Modernity, Civilization and the Return to History

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Introduction: *An Epoch's End*

This work critically examines its principal themes from three distinct but interrelated perspectives: conceptually, historically and philosophically. But it is philosophy, especially as it relates to the dynamic between identity and personhood, that will occupy us the most. One cannot even begin to approach modernity and civilization without presupposing an ontology of identity, if only because knowing begins somewhere. There are many kinds of identity—logical, personal, social, cultural, etc.—and each can be investigated from various vantage points. Without identity the basic unit of investigation, the object, would be unintelligible. Yet, who decides its scope and on what basis, indeed whether or not it corresponds to anything real? Philosophy cannot do these things in advance for any field. There is no straight line leading from philosophical inquiry to a specialization, definition of a basic unit, or for that matter, moral course of action—no matter how much it is formalized.

It is customary for specialized studies to start by separately determining the method or model to be employed. This activity depends on a set of stated or unstated presuppositions, which among other things either support or determine the legitimacy of the subject-area. Things then carry on as if—by another, extraneous assumption— abstraction and extrapolation from empirical data in themselves conferred impartiality. The fact is that the most basic presuppositions of modern science since its inception have been passed on from one generation to another. When they are examined they are done so from a purely epistemological or social perspective, though this perspective itself rests on deeper ontological assumptions that predetermine how the world should be divided. The products of thinking, observation and indeed the "rational" approach itself do not occur in a vacuum. They are meaningless without the purposiveness that assigns them their functionality, pertinence, and which alone can measure their legitimacy, even if the thinking subject him- or herself is irrelevant to the logical process.

The inherent biases of the researcher's point of view, concepts and modeling are familiar to everyone, but they are only a small aspect of the problem. They stem from structures and social forces beyond the realm of investigation, because human purpose cannot be dissociated from the sociohistorical dimensions within which worldviews, ontologies and basic paradigms exist and continue to evolve. It is the wider societal consequences of intellectual activity, an active source and more so in the so-called Information Age, that led me to explore something we call modernity both historically and from a new philosophical perspective. It has become evident to a growing number of people, for instance, that even the most pragmatic public policy based on a balancing of interests cannot ignore a truthful accounting of the matter before it, nor can wheeling and dealing be a substitute for the latter. Modern institutions and the "modern style" of doing things have taken this "pragmatism" to new heights on the unfounded assumption that their particular brand of it resides in some kind of neutral zone. This

assumption has deeper ramifications than the mundane running of society. They fall within the purview of philosophy, if only modern philosophers could agree about what philosophy is and how it should approach questions relating to truth, truth determination, the good, felicity, etc. There is no longer any consensus that these questions should be part of philosophy.

Fortunately, neither the study of modernity nor that of civilization has been stuck within any special discipline. Our object is not to invent a new model by which to solve specific problems of interest to social scientists or historians, but first to develop a more complete understanding of philosophy, and second to explore how philosophical inquiry can be of assistance outside the departmental functions, poised to ask difficult questions not just to *philosophize* in abstraction. This entails subject-areas which for various reasons have slipped out of contemporary philosophy, though they have been part of philosophy in one way or another for millennia.

Now, the big question. What is philosophy? Is it a field, a state of mind or a waste of time? If it has no immediate practical use, as I hinted, why then do people continue to do philosophy and to talk about its history? Let us put aside Islamicate philosophy for the moment.

In his search for a definition, one of the most renowned teachers of philosophy, Kai Nielsen, concluded some years ago that since definition meant having to gather the "properties" of philosophers and to observe what they did, then perhaps there was none for philosophy. He would have been justified if definitions were based on surveys or a gathering of facts. If present circumstances offered no clear clue about what philosophy was, why not consider how philosophy was practiced further back? This is what we shall do. Despite their lack of consensus, those who teach and write in philosophy jealously stick to a professional calling focused on Contemporary Philosophy. In their minds philosophy means little more than philosophy in the "Western" tradition. This is plain from what Nielsen next proposed in place of a definition. If there was no single method, doctrine or overarching principle on which all philosophers agreed, he claimed, then nothing more could be said about their field than that it is "an analytical study of concepts."[1]

This is an astounding thing to say. Eschewing definition while insinuating *analytic philosophy* as a generic is presumptuous, to say the least. He nevertheless confessed that "a good bit of what passes as philosophy is a waste of time; even that some of the things philosophers say are, to put it crudely, a lot of hot air."[2] As laudable as this admission was, we learn that his exemplar for the failed philosopher was in fact Martin Heidegger, though he admitted not having the faintest idea what his philosophy was about. His avowal, if he meant it, mirrors the unfounded belief that philosophy should consist in analyzing concepts in our heads.

Such a working "definition" rests on a supposed zone of practical neutrality, this time staked out specifically for philosophy. From there, it matters little in the end *for whom* philosophers set out to analyze concepts, what concepts they analyze, or for that mat-

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[1] Kai Nielsen, *Reason and Practice. A Modern Introduction to Philosophy* (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1971), 4.
[2] *Ibid.*, 3.

ter, whether they are doing it inside or outside the classroom. There is nothing misplaced about philosophy having an institutional dimension. It has been a collective, institutional effort for more than two thousand years. What is unusual is that the present and the contemporary to which most of us are beholden, philosophers included, should be named Modernity, Post-modernity or some such thing in complete *isolation* from the past. This is certainly different from how learning took place in the past or how people expressed their collective purpose. We like to believe that isolation makes us somehow freer or more effective, and then gaze at our common human heritage as we would a ghost.

If even history is just another item *present* to us in our push-button world, surely the answer is not churning out more history graduates. The prevailing attitude is symptomatic of a general impatience with certain types of questions that have been deemed unwieldy. Unfortunately, impatience preempts careful reflection on matters that are possibly weightier than what "engendering dispute" can bring to attention, as Nielsen also describes the philosopher's calling. What could have frustrated him and his colleagues in their readings of Heidegger? Likely disinterest in anything smacking of "metaphysics," which has been heavily criticized within the Western tradition and perhaps rightly so. But it is also true that this longstanding aversion to metaphysics has become more nuanced in recent years. Some of analytic philosophy's defenders have come to espouse a renovated, even speculative metaphysics of their own. One intellectual circle has drawn inspiration from Wilfrid Sellars thanks in good part to an influential paper he published in 1963, where he wrote,

> The aim of philosophy, abstractly formulated, is to understand how things in the broadest possible sense of the term hang together in the broadest possible sense of the term. Under 'things in the broadest possible sense' I include such radically different items as not only 'cabbages and kings', but numbers and duties, possibilities and finger snaps, aesthetic experience and death. To achieve success in philosophy would be, to use a contemporary turn of phrase, to 'know one's way around' with respect to all these things, not in that unreflective way in which the centipede of the story knew its way around before it faced the question, 'how do I walk?', but in that reflective way which means that no intellectual holds are barred.[3]

He held that "[k]nowing one's way around is...a form of 'knowing *how*' as contrasted with 'knowing *that*'." In this sense, "What is characteristic of philosophy is not a special subject-matter, but the aim of knowing one's way around with respect to the subject-matters of all the special disciplines."[4]

Although his orientation was basically epistemological, developed in close conjunction with problems familiar to philosophers of science since Hume and Kant, his view of language in relation to the world provoked an intense debate. He understood language

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[3] Wifrid Sellars, "Philosophy in the Scientific Image of Man," in Scharp, K. and R. B. Brandom (editors), *In the Space of Reasons: Selected Essays of Wilfrid Sellars* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 369.
[4] *Ibid.*, 370.

as being tied to the world through multiple relationships of a causal, spatiotemporal, and normative nature. One such relation he called "picturing." Of recognizably Wittgensteinian inspiration, it nevertheless acquired a naturalistic character as a relation between natural linguistic objects on the one hand, and objects in the world on the other. Language was empirically meaningful when it consisted of a linguistic picture. In this vein, he entrusted science with the role of improving "accuracy." While this led back to older problems that afflict all inductive and empirical reasoning, he had the audacity to think beyond the epistemological circle and the merely scientific. He sought to create a dynamic between what he called the scientific image and the manifest image.

In this dual imaging, his most passionate and faithful follower, Ray Brassier, saw with him "a compelling diagnosis of the predicament of contemporary philosophy."

> The contemporary philosopher is confronted by two competing 'images' of man in the world: on the one hand, the *manifest* image of man as he has conceived of himself up until now with the aid of philosophical reflection; on the other, the relatively recent but continually expanding *scientific* image of man as a 'complex physical system' (Sellars 1963a: 25)—one which is conspicuously unlike the manifest image, but which can be distilled from various scientific discourses, including physics, neurophysiology, evolutionary biology, and, more recently, cognitive science.[5]

There is a problem with this line of thinking, as the reader will recognize in the course of this book. Who but the most introverted philosopher can seriously say that human beings—let alone "man" of a thousand cultures—have conceived themselves "up until now with the aid of philosophical reflection"? Is this how we should mean identity and personhood?

Brassier values the manifest image above all for its "normative," not ontological, significance.[6] This is how Sellars was able to speak of a "conceptual framework of persons...in which we think of one another as sharing the community intentions which provide the ambiance of principles and standards (above all, those which make meaningful discourse and rationality itself possible) within which we live our own individual lives."[7] Based on his definition of "person" as a being with intentions, he argued that this conceptual framework need not be "reconciled" but fully "joined" with the scientific image, which in turn can be enriched with "the language of community and individual intentions."[8] He denied that this amounted simply to finding "more ways of saying what is the case," because by "construing the actions we intend to do and the circumstances in which we intend to do them in scientific terms, we directly relate the world as conceived by scientific theory to our purposes, and make it our world and no longer an alien appendage to the world in which we do our living."[9] He claimed that

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[5] Ray Brassier, *Nihil Unbound. Enlightenment and Extinction* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 3.
[6] *Ibid.*, 5.
[7] Sellars, "Philosophy in the Scientific Image of Man," 408.
[8] *Ibid.*
[9] *Ibid.*

even if it occurred only in the "imagination," this is the way "to transcend the dualism of the manifest and scientific images of man-of-the-world."

Clearly, "speculative" metaphysics has gained a readmission of sorts into contemporary philosophy, but only as an apology for a purely rationalist, not civilizing, society. It resembles a program for social engineering almost indistinguishable from Jürgen Habermas's vision of a rational society, though without Habermas's penchant for "progressive" discourse. One of the most troubling traits of earlier versions of analytic philosophy had been that any concern expressed by its defenders' with human welfare was personal and only incidental to the pursuit of abstract valuations: logical truths, truth-values, mathematical precision, or some such thing independently of human interests. This disjunction with the human sphere has taken a radical turn among those following in Sellars' footsteps, among others. It reappears in the hyper-rationalist guise of Brassier's *nihil* and Meillassoux's *absoluteness of the contingent.*

Brassier describes Sellars' manifest image as something that "indexes the community of rational agents," its "primary component" as "the notion of *persons* as loci of intentional agency," and claims that it is not something one is "in a position simply to take or leave."[10] On the contrary, he construes Sellars as meaning that "it provides the ineluctable prerequisite for our capacity to identify ourselves as human, which is to say, *as persons.*" Sellars does not quite define man by his intention, but rather as "that being which conceives of itself in terms of the manifest image," adding that without the manifest image man "would not survive."[11] Brassier quotes this sweeping sentence and considers it "indispensable" that the manifest self-image *not* be ontological in its commitments (i.e., what it might say *exists* in the world), and that it have instead "normative valence as the framework which allows us to make sense of ourselves as rational agents engaged in pursuing various purposes in the world." This is the only way in which people could "know what to do or how to make sense of ourselves"; without it "indeed, we would no longer be able to recognize ourselves as human."[12]

It is as if social science, as specialized in its approach as it may be, had never seen the light of day. Somehow he reasons his way out of any other concern but what his notion of rationalism dictates. Before we get to his sanguine view of nihilism, which this brand of rationalism also requires and which puts an odd but revealing finish on the legacy of analytic philosophy, let us note two objections. One, what does rational mean; indeed, who decides what is rational? We shall be concerned with this point because the modernist Western narrative takes it as its definitive characteristic. And two, what makes the manifest image rational if, as Brassier recognizes, it is also "the sources for the norm of rational purposiveness, which we cannot do without"? That it is rational seems to be countenanced by nothing more than a value judgment matching the "normative" character of the manifest image. Something is already given in human conduct, it seems, that yearns for and confirms Brassier's and Sellars' brand of rationalism. This givenness is not accorded the same dignity of rational exploration as the givenness and apriority once were in the hands of an Avicenna or a Thomas Aquinas. The nature of

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[10] Brassier, *Nihil Unbound*, 5-6.
[11] Sellars, "Philosophy in the Scientific Image of Man," 386.
[12] Brassier, *Nihil Unbound*, 6.

any correspondence between "rational" structures—the subject of much debate over the centuries (in Kant and Hegel, just as with Mullā Ṣadrā and Ḥikmah), as we shall see—is conveniently disposed of without further discussion.

Meillassoux, for his part, is more ontologically oriented. Recently billed as the hottest thing in Continental philosophy, he has triggered a fuss over his idea of returning philosophy to the "absolute," by which he means reality apart from *any* relation to human beings. Of all the self-contradictory ideas one can think of, this one must qualify as the most insouciant of nearly every strand of philosophical thinking of the past. Many understand him to mean that philosophical reasoning has to be so rational that it need not entertain any relationship with human beings. But the question that naturally comes to mind then is, why even talk? He either does not see himself or thinks he is that absolute. Basing his arguments on the set-theory notation learned from his teacher, Alain Badiou, whom we shall discuss briefly in one chapter, he systematically reduces major philosophical problems to the Zermelo-Cantorian axiomatic in order to demonstrate "the illegitimacy of extending aleatory reasoning," associated with Hume and Kant, "beyond a totality that is already given in experience."[13] This is a method developed by Badiou, who he describes "Meillassoux's proof" in the preface as having demonstrated that there is only one thing that is absolutely necessary: that the laws of nature are contingent.[14]

Far from a new discovery, Meillassoux and Badiou have something else in mind besides natural science. As one of Meillassoux's reviewers put it, he "then goes on to draw some of the consequences of his resumption of the fundamental problem ('what can I know?') towards two other problems: 'what must I do?' and 'what can I hope?' It is there that what lies beyond finitude is deployed for contemporary thinkers."[15] His and

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[13] Quentin Meillassoux, *After Finitude. An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency*, translated by Ray Brassier, with a preface by Alain Badiou (London: Continuum, 2008), 105.

[14] *Ibid.*, 104. Meillassoux summarizes his own argument as follows:

> It is possible to construct an unlimited succession of infinite sets, each of which is of a quantity superior to that of the set whose parts it collects together. This succession is known as the series of alephs, or the series of transfinite cardinals. But this series itself cannot be totalized, in other words, it cannot be collected together into some 'ultimate' quantity. For it is clear that were such a quantitative totalization to exist, then it would also have to allow itself to be surpassed in accordance with the procedure of the grouping of parts. Thus, the set T (for Totality) of all quantities cannot 'contain' the quantity obtained by the set of the parts of T. Consequently, this 'quantity of all quantities' is not construed as being 'too big' to be grasped by thought—it is simply construed as not existing. Within the standard set-theoretical axiomatic, that which is quantifiable, and even more generally, that which is thinkable—which is to say, sets in general, or whatever can be constructed or demonstrated in accordance with the requirement of consistency—does not constitute a totality. For this totality of the thinkable is itself logically inconceivable, since it gives rise to a contradiction. We will retain the following translation of Cantor's transfinite: the (quantifiable) totality of the thinkable is unthinkable.

[15] Gabriel Riera, "Quentin Meillassoux. *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency*," *Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews (an Electronic Journal)* (October 12, 2008), http://ndpr.nd.edu/news/23797-after-finitude-an-essay-on-the-necessity-of-contingency/.

Badiou's thorough formalization of philosophy ramifies far beyond even the narrow field of concerns they have carved for themselves, just as in the case of Sellars and Brassier.

All these intellectuals seek to clear away everything but the hyper-rational. However, rather than burden the reader with rebuttals, some of which will become apparent in the main body of this book, I will end with the following two long quotations from Brassier's main work. They are an excellent example of how the analytic philosophers have come to bare their programmatic design.

> The disenchantment of the world deserves to be celebrated as an achievement of intellectual maturity, not bewailed as a debilitating impoverishment. The second fundamental contention of this book is that nihilism is not, as Jacobi and so many other philosophers since have insisted, a pathological exacerbation of subjectivism, which annuls the world and reduces reality to a correlate of the absolute ego, but on the contrary, the unavoidable corollary of the realist conviction that there is a mind-independent reality, which, despite the presumptions of human narcissism, is indifferent to our existence and oblivious to the 'values' and 'meanings' which we would drape over it in order to make it more hospitable. Nature is not our or anyone's 'home', nor a particularly beneficent progenitor. Philosophers would do well to desist from issuing any further injunctions about the need to re-establish the meaningfulness of existence, the purposefulness of life, or mend the shattered concord between man and nature. Philosophy should be more than a sop to the pathetic twinge of human self-esteem. Nihilism is not an existential quandary but a speculative opportunity. Thinking has interests that do not coincide with those of living; indeed, they can and have been pitted against the latter. It is this latter possibility that this book attempts to investigate.[16]

A sign of "intellectual maturity" it may or may not be compared to medieval Europe, but we shall see that this conflict can never be projected onto *world* history. It is far too local for that. I am not recommending "re-enchantment" of the world, as others have advocated, which would probably land us in a new swamp of superstition—history is not reversible. Things tend to look the way Brassier depicts them only when the conflict pits a "reason" against a "revelation." He is consciously trying to push Western thought to its logical conclusion within this framework. Whereas Heidegger entrusted Nietzsche with this role, always *within* the same tradition Nietzsche sought to overturn, Brassier has arrogated this task to himself with the quaint idea that nihilism is total liberation from the past. He gets almost mystical about it because, as a problematic, the extinction (otherwise known as annihilation) to which he is forced to appeal was once central to both Ḥikmah and Christian mysticism, just as it was and continues to be also to all science in respect of the sensory givens. The difference is that he takes it as the terminal point.

> Extinction is real yet not empirical, since it is not of the order of experience. It is transcendental yet not ideal, since it coincides with the external objectification of thought

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[16] Brassier, *Nihil Unbound*, xi.

unfolding at a specific historical juncture when the resources of intelligibility, and hence the lexicon of ideality, are being renegotiated. In this regard, it is precisely the extinction of meaning that clears the way for the intelligibility of extinction. Senselessness and purposelessness are not merely privative; they represent a gain in intelligibility. The cancellation of sense, purpose, and possibility marks the point at which the 'horror' concomitant with the impossibility of either being or not-being becomes intelligible. Thus, if everything is dead already, this is not only because extinction disables those possibilities which were taken to be constitutive of life and existence, but also because the will to know is driven by the traumatic reality of extinction, and strives to become equal to the trauma of the in-itself whose trace it bears. In becoming equal to it, philosophy achieves a binding of extinction, through which the will to know is finally rendered commensurate with the in-itself. This binding coincides with the objectification of thinking understood as the *adequation without correspondence* between the objective reality of extinction and the subjective knowledge of the trauma to which it gives rise. It is this adequation that constitutes the truth of extinction. But to acknowledge this truth, the subject of philosophy must also recognize that he or she is already dead, and that philosophy is neither a medium of affirmation nor a source of justification, but rather the organon of extinction.[17]

As tantalizing as this formulation appears, and as false as the puzzle of correspondence has finally proved, Brassier seems to have no inkling what to make of extinction, where personhood could possibly figure after "death," and so on, besides assuming that the world is already dead. That it might be dead justifies his literal take on extinction. I use the word literal because extinction to him extinguishes even meaning. Yet, such an event logically implies either that a noetic source lies outside a given subject-matter, or that there is none. This is what unintelligibility and lack of meaning mean in the face of a persistent *fact.* There is no need to speculate beyond that point. He is known for having asserted that knowledge is the knowledge of facts; and like Sellars and Meillassoux, he reduces everything to epistemology and works from there. He is basically talking about the human faculty that rationalizes about objects and facts—namely, the perceptual organ of man, not an external source, be it a sensory object or any other object of contemplation. This is the faculty that has to die. Instead of conceiving it within a continuum, as it was in medieval philosophy, he has to separate the organ from everything, only to "extinguish" it with nothing fit for humans left.

This approach is symptomatic of the ahistorical approach to thinking of contemporary philosophy. I believe that all like-minded analytic-cum-metaphysical formalizers caught in this trap have to refine the language of their philosophies *ad infinitum*, much like Bertrand Russell and Alfred North Whitehead but less skillfully. They invent new terms and languages as they go along for what they ardently want to believe is the only course for philosophy. As a result, they unwittingly repeat in new form the dualities and relations between concepts familiar from the past while thinking that they are making progress. Is this the progress of a mouse running itself rugged on a wheel? Perhaps their logic is better left to computer scientists to sort out. Neither computer

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[17] *Ibid.,* 238-96.

science nor symbolic logic is yet philosophy. The basic question will always remain: What is to be done? True, those thinkers have readmitted this question, in a way, but they seem to ignore that it is not philosophy's task to answer it with finality or the accuracy of mathematics.

Philosophy has to frame its questioning with a view to providing answers; however, questions are not posed by any but people, and not indifferently to how people will seek to answer them, their capacity to do so, their circumstances, etc. It is somewhat like the burden of the mystic. He may be convinced of the absolute truth he believes he has received from on high, but if he cannot realize it through words or actions among his fellow human beings, if he cannot return from the high summit, as it were, then he does not live among men, but either before or past his time. The age of prophets with the authority to set down the truth of things by fiat is long gone. Brassier and Meillassoux will no doubt concur in this. Before the maze of new abstractions they and other contemporary philosophers keep conjuring up, however, the old complaint about the object of Heidegger's language fades into a contest of expectations. His critics appear to be imposing their own expectations about what an object of philosophical inquiry *ought* to be—in short, the legitimacy of what Heidegger was pondering.

The problem of language and authority of reason has been fundamental to philosophy since at least Plato. In fact, it is an important preoccupation of the analytic philosophy with which Nielsen obviously sided in the first place. The analytic philosophers pride themselves for the advances they have made on the question of language, both natural and technical; the logical positivists have gone even further and produced some of the most complex theories ever worked out in mathematical and symbolic logic. What separates them from Heidegger and most previous philosophy is not the question of language and its application, but the claim that their pronouncements could stand in judgment over *every* question, and that their clarities alone decide which new questions are to be posed and which "salvaged" from the past. Language is about more than just grammar, proper usage, consistency, reference, object. If anything, this barren presumptuousness may indicate that it is philosophy as a *profession* that has lost contact with reality. If language were oriented strictly toward worlds seen or conjured up, then there might be something to their preposterous claim.

Sellars' conception of ontology is described as *object-oriented* and framed as a naturalistic nominalism. True or not, however, the orientation of language *toward* objects rests on a faculty that need not always have either empirical or conceptual objects in front of it. Admittedly, when one closes one's eyes, the mind may go to sleep and eventually into a coma. But the fact is that it has not generally been believed, as it is today, that the world consists only of empirical things and abstract concepts. Objects aside for a moment, thinking is object-*related* because it cannot forego the *a priori*, beginning with its own self-transcendence. In fact, it can take object-relatedness itself as an object. We shall have much to say about the possibilities and pitfalls of the manner in which object-relatedness (Ger., *die Gegenstandsbezogenheit*) has been treated in early modern philosophy, and how it was formulated in Islamicate philosophy. The reason why object-relatedness captivated Kant is that he wanted to determine the limits of the intellect, independently of experience. A similar concern can be observed also in the case of Ibn Sīnā and Ṣadr al-Dīn Qūnawī, both of who declared man incapable of knowing the realities of things—i.e., the true nature of things—solely by dint of his mind. To be sure, this is different from talking only about pure reason to find out its furthermost limits. They saw the rational or thinking faculty as an attribute of spirit, in a continuum, in order to emphasize among other things the active sense of intellection (as opposed to the passive reception of sensations). But the connection is there for the taking.

Thinking is not just thinking about anything. It is finite by definition, because it can only think *one* thing at a time. But it must be finite also in order to think of the infinite. *Falsafah* was the first major philosophical movement that tried to unravel this paradox in the productive manner familiar to us. Ironically, the sharpest skeptics in the medieval period regarding the objects of intellection (even those of religion) were fideistic skeptics of the most religious kind. As a tactic of religious orthodoxy, skepticism is no assurance against atheism and may hide precisely that when objects of thought are fatally taken for "real" things, like any ontic being. On the other hand, Qūnawī knew exactly how the skeptics' own polemics assimilated them into the philosophical discourse, not the reverse, because philosophy is not about rationalizing even hidden objects.

WHAT IS ISLAMICATE PHILOSOPHY
(ʿILM AL-ḤIKMAH)?

This is a good point to pause for an explanation of two words I have adopted throughout this book: Islamicate and Ḥikmah. First, the widely used "Islamic" label assigns unwarranted specificity to a medieval civilization that defined itself as multireligious and inclusive *by law*, over and above reasons of state. Moreover, the *Muslim* denominations within this civilization directed themselves outwardly as a universal community in *islām* before Islam, which is the faith, practice and way of life they shared with even the most "rationalist" philosophers among them. *Islamicate* learning counted numerous Christians and figures from other faiths. With regard to philosophy, my motive for using "Islamicate" instead of "Islamic" is, consequently, that the latter needlessly attaches the open pursuit of knowledge and wisdom to the narrow concepts of culture and religion reserved in Western culture for others. This approach falsifies the philosophy, the civilization and, most unfortunately, what they have bequeathed to the world from the long medieval period. Muslims had no special need to label this or that Islamic until today, when identities are fluid and everywhere threatened in their own countries. Trying cavalierly to fit Islamicate civilization into a special category reduces it to a fragment of history and bridles our understanding. As a civilization, it spanned nearly the entire mapped world and the medieval period, which it pretty well defined. It is hardly surprising, then, that "human civilization" should be one of the central preoccupations of its philosophy and science.

Regarding *Ḥikmah*, I frankly have found no word better suited to convey what philosophy has meant in the fourteen centuries of Islamicate civilization. Still, my choice is arbitrary to some degree, because in fact there is no single word that encompasses every branch and emphasis. The English term philosophy itself is inadequate, because the range of themes treated in Ḥikmah steadily expanded to cover much more ground than what we ordinarily take today to comprise philosophy.

The word *ḥikmah* has the same radical as *ḥukm*, which indicates the presence of knowledge and discernment (*al-ʿilm waʾl-fiqh*), though in this book we have translated it as precept, its more technical meaning (see Chapter One). *Ḥukm* can have the negative connotation of something said to prevent ignorance and is semantically related to two

other concepts, ʿadl (justice) and ḥikmah (wisdom).[18] Justice is a restoration of order; its association with ḥikmah is appropriate because the latter is the furthest thing from chaos. A ḥakīm can mean physician, wise person or governor.

It is useful to consider what the late thinker Āghāmīrzā Ḥassan Lāhījī (d. 1709) said about ḥikmah. He held that it signified that the actions performed agreed with their benefit and welfare. Thus, the wise person (al-ḥakīm) is one who acts with wisdom and with a cognizance of the realities and the subtlety of their benefits. It is a cognizance of the realities of things, their causes, reasons, benefits and dangers.[19] This gives some indication what common abstract concepts like the "realities of things" meant and how they were used. It also reveals something about the purpose of philosophy in its more proper civilizational context. But it does not tell all. Lāhījī points to a second more technical sense of ḥikmah referring to those who pursue the intellectual sciences and can master the theoretical fields (ahl al-ʿulūm al-fikriyyah wa arbāb al-ṣanāʾiʿ al-naẓariyyah), where more decidedly reason devises the means for knowing things.[20] This is a special kind of reason that has to do with cognizance of the realities of things, their principles and implications through proof and thinking (al-fikr).

We shall use Ḥikmah in an intermediate sense lying somewhere between Lāhījī's semantic definition and second, specialized science. In its more specialized forms, it should not be confused with the early versions of philosophy like Falsafah, associated more with Ibn Sīnā, because the specialized forms collectively refer to *the systematic approach to problems of a philosophical nature.* The original Falsafah definition of the First Science was as a systematic science devoted to the noblest pursuit of the noblest object of knowledge. This definition was maintained elsewhere and demonstrates at least a common purpose shared with Aristotle and the Hellenic conception of philosophy. Ḥikmah also denotes ʿilm al-ilāhiyyāt, first conceived with the First Science. But ʿilm al-ilāhiyyāt referred to what was projected by the falāsifah Ibn Sīnā and al-Fārābī, before it developed into a general designation proper to the mature form of philosophical as a systematic science. To complicate matters, falsafah too continued to be used as a general designation to emphasize the theoretical or logical side of philosophy.

Other terms also gained currency. For the sake of simplicity, then, I shall use Ḥikmah to cover all the above, but also to gather with it currents that were more identifiably "mystical." These currents sometimes crystallized into mystical orders (ṭarīqahs) that were not always part of the popular institutional network of the ṭarīqahs. They became increasingly important everywhere except later in Persia, which developed its own mystical learning tradition along similar lines especially under the Safavids. I shall occasionally use the term ʿirfān (wrongly translated as gnosis), which has more to do with personal cognizance verified in a specific area of concern based on a deeper knowledge of how the meanings of things are manifested. It is related to Lāhījī's maʿrifah (cognizance or knowledge). Taṣawwuf (Ṣūfism) came to mean something similar to ʿirfān, but with the added element of ritual designed for self-discipline as part of the

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[18] "Ḥakama," *Lisān al-ʿArab* XII (Beirut: Dār Ṣādir, n.d.), 140-1.

[19] Āghāmīrzā Ḥassan Lāhījī, "*Zawāhir al-ḥikam*," *Muntakhabāt az āthār-e ḥukamā-ye ilāhiyy-e Irān* III (Qom, Iran: Islamic Seminary of Qom, 1383 AH), 294.

[20] *Ibid.*, III.295.

quest for wisdom and insight in practice. It is good to note that none of the designations listed so far implied obligatory service or adherence to any one school of thought or practice. Men and women could take part in any circle, the emphasis being on the quest for wisdom and knowledge. Fortunately, my use of *Ḥikmah* comes close to what it meant then, but with a certain generic emphasis for easier identification by the reader which avoids, at the same time, artificially separating the theoretical from the practical. Although it is all philosophy in one way or another, the reader will likely be confused by the use of the word philosophy, since we shall speak of more than one tradition, however much they have in common. Therefore, I will say Ḥikmah (for the Islamicate), contemporary philosophy, and Scholasticism for Latin Europe.

Ignoring Islamicate civilization, as most history textbooks do, bridles our understanding of modern times, which cannot be explained in any other way but through history. The concept of civilization itself has undergone various stages of development in the last fourteen centuries. This is roughly the time it has taken a long, interconnected and self-conscious process to develop its most distinctive features, which most people today recognize only through that historical process's *outcome* in the present world. But we seem also to have forgotten that the concept invites philosophical discussion. Whether by choice or not, few social scientists and historians today bother to venture outside their respective fields to engage in philosophical debate. However, I remember a time when the classical sociology of knowledge, for one, was valued in part because its founders continued to mediate between philosophy and the "human sciences." That was before statistical surveys for measuring attitudinal or occupational trends acquired complete supremacy. The history of the social sciences reflects the wider modifications taking place in the conception of knowledge in relation to society. Anyone familiar with this history would immediately recognize the importance of philosophy. Sociology's closest ancestor concerned itself with the *Lebenswelt*, but its roots reach further back to a "region of being" occupied by Marx, Hegel, Kant and Newton. To "region of being" I attach a meaning similar to what Heidegger—who will accompany us for a good part of this book—argued was inseparable from the modern sciences in their *existential* dimensions, not as something independent from *Dasein*, or man in the world. He traced the *origins* of this orientation of being as far back as antiquity, but without effacing its distinctive modern features. With respect to its "modern" features, we on the other hand shall go back no further than Islamicate civilization—Latin Europe's *ambient* civilization—without which the very word science would make little sense today.

Region of being is useful to keep in mind. Early modern philosophy essentially had the subject facing the object of theoretical and empirical inquiry, and only from there did it project the history of being of this relation as a history of humankind, as Hegel tried to do. It concerned itself with the object-relatedness of thinking and perception as the relation of the object and the subject. It is easy to overlook how this line questioning took on the dimensions of a paradigm. This will become clearer later in this book with regard to *thinking*. It is also why I believe that, in their hurry to reinvent the wheel, Nielsen and many contemporary philosophers misunderstand both what thinking implies and thinking itself, the products of which they purport to analyze as the definitive boundary of what they call philosophy. Clearly, how philosophy—given the traditional scope of its subject-matter that academics today either discard or assume—is conceived has ramifications beyond this boundary. It can affect how the social sciences are put to use and can give rise to lively riddles about which comes first, the chicken or the egg. The reader is no doubt familiar with the debate that pitted Weber and Tawney against Marx about whether ideas or material forces were the more decisive factor. The underlying problem is not as new as one might think. Ibn Khaldūn, whom we shall

examine, factored learning, the philosophical sciences and his own science into a broad category where man, endowed with the thinking faculty, moved toward higher (though also lower) forms of collective life. A concept similar to *Bildung* has been associated with civilization for a long time in Islamicate civilization, in its social as well personal forms. It sounds simple enough, but it figured in the study of civilization, his province, in a more or less "phenomenological" vein.[21] But Ibn Khaldūn was not a philosopher. Modern social science has bestowed upon him, with unstinting flattery, the title of founder of social science and of the study of culture and civilization. His achievement used to be portrayed as an isolated event, but it is simply impossible that a complex, full-fledged science like his could have emerged unbidden and ready-made with a conception of human life with an empirical aspect, together with the theories and corollaries needed to understand it. We shall study his approach and his understanding of the role of philosophy in the "building" of civilization.

OVERVIEW OF THE PROBLEM OF "THEORY"

Unlike Weber and Marx, Heidegger identified the fertile relationship between *thinking* (not idea) and society dynamically as a history of being. For this, he had had first to lay bare the self-enclosed Cartesian subject, which was shutting off every other avenue to knowledge. In my view, his achievement is to have broken out of the vicious circle that resulted therefrom, though perhaps without yet staking new ground. This is where he seems to approach something like what had been going on in Ḥikmah. He owed much to Edmund Husserl for the insight, but they parted ways intellectually early on.

Ḥikmah continues to challenge, in my opinion, because it has figured out a fecund way to approach the relation of thought to the world, to phrase it rather poorly here for simplicity's sake. Stopping at a formulation like this would be like starting again from where it began in the early medieval period. There is no question of a direct correspondence between the minutiae of a technical argument and something deemed to be externally real. In particular, the Islamicate philosophers were keenly aware of the *theoretical*, indeed paradigmatic, dimensions of the problem of perception. But let me first point to what gave theory its direction.

I associate the achievements of Ḥikmah with what Heidegger called region of being not only as a historical characterization, but more importantly because its expositors were themselves conscious of something similar to the ontological relation assumed for "region of being." They saw their theoretical understanding as the ontology: *within the world* but not of it; in the *being-there* (*Dasein*), not in a separate world as in the Cartesian dichotomy. Its root lay elsewhere, and it too had to be explored. In this fundamental sense, theory was not indifferent to man. By indifferent I do not quite mean a rational neutrality reserved for the pure understanding. And it is somewhat different from the

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[21] Max Scheler compares the task of religion and philosophy, which he describes as "part of culture" in the context of civilization (cf. Scheler, *Der Formalismus in der Ethik und die materiale Wertethik. Neuer Versuch der Grundlegung eines ethischen Personalismus* (Freiburg: Verlag von Max Niemeyer, 1916), 575.

rational perception of the world corresponding to the rationality of the world for He-
gel; and from the "new metaphysics" for Kant being the most natural thing for man.
Theory gained its focus from intention and purpose thanks to another kind of ground
for thinking which the contemporary philosophers discussed above replace with an
absence of man even while they talk about him.

   In the contemporary world, we think we have invented a more rational way of think-
ing about the world than any in the past. However, we are well advised to remember
the insight that inspired Kant, Hegel and others, as we shall see: how we think and
ponder things has to correspond in some sense to reality, if it is not outrightly the
language of reality itself. But this reality is not just empirical even for the purest empi-
ricist, who requires more than facts for his construction of a reality. No reality—divine
or otherwise—can be generated from empirical facts alone. Whether or not we see it as
rational is immaterial to this simple formality. This is not about epistemology. Under-
standing cannot occur across mutually exclusive zones—thought and the world. This is
the conundrum that Cartesianism has led to and the fragmentation of knowledge it has
caused. The nature of the correspondence has been central to philosophy from the
ancient Greeks to Ḥikmah and Latin Scholasticism. It has been dissected for various
purposes and under vastly different conditions. We shall discuss Ṣadr al-Dīn Qūnawī (d.
1274) at great length because of his pivotal role and systematic way in which he
oriented this question decisively away from a correspondence theory.

   The "theory" of correspondence is not just an oversimplification. It is based on an
error regarding knowledge. Heidegger has taken the trouble to dispel a persistent
misunderstanding of Aristotle on this score, particularly in view of its damaging effects
on ontology. Any conception of the real is already a unity above the empirical facts
presented to the mind. The contemporary problems to which he turned have to do with
the chimera of "bridging the gap between the real and the ideal, the sensible and the
non-sensible, the temporal and the timeless." He searched for origins because bridging
such a gap would otherwise have to be undertaken after the fact of separation between
"irreconcilables." The real has generally denoted the empirical, in relation to which the
ideal zone of being is "totally distinct" and "non-interchangeable" with it. He called
into question the usefulness of this radical line of questioning, and tried to show that
the task was not to determine the *being* of theory—how it itself is real or corresponding
to its object—but the in-between: the thinking-of-what-is-thought. Yet, this too is an
oversimplification of what he hoped to accomplish. And he indicated as much. Saying
"in-between" maintains the divide in a different form. What I believe Ḥikmah did for
theory was precisely to *transform* the assumed relation, not try to expunge it complete-
ly, since it already existed by then. In fact, this is what made theory and the object-
relatedness of thinking what they were meant to be, because as long as there is an
object there is an *other*, an ipseity, an itness, not an *I*, though even the *I* can be an *other*.

   Ḥikmah does not take *ḥaqq* or *ḥaqīqah* (both mean truth and real) as the sensory, the
empirical, or anything to which the concept might be said to correspond in a formal
relation. Formal logic—the only device that would have qualified for the task—cannot
establish this. Qūnawī avails himself of the structural dynamics of articulation in the
superordinate-subordinate relation, which he draws from linguistics. "Superordinate"
indicates the part of a sentence that precedes the other parts and grammatically go-
verns them. Though hewed to utterance and the proposition, this linguistic logic does
not contradict but exhibits the tripartite structure of the syllogism in a more ramifying
and fecund form. The superordinate names refer generally to the names of the signs (as
in "sun," "light," etc.), since he elaborates his object-related nominology based on the
concept of sign. In other words, thinking coordinates knower, known and knowledge

according to principles that pertain to sign and signification. Naming signifies that something is named in a *possessive* relation (*nisbah, iḍāfah*), another concept derived from grammar. Further along, he extracts from what is absolutely hidden the *relative hidden*, which bifurcates into the two elements of a transformed relation, but one still structurally subordinate to the other: the root and the branch. The superordinate names include the names of attributes *with respect to the attributes*, just as the reality or meaning (*maʿnā*) in knowledge is related to the utterance (*lafẓ*) of a word (the first complete construction that can convey meaning).

The linguistic principles he uses were still abstract and heuristic, but not as removed from the object-relation as logic, albeit a very different kind of object-relatedness from that of pure reason. He is clear that none of this imperiously replaces or captures the original oneness of knowing and existing by means of a direct correspondence. The superordinate and subordinate names stand for the persistence of the possessive relation that hide the creative oneness in relation to which the manifold is possible. There is no direct relation between oneness and multiplicity. The possessive relation makes manifest the two elements normally assumed in any relation.

What all this indicates is that, as long as the intention is theoretical, relation cannot be extinguished, only transformed. Relationality hides the unity and determining factor thanks to which there is a relation between the *one* and the one of *two things* to begin with—e.g., in Ḥikmah, this means between God and the God-of indicated by the relational concept of Godness (*ulūhiyyah*). It is through the distinctions in the triad name-naming-named that the root then moves to the object sought (requested by a question), from which everything points and returns to its origin. This is based on the rule of reduction where what is a sign for that which is a sign for something is also a sign that points to *the thing*. It remains that what is truly hidden is distinct from the relative hidden that bifurcates into the two resulting structural features (the root and the branch). The superordinate remains the root of existence for all things subordinate, being the exteriorization of the "secret" of their signifying function (secret refers to the innermost purpose and function). On the other hand, what is subordinate has two precepts: signifying (*dalālah*) and instructing (*taʿrīf*) through itself, its root and its levels. The *object named* may be taken either way.

In sum, this is why the theoretical orientation (*naẓar*) of Ḥikmah and its semiotics of object-relatedness are *paradigmatically* significant. They neither constitute nor are they intended to be a scientific explanation of an ontic phenomenon. Here, theoretical is meant in a distinctly different sense from today's, and closer to what Heidegger intended when he said that ultimately method could not be separate from thinking. Philosophically speaking—and separately from the requirements of positive science— the "semiotic paradigm" is not a method separate from what is thought. Thought is already the method. All this may be considered through the apophantic as-structure and the theory of perception (intellects), both of which we shall examine in some detail.

Ṣadrā—short for Ṣadr al-Dīn al-Shīrāzī (*ca.* 1571-2/1640 CE)—says, "It is known that every perception (*idrāk*) is through the unification of the perceiver and the perceived,

and the intellect which perceives all things *is* all things..."[22] This is not what was generally meant by "existence has no opposite," but rather how ipseity (*huwiyyah*, heness) and identity emerge from a hiddenness that presages the exteriorized order. It also accounts for the understanding that all attributes return to the First Necessary Existent and He to His essence names. There is no act but which emanates from existence, by virtue of which every *thing* that exists with the attribution of action returns to the point of origination. That this point of origination is properly that of existence means only that every act is what it is in itself, in its own ipseity, not through some other essence; just as existence means that something exists, and that this something has an ipseity and particularization (personhood). Therefore, he says, we write by virtue of the attribute of writing, speak by virtue of the ability to compose speech, etc.

Perception distinguishes the human being from the animal thanks to his rational—i.e., speaking—faculty. The common sense alone, which functions to unify all the senses, does not amount to a human being in the full sense. The intellect allows man to perceive what is harmful in harmful things and what is beneficial in beneficial things. Ṣadrā points to this as the pattern (*unmūzaj*, also paradigm) that discloses the structuring of what God has given to every human being through perception. It arranges everything perceptual, including the sensory, imaginative and the intellective faculties. Sensation is related to intellective sensation, he says, just as a living being of the flesh is to a living being of the intellect. Sense in the created world does not resemble the "sensation" in the higher world; sensation in the higher world occurs only in the manner of the higher world. This does not expunge the indisputable fact that the earth below is *inhabited*—he uses the word ʿ*āmirah*, from which ʿ*umrān* (civilization, settlement, social development, culture) is derived. He is referring to all living beings, including human beings. However, "living being" is also not corporeal in the world of pure life unblemished by death and where earthly beings have their root. Sensation is not merely an affection from a natural corporeal form. What is inside the soul (i.e., mental events and thoughts) is the modality of the soul that merely prepares the soul for the real intellective beholding. It "tells" of a thing's universal reality. In this sense, theory as a product of the mind cannot replace the act of living. It, too, prepares the soul for other than biological functions.

Interestingly, this seems to rectify what Heidegger qualified as the fallacious "inversion" effected by psychologism, which inversion is mistaken for the supremacy of the ontic object, in whatever form.[23]

The foregoing should give a preview of the theoretical function of perception and thinking and what the use of the "rational faculty" has variously meant in this line of questioning. For one thing, it seems to avoid the pretension that one can know the plenary reality inductively through the manifold of its appearances, but also the other way around: the tendency to begin with preconceived ideas about what is and what should be. Similar pretensions persist in the demand that everyone follow the letter

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[22] Ṣadrā, *al-Shawāhid al-rubūbiyyah fī l-manāhij al-sulūkiyyah bā ḥavāshī Hādī Sabzavārī*, introduced, edited and annotated by Jalāl al-Dīn Ashtiyānī (Qum: Būstān-e Kitāb Qum, 1382 AS [2003 or 2004]), 328.
[23] Martin Heidegger, *Logik. Die Frage nach der Wahrheit*, 50. See below for a fuller discussion.

and the literal word exactly as they are dictated in either the world of sense or outward religion. It is not even how science proceeds to carry out an investigation; and it was not in this graphic manner that religious beliefs were intended or religion to be practiced.

<div align="center">

IDENTITY IN THE PROBLEM OF HISTORICAL
PERIODIZATION

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This book was inspired by a very different idea for a project I had been planning that deals with some glaring anomalies I recognize in the current periodization of history. While history is not my specialty, I saw how historical interpretation could influence the way we think in other areas. Although this is a much narrower field of interest, one I prefer to keep for another day, it has helped me order my thoughts—before embarking on the present book—about a periodization of history that even Arnold Toynbee had called into question. It is still widely supposed that developments in the westernmost corner of the Eurasian continent constitute the epicenter of historical transformations everywhere else. Reading the history textbooks today one gets the impression that human history has been either a *Western* story all along or has discovered its true logic at an endpoint conveniently marked off as Modernity, the Present, the Now. No one can deny the impact of three state formations comprising the West on the modern world—England, France and the United States. These nations share similar outlooks and political economies. However, their actual place in the broader history relative to the rest of the world has been less than soberly viewed in popular culture than at least people of certain erudition are willing to concede. The most common interpretation of history is not much different from the one that existed more than a century ago.

Material progress, global development, science—these are supposed to underlie the "Western success story." We all know how power imbalances are never a permanent state of affairs, but that self-interpretation has proved infectious elsewhere even where it has not been reinforced by the unequal use of force. Although its contents have found their way around the world, it is the form and criteria it communicates by which other peoples have come to measure their own success that has made the greatest difference. Myths of self-exceptionalism have a transforming effect when they affect *how* people view themselves and go about designing their new identities. In an elementary sense, the Western narrative or myth of origin is like any other. Its apparent strength lies rather in two elements: its fixation on material progress, and the fact that it stands on the shoulders of centuries of historical development at every level. Almost all this development has occurred outside of the core region that makes up the West (England, France and America); and it is observable everywhere, from science to the vegetables we eat. Yet, until only recently Westernism followed by modernism have operated as if nothing else mattered either in the rest of world or in the past. Too many historians still are wont to explain things anachronistically, after the fact, until they stumble into the tangled problems of an artificial teleology they need computers to sort out.

Interpreting history from a single, hitherto isolated geographical point is doomed from the start because it is, above all, based on a circular argument. Hopefully, this study will help rectify this distortion. The insistence on the exclusive "right" of a West to serve as the standard of human development has become a stumbling block to the resumption of history after a hiatus of a hundred and fifty years. Whatever the "technological" achievements have been in the interim, the Western myth has occupied the center stage for too long. But the challenge is not just one of revising history. Reconsi-

dering why we still run our affairs in the way we do at this late hour, when we risk losing our living environment, leads to areas of thought that have lain dormant but which no cultural branch of humanity can or should monopolize.

There is nothing very radical in what I am saying. I remember how thoughtful minds in my youth, energized by the idea of a new start, fought to "rectify" the debt owed for the material "success" enjoyed by my generation, in particular. All they had to do was to step out of the blind orthodoxies. Unfortunately, most of the questioning back then tended to gravitate back to the economic drivers of history and to class conflict stretching back to ancient times. Expanding our sources of knowledge to include more than just those within easy reach may help reduce the stifling monologue that continues largely to define the boundaries of debate, not to mention the related monstrosities of over- and under-consumption. Mainstream philosophy in the past did not need to explore self-indulgence, the last frontier of the human psyche. There is a reason why it unanimously regarded self-contemplation not as self-knowledge, but a form of narcissism that mimicked the self-identity which every mainstream tradition thought better to leave to the creative power of God, His giving of Himself; or to a higher Self in the case of the Eastern traditions. These issues were germane to personal ethics, but also to the question of *human civilization*, where people were supposed to thrive as *human* beings. It is not enough to explain the journey of human civilization in all its branches and forms as a series of continuous or discontinuous economic, or technological responses to circumstances. As useful as it might be in historiography, the explanation of events alone cannot account for human behavior and its accomplishments in a manner consistent with the fulsome conception of knowledge that people have been exploring for a long time. What makes us so different to think that we can defy the law of gravity indefinitely?

The purpose of the present study is not to pour hostility on everything with a Western stamp on it, but to separate the thin crust of Westernism from a millennial civilization. How, then, should "civilization" be viewed or, if possible, defined? One cannot undertake a critique of modern society only out of sense of loyalty to another essentialist and equally imaginary self-exceptionalism based on a cultural fault-line. Samuel P. Huntington proposes a sweeping conception of the world. From one angle, he broadly defines civilization as,

> the highest cultural grouping of people and the broadest level of cultural identity people have short of that which distinguishes humans from other species...People have levels of identity: a resident of Rome may define himself with varying degrees of intensity as a Roman, an Italian, a Catholic, a European, a Westerner. The civilization to which he belongs is the broadest level of identification with which he strongly identifies. Civilizations are the biggest 'we' within which we feel culturally at home as distinguished from all other 'themes' out there.[24]

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[24] Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1997), 43.

"Varying degrees" is what allows him to home in on exactly what we shall try to avoid with all our might: civilizations as essences or, as the pseudo-intellectual jargon he uses suggests, substances. This is his other angle. This essentialism has been compared to that of the Platonic ideal forms existing as "real" separate individuals. The difference is that Plato was proposing a possible solution to the problem of knowledge, however. Before slipping into nonsense, one is better off showing at least some humility at what people before us said. What civilization or any other collective formation qualifies as a separate essence? Like "society," civilization is a relational concept. In fact, this is what social scientists do: they study social relations, not the machines and the buildings themselves that people build. We shall see further that *collective* identity is at best a purely analogical concept and close to being an invalid inductive inference from *individuals.*

Determining what collective identity is in a more realistic sense involves a mode of reasoning specifically adapted to relation. But relation implies something else that passes our notice today. It does not actually begin with the two elements in any given relation, otherwise they would logically be identical units. Outside of mathematics, the things that exist and which scientists observe do not exist as correlatives; in other words, they cannot be first juxtaposed and then bound together in a relation. This is another area where philosophy can be of immense help, because the factor of distinction—we shall learn—is neither empirical nor what is generated from a simple unity. The concept of identity has its uses in logic. It has also produced philosophies of history—unsuccessfully. In fact, some philosophers have judged identity to be "an utterly unproblematic notion."[25] They may well be right. Hume argued from another direction and concluded that identity over time was a fictional substitute for a collection of related objects. However, he based himself on a misunderstanding of Leibniz's law of identity. Some grasp of personhood is needed, because alone the simple self-identity yields nothing worth knowing—it is tautological. Even basic algebra leads to *implications* of the simple equation A=A which at least begin to break the tautology. Chasing after the phantom of essences leads thinking to a state of paralysis. And upon closer examination the Western narrative of self-sufficiency resembles a wooly illusion.

As hard to decipher for most people as his writings are, Heidegger in my estimation brought philosophy back into the fold of basic *human* civilizational concerns. There is no disputing that his insights have provoked a wide-ranging *intellectual* debate over the decades, both inside and outside western Europe. In view of the affinity of many of them with Islamicate philosophy, he may well have opened the door just ajar for a more productive dialogue of civilizations. That said, an intermediate zone has always existed where minds from every culture and background can meet without the annoying hindrance of mutual "omission." The return to history means also this.

One notable figure I should mention, Henry Corbin, the first French translator of *Sein und Zeit*, acknowledged a great debt to Heidegger for his own rediscovery of Iran's long and complex philosophical tradition. Any mention of "Islamic thought" in the 1930s and 1940s had been limited to the occasional homage to the "Islamic contributions to

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[25] "Identity," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (March 10, 2015; first published Wed Dec 15, 2004; substantive revision, Friday, April 25, 2014). http:// plato.stanford.edu/entries/identity/.

civilization," which appeared like a fluke of history compared to the unstoppable *Western* march from the Greek golden age. Rarely if ever was "Islam" viewed as an *element* in the path of modernity, despite what had then been known about the centuries of borrowings. Corbin has been criticized for some of his more tendentious interpretations, sometimes mean-spiritedly in the case of Dimitri Gutas, who has his own baggage of misconstructions. As much as I admire his combativeness, I admit to sharing none of his enthusiasm for "European esotericism," which he tried to connect to other philosophies in the face of what he rightly recognized as the contemporary culture of nihilism. This does not diminish his precision as a scholar. His probing work nonetheless remains only a preliminary effort to build from the bottom up. Others like Max Horten also have merited mention.

MODERNITY AND CONVERGENCE

Western Europe was not so uniquely endowed a century and a half ago that the most natural thing for it was to wave a magic wand and make the world modern in its own image. It was still backward, and in significant ways growing more backward with industrialization. In its early stages, industrialization meant devastating deindustrialization for the peoples of the Isles. How this "industrializing" core managed to conquer the world with the elites' never-ending state of crisis in nearly the whole of Europe is unfathomable through economic theory alone. And the most that even alternative analytical and comparative models have been able to show, regarding the cultural and economic convergences that occurred with the outside world, are only the most obvious cases of co-optation of broad social sectors in foreign lands. But because some of those sectors resisted Westernization, they were automatically relegated to a new social status dubbed "traditional."

   As an explanation, this has proved inadequate for many reasons. One is that, in the case of the Islamicate world and other highly developed societies, it takes no account of internal historical processes already underway. The socioeconomic character of these processes predates the industrialization of western Europe. Things appear very differently when we put aside the unhistorical conflation of "West" and "modernity." Clearly, convergences of one sort or another have taken place in many parts of the world, and not only through colonial occupation. Besides all the recorded borrowings and outright thefts, this alone should suggest that modernity was shaped by more than one active participant. History shows that its course of development favored certain types of social evolution and elites, some with longer experience than others. Convergence had to have had both external and internal causes to occur in the manner it did. Asia Minor, Persia, China and Japan were never occupied or colonized, except on the margins in the case of China. Moreover, the Islamic world had been functioning independently of the backward expanses of western Europe. Only the Italian city-states had been trading with it for centuries, which proved an important factor in the early accumulation of wealth among the "successor western provinces" to the north.

   If the conventional assumptions about the origins of modernity have no historical basis, then one has to look elsewhere for any causes of the so-called Modern Age and its new collective identities and offspring associated with it. Before our era there was no real sense of *Europe*; further back the geographical European subcontinent was composed of many tribal formations, languages and religions that included indigenous Islam, which has always been part of the "European" landscape. Both concepts—Europe and West—are of recent vintage, and then always as projects.

Culture has to do with how people are expected to view the world, their past and their future; how they find their place in that world; how they may interact with one another and with their environment. For any of these orientations to take hold, they have to be rooted in social and material mechanisms embedded deeper than any "content" introduced from the outside. The quality of French-manufactured metals of the swords that France exported were inferior to those of Egypt's Mamlukes. And they sold badly except as novelties. But exotic items are irresistible, and other French imports followed in their wake, including Bonaparte's landing in Alexandria. The point is that premodern cultures were not all song and dance, compared to the money-pinching Western "pragmatists" unfurling themselves upon the rest of the world. This is just a myth propagated by intellectuals nostalgic about lost paradises. The fact is that modernity is the outcome of far more than simple Western conquests. As violent and devastating as those conquests were, everyone had a hand in the outcome. The mere possession of technological know-how confers no inherent power over other people, unless it translates into outright physical annihilation, which is what happened to Native Americans. Otherwise, British imperialists suffered defeat after military defeat, despite the destructive power of their weaponry. The transformation of gunpowder into a firearm was not a Western invention. It, too, is part of the inheritance.

Therefore, my point is not about technology. It was know-how, knowledge, religion and the vast institutional networks of society that posed the greatest obstacles to foreign encroachment in the Islamic world, China and India. They were integral to how people had been living together until then, not just trading and manufacturing. Know-how was the first obstacle deliberately dismantled piece by piece by the British imperialists, their merchants and missionaries, beginning with the cotton industry and agriculture. The western Europeans had known almost nothing about cotton, the vast industries built around it, let alone that this industry was the axis around which the global economy revolved—until England and France set out to conquer Asian markets militarily. Along the way they decided to destroy what little cotton processing existed in the German lands. But the *human* resources outside of the European subcontinent continued to endure—sometimes as rumps—in those place where they had existed for centuries. Higher civilizations are not destroyed upon the demolition of what they have built. Their endurance was what saved the British Empire from its sheer ignorance. I am not recounting anything new. The empire relied on the knowledge and expertise of other peoples. The human resources it stumbled upon were gradually integrated into the new, purely economic division of labor surreptitiously imposed on the world, thereby accelerating the process of cultural and economic convergences that was underway.

By the mid-twentieth century, the institutional foundations of learning in the Islamicate world had all disappeared, to be replaced by Western-style "secular" education. Western religion had nothing to offer the peoples of the Middle East, Muslim or Christian, where the majoritarian Muslims have been living and building with Eastern Christians peacefully for centuries. It was the alluring prospect of quick material "progress" that attracted them. Most of the writers in the era that began in earnest only in the mid-nineteenth century were self-styled reformists. They gradually inherited the task of acculturation from the new Westernizing, military-minded and thoroughly tyrannical elites.

In the second to last chapter, we shall look at one such intellectual figure in particular, Muḥammad ʿAbdū. The Japanese experience offers another case of incongruity and convergence in the cultural confrontation with the incomprehensibly swift onset of modernity, from a different culture and spiritual tradition. Japan had its own crop of reform-minded intellectuals seeking cultural egress from the stranglehold of Wester-

nizing militarism in their country. Keiji Nishitani, the foremost student of Japanese philosopher Kitarō Nishida, who led a Buddhist-inspired philosophical current associated with the Kyoto School, pictured a distant life of Japan he saw mostly in his imagination. He felt animated by his sense of identity. "The idea of life as a living bond had been central to the prescientific, pre-Cartesian view of the world. Life was *alive* then not only in the sense of the individual lives of individual people, but, at the same time and in a very real way, as something uniting parents and children, brothers and sisters, and thence all men. It was as if each individual human being were born from the same life, like the individual leaves of a tree that sprout and grow and fall one by one and yet share in the same life of the tree. Not only human beings, but all living beings belonged to the larger tree of life."[26]

What we know about Japan's old highly refined skills in metallurgy and other technical fields need not gainsay this idyllic picture. What is clear is that he digested a conceptual, barely historical periodization that classified his culture as a "prescientific view." This manner of counterpoising "tradition" in relation to the Westernism defied the reality. Material developments in "premodern" Japanese society proved congenial to the Westernization and militarization of Japan that finally happened. This is not to say that there was no gulf with the Cartesian "view of the world," as he argued. He reckoned that Cartesianism produced the uni-dimensionality of a "scientific" attitude. "The self of contemporary man is an ego of the Cartesian type, constituted self-consciously as something over against the world and all the things that are in it. Life, will, intellect, and so forth are attributed to that ego intrinsically as its faculties or activities," he wrote.[27] The "faculties of perception" have a lengthy history that goes back to the Greeks, not just Descartes. They happen also to be part-and-parcel of the Ḥikmah tradition, as we shall see, though they were not the defining element of personhood and identity.

His overall impression about all this was that from the "raw material of the world" and "the absolute formative agent of human reason"—anchored as they are to the faculties of perception—arose the idea of progress.[28] But this was contrary to that "reason" after which at least philosophy outside the Anglo-American world had been hankering. Still, the Western Cartesian form had become his incontournable present. Like many intellectual reformers, not just in Japan, he had no historical or comparative depth whatsoever.

There is, however, an interesting fact to be mentioned. Whereas Nishitani viewed the old culture as an ahistorical ideal, the reformists in the Islamic world were inconsolable historical pessimists. They simply could not stop denigrating their own history, even though they knew considerably more about it than he did his. This difference in self-perception accounts for how Western culture was received by the new intelligentsias of those two countries—in orderly doses, in the one case, and in a hysterical rush for power when the very sources of independence had evaporated, in the other. Self-

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[26] Keiji Nishitani, *Religion and Nothingness*, translated with an introduction by Jan van Bragt, foreword by Winston L. King (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), 11.
[27] *Ibid.*, 13.
[28] *Ibid.*, 54.

denigration does not work well when dealing with overwhelming change. Still, both responses to Westernization suffered from the same kind of overestimation of the source of power they confronted. He saw "the awakening of man to free and independent subjectivity" as a natural reaction to the childish particularism of Judaic-type religion in the West.[29] He did not quite see through this "independent subjectivity" as perhaps something not only particularistic but imperious at its most universal. He ignored the fact that beneath this universalism lay a Reformationist eschatology centered on the chosenness of a chosen people that biblical criticism had invented. Biblical criticism was a major contributing factor for the linear self-centric view of history.

Nishitani was a cultured man, though. He was able to dialogue with Heidegger about modernity, the meaning of the Western rise, and even the paradoxical contributions of the modern West's nihilism and atheism.[30] No such culturally sophisticated dialogue ever took place with the "Islamic reformists," who summarily threw everything they owned into the garbage bin in their rage. He reflected on the opportunity presented for a conscious rejection of Western nihilism, perhaps to avoid such a rage. He tried to see beyond it through the eyes of Heidegger, who also saw it and who felt like a fellow traveler. On the other hand, ʿAbdū saw his light in Herbert Spencer, an intellectual drunkard to whom he finally paid a visit in England, which visit he compared almost to a pilgrimage. Nishitani shared with Heidegger thoughts about meaning beyond the social devastation, which everyone suffered, not just the Japanese. Unbeknownst to ʿAbdū, similar themes were covered in English literature at the time by Huxley, Eliot and the indomitable Flannery O'Connor.

Toynbee once argued that Buddhist and Western cultures formed the main cultural divide in the world. He classed culture of Islam with that of Western Society, as he called it, because of the "Abrahamic tradition" they shared and their long association within a Hellenic sphere of civilization. Nishitani adopted this division and took it as proof that self-centered *religion* was the definitive characteristic of both the Christianity he knew about *and* Islam. In contrast to this religious conception, he felt it important to rework the Buddhist concept of "nothingness" as an antidote to the nihilism produced by Western rationalism. In order to bridge the cultural divide that Toynbee also thought he saw, he tried to reinterpret nihilism—in kindred spirit with Heidegger—so as to refurbish Buddhism. For such an accommodation he basically had to relativize the absoluteness of the Buddhist concept of "absolute nothingness."

PARTICULARISM AS SOCIETAL DECLINE

Every society has its myths, and historiography has certainly been an active source in their creation. History became especially important in the nineteenth century, when national narratives were being woven. But while interest in history and cultural development came very late to western Europe, it was certainly not new to the Islamicate

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[29] *Ibid.*

[30] Interesting glimpses into this dialogue can be found in Graham Parkes (editor), *Heidegger and Asian Thought* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1990).

intellectual tradition. Both cultural spheres project a sense of universality that has attracted peoples beyond the original core. Historiography is not the source, though, that determines how people perceive and interact with their world. And not every culture is able to project universality and universal values. When it happens these values differ markedly from those other cultures. The appeal to universal values can only occur within the space created by something like a civilization, whether it is typical of that civilization as a whole or a segment of it.

This study is not concerned with history writing or a contest of "universalities." The only comparison, if any, has to do with the ontologies that underlie differing conceptions of identity, modernity, collective existence and civilized life. We shall concentrate on philosophy because this is where ontology is consciously articulated. We have expanded its range to include Islamicate philosophy, but others may and should work out how other intellectual traditions can clarify the questions posed here. This expansion is necessary because the modernity—indeed the *New World*—to which different peoples have aspired is not the product of a single nation and will never be sufficiently understood in that way. But there is now a global dimension to this problem that I strongly feel should be kept clearly in view. The present risks being bogged down by narrow self-interests similar to those that triggered the cultural convergences of the past—only, to more devastating effects, because they are now actively cultivated everywhere.

The irony is that the superficial controversies regularly stirred up about decline, extinction of civilization and so forth are more liable to encourage the very tendency toward mutual exclusion and tribalism against which they often warn. Sophisticated intellectuals have been harping on this theme for some time. One glaring example is Oscar Spengler. The reason I mention him is that, despite his turgid presentation, he at least challenged the prevailing myth of a linear, inexorable course of history. In an incisive review, Northrope Frye describes his histrionic work, *The Decline of the West*, as "not a work of history," but "a work of historical popularization. It outlines one of the mythical shapes in which history reaches everybody except professional historians...What Spengler has produced is a vision of history which is very close to being a work of literature--close enough, at least, for me to feel some appropriateness in examining it as a literary critic. If *The Decline of the West* were nothing else, it would still be one of the world's great Romantic poems. There are limits to this, of course: Spengler had no intention of producing a work of pure imagination, nor did he do so. A work of literature, as such, cannot be argued about or refuted, and Spengler's book has been constantly and utterly refuted ever since it appeared."[31] This is a fitting portrayal, but he also credits him with the "morphological view of history, which sees history as a plurality of cultural developments..."[32] He says that this plurality "is...an immense improvement on the ordinary 'linear' one which divides history into ancient, medieval, and modern periods. Here Spengler seems to me to be on very solid ground, at least to the extent that linear history is really, at bottom, a vulgar and complacent assumption that we represent the inner purpose of all human history."

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[31] Northrop Frye, "*The Decline of the West* by Oswald Spengler," *Daedalus,* vol. 103, no. 1 (Winter, 1974), 6.
[32] *Ibid.*, 4.

Seen through the eyes of distant Europe, modernity is supposed to have "descended" from the Middle Ages. It is here that Spengler found his unit of study, what identifies the subject for the historian. "In Spengler's day," Frye explains, "philosophy was still largely dominated by the Cartesian model of the individual perceiver completely detached from his social context. But this is an unreal abstraction, however useful as a heuristic principle; man also perceives as a representative of a larger social unit. The next step is to identify that unit. Spengler finds that it is not the nation, which is too shifting and fluctuating to be a unit, not the race (though he wobbles on this point, for reasons to be examined presently), not the class, which is a source mainly of limitation and prejudice, not the continent, but the culture. The culture to which we belong is the 'Western' culture, with its roots in Western Europe, though now extended to the Americas and Australia."[33]

Yet, the medieval period—the root of this "Western culture"—is not just a footnote for modernity. It was also predominantly Islamicate, a civilization which, far from monolithic, was the first global civilization to bring together disparate parts of the world and cultural spheres with the exception of the Americas. This period is not a lost paradise, but a historical culmination, and like every culmination it served as the foundation of the world that was to come. It is "transitional" strictly according to the logic of the outcome—that is, whoever inherited it. The chief exponent of historical "plurality" today is Huntington with his theory of the clash of civilizations. And what ails his deconstructionist view also ailed Spengler's: he breaks up history into *histories* as a last resort because there is no documentable proof for the thesis that history consists of a linear *Western* trajectory. This trajectory is only what hindsight projects back from an established point in the present. Building a logic on this basis is at best to beg the question and, at worst, reflects greater interest in self-serving threads of meaning than are worth knowing.

NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

The idea behind this book is to explore a set of central and interrelated philosophical questions in a way that will give the reader a more profound view of how they have been posed across time and geography. Instead of trying to be comprehensive, I prefer to expand on them as much as the book can bear for two reasons.

One, because without them the concepts of modernity, civilization and history would never have been born. As concepts, civilization and history have different but not unrelated roots in Islamicate and contemporary Western ontologies. More specifically the relationship between philosophy and the question of civilization has been a persistent feature all along. As far as philosophy is concerned, thinking itself has been embedded and closely intertwined with what we refer to today as socio-historical process, but which older philosophy understood as part of what makes us human within some such process. Not only is this book not simply an exercise in conceptual analysis, but there is a strong dose of history. Hopefully, the multiple points of comparison covered

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[33] *Ibid.*, 2.

will add new dimensions both to the study of philosophy and to the new thinking that other people besides myself have already undertaken. The reader will notice that certain themes return in different contexts, and others are treated from more than one angle. One should not be under the illusion that in a study like this basic issues can profitably be treated in isolation.

Another reason I have been expansive is that many readers are unlikely to be familiarity with most of the sources I have used for Islamicate philosophy, few of which have been translated. And they are likely to know Heidegger only through popular translations of his writings. I have paraphrased and translated (more precisely than in the published translations, if somewhat literally) quite a bit of material from his original works. Finally, given the dearth of in-depth studies of the primary sources for Ḥikmah used in this study, I want to give the reader a better glimpse through a handful of—but also some of its most pivotal—representatives up to the nineteenth century, a period that stretches at least twelve hundred years.

With respect to the writing style, I have deliberately used "man" and the masculine pronouns based on conventions of the English language regarding the use of the impersonal, avoiding the popular but waning use of feminine pronouns for the genderless impersonal. Using the feminine pronoun as a palliative to gender bias would have been not only distractive but disastrous in a complicated work like this. In the end, it is based on an unsound understanding of, not only English, but language generally.

Arabic grammar has no such problem. I have used "man" for *insān*, instead of human being and humankind because personhood conveys oneness and unity. *Insān* is the equivalent of generic "man" without ambiguity or hint of reference to sex. Though neutral, "human being" conveys the idea of individual, which is not at all the same thing. The closest equivalent of generic *man* is *Ādam*; whereas the expression *ibn Ādam* (child of Adam) means human being. However, only *rajul* refers unambiguously to the male person. In Arabic, most nouns are masculine for reasons that have nothing to do with biology. On the other hand, the plural form is feminine. In French, the word for person, *la personne*, is feminine. What is commonly overlooked is, in other words, that the grammatical feminine and masculine forms in language have nothing to do with male and female, unless the words are specifically employed with such an intention.

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