

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 Averose's unfollowed philosophy, has had more improvements in Shi'ites Iranian cultural background. 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 that must be overcome. 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. 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. 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 Philosophy¹. Among these interpretations we find the following²:

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* (*Salafi* 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 Turkey³ 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 *Salafi* 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 René Guénon, Frithjof Schuon, 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 philosophy⁴.

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 lose 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 centuries⁵.

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 centuries⁶.

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 Religion⁷;
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 experience⁸;
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 revelation⁹;
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 these 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 another¹⁰. 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 orientalist 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 culture¹¹.

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 rules¹²:

- 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 ourselves 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 Tabatabaïi 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 elmīyyeh*). 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 culture¹³. 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 acquaintance 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 them¹⁴. These topics can be classified in three types. First one is comparison between philosophical views 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 whole¹⁵. Third, we can compare treatments of one philosophical issue or problem in the thoughts of two or more philosophers.

I suggest some sample 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:

For example Avicenna and Descartes, Avicenna and Kant, Mulla Sadra and Hegel, Mulla Sadra and Kant, Mulla Sadra and Heidegger, Tabataba'ii and Whitehead, Motahhari and Hume,

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

Metaphysics, Being, Substance, Essence, Motion¹⁶, Causation¹⁷, Space and Time, Necessity and Contingency, Epistemology¹⁸, Philosophy of Religion, Ethics and Moral Philosophy, Aesthetics, Political Philosophy, Philosophy of Language, Cosmology.

3- Comparison between treatments of one philosophical issue or problem in the thoughts of two or more philosophers. The followings are few exemplary topics in these comparative studies:

- 1- Existence in Existentialism of Heidegger and Sadraean Principality of Existence, A Comparison¹⁹
- 2- A Comparison between Kant's Theory of Analyticity and Mulla Sadra's
- 3- A Comparison between Ibn Sina and Aquinas on the Essence/Existence Distinction
- 4- Essence: Sadra and Husserl
- 5- Truth of Time in Mulla Sadra and Henry Bergson²⁰
- 6- An Analysis of Cosmological Argument Compared with Necessity-Contingency Argument in Islamic Philosophy²¹
- 7- A Comparison between Motahhari's Philosophical Analysis of Ethics with the Husserlian Phenomenological Method²²
- 8- The concept and status of virtue in Farabi and Aquinas
- 9- Natural Law theory of ethics in Aquinas and Mo`atazelah
- 10- A comparative study on the concept of secondary intelligible of Mulla Sadra and Kant's categories
- 11- The Subjectivity of the Subject: A Sadraean Answer to Heidegger's Question²³
- 12- Mental Causation: A Sadraean Solution
- 13- Possible Worlds: Islamic Philosophy and Western Modern Philosophy Comprised

¹ - Hassan Hanafi in a chapter in his book *Islam in the Modern World: Religion, Ideology and Development* has classified some of these attitudes in chapter IV pp. 457-561. I think he has introduced some of these trends but neglected some others that I try to mention them

² - Ayatollahy Hamidreza, "Philosophy in Contemporary Iran", *Revista Portuguesa de Filosofia*, Volume 62, Number 2-4, April-December 2006.

³ - You can find this approach in Shukran Vahide (2005) *Islam in Modern Turkey: An Intellectual Biography of Bediuzzaman Said Nursi*, Albany: State University of New York.

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- ⁴ - Mehdi Mohaghegh; Tsihiko Izutsu, *The Metaphysics of Sabzavari*. Tehran: University of Teheran Press, p. 3.
- ⁵ - Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Sadraddin Shirazi and His Transcendental Theosophy*. Teheran: Institute for Cultural and Humanistic Studies, 1997, p. 16.
- ⁶ - See Khamenei, Seyyed Muhammad (2000) *Development of Wisdom in Iran and in the World*, Tehran: SIPRIn Publication, Pp. 191-203
- ⁷ - For the position of reason in Shi'a and Mulla Sadra see Shomali, Mohammad *Shi'I Islam: Origins, Faith and Practices*, London: ICAS Press, pp.134-142.
- ⁸ - See for example Muhammad Kamal (2006) *Mulla Sadra's Transcendent Philosophy*, Burlington: Asgate Publishing Company, pp. 42-64.
- ⁹ - Khamenei, Seyyed Muhammad (2004) *Mulla Sadra's Transcendent Philosophy*, Tehran: SIPRIn Publication, pp. 39-43.
- ¹⁰ - See Ayatollahy, Hamidreza "Hermeneutical Considerations in Translation of Philosophical and Religious Texts", *Translation Studies*, Volume 4, Number 15, Autumn 2006.
- ¹¹ - in introduction of this paper it is well stated on the matter: Ayatollahy, Hamidreza "Existence in Existentialism and Sadraean Principality of Existence, A Comparison", *Pajoohehname Ulome Ensani (Research Journal of Human Sciences)*, University of Shahid Beheshti, Tehran, Vol. 51, No.3, Autumn 2006.
- ¹² - Betti, Emilio: (1962) *Allgemeine Auslegungslehre als Methodik der Geisteswissenschaften*, Translated in Bleicher, Joseph (1980) *Contemporary Hermeneutics*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, pp.57-85.
- ¹³ - Ayatollahy, Hamidreza "Interaction of Islamic and Western Philosophies" *Ishraq (Illumination)*, Islamic Philosophy Yearbook, Moscow, No.1, 2010.
- ¹⁴ - Many papers in comparative philosophy can be found in Volume 3 and Volume 4 of series of books published from the papers presented at the World Congress on Mulla Sadra (May, 1999, Tehran) entitled: *Mulla Sadra and Comparative Studies*. Tehran: SIPRIn Publication.
- ¹⁵ - See for example: *Mulla Sadra's School & Western Philosophies*, edited by Khamenei, Seyyed Muhammad, Tehran: SIPRIn Publication, 2005.
- ¹⁶ - See Dehbashi, Mahdi (2010) *Transubstantial Motion and Natural World*, London: ICAS Press.
- ¹⁷ - See for example the book: Safavi, Seyed G.(ed.) (2003)*Mulla Sadra & Comparative Philosophy on Causation*, London: Salman-Azadeh Publication,
- ¹⁸ - See for example Misbah Yazdi, Muhammad Taqi (1999) *Philosophical Instructions: An Introduction to Contemporary Islamic Philosophy*, Binghamton: Binghamton University Press, PartII.
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- ²¹- Ayatollahy, Hamidreza "An Analysis of Cosmological Argument Compared with Necessity-Contingency Argument in Islamic Philosophy", *Qabasat*, Vol.11, No. 3, Tehran, 2006.
- ²² - Ayatollahy, Hamidreza "A Comparison between Motahari's Philosophical Analysis of Ethics with the Husserlian Phenomenological Method", *Maqalat wa Barrasiha*, Faculty of Theology and Islamic Studies, University of Tehran, No. 74, 2004.
- ²³ - See the book: Khatami, Mahmoud (2004) *From a Sadraean Point of View: Toward an Ontetic Elimination of the Subjectivistic Self*, London: Salman-Azadeh Publication.