarities between them. Therefore the comparative philosophy has been hard and far reaching. Some of theses difficulties are as follow:

The historical background and geographic situation of philosophical problems and solutions make the mutual understanding of two different philosophical schools which are belonging to two paradigms in question. In first glance, we encounter one topic that is translated in two cultures and it seems that they are the same; but the

deep meaning of that topic is connected to those cultural backgrounds that varied hardly one from another. The hermeneutical situation of a word or a text is an obstacle for understanding them in another culture. Therefore there are some suspicions that we can understand similarities between two words in two cultures. Thus most of critics of some philosophical views from perspective of another philosophical paradigm can not be sound.

The epistemological approach of modern philosophy and its subjective view based on a kind of humanism bring a sphere that is different from another intellectual and ontological attitude. It is difficult to criticize another philosophical tradition from Western-modern point of view.

It is also difficult that understand from a non-western philosophical perspective Western one without having necessary knowledge from Western culture. In my view, the Christian background of Western philosophy (for both theistic and atheistic philosophies) is one of the most important paradigms of modern philosophy. It is confused in translation of the important idea of Nietzsche that "God is dead" in nonwestern philosophies. Nobody may have correct understanding from "God is dead" without understanding the Christian doctrine of God incarnated in Christianity. Without understanding the importance of history in Christian doctrine it is difficult to understand various philosophy of history in many philosophical approaches in Western philosophy.

It is also difficult to understand contemporary Islamic philosophies from an empiristic or pragmatistic approach in philosophy that is dominant philosophical method in Western philosophy. The rational attitude of Islamic philosophy differs from rational one in Western philosophy.

The orientalists in Western countries are guilty in this confusion. For them, the oriental culture must be understood carefully but from a Western point of view and must be judged based on Western values. But some useful attempts –like this

conference- are realistic awareness of this gap and the solution for building some bridges between all cultures. Philosophy needs, in a globalised world, more mutual understanding than philosophical theories.

V.   The possibility of comparative philosophy

However, it does not mean that it is not possible to have comparative philosophy. If it was so, there was not any meaning for dialogue and negotiation. All philosophical attempts for understanding other thoughts in all over the world and in all periods of time in history (or historical study of philosophical schools) presupposes admitting the possibility of understanding others even in some main part of their thoughts. Therefore, although it is possible to understand others, there are many considerations in translation of one thought in a culture to another culture.

These considerations are the most important factor to think of comparative philosophy as a difficult but possible study that must measure a long process to bring the other thought nearer.

VI.   The method of comparison

I believe that, for a best comparative study in philosophy, the comparison must pass through four stages of four hermeneutical rules in the view of Emilio Betti (1890-1968). Because of limitation in this paper, I point, only, to these four rules[iv]:

1- The principle of hermeneutical autonomy of subjects

2- The principle of totality or the rule of coherence of meaning

3- The rule of actuality of understanding

4- The compatibility of meaning in understanding or the rule of hermeneutical correspondence of meaning.

I hope I can develop this method in another research.

VII. The advantages of attempting for a comparative philosophy

There are some factors that make comparative study in Western and Islamic philosophies necessary nowadays. First, that the penetration of globalization in all dimensions of our life make necessary to understand each other in a same tent. The global awareness which conflicts local thoughts and the necessity of interaction between cultures requisites a kind of mutual understanding. All various cultural representations point to deep variety that is caused from different foundations of those thoughts. Philosophy that has the task of analyzing the basic foundation of all cultural representations has very important role in any interaction between cultures. This is what necessitates comparative philosophy.

The second, we can know ourselves not from an inner insight but from its contrast with others. In otherness we understand the boundaries of selfness. There is a joke that can make this truth clearer. A child showed his father a quite white paper and said to him "Oh, father, look at my painting. Is it nice!" father asked him "there is nothing in your paper!" the child reply "why you can not see the painting? It is a white bear in the snowy surface of north pole, which is pursuing a white rabbit!!"

This is a joke but If it was correct how could somebody confirm it. Without the boundaries of bear and rabbit nobody can find any one. I the contrast of rabbit and bear one can distinguish them; more contrast more understandable!

Every thought needs others to clear itself. We can understand our selves more and more with more understanding the others. In comparative philosophy we can reach to know selfness and otherness.

VIII. Necessity of comparative Western and contemporary Islamic philosophy and its position nowadays

The philosophy of Mulla Sadra, must be considered as one of the most important contributions of contemporary Islamic Philosophy specially in Iran. This philosophy has been continued and matured by scholars like Sabzavari and Tabatabaii and Motahhari. In fact, due mainly to its compatibility with the Islamic tradition a very honorable place within the context of Shiite Islamic thought was granted to this kind of philosophizing, so much so that it became part of the official learning and teaching in religious seminaries (*hozeh elmiyyeh*). Moreover, we also would like to say that Shiism has been a good context for all kinds of rational thinking. We can say, therefore, that understanding and confronting with every kind of rational and philosophical thinking has been a major duty of Islamic scholars in Shiite countries like Iran. Islamic philosophy has been a strong foundation of Iranian culture. It constitutes a strong factor in promoting Iranian culture. For example, it was due to the Iranian Islamic philosophical background that the people of Iran were preserved from Marxism and atheistic positivism.

I also would like to add that philosophical research in Iran is not focused on Islamic philosophy only. For more than 50 years, there is an ongoing acquaintances of the Iranian culture with Western schools of thought, which are studied side by side with Islamic philosophy. The number of works of the Western philosophical tradition translated into Persian is already quite significant. But it is also true that Islamic philosophy represents the major interest of this domain in Iran. On the other hand, the comparative study of philosophy has become a major topic for academic dissertations, lectures, books and conferences. In Iran, the majority of scholars believe that Islamic Philosophy has the power to seriously contribute for the solution of many contemporary problems.

IX.   Conclusion

We suggest, therefore, that Philosophy is crucial for the furthering of any kind of positive dialogue between Iranian culture and the culture of other peoples and nations. In other words, we are convinced that Philosophy must play a very important role in the furthering of international peaceful relations. As we very well know, there are many historical backgrounds that constitute serious obstacles for the achievement of peaceful relations between countries. Moreover, the flood of false news and deficient political analysis, together with all possible difficulties attached to the differences in the corresponding system of values, are abundant cause for conflict and misunderstandings. Accordingly, we advocate the recognition of the extraordinary role of reason and of rational thinking in order that differences and misunderstandings may not remain serious obstacles to peace and the mutual understanding of different cultures and civilizations.

Some topics in comparative philosophy

There have been many topics for comparison between Western and contemporary Islamic philosophy. We had many comparative studies in many of them. These topics can be classified in three types. First one is comparison between philosophical view of a philosopher as a whole with another one. Second, it is also possible to compare one particularly philosophical issue in Islamic and western philosophies as a whole. Third, we can compare treatments of one philosophical issue or problem in the thoughts of two or more philosophers.

I suggest some topics in each of these three kinds, which have the good capacity for comparative studies. Some of these topics had the opportunity to be title of some researches.

1- Comparison between philosophical view of a philosopher as a whole with another one:

Avicenna and Descartes, Avicenna and Kant, Mulla Sadra and Hegel, Mulla Sadra and Kant, Mulla Sadra and Heidegger, Tabatabaii and whitehead, Motahhari and Hume, Avicenna and Bergson, Ghazali and Aquinas, Ghazali and Descartes, Ibn Khaldun and Kant, Ibn Khaldun and Collingwood, Sabzevari and Husserl and etc.

2- comparison between one particularly philosophical issue in Islamic and western philosophies as a whole. Some topics can be as follow:

Metaphysics

    The Nature of Metaphysics

    Physics and Metaphysics: The Classification of Theoretical Wisdom

Being

    Existence and Essence

    Existence as Predicative

    Existence, Subsistence and Abstract Objects [Non-existence Objects]

Substance

    Substance/Accident Distinction

    Classification of Metaphysical Categories

    Aristotelian Categories vs. Modern Categories (i.e. Metaphysical Categories in Contemporary Metaphysics)

Essence

    Essentialism

    Essential vs. Accidental Properties

Form and Matter

Motion

> The Reality of Motion
>
> The Nature of Motion
>
> Substantial Motion and Process Philosophy
>
> The Paradoxes of Motion
>
> Potentiality and Actuality

Causality

> The Concept of Causation:
>
> Agent Causation vs. Event Causation
>
> The Epistemological Status of Causation

Space and Time

> The Nature of Time (Absolutism vs. Relationalism)
>
> The Nature of Space
>
> The Relation of Time and Space

Necessity and Contingency

> Classification of Necessity (Logical, Metaphysical and …)

Universal and Particular

> Universals: Realism, Idealism and Nominalism
>
> Universals and Platonic Forms
>
> Existence and the Criterion of Particularity

Epistemology

> Agnosticism and Doubt
>
> Reason and experience

Philosophy of Religion

God

Divine Names and Attributes

The Arguments for the Existence of God: A Different Approach in Contemporary Islamic Philosophy

Ontological Argument or Necessity Argument

Ethics and Moral Philosophy

Good and Evil

Justice in Islamic Jurisprudence and Western Ethics

Aesthetics

Logic

Political Philosophy

The Interaction of Religion and the State, An Islamic Point of View

Philosophy of Language

Universe

Man

Mind and Philosophy of Mind

Soul and Body

Knowledge

Intellect

Identity

    Criteria for Identity

    Identity, Essence and Existence

3- Comparison between treatments of one philosophical issue or problem in the thoughts of two or more philosophers.

1- A Comparative Study of the Evolution of the Analysis of Causality in Modern Western Philosophy and Tabatabaii Philosophy

2- Existence in Existentialism of Heidegger and Sadraean Principality of Existence, A Comparison

3- A Comparison between Kant's Theory of Analyticity and Mulla Sadra's

4- A Comparison between Hegel's Ontological Argument and the Proof of the Sincere

5- A Comparison between Occam and Mulla Sadra on the Fundamentality of existence

6- A Comparison between Ibn Sina and Aquinas on the Essence/Existence Distinction

7- A Comparison between Meinong's Theory of Objects and the Doctrine of the Nafs al-Amr

8- Essence: Sadra and Husserl

9- Movement: Sadra and Bergson

10-Truth of Time in Mulla Sadra and Henry Bergson

11-Logos: Ibn Arabi and Heidegger

12-Substance and Accident: Ibn Sina and Aquinas

13-Ontological Interpretation of Causality in Sadra and Heidegger

14-An Analysis of Cosmological Argument Compared with Necessity-Contingency Argument in Islamic Philosophy

15-The Principality of Existence and the Problem of Evil

16-A Philosophical-Islamic Viewpoint to the Problem of Meaninglessness of Religious Statements

17-A Comparison between Motahhari's Philosophical Analysis of Ethics with the Husserlian Phenomenological Method

18-Transcendence of Indeterminate Human Identity in His Free Will Acts, A View from Transcendent Philosophy

19-Necessity of Necessary Being: Logical or Ontological Qualifier? Mulla Sadra's School against Kant's View

20-Cosmological Arguments in Ibn Sina and Aquinas

21-The concept and status of virtue in Farabi and Aquinas

22-A comparative study on theological voluntarism in the west and the Muslim world

23-Natural Law theory of ethics in Aquinas and Mo`atazelah

24-A comparative study on the concept of 'double truth' in Latinian Averroeism and in the Muslim world

25-A comparative study on the concept of secondary intelligible of Mulla Sadra and Kant's categories

26-The Subjectivity of the Subject: A Sadraean Answer to Heidegger's Question

27-Consciousness: A Sadraean Interpretation

28-The Unitarity of Human Being: Toward a Transcendent Psychosoatology

29-The Self and the Body (The Phenomenology of the Living Body)

30-Human Subjectivity: Consciousness and Action

31-Mental Causation: A Sadraean Solution

32-Possible Worlds: Islamic Philosophy and Western Modern Philosophy Comprised

33-Intentionality: Its Sense and Background in Islamic Philosophy

34-Interpretation of Experience in Islamic Philosophy: A Comparison to Modern Western Philosophy

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