

## ON THE RELEVANCE OF PHILOSOPHY IN THE ARAB WORLD TODAY

(Prepared for the Shlomo Pines Lecture Series, The Academy of Arts)

When first approached with the honor of participating in this series of lectures in commemoration of the late Shlomo Pines, my mind almost turned immediately to Abd al-Rahman Badawi as a possible subject for the lecture. I say "almost", because two consecutive ideas at first flitted through my head: my very first thought, perhaps naturally, was to choose one of those topics in the medieval Arabic tradition that Shlomo Pines himself had addressed, and which had been a source of inspiration to many a scholar. Not that I dared to believe that I could shed further light on such topics. But I did consider, simply for memory's sake, to revisit the seminar on Plato's *Laws* convened by Pines, and which I attended soon after I finished my studies at Harvard, simply as a way of expressing my own feelings of respect (and intellectual gratitude) for this great scholar. However, the invitation to speak also coincided, in philosophical time, with news of the death of Badawi, and, cognizant of Badawi's own contribution to that field of research which had been very much a major focus of the Pines scholarship, namely, the Greek tradition in Arabic, I thought –and this was my second idea- I could perhaps make my presentation focus on Badawi's own contributions to the field.

However, as soon as my focus began to shift to Badawi, various questions began crossing my mind, compelling me eventually to devote the better part of my time to trying to address them, and to use this opportunity to doing so. Hence the rather bold title of this lecture on the relevance of philosophy in the Arab World today. For, I asked myself: "After Badawi, Who and What next? What else? Was Badawi an intellectual aberration in the Arab world? Is there a vibrant philosophic tradition behind him? Is there any philosophy going on in the Arab World today, and if so, what is it? Is philosophy in the Arab world today simply feeding off and regurgitating the Old Masters? Is philosophy in the Arab World at all *respected*? Is it in fact even *relevant*?"

Occasioned by the death of the 84 year-old Arab philosopher a few months ago (25/7/2002), a splurge of articles appeared in the Arabic press (*al-Safir*, published in Beirut, *al-Rai*, published in Kuwait, *al-Hayat*, in Lebanon, *al-Ahram* in Cairo, etc.) commenting on Badawi's life, work and relevance. He was reportedly described as "the first Egyptian

philosopher" by his then-supervisor Taha Hussein –who, significantly, himself was the first Ph.D. recipient of the first contemporary university institution in Cairo which had arisen as an embodiment of an Egyptian national revival in the face of British imperial rule. In that fledgling intellectual milieu in Cairo Badawi was apparently regarded as – more perhaps as a show of grace given its limited impact- "having introduced existentialism and Heidegger into the Arabic world" through his thesis "Time and Being", submitted to the University of Cairo in 1943, or four years before Jean Paul Sartre published **Being and Nothingness**. One of twenty one children to a well-to-do land owner and town mayor in provincial Shurbas along the Nile in the Egyptian countryside, Badawi had worked his way up the academic ladder in Egyptian Universities, and had already published a book on Nietzsche before taking up the challenging and quite ambitious task of trying his hand at a mathematical rendition of the relationship between Time and Being as a subject for his Ph.D. thesis. His academic output, which extended over the next sixty years, covered no less than 120 publications, some of them Arabic editions with commentaries on the major medieval Arabic translations of Plato and Aristotle. Indeed, Shlomo Pines may well have come across Badawi on more than one occasion in Paris, the self-imposed city of exile of this lone Egyptian philosopher, especially in academic conferences on Islamic philosophy held at the UNESCO headquarters or the at the Sorbonne. Badawi, however, does not mention it in his memoirs. Following a series of academic appointments in Arab Universities extending over a number of years, Badawi chose to disengage himself from the Arab world, even scornfully rejecting attempts in the decade prior to his death to woo him back by his own motherland, except, as one cynical obituarist noted, on the occasion of being offered the Mubarak prize, which carried with it a hefty financial reward. Unmarried, old, and found fallen sick on a Parisian sidewalk one cold winter evening in March, 2002, he was transferred by hospital authorities to Cairo where he died in hospital a few months after his return.

Badawi, an accomplished linguist in classical Greek no less than in French or German, had nothing kind to say about his Arab milieu, his peers or his former mentors, including the master who first crowned him, Taha Hussein himself. His memoirs, published only just over two years before his death, aroused anger equal only to its contempt for the intellectual poverty of his peers. Referring to his contemporary, major Egyptian figure Zaki Naguib Mahmoud, Badawi writes that his learning never exceeded the level of an artificial education, and was followed upon by nothing more than a dilettante contribution to the field of philosophy. Judging by the commentaries on the occasion of his death by

some of his contemporaries this sentiment, however, seems to have been reciprocal. Commenting, for example, in a supposed obituary on what he considered the paradigmatic futility of Badawi's career Syrian philosopher Anton Maqdisi, referring to an earlier article of his on the abandonment of and by philosophy in the Arab World, portrays the academic biography of this dejected philosopher in terms that mirror exactly his own depiction of the state of that philosophy: both the philosopher as well as philosophy have proven themselves to be totally irrelevant to the Arab World. In Maqdisi's eyes, Badawi thus comes to typify the ruined state of philosophy, not a highlight of its success; not even a beacon in an otherwise dark universe. Whether on the grounds of his self-imposed exile, or his timidity in addressing issues of real concern to the contemporary Arab intellectual, or because of the vacillation of his academic focus between external and equally irrelevant philosophical issues and orientalism, Badawi for Maqdisi typifies Arab philosophy's impotence and irrelevance. But what, one may usefully ask, is at issue? Is the question that of whether contemporary Arab society has a use for philosophy and philosophers? Or of whether philosophy and philosophers have some use for their society?

Spurred by these questions I began to scan, cursorily I must admit, the philosophical scene in the contemporary Arab World. My purpose was to find out whether, ever since the so-called Arab *Nahda* or Awakening phase associated with such intellectual giants as Jamal Afghani and Mohammad Abdu, and, the latter's response (*al-Islam wa'l nasraniyyah ma'á'l-ilm wa'l madaniyyah*) to what was probably, in the wake of the then-developing indigenous presses in the Arab world, the first Arab print of a philosophical essay, philosophy had been making a headway or not. Significantly, the Alexandria philosophy print in question, essayed in 1903 by one Farah Anton, notably a Christian Arab, was a Rushdian, or Averroist revivalist attempt, or an attempt, in other words, to re-introduce rationalism into Arab intellectual –mostly religion-associated- discourse, and to propound secularism. I say “significantly” because, in a sense, as I shall discuss later, the essential underlying pattern of the contemporary Arab intellectual debate –in particular, secularism versus religious revivalism- does not seem to have changed much since then. One hundred years after the publication of that book on Averroes, progressive Egyptian film producer Yousef Shaheen had again found it necessary to re-introduce to public debate, through his controversial film *ALMASIR*, the virtues of rationalism, using the life-model of none other but Averroes. Did Badawi then come to occupy a point in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, which is philosophically equidistant from both its beginning and its end?

This would indeed be a harsh judgment, but not a totally isolated one. "It is a matter of great sadness", recently deceased Egyptian liberalist philosopher Fuad Zakariyya writes in 1987, "that the Arab intellectual finds himself at the end of the twentieth century obliged to engage in a debate which Arab intellectuals had almost, at the end of the nineteenth century, been able to conclude in favor of Reason and progress". Writing as a co-author in France in a book entitled "**Un Siecle Pour Rien**" which appeared only recently former *al-Nahar* editor and well-known Lebanese intellectual Ghassan Tweini, looking at the last century of Arab intellectual progress, concludes that the direction has generally been circular, or that the terms of reference of the intellectual debate have essentially remained what they were at first, namely, an expression of the tension between a glorious past associated with Islam, and a subservient present associated with the overall hegemony of the non-Islamic World.

Indeed, even if one does not fully subscribe to such a harsh view, it is difficult nonetheless not to recognize the aridity, or numerical scarcity of argument-directions in the contemporary Arab intellectual debate, as I shall discuss further below.

Let me meantime return to my cursory scan of the philosophical scene. Because, however one wishes to evaluate the state of philosophy in the Arab world, it is useful to begin by considering the elementary data, or the data behind such "relatively" big names as Mruwweh, Jabiri, Arkoun, Hanafi, Zaki Najib, Fouad Zakariyya, Mahmoud Amin al-Alem, al-Urwi, Al-Azm, and others. And by "elementary data" I do not mean to compare between the dramatically different circumstances surrounding the deaths of Mruwweh –a Shi'ite who was assassinated in the eighties probably by Hizbullah fanatics for his Marxist beliefs, and Badawi, who died less dramatically but probably more romantically as I already explained. Rather, I mean the simple facts about whether philosophy is being taught at all, where, how, by whom, and whether there is a breed of philosophers, or professors of philosophy associated together in professional syndicates, and whether one could inform oneself of their interests through professional journals and publications. However, a cautionary note: I do not wish to be understood as arguing that the institutionalization, and even popularity of things philosophical in a particular milieu is a function of philosophy's significance, or relevance, whether in, or for that milieu. After all, a philosopher's, or a philosophy's readership, following and influence tend –unfortunately, some of the concerned parties might say- to span over indefinite time and space far more prominently than over a limited sector of that time and space. We tend to see al-Farabi today as a luminary typifying an

intellectual golden age; but I am not sure how the market-vendors in Damascus at the time viewed him, or whether it was his philosophical credentials that had landed him a gardening job in the one-time famous gardens of that city.

Having made this comment let me proceed with some of my preliminary observations: first, as to the basic question of whether philosophy is a subject that is taught at the school level. This is an important aspect since one important factor that affects the decision by university applicants to study a specific subject in a local Arab university seems to be whether this subject is being taught at schools, thereby promising future graduates with teaching jobs. In its turn, such choices by applicants become reflected at the university level where demand-oriented decisions are made for such matters as employment and the support of departments. Therefore, questions as to the existence of philosophy departments and the employment of philosophy professors, and hence questions concerning philosophic activity, are already affected, and perhaps even determined by what occurs at that preliminary level. Here we immediately come across the basic division in the educational system in the Arab world between that which is a British legacy and that which is French. Egypt, Lebanon and Morocco, for example, would have philosophical topics taught at the school level as a matter of course. Countries like Jordan or Iraq, on the other hand, would not have the subject taught as a matter of course, and we find oscillations in its treatment at that level by the educational authorities over time. Recently, specific topics such as pluralism, tolerance, rules of argument and disagreement, scientific knowledge, etc. have been infused into the curriculum at the school level in Jordan, after off and on experiments with various topics in philosophy, including outdated Aristotelian logic in the dry and over-simplified al-Azhar form that is the legacy of copyists of copyists of summaries of old Arabic Masters. Clearly, the authorities' decisions on whether to include philosophy, and what to include as topics in that field, are informed by more general societal and perhaps political considerations. Be that as it may, we are still left with a good –or down-to-earth- explanation as to why Egypt, Syria and Lebanon seem to have a respectable number of philosophy departments and professors, in contrast with countries like Jordan, Kuwait or the Yemen, to choose some examples. Iraq -with a British educational legacy- is a special case which I shall come to later.

Going by the counts of the Association of Arab Universities, and allowing for the appropriate margin of error in such situations, the picture before us is one where there seem to be approximately four hundred

professors of philosophy spread over some thirty universities in the Arab world, with the highest concentrations (200 and 100) being in Egypt and Lebanon respectively, accounting for two thirds of the total figure. In theory, this is or should be a sufficiently fertile environment for an Arab philosophical community. Yet, this does not seem to be the case. Although the school-curriculum argument may usefully account for the numerical distribution of departments and individuals in the various countries of the Arab world, it still leaves us with the question as to what is to be philosophically counted, so to speak. For example, if one is looking to inform oneself of the philosophical issues of debate and concern among this rather impressive number of philosophers in their own professional journal, one would be disappointed to find out that, with one proviso I shall presently attend to, Arab philosophers have not had the privilege, or pleasure of having the vehicle or means to express their own voice. Yet this is a fact to be measured against the background of the existence of no less than 120 professional journals in the humanities and social sciences which seem to be being produced by the different universities throughout the Arab world. Granted, some of these journals are so general that they do carry philosophical articles. And granted too, a recent journal edited by the well-known philosopher/intellectual al-Jabiri from Morocco does reflect a prejudice in favour of philosophical subjects, as does an electronic journal “**äl-Tajdid al-Arabi**”, edited by Yousef Abdullah Makki. But it is a mark of curiosity that- and this is where Iraq steps in- the first Arab philosophy journal properly so-called to have seen the light throughout the past century in the Arab world only started to appear in 1999, under the title “**Majallat qism al-Dirasat al-Falsafiyyah**”, which is associated with the recently established “Dar al-Hikmah” in Baghdad –a name clearly recalling the golden age of that city. To come back in a full circle, so to speak, it is interesting to note that this quarterly devoted its 4<sup>th</sup>.issue of the first year, one year before his romantic death, to the works of none other but the Arab philosopher with whom we started, namely, Abd al-Rahman Badawi. (Its first issue, again perhaps significantly, but also with any eye on the occasion of the Averroes centennial, and the various conferences in cities around the Mediterranean that were being held in its commemoration, was devoted to Ibn Rushd. This was followed by issues addressing the turn of the century and philosophy’s role, past and present; other issues dealt with globalization, clashes of civilizations, among other subjects; but in 2002 Abd Al-Amir A’sam –the main editor and contributor – clearly with an eye on the Palestinian scene, addressed the issues of jihad and the right of return in introductory essays. However, to make sure I do not leave the wrong impression, I must also mention that other, more strictly

philosophical subjects were discussed, including, I am happy to report, Shroedinger's cat).

Having made reference to today's Dar al-Hikmah, allow me now to take another look at the philosopher-distribution to which I already alluded. If we now take a brief look at the Ph.D.-granting institutions of the philosophy professors in three major universities in Egypt, namely, Alexandria, Cairo and Ein Shams, we discover the telling fact that almost ninety-five percent of the professors are in-bred: in Cairo University, only six out of thirty nine philosophy professors earned their Ph.D. in some other institution, and one only from abroad (the Sorbonne); in Ein Shams, thirty seven Ph.D.s out of forty four in the philosophy department earned their degrees at the same university (eight at the Sorbonne, and one at Salonica); and in Alexandria I counted seventeen Ph.D.s in the philosophy department, all graduated from that same university. If we turn to Lebanon, we find a not too different picture, with an overwhelming majority having earned their degrees from their local institutions, and with the majority of the rest who have earned it abroad having done so at some French university.

I am not sure to what extent these facts can help us understand the state, and level of philosophical activity in the Arab world. But if we compare Egypt with Iraq, Jordan or Kuwait, and, to a lesser extent with Syria, we find a somewhat different picture. My choice of these countries in particular is made with an ulterior motive, as I shall presently show. If we first take a look at Damascus University we find that of thirty three Ph.D.-holders in the philosophy department only one is a graduate of that same university, all the rest being graduates from abroad. Seventeen are graduates of Russia, one (Sadeq Jalal al-Azm) from Yale in the States, and the others earned their degrees from various European universities. At Baghdad University, out of twelve Professors three graduated from that same university, one from Oxford, three from Cambridge, and the rest from various universities abroad (including Cairo and the AUB). The University of Kuwait boasts nine philosophers, all graduated from Europe and the States (including one from Harvard). Finally, at the University of Jordan six professors of philosophy teach at the department, graduated from Moscow, Essex, Tehran, Grenoble, Cairo and Cambridge. Among those six is Ahmad Madi, the first and current President of the Arab Philosophical Association. This Association, you may be surprised to know, is one of two that have surfaced in the Arab world in the past two decades, the other being associated with none other but Dar al-Hikmah, Baghdad.

Which brings me now to state that ulterior motive: I have posed the question before whether the numbers of philosophy professors appropriately reflect an embryonic community, complete with journal, syndicate, and a lively discourse. In fact, as I have already intimated, the manifestation of philosophic activity was not borne out of such numbers. The first philosophy conference took place in 1985, not in Cairo or Beirut, but in Amman, to be followed two years later by the second conference, also in Amman, witnessing the birth of the Arab Philosophical Association. The proceedings of this second conference were published a year later, 1988, by *Markaz Dirasat al-Wihdah al-Arabiyyah*. Concurrently, and in the last year of the last century, Baghdad stepped onto the scene with the establishment of another philosophical syndicate (the Arab philosophical Union), which in the course of the last three years organized a series of philosophical conventions and conferences, published the proceedings of the first, and oversaw the publication of the philosophical journal. And although it was in Cairo in 1971 but under the auspices of the Arab League that the first conference on the ideological state and future of the Arab World was held, it was the Kuwait University-sponsored conference three years later (in 1974) that was heftily attended by a number of Arab intellectual luminaries representing the seemingly ossified schools of thought occupying philosophers and intellectuals alike, and which seems to have set off the contemporary intellectual debate that followed on modernization and the heritage. As to the lively debates engaged in by philosophers and intellectuals alike concerning these issues, besides being contained in the separate books published throughout the Arab world or abroad, it is mostly in Marxist literary magazines published in Syria/Lebanon (**al-Adab** and **al-Jadid** stand out in this category) that articles are written, rather than in academic journals proceeding from established philosophy departments or societies. In other words, it is less the critical mass of professional philosophers, or professional philosophic discourse that seems to be behind the recent flowering or shaping of philosophic activity as it is the externally pressing political or public demand for answers concerning the state of the Arab world, or a part of it.

Again, before addressing the content of this activity, perhaps it would be useful to look at another indicator, namely, book publications. The effect on the evolution of ideas through the availability of the written text is not something to be scoffed at. What is called "*Asr al-Tadwin*" –the Abbasid period in which calligraphy in the Islamic world took major steps forward- is precisely the period of the birth of Islam's golden intellectual age. I already mentioned the first print of a philosophical publication in Arabic, in 1903. Printing had been known in Ottoman Turkey since the



fifteenth century, Bernard Lewis tells us, but a printing press was first officially sanctioned to use the Arabic script only in 1729, with the first output of seventeen titles dealing with history, geography and language. George Atiyyeh reports that the first Arabic print ever in fact appeared in Fano, Italy, in 1514, and was, not strangely, a book of Christian prayers. Furthermore, Atiyyeh reports, printing in Arabic movable type was introduced into Lebanon as early as 1610, in the Maronite monastery of St. Anthony, and underwent its first phase of development in the Arab world under the auspices of the Arab Christians of Syria and Lebanon. Indeed, it was notably in Venice rather than Istanbul, in 1573, that the first print of the Koran appeared. The time-lag (between 1610 and 1729) is significant, as well as the geographic location and the national identity of the publisher of the Koran, for they both reflect, perhaps in a more serious way given the Author, a tension among Islamic scholars in the Islamic capital concerning the use of the printing press to popularize God's Book, and even language, reminiscent in a sense of the Lutheran challenge to the Vatican monopoly of the sacred text. But the meager showing of print-power by the end of the third decade of the eighteenth century in the Ottoman capital already compares poorly with the penetration of print into public life in the West, where news and ideas were already by the beginning of the eighteenth century being disseminated through one-page journals, offering the wide public the revolutionary means or forum to engage in free and informed debate. Indeed, between 1660 and 1800 in England alone we are told, more than 300,000 separate books and pamphlet titles were published, and approximately 200 million copies of those sold. The annual total sale of newspapers in 1713 was around the 2.5 million mark, while by the 1770s the figure was well over 12 million. Ataturk himself laments the painstakingly slow progress of the Islamic world to latch on to this print revolution: "Think of the Turkish victory of 1453, the conquest of Constantinople, and its place in the course of world history", he once told an audience in a public meeting. "That same might and power which, in defiance of a whole world, made Istanbul forever the property of the Turkish people, was too weak to overcome the ill-omened resistance of the men of law and to receive in Turkey the printing press, which had been invented at about the same time." Clearly, the intellectual concern and hunger exhibited in *Asr al-Tadwin* had totally disappeared by the onset of the print revolution. Be that as it may –and I shall return to this subject later- philosophical prints since 1729 in the Islamic world (in Turkish, Persian, or Arabic), and especially translations from European languages, seem to have been generally scant, with the emphasis in the Ottoman period being (as Bernard Lewis tells us) on subjects having to do with the military and related sciences. Indeed, Lewis makes a point of

showing that, unlike the case was in the medieval period, not much interest seems to have been expressed at the time in finding out about and analyzing the European philosophical output of the Renaissance and Enlightenment. One exception seems to have been the initial interest expressed in Machiavelli's **The Prince**, most likely by the founder of the *Bulaq* printing press, which between 1822 and 1842 published 243 books, mostly translations. The Pasha had instructed a Christian priest to render a translation of **the Prince** in 1825. But this translation never saw the light of day in printed form, leaving it as a calligraphic manuscript in the Egyptian National Library to this day. Turkish-speaking modernizer Muhammad Ali Pasha (1805-1848) had his eyes more clearly set on what might be "useful" subjects to learn from the more advanced West. Military and naval, as well as pure and applied mathematics subjects were thus translated into Turkish. Medicine, veterinary science and agricultural subjects were translated into Arabic. Philosophy, or political philosophy, was viewed but not deemed useful. In the second part of the nineteenth century, however, and especially towards the end of it, things began to change in the Ottoman Empire, whether with the Young Turks movement in Istanbul – eventually leading up to Ata Turk; or with the first seeds of the so-called Arab *Nahda*, in Cairo- first associated with Abduh and Afghani. Thus Lewis reports the published Turkish translation, in 1895, of materialist historian and philosopher John William Draper (1811-1882), a mere 23 years after his book appeared in the United States. Still, these were clearly mere drops in a vast and ever-expanding ocean.

Paradoxically, even though printing picked up somewhat in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, translations from European languages seem to have lagged behind, relatively speaking. One of the findings of the recently-published Human Development report on the Arab World focused precisely on the impoverished state of translated materials in Arabic from Western languages, and, by implication, on the impoverished information-reservoir available to Arabic speakers. (This, by the way, is reflected also in the context of the new medium for the dissemination of ideas and information, namely, in the electronic sphere). But even against this limitation in both publishing as well as translation, philosophy as opposed to other fields of learning still fails to make a respectable impression. Scanning the humanities publications list of a book fair in Syria in 2002, I counted a meager 125 titles in philosophy published in a four-year period between 1998 and 2002, from some ten publishing houses in the Arab World (including Saudi Arabia and Egypt), of which only some ten volumes were translations, again of which Plato's dialogues occupied the better part. True, many of the some 125 titles are expositions, or Arabic formulations of philosophical productions in the West (e.g., in the

philosophy of science, logic, Hegel, Descartes, Ethics, History of philosophy, etc.); while some others are essays on the old Arabic Masters. However, a preponderance of expositions of Western philosophies and philosophers, as against a significantly scant body of literal translations of those philosophers and philosophies reflects poorly, I believe, on the state of Arabic philosophical discourse. In another Arabic book fair at the end of 2002, the directory on ancient, medieval and contemporary philosophy books lists some 600 titles altogether, with publication dates ranging from 1980 until 2002, and listing publishing houses from different parts of the Arab World. Various continental classics figure in this list, including Kant's **Critique of Pure Reason** and Nietzsche's **Beyond Good and Evil**, as well as various contemporary philosophers, such as Foucault and Habermas. Once again, given the range of years, and the range of subjects covered as well as excluded, the list does not reflect well on the state of Arabic philosophy. Finally, scanning the Arabic philosophy holdings of one major Arabic bookstore/publisher, namely, *Maktabat al-Nil wa'l Furat*, on the internet, I found a total holding again of some 600 titles, in subjects ranging from Plato to John Dewey, including a solitary study on Wittgenstein.

It is indeed hard, looking at the Arabic philosophic landscape of the twentieth century, and even, with the exceptions of Abduh and Afghani, looking further back at the three or four hundred years before that, to be impressed or moved by any vibrant philosophic debate, beyond the contribution to the general intellectual discourse to which I shall turn below. It could be argued that the Old Masters, besides taking an interest in and contributing to the general intellectual debate of their period, distinguished themselves as philosophers precisely through engaging in philosophical debates that were as pressing in Greek times as in the medieval period, and as they continue to be today, in fields ranging from epistemology to logic and metaphysics. Their contribution to the then-pressing general debate concerning the relationship between faith and reason, however impressive some might consider it, still constituted but a part of their philosophic greatness. As for Averroes's *Decisive Treatise*, much as it is acclaimed now and referred to (even serving as the name – *Fasl al-Maqal* – of the Arabic newspaper and mouthpiece of the Israeli party headed by the once philosophy-professor Azmi Bishara), it occupies but a small corner in the well-received and much appreciated portfolio of its author, the rest of the portfolio being a highly sophisticated critical rendition of the works of Aristotle. It seems to me that an engagement in the pressing intellectual concern, to the exclusion almost entirely of a significant contribution to the general philosophic debate, ignores the centre-piece of philosophy's role in favor of one of its necessary, though

not essential attributes –to use a distinction favored by the Old Masters. But I shall return to this subject later, sufficing myself at this moment with saying that, in addressing it I shall also refer to a serious exchange of articles on the role of the philosopher/intellectual in the contemporary Arab world.

Before I finally fulfill my promise to scan some content, I would like to bring into focus one last aspect which may turn out to be, in some form or another, a major and complementary dimension in understanding the overall picture. This has to do with appraising relevance through appraising the practitioner rather than the practice, or the philosopher rather than philosophy. I have already referred to Bernard Lewis's short publication "**What Went Wrong?**" in which he mentions, besides the general intellectual passivity or disinterest of the Ottoman Islamic World towards the advances and achievements of the West, even in spite of such defeats as those at Vienna in 1683 which at most provoked an interest in studying the military sciences and their auxiliaries, a specific disdain for philosophy as a useless subject. Indeed, the shocks suffered at Vienna and at some other locations in the Ottoman Empire may have compelled the authorities to begin looking at and studying the scientific workings of a stronger military power, with a view to building up or rebuilding their own military strength, perhaps in the same manner that explains Muhammad Ali's concerns in Cairo, or even Imperial Japan's first phase of military development right up to Pearl Harbor. But if science had to be imported, as opposed to philosophy, it was perhaps largely due to the fact that the two were not perceived as having anything to do with each other, even accidentally. In sharp contrast, it must be recalled, it was mostly the natural philosophers in the early Islamic period, as indeed in other civilizations before specialization took hold, who were the harbingers of science. In his article "*An attempt at a social explanation of the rise and development of Arabo-Islamic science*", Kuwaiti philosopher and historian of science Ahmad al-Rab'i points out that, besides his strictly philosophical output, someone such as al-Kindi had, according to the medieval bibliographer Ibn Abi Usaybi'ah, scientific epistles in subjects ranging from the making of clocks, to the measuring of distances and areas, geometry, and even how to rid cloths of stains, in addition to the more worthy subjects of ailments and medicaments. Clearly, then, the Old Masters were, right from the beginning, indistinguishable from the scientists. Later, and in other periods and places, including the West, even if not the same person combined between the disciplines, yet it could be argued that the disciplines themselves were intertwined in a single community, in expression of a single culture, much in the same way that Rab'i explains the totality or indivisibility of the early Arabo-Islamic

culture. It must also be noted that, even while in the West scientists from Copernicus and right up to Galileo and after were grappling with the dead weight of Aristotelean teaching, trying to replace metaphysical conjecture with experiment, the Old Arabic Masters were already subjecting the inherited Greek traditions to the test, and coming up with useful concoctions for their community. Thus Rab'i reports that "these scientists were not merely theoreticians who studied the abstract sciences, but they contributed effectively in addressing the scientific and technological needs of the time". It is this association that compels the Egyptian governor of the time to invite none other but the well-known philosopher-mathematician al-Hazen (Abu'l Hasan Ibn al-Haytham) to study whether it is possible to set up a dam at Aswan – a gigantic feat that was only to become a feasible undertaking in Nasser's time.

It is not clear when this community of scientists, and the associated interaction with the Christian West, began to fade out, ushering in the phase of Islamic self-sufficiency and disdain already referred to. Quite possibly, two benchmarks are worth noting, the final defeat of the Muslims in Spain in 1492 and its reclamation by Christendom, as well as the fall of Byzantine Constantinople to the Muslims in 1453 – both being events which, while militarily opposite in direction, nonetheless delineated breaking points in what had been, to all intents and purposes, and for a considerable period of time, including the Crusader period, a civilizational continuum. In the aftermath of these two major events in the fifteenth century, the continuum somehow seems to have all but broken down. In general, the West continued to imbibe, be it in a more limited fashion, the works of the Old Masters. A case in point is the establishment, in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, of chairs of Arabic in the major European universities; also the publication, in 1553, by Spanish physician and theologian Michael Servetus, of the discovery of the lesser or pulmonary circulation of the blood, generally considered to be, not only a precursor to William Harvey's acclaimed essay, in 1628, on the subject, but also a clearly influenced treatment of it by the works of the thirteenth century Syrian scientist Ibn al-Nafis. But in the East, the gradual death was beginning to tell, in spite of some continued efforts. Jamil Rajeb, in the articles he has recently been publishing on the state of Islamic science, contends that some significant work by Muslim scientists and, by implication, some significant communication in science between Europe and the East, continued right up to the sixteenth century, and a little beyond, contrary to what had earlier been supposed by the historians of science. Many texts from the period need to be studied, let alone published, before one can claim any exactitude, he contends. Bernard Lewis tells us of the observatory set up in Istanbul in 1577, under the

auspices of Sultan Murad III, by astronomer Taqi al-Din (1526-1585), comparable in its technical equipment with that of his Danish contemporary Tycho Brahe, on whose findings and with whose equipment, we know, Kepler was to make his significant calculations, finally bringing Copernican conjecture and Galileian observation to a mathematical test. Unfortunately, Taqi al-Din's observatory could not claim a comparable distinction, having been razed to the ground a few years after its establishment by order of the Mufti, thus bringing to a ruinous end a distinguished history of astronomical research, and closing a chapter of astronomical observation in the Arabo-Muslim world that would only be reopened in the 20<sup>th</sup>. century. Even so, Jamil Rajeb reports to us of several astronomical works by two contemporaries of Copernicus, al-Birjandi (d. 1526), and al-Khafri, also from the early 16<sup>th</sup> century. Birjandi continues a debate with Copernican predecessor al-Qushji, to whom the assumption of a rotating earth would not lead to a falsehood. The entire matter of a possible continued field of communication between astronomers from East and West is dealt with by Rajeb, in his "*Tusi and Copernicus*" and other writings, against the background, it must be recalled, of a scientific methodology in the East that had long before succeeded in modifying its own inherited Aristotelean corpus in accordance with actual observation and experimentation, but also during a period of decline in which scholars of Islamic law had already begun prohibiting and suffocating the natural flow of emancipated enquiry and debate, whether through opposing the dissemination of knowledge through print, or its acquisition through scientific observation. If scientific communication existed at that period (i.e. the sixteenth century), it was, we know in retrospect, simply a way-station where two civilizations briefly touched, each heading in the opposite direction, one soaring with the spirit of free inquiry, and the other plummeting from its heights by cause, inter-alia, of its religiously tethered wings.

Indeed scientific activity, in the larger sense in which philosophy is part and philosophers are actors, as well as the value of both subject and practitioner, gradually faded out and disappeared, in reality as well as in memory, until the ill-advised selective process of reclamation began, whether in Turkey or in Egypt as already stated, with the explicit attempt at reacting to the sudden emergence of non-Muslim military prowess, whether exhibited in the loss or inability to gain territory in the north and East experienced by the Ottoman rulers, such as the defeats at Vienna, or in the unsolicited visitations to Egypt, first in 1798 by general Napoleon, and a few years later by the British under Horatio Nelson. Thus we witness the slow and gradual re-awakening, especially in the latter part of

the nineteenth century, by Turks as well as by Arabs, finally spilling into the twentieth century with the birth, in Cairo, of the first printed work in philosophy on Averroes in 1903.

If I have dwelt at length, first at a surface scan of the philosophy landscape in the twentieth century, and later at the historical background to this landscape, this has only been in order to appreciate the expressed concerns of the contemporary Arab philosopher, and his immersion (the overwhelming majority being males) in the so-called intellectual debate that seems to dominate the scene, and which has revolved, as I had occasion to mention earlier, around the perennial question of how to restore Arabo-Islamic strength, and remove the non-Muslim domination of the Arabs and Muslims. This, needless to say, is only perceived as having been crystallized in modern form and further entrenched through the establishment of Israel in 1948, and the devastating defeat in 1967. Indeed, while from Israel's point of view it may seem as if she had been singled out for Arab animosity, whether fairly or unfairly, the attitude towards her could be better understood if viewed as actually having been shaped and even defined by the Arabo-Islamic overall predicament with the suffocating reality, and challenges of a long process of decline, and the defeats suffered at the hands of the non-Muslim world.

But if the birth of Israel brought about sweeping changes in Arab regimes, and the hopes associated with a revival through some form of pan-Arabism or socialism, it was the Arab defeat in 1967 precisely of those regimes that seems to have occasioned an intellectual upheaval. Syrian philosopher Sadeq Jalal al-Azem, for example, wrote his controversial **Naqd al-Fikr al-Dini**, a sweeping and devastating critique of the Arab mentality that allowed, in his view, for Israel's victory, in the aftermath of this war. It is only in the preface to this book that al-Azem refers to the '67 defeat, and bitterly to a consolation note sent by Nasser to King Hussein affirming that God will yet come to the rescue of the Arab nation. But the essay, together with others published in the same volume, including a scathing attack on the rumours, widely carried in the Arab press at the time of the appearance of St. Mary in Egypt, addresses directly and boldly the restraining powers of the mythical mentality which has taken a grip of the Arabo-Islamic world, preventing it from being able to progress and meet its dangers and challenges. Al-Azem challenges such major Islamic scholars as Sayyed Qutub and Ali Abd al-Razeq for their contribution to the entrenchment of this backward mentality, insisting all the time that this mentality is at odds with the progress having been made in the West from Francis Bacon to Descartes

to Galileo, Newton, Darwin and Marx. Indeed secular/nationalist, materialist/Marxist as well as Islamic literalist or fundamentalist ideologies had begun to ferment in the Arab World right from the beginning of the twentieth century, and especially with the drastic changes brought about by the Sykes-Picot agreement (1917), which formalized, in the Arab mind, the usurpation of the Arab will by foreign powers. The installation of state-structures and local governors or governments did not remove the latent sense that the real will of the people had been usurped, and that a peoples' liberation struggle (pan-Arabism), a class struggle (Marxism), or a revival of genuine religiosity (the Islamic brotherhood of Sayyed Qutub and Hasan al-Banna) is required in order to regain true self-determination. Nothing could be more damning of these imperialist-installed structures and governments than their failure at best, or their collusion, as generally perceived, in the actual creation of the State of Israel- a State which was viewed as being, to all intents and purposes, an implantation by those foreign powers in the midst of, nay, even as a dagger in the heart of the Arab world, epitomizing or even embodying the Arabo-Islamic subjugation to imperialist rule.

And, while for a brief period much hope was pinned on the first wave of this much sought after Arab liberation movement led by Jamal Abd al-Nasser, Sadeq Jalal al-Azem was quick to be critical even of this movement following Sadat's shocking visit to Israel, arguing that this visit was clear proof of the movement's failure to stand up to the penetrating hegemony of the Western imperialist powers, a hegemony which had clearly succeeded in co-opting subservient allies among Arab political systems and rulers. In his view, Sadat's visit was a natural outcome of this failure, not an aberration of an otherwise sound process of emancipation. Even the Palestinian national liberation movement led by Yasser Arafat does not escape al-Azem's criticism, who, in a later book on Sadat's visit laments the seeming co-option of even this "darling" of Arab national liberation movements by the conservative, right wing governments in the Arab world, whose interests lie with the foreign West (and are hence conciliatory towards Israel) rather than with the people over whom they govern. Indeed, the Israeli-Palestinian confrontation fits neatly into the historical picture as I have presented it, for it has come to be viewed as encapsulating, in sharp relief, the entire predicament of the decline of the Arabo-Islamic world, or as a microcosm against which intellectual theories and remedies for an Arab renaissance are to be measured or tested. Does the Arab world submit to the supremacy of the other (hence accept, for example, Westernization rather than modernization only, or accept normalization rather than



nominalization – i.e. nominal peace treaties with Israel- only?) Or should the Arab world, mindful of its inner strength and superior past, rather seek the means to reject and deny the “other” totally, with a view to overcoming it? The intellectual dilemma of how the Arabo-Islamic world could release itself from its tethers, and reassume what is perceived as its rightful place, henceforth centers on or revolves around the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, even the very existence of Israel. Perhaps without this being properly comprehended by either side, this places Israel from an Arabic perspective, and how to address the conflict with it, in the rather existentially crucial spot of being a fulcrum that balances between (and can therefore be used to unleash) historical forces in two contradictory directions: of making a leap towards the modern world, using Israel as a bridge; or of further sinking in the quicksand, its progress being thwarted by Israel's role as an impenetrable " wall". Nor need this perspective only be seen in a negative light, as it has classically been by both sides. Indeed, it has up to now only been considered in its negative perspective. Al-Azem's message, for example, is clear: reconciliation with Israel is a submission to foreign rule. To shake off this foreign rule it is necessary to shake off the chains of religiosity, and to release the spirit of free scientific inquiry, alongside the economic and political emancipation of the people. Only thus is it possible to “rub out” negative reality as this has come to encroach itself on the Arab people.

Another work by another philosopher, Egyptian Abdullah al-Urwi, published in French just months before the '67 war, but appearing in Arabic in 1970, reinforces the same message concerning the need of the Arab world to shake off its atavistic (*salafi*) burden, but calling for, unlike al-Azem, a merger with the West as a means for scientific and cultural survival. Egyptian father of Arabic positivism Zaki Nagib Mahmoud published in 1970 a work entitled **Renewal of Arab Thought** in which, while addressing the Islamic intellectual heritage, he called for the need to engage in a functional selective process, choosing from that heritage what was useful for the modern age, and discarding that which is no longer necessary. Zaki Nagib participated in the 1970 conference held in Cairo on the subjects of authenticity and renewal to which I referred earlier, and which featured eight papers only. Two other participants, Muhammad al-Mazali and Shukri Ayyad, also presented papers, the first also propounding a utilitarian approach to heritage, while the second, a literary critique, claiming that both renewal as well as authenticity were complementary aspects of cultural evolution.

The Kuwait conference in 1974 brought many of the intellectual luminaries, some of them philosophers, together, and in many ways set

the tone for the ensuing debates in the following two decades. Palestinian-born Issa Bullata does a beautiful job in defining the scene. Egyptian positivist Zaki Nagib Mahmoud, Anwar Abd al-Malik, Marxist Mahmoud Amin al-Alim, rising Moroccan star and philosopher Mohammad al-Jabiri, Syrian poet and literary critic Adonis (Ali Ahmad Saïd), Egyptian liberalist philosopher Fuad Zakariyya, all of them were among the twenty two thinkers present to discuss what is to be done. And even those that could not attend (Marxist ideologist Mahdi al-Amil) later in the year published a scathing criticism of the colloquium, claiming that the real crisis in the Arab world was the inability of thinkers like those present at that colloquium to transcend their bourgeois analysis of the situation in the Arab world. Sadly, Mahdi al-Amil was the second intellectual victim of an assassination in the eighties by religious fanatics in Lebanon, the first being philosopher Hussein Mruwweh, author of a two-volume materialist reading of early Islamic philosophical thought. This appeared during the late seventies, contemporaneously with two other Marxist works by Syrian Tayyib Tizini, essentially dealing with how best to deal with the heritage in order to proceed with a genuine Arab revolution. Adonis, meantime, had also published the first volume of his compendium on the fixed and variable in Arab Thought – a study which took him from a reading of early Arabic poetry to an appraisal of the contemporary Arab condition, concluding that the entire structure of the past must be shaken in order to build successfully anew. His bold call for the replacement of God by Man, and religion by reason, as a means of change to bring about social justice, equality and progress drew strong criticism against him, like that against his co-patriot al-Azem, who in fact was brought to trial on charges of incitement against religious beliefs following the publication of his work in Lebanon.

The stage was already set for the interplay of ideas. There, on the one hand, was the glory of the Arabo-Islamic past but the impotence likewise of the present. And here, on the other hand, were the ideological tools to analyze and remedy this sick condition – a condition which, I must hasten to say, and going by the readings of some of the indicators of the aforementioned Human Development report, portends potential deterioration, even disaster if not duly remedied, with a population reaching the 450 million mark by the end of the next decade, with a staggering 40% of the population currently under 14 years of age, a 40 percent illiteracy rate, a steady migration reaching almost 70 percent of the total population from rural to ill-prepared urban areas, an almost non-existent culture of research and development, and even less a serious investment in government-sponsored research, with barely five cited scientific articles in the entire Arab world as reported in '87. The list is both defiant and

depressing. In the eighties, and mindful of these conditions as well as of the seventies debates, the philosophical output continued, now shifting from Lebanon/Syria (Mruwweh, Tizini, Azem, Amel, Adonis, etc.) to North Africa, with the sharpened works of Mohammad al-Jabiri in Morocco, the Arabic translations of French-based Mohammad Arkoun, and Hasan Hanafi in Egypt, among others. Here we also begin to see the influence of Derrida and Foucault, whether in deconstruction methodologies or post-modernist discourse reification and analysis, as well as a novel, almost leftist Islamicism, but all essentially still dealing with what, given the present, to do with the past. Discard it (Arkoun)? Build upon it (Jabiri)? Renew it (Hanafi)?

One wonders whether Arkoun's works end up as being anything much more than applied post-modernist analysis to the Islamic (as well as other, religious), heritage, whose philosophic value therefore is as good or not as the analysis method itself, and which can be judged quite independently from the corpus on which it is applied. Its relevance, however, primarily lies in its message, namely, to break free from that heritage. Something similar might also have been said about Mruwweh's and other Marxists' earlier materialist analysis of the same corpus. Jabiri, on the other hand, approaches the philosophical heritage analytically (his Arab commentators call the method "epistemic"), concluding with the need to build upon that heritage in intellectual history which genuinely stands for the upholding of rational and scientific inquiry. To him, Eastern Arabic intellectuals and philosophers, such as al-Farabi or Ibn Sina, in spite of the rationalist component of some of their works, still represent a Resigned Intellect, that is, a regressive, mystical or spiritual yearning which must be broken free from, along with other parts of the heritage. Western Arabic intellectuals and philosophers, on the other hand, such as Ibn Hazm and Ibn Rushd, can constitute a real foundation for a modern revival of Arabic intellectual activity. As for Hanafi, discarding an Orientalist, a Marxist-materialist or a post-modernist approach to analyzing the Islamic heritage need not necessarily mean reverting to a classical adoption or a whole-sale endorsement of that heritage, nor need it also mean turning a blind eye to Western culture and scientific development. With regard to the latter, a culture of Occidentalism should rather be developed, or a conscious pursuit of understanding and analysis from a genuine Islamic perspective. With regard to the heritage, on the other hand, this is already so inbuilt in the contemporary cultural mentality and psyche that a rupture, as called for by some, would simply not be feasible. A process of revivication should rather be pursued commensurate with contemporary needs, and in line

with the Islamic spirit and vision of bringing about justice, happiness and equality.

Hanafi's works and ideas are regarded by some as representing an enlightened and modernist Islam, those of Jabiri a rationalist treatment of the heritage that might allow the contemporary Arab world to move ahead, while Arkoun presents some with the latest and most fashionable reasons as to why one should leave one's heritage behind. But the terms of reference of the debate remain what they are. The historical terms of reference are also almost agreed upon, defined by Napoleon's invasion, Israel's creation and the 1967 defeat. As we saw, the problem really started much earlier than Napoleon, but the consciousness as well as the intellectual reaction to it in the Arab world may well have been marked by the 1798 shock. The defining streams of thought have to all intents and purposes been rigid, still captured by Jamal al-Din Afghani's famous dictum that while the Arab is proud of his past ancestry, he is totally blind to his present and future. Nonetheless, and even in the context of these arrested terms of reference, one cannot deny that there have been moments of lively philosophical discourse. I shall quickly refer to one, namely, the argument on perception presented by Shi'ite ideologist Mohammad Baqer Al-Sader, expressed in his (**Our Philosophy – Falsafatuna**) which first came out in the early sixties. Al-Sader's distinctiveness, to my mind, lies in his proactive philosophical treatment of the subject of perception. Mindful of his own ideological position, his own intellectual ancestry embodied by the famous Sadr al-Din Shirazi, as well as of contemporary Western philosophical schools of thought, he nonetheless engages in an analytical critique in order to try and prove the immateriality of the perceptive faculty. I called this analysis "proactive" to distinguish it from the secondary-language and often self-referential discourse which otherwise characterizes much of the intellectual debate I have been discussing. Here al-Sader is not explaining a piece of heritage in a new light, less trying to explain it away. Rather, he is creating original thought, as a philosopher should.

I cannot resist mentioning, again with dismay recalling the summary assassinations of Marxists Mruwweh and al-Amel in Lebanon, and the execution of fundamentalist Sayyed Qutub in Cairo, the execution of this original thinker in the eighties at the hands of the Saddam regime.

And in the midst of this continuing debate waged by intellectuals in the Arab world, and the seeming incapacity to be of any real use, what remains to all intents and purposes in spite of the creative efforts in rediscovering the intellectual past, nonetheless a circular discourse

concerning the Arab predicament, suddenly takes another loop around itself, appearing now in the form of a series of self-referential articles on the role of the intellectual, whether, like it is said of history, or of civilization itself, it is at an end, or whether the torch of the revolution and change can still be heroically carried on. Once again, and as it had done with other “trans-continental” issues such as globalization, post-modernism, and so on, it is the progressive literary magazine **al-Adab** which takes it upon itself to provide a forum for contemporary Arab philosophers and intellectuals to engage in this debate. But it is sadly, one feels, an irrelevant debate carried out by a set of marginalized intellectuals, whose discourse hardly impacts their own communities, let alone the centre of the debate itself. An expression of a possible hope that Arab discourse may finally be delivered from its culture-centrism is proposed by al-Azem in an article “*Culture and Globalization*”, published in **al-Nahj** in 1999. Perhaps, he argues, referring to the cross-cultural and trans-continental debates that arose prompted by such works as Edward Sa’id’s **Orientalism**, Salman Rushdie’s **Satanic Verses**, Fukuyama’s **End of History** and Huntington’s **Clash of Civilizations**, we are finally witnessing the birth of a true world culture that transcends the multiplicity of the multifarious cultural heritages to which we seem to be bound or chained. This, he wonders, may well be what will finally offer Arabs and the Arab intellectuals with real delivery from the past.

Meantime, and in the context of the above-explained fray of intellectuals and philosophers, it is clear that the role-model of Abd al-Rahman Badawi, the man with whom we started, and the existentialist whose center of focus is the individual (some claim, especially going by a reading of his auto-biography, it was the specific person himself), and whose whole philosophy revolves around the individual rather than about the larger community, is clearly one whose place, and solitary state, is exactly where death found him.

The first sentence in his auto-biography reads : I was born by accident, and by accident I shall leave this world. To what extent the in-between period was necessary or essential rather than accidental –whether as a statement about him as an individual philosopher, or more generally about the philosopher in the Arab World- may still be a matter on which the jury is out- as is the co-extensive question, perhaps, whether philosophers in the contemporary Arab world are of any relevance.