

# The Decline of Thought in the Arab World According to Muhammad ‘Abed al-Jabiri

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What survives of our philosophical tradition, *i.e.* what is apt to play a role in our times, can only be Averroist.

Muhammad ‘Abed al-Jabiri (1994: 164)<sup>1</sup>

One of the contemporary Arab philosophers whose thought is exercising a major influence on the intellectuals of the Arab world is the Moroccan Muhammad ‘Abed al-Jabiri. Professor of Philosophy at the University of Rabat from 1967 to 2002, he has been the recipient of numerous honors.<sup>2</sup> His works, especially his three volume *opus magnum*,<sup>3</sup> *Critique de la raison arabe*, created a great stir in the Arab world. His thought is presented as an unprecedented attempt to renew the way in which the Arab world conceives of the ‘tradition-modernity’ relationship. In the introductory part of one of his works, *Introduction à la critique de la raison arabe*, he appeals to Arab and Moslem intellectuals to stop letting themselves be locked up in tradition, without for all that scorning it. The renewal of thought in the Arab world and its entry into a modern era in which it has not participated up until now can only come from the manner in which it connects with, and integrates, its own tradition, which today’s intellectuals must not conceive of – as is too often the case according to al-Jabiri – as a reality that transcends history, but must rather be apprehended in its relativity and its historicity. Their role is to recognize within their tradition the currents of thought that have been able to break with their ossified antecedents and to reappropriate them so as in turn to free themselves from the burden of the past that is shackling them and keeping them from entering into the modern era: ‘Modernity, does not, therefore, mean either rejecting tradition, or breaking with the past, but rather raising our way of assuming our relationship to the tradition to the level of what we call “contemporariness”, which for us must consist in joining the march of progress that is taking place on the planetary level’ (al-Jabiri, 1994: 24).

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For al-Jabiri, Averroes' philosophy represents one of those exemplary historical moments in the history of Arab culture in which one witnesses a genuine epistemological break.<sup>4</sup> The break engineered by the Cordoban philosopher consisted, according to al-Jabiri, in rejecting Gnosticism and the irrationality that had weighed down thought in Islamic countries. For him, Avicenna's philosophy constitutes the most representative example of this pernicious tendency. al-Jabiri strives to define the epistemological conditions of this break so as to provide Arab and Moslem intellectuals an opportunity to reproduce it in order to enter without difficulty into a modernity that is continually slipping further and further away from them.

al-Jabiri's theses are in keeping with those of an intellectual movement born in the middle of the nineteenth century, when Arab intellectuals asked themselves why Arab culture – once so brilliant – had suddenly gone into decline to the point of coming to a standstill. Certain of them thought that this decline was due to the fact that Averroes' rationalist method had been abandoned by later authors.<sup>5</sup> This thesis, according to which it is necessary to go back to Averroes to make the conditions for exercising philosophical thought once again possible, presupposes a singular conception, not only of the history of philosophy, but of philosophy *tout court*, that I would like to examine in this article. I shall particularly engage in the analysis of the assumptions underlying the radical contrast that al-Jabiri sets up between Avicenna's philosophy – which is supposed to represent irrationality and Gnosticism – and that of Averroes who, according to him, breaks decisively with that current of thought and thus makes exercising philosophical thought once again possible.

### The Persian World versus the Arab World

One of the hypotheses upon which al-Jabiri's argument rests is the distinction that he draws between two founding currents of thought in the Arabo-Moslem world: on the one hand, a Gnostic current originating in the Persian world, the most famous representative of which is Avicenna; on the other, a rationalist current, rooted in the western part of the Moslem world, the most emblematic figure of which is Averroes. According to al-Jabiri, from the beginning of its instauration, the Abbasid dynasty had to confront the political manoeuvres of a Persian aristocracy that was seeking to gain in the ideological arena what it had lost in the political and social arena: '... [it] had resolved to fight on the ideological front after its offensives on the political and social fronts had failed' (al-Jabiri, 1994: 80). The Persians, close to the central power in Bagdad under the Abbasid dynasty, were to have in fact sought to undermine this Arab power, to weaken it by establishing an ideology sustained by a religious heritage permeated with Gnosticism:

So this aristocracy decided to engage in combat in the very arena in which the strength of the Arab State resided, in the ideological arena. The weapon that it was going to use to achieve its ends would be its own cultural and religious heritage based on Gnosticism, *i.e.* the belief in the existence of a source of knowledge other than reason, illumination, or divine inspiration that does not break off with the end of prophecy, "ongoing revelation", which leaves no room for reason or for transmission. The Persian aristocracy, therefore, launched a vast ideological offensive, using a religious-cultural heritage drawing upon Zoroastrianism,

Manichaeism and Mazdaism to discredit the religion of the Arabs, undermine its foundations and thus overthrow the power of the Arab State' (al-Jabiri, 1994: 81–82)

To combat this Persian ideological offensive, under the reign of Caliph Arab al-Ma'mun (198–218 = 813–833), the Arabs undertook the gigantic job of translating the Greek scientific and philosophical corpus. These translations provided them with the doctrinal tools needed to combat this current. To defend themselves in turn from the counterattack directed towards them by the rationalist theologians – the Mu'tazilites – under the cover of Shi'ism, the Persians also turned to the 'learning of the Ancients'. Thus was born Ismailism, the movement to which *Epistles* of the Brethren of Purity belong (al-Jabiri, 1994: 84).

The view of history expounded here by al-Jabiri sanctions a thesis dear to many Orientalists that he himself combats in other respects.<sup>6</sup> This is the thesis that certain peoples are – by nature – more, or less, predisposed to practice one discipline or another. For example, contrary to Indo-Europeans, Semites lack the capacity to philosophize.<sup>7</sup> In al-Jabiri's interpretation of history, one finds rather the opposite: the Arabs – a Semitic people – are ranged on the side of rationality and the Persians – an Indo-European people – on that of Gnosis and mysticism.<sup>8</sup> This is less a matter of a well-founded scholarly historical thesis than of an ideological interpretation of history (dangerous and unproductive besides<sup>9</sup>). As such, it is hard to refute on scholarly grounds, since it does not make any objectively verifiable claims. One can merely cite the names of some eminent scientifically-minded figures that the Persian world has produced: Ibn al-Muqaffa, the translator of *Kalila wa Dimna* (كليلة ودمنة) and the author of an important logical treatise; Sibawayh, the great grammarian of the Arab language, Nasir al-Din al-Tusi, the great astronomer, Omar al-Khayyam, the great mathematician . . .

We can, on the other hand, take a close look at – in order to refute them – certain of al-Jabiri's historical allegations. He discusses a close link between Shi'ite thought, Gnosticism and the Persian world. However, the cradle of Shi'ism is Iraq<sup>10</sup> – after Iraq's victory over the Sassanids, the Arabs founded Basra and Kufa there – and it was precisely in Iraq that Islam came into contact with Gnosis. From the beginning of the eighth century, in Iraq, a certain number of genuinely Gnostic themes were to be found in the different Shi'ite systems established then. Most of the Gnostic elements were eliminated from the Twelver Shi'ism that grew up after the Great Occultation in around 940. Not only is the historical and cultural cradle of Shi'ism not in Persia, but the dating of the emergence of Gnostic conceptions and teachings in Shi'ism is under debate among specialists. Certain of them, like Heinz Halm, consider that Gnostic conceptions were transmitted from the beginning of Shi'ism, others, more controversial, like Tamima Bayhom Daou, think that their introduction dates from the tenth century. Be that as it may, the link between Shi'ism and Gnosis is in no case historically linked to Persia. Thus, when al-Jabiri writes that from the ninth century, the Persian aristocracy used 'its own cultural and religious heritage based on Gnosticism' to combat 'the religion of the Arabs, in order to undermine it and thus overthrow Arab State power', he is making a historical error.

Besides the mistaken link established between Persia, Shi'ism and Gnosis, al-Jabiri's analysis rests on a distorted conception of what Gnosis is. This term is used

nowadays to designate any sort of mystical, spiritualistic, occultist teaching having little in common. However, in the historical sense, the term 'Gnosis' designates a body of teachings developed during the second and third centuries AD by Jewish, but also Christian, movements. This movement believed it represented the genuine secret teaching of Christ contained in the esoteric meaning of the Gospels, or set forth in the apocryphal Gospels.<sup>11</sup> Kurt Rudolph (1984), the specialist on Gnosis, established a typology that makes it possible to characterize the Gnostic movement in a precise way. Among the five criteria isolated, one concerns Gnostic eschatology, which conceives of human salvation as the liberation of the packet of light locked up in the body.<sup>12</sup> This liberation is achieved through knowledge, 'γνῶσις' in Greek. Aggressively combated by Neo-Platonism,<sup>13</sup> Gnosis nonetheless displays a certain number of points in common with it, among them the idea that salvation is achieved through knowledge. It is difficult to reduce, as al-Jabiri does, these two intellectual movements to currents of thought that draw Arab civilization into the darkness of irrationality.<sup>14</sup> Through the *Theology of Aristotle*, Plotinus' thought circulated widely in Islamic countries. This work, consisting of an Arab translation of *Enneads* iv-v-vi by Plotinus, was attributed to Aristotle (after Alkindi) and exercised a profound influence on philosophers, among them Avicenna.

### Avicenna's Responsibility in Ruining Arab Reason

The words al-Jabiri uses to stigmatize Avicenna are most harsh. Through his 'oriental philosophy', the latter was to have developed an ideological, national (Persian) project that ruined Arab rationality. In writing about Avicenna, al-Jabiri (1994: 91–92) talks of 'retreat backwards' and 'deleterious irrationalism':

Through his oriental philosophy, Avicenna sanctioned a spiritualistic Gnostic current whose impact was determinative in the retreat backwards by which Arab thought regressed from being an open rationalism – of which the Mu'tazilites, then Alkindi, were the torchbearers, and which culminated with Alfarabi – towards a deleterious irrationalism, that favored the development of a thought of darkness that thinkers like al-Ghazzālī, al-Suhrawardī of Aleppo and others but spread and popularized in different settings.

First of all, let us not forget that the matter of Avicenna's 'oriental philosophy' has now been resolved by the specialists. In the prologue to the *Book of Healing*, Avicenna alludes to another of his works, *Oriental Philosophy*, in which he was to have set forth his teachings without taking into consideration the Peripatetics as he had, however, done in *Shifa'*. This work is lost today. However, nothing in the part of this work that remains (a treatise on logic) indicates that it is a question of an esoteric teaching.<sup>15</sup> The fact that in the prologue to *Hayy Ibn Yaqzan* (حي بن يقظان), Ibn Tufayl suggests reading his treatise in light of the mysticism of Avicenna's *Oriental Philosophy* (a work that was not available to him) does not suffice to make one think that the latter really expounded mystical doctrines in that work.<sup>16</sup>

Let us now come to Avicenna's mysticism. He did indeed write several stories in which a mystical connotation can be found: *The Treatise of the Bird*, *Hayy Ibn Yaqzan*,<sup>17</sup>

*A Treatise on Love* . . . Whatever tenor one attributes to these stories,<sup>18</sup> it is no less true that Avicenna's philosophy, through the masterly, original synthesis that it makes of Peripatetic and Neo-Platonic philosophy, of questions tied to Koranic revelation (prophecy; salvation of the soul; resurrection) and the system of Hellenic thought, constitutes a major turning point in the history of thought in Islamic countries. One can distinguish a before and an after Avicenna. Be they direct or indirect disciples (from Bahmanyār to al-Jurjani, by way of Nasīr al-Dīn al-Tūsī and al-Hillī), opponents like Ibn Taymiyya, Averroes, 'Abd al-Latif al-Bagdadi, or even partisans of the Illuminationist tradition (الإشراق) like Ibn Kammuna or Mullā Sadrā Shīrāzī, they all, in one way or another, owe something to Avicenna.

That Arab philosophy died out after Averroes is another historical fiction that but revives certain nineteenth century Orientalist stereotypes (Gutas, 2002: 6). It is true that al-Jabiri does not consider the metaphysical writings of someone like al-Suhrawardī (twelfth), or Mir Damad (seventeenth), or those of Qadi Sa'īd Qummi (seventeenth) to be philosophy. He reserves this appellation for the teachings of Averroes, who 'takes care to consider the parts through the whole into which they fit' (al-Jabiri, 1994: 125). He considers this 'mathematically minded' intellectual way of proceeding to be the fruit of the work of Andalusian scholars who 'approached the ancient sciences through mathematics and logic, far from theological controversies and the issues surrounding the reconciliation of reason and transmission'. Avicenna's extraordinary, pioneering requirement was precisely that of conceiving a philosophical system that attempts to comprehend the different parts making it up (logic, metaphysics, mathematics, noetics, prophetology) in a unified consistent whole, as attested to by the immense philosophical *summa* that is *The Book of Healing*, rightly thought of as the first philosophical encyclopedia of history. Besides not acknowledging the philosophical attributes that Avicenna possessed to the highest degree, al-Jabiri's analysis rests on a very narrow conception of what philosophy is. It is to be inseparable from the method of mathematics and logic. However, western philosophy – held up as a paradigm by al-Jabiri – is showing, on the contrary, that it has been able to renew itself by opening up to poetic expression. Analytic philosophy is not the only face of philosophy: Heidegger and the rehabilitation of poetic expression is another,<sup>19</sup> and not the least of them!

Avicenna's other mistake was to have been his attempt to reconcile philosophy and religion. A practice abandoned by Averroes: 'With Averroes, it is therefore a radically new conception of the religion-philosophy relationship that emerges: the level of rationality must be heightened in these two fields within each of them. In philosophy, rationality is based on observing the order and arrangement of the world and, through that, on the principle de la causality [ . . . ]' (al-Jabiri, 1994: 146–147). According to al-Jabiri, the attempt to do this has had a pernicious influence on philosophy in the Islamic countries. However, Avicenna's goal was not to reconcile philosophy and religion. Once again, al-Jabiri is only reviving a commonplace Orientalist idea (cf. Gutas, 2002: 12 ss.). For Avicenna, as for Alkindi and Alfarabi before him and Averroes after him, truth can only be reached through reason, with the help of proofs and of their tool, the syllogism. All these *falasifa* defended the idea that truth is one, that only the means of reaching it differs. Not all people are capable of attaining it by means of proofs. What philosophy obtains by the syllogistic method inherited from

the Greeks, the rest of humanity attains by revelation. The distinctive mark of all the *falasifa* – Avicenna as much as Averroes – is the important idea that human reason can by its own means attain truth. These means are the conceptual tools and categories conceived by the Greek philosophers. What also sets them apart is the profound conviction that religion, whether Moslem, Jewish or Christian,<sup>20</sup> is not in any way incompatible with practicing philosophy. Quite the contrary, they both strive after the same goal: perfecting human beings and bringing them to fulfillment.

### Conclusion

The Arab world seems wrapped up in itself and its history, turned in the direction of a glorious, bygone past when it was at the pinnacle of philosophical and intellectual activity: the twelfth century dominated by the figure of Averroes. al-Jabiri starts from this fact and tries to induce Arab intellectuals to come out of the impasse. It is true that philosophical practice does not develop within every historical configuration.<sup>21</sup> The Averroist model, al-Jabiri tells us, is not of value because of the philosophical practices that were those of the Cordoban and which are, as such, outmoded: it is of value because it represents an 'epistemological break' with the 'deleterious' practice that preceded it, namely the mystical and Gnostic trends of Avicennian teachings, the theological concerns aimed at reconciling faith and reason. al-Jabiri invites intellectuals to make the same break by radically distinguishing between the scientific domain and that of religion, which does not mean – and this was the mark of Averroes' genius according to him – that one has to give up religion and practicing it. This is how he sums up his position in the conclusion to his work:

Actually, in our opinion, one would have to envision the problem in the following manner: How can contemporary Arab thought recapture and embrace anew, from a perspective similar to that from which the rationalist and 'liberals' attainments of its own tradition were embraced in the beginning – the fight against feudalism, against Gnosticism, against fatalism, and the will to establish a City of Reason and of Justice, so as to build the democratic, socialist Arab City? That is not a narrowly nationalistic position. We are in no way minimizing humanity's great attainments. We simply think that these attainments will always remain alien to us as long as we have not embraced them to solve our own problems by adopting a scientific method adapted to the requirements of our historical condition. (al-Jabiri, 1994: 169)

Echoing that, as if to counter him, are Averroes' remarks:

But if people other than ourselves have already investigated this matter, it is obvious that we are obliged, for the sake of that toward which we are moving, to turn to what those who have gone before us have said about it. It matters little whether they share our religion or not. Likewise, one does not ask the implement one is using to perform ritual sacrifice whether or not it belonged to one of our fellow Moslems in order to judge whether the sacrifice complies with legal specifications. One only asks that it meet to criteria of compliance. By those who are not our fellow Moslems, I mean the Ancients who studied these questions before the advent of Islam. (Averroes, 1996: 109–111)



It is the very validity of the notion of 'Arab reason' that has to be questioned in al-Jabiri's analysis, a notion whose relevance would not have been acknowledged by the *falasifa*. Their intellectual approach was characterized by a remarkable capacity for openness with respect to a heritage coming from another culture, from another time, from another language, from another religion. It is not that they considered that truth is always the same in all places and in all times, but they were conscious of the invaluable worth of the Greek legacy, which provided them with the conceptual tools to tackle their own inquiries, to respond to the needs of their particular times. Seven centuries stand between Alkindi and Mullā Sadrā, and yet each one drew upon this legacy in order to breathe new life into it. Neither was a prisoner of sterile ideas frozen in time.

Studying the history of Arab philosophy – called Arab insofar as the language in which the philosophical lexicon is mainly constituted is Arabic – without mixing in ideology is risky. Many specialists, as al-Jabiri rightly emphasizes, continue to make Orientalist stereotypes their own. However, discrediting whole sections of this history on the pretext that they represent darkness and the decline of reason is nothing else but ideology.

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Translated from the French by Claire Oritz Hill

### Notes

1. *Introduction à la critique de la raison arabe* (نقد العقل العربي) is composed of two works: *نحن والتراث: قراءات معاصرة في تراثنا الفلسفي* [*The tradition and us. Contemporary interpretations of our philosophical tradition*, 1980] and *دراسات ومناقشات* [*Tradition and modernity*, 1991].
2. Details concerning these honors are available at the following address: <http://www.aljabriabed.net/taarif.HTM>
3. i. *تكوين العقل العربي* (*The formation of Arab reason*); ii. *بنية العقل العربي* (*The structure of Arab reason: an analytical and critical study of cognitive orders in Arab culture*); iii. *العقل السياسي العربي* (*Arab political reason. Determining factors and manifestations*).
4. al-Jabiri's analysis is supported by references to contemporary epistemology, which he helped make known in the Arab world.
5. Among these thinkers may be cited the Syrians Farah Antun (1874–1922) and Tayyib Tizini (born in 1938), the Egyptian Muhammad 'Atif al-'Iraqi (born in 1936). About this movement, cf. Von Kügelgen (1996: 97–132 and 1994).
6. For a discussion of these Orientalist ideas, cf. Mahdi (1990: 79–93).
7. It is a matter of teachings that were very widespread during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and not only among Orientalists. So it is that Ernest Renan (1947: 952) considered that the Arabs were but conveyors of ideas and that anything productive in their philosophy came from Greece.
8. One may note with some irony the overturning of the thesis dominant in the world of nineteenth century European Orientalism according to which Semites – unlike Indo-Europeans (to whom, as is well known, the Persians belong) – were impervious to any metaphysical thought because their language lacked the copula 'to be'.
9. It is this type of essentialist interpretation that is nowadays leading to some very hostile reactions to Islam, which is deemed inherently unable to face up to modernity. As an example, one may quote an excerpt from the speech given by Pope Benedict XVI in Ratisbonne. The Pope referred to a commentary by Professor Khoury, who published the dialogue between the erudite Byzantine emperor

Manuel II Paleologus and an educated Persian: 'for Moslem teaching', Khoury writes, 'God is absolutely transcendent. His will is not bound by any of our categories, even that of rationality.' In support of this, Professor Khoury quotes a work by the noted French Islamist Roger Arnaldez declaring 'that Ibn Hazm went so far as to state that God is not bound by his own word, and that nothing would oblige him to reveal the truth to us. Were it God's will, we would even have to practice idolatry.' It was then that the Pope concluded from his interpretations: 'As far as understanding of God and thus the concrete practice of religion is concerned, we find ourselves faced with a dilemma which nowadays challenges us directly. Is the conviction that acting unreasonably contradicts God's nature merely a Greek idea, or is it always and intrinsically true? I believe that here we can see the profound harmony between what is Greek, in the best sense of the word, and the biblical understanding of faith in God.' (Pope Benedict XVI's talk is available in English online at: <http://www.catholicculture.org/news/features/index.cfm?recnum=46474>).

Yet, Islam, like many other religions (Christianity, Buddhism, Hinduism) has displayed an extraordinary capacity to adapt (African Islam is not the Islam of Southeast Asia, which itself differs from Chinese Islam and Turkish and Iranian Islam . . .). This religion has made possible societies of great intellectual openness (after the fashion of the city of Bagdad in the tenth century, which saw the birth of Bayt al-Hikma) and others which, in contrast, engendered terrible cultural ghettos (Afghanistan), just as Christianity saw the Inquisition and the Enlightenment come into being in its midst.

10. During the first half of the Othman caliphate, a popular movement grew up in Kufa around 'Ali whose representatives later became the leaders of the Shi'at 'Ali. Shi'ism was born within an Arab context. Its adoption as State doctrine by the founder of the Safavid dynasty in the sixteenth century in Iran must be distinguished from its origins.
11. I wish to thank Daniel de Smet for having made available to me the course on Gnosis that he gave at the Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes (Vth section) during the years 2007–2008.
12. The other criteria are: 1) a dualistic vision of the universe; 2) a cosmology that contrasts a celestial world – a realm of being of light – and a world of darkness, the one in which we live, the world of matter ruled by evil beings; 3) an anthropology that conceives of human beings as composed of light (by their souls) and of darkness (by their bodies); 4) the final salvation of humans requires a long cycle of reincarnation. To that is added a distinction in Scripture between a literal, exoteric, meaning and a hidden, esoteric, meaning.
13. Plotinus devoted the second Ennead to refuting Gnostics.
14. We are presently witnessing a philosophical rehabilitation of Gnosis, cf. for example Depraz and Marquet (2000).
15. On Avicenna's oriental philosophy, cf. Gutas (1988: 115–130).
16. On the connection between Ibn Tufayl and Avicenna, cf. Gutas (1994: 222–241).
17. For a study of the relationship between the story Hayy Ibn Yaqzan by Avicenna and the 'philosophical novel' of the same name by Ibn Tufayl, ed. Corbin (1999: 157–175) [Editor's note].
18. Henry Corbin translated them under the title: *Avicenne et le récit visionnaire*. He attributes a mystical undertone to them that served as a basis for renewing thought in Islamic countries. Dimitris Gutas (2002: 16–17) just sees them as poetic essays lacking any spiritual meaning. He considers that the idea circulated by Corbin, that Arab philosophy is essentially linked to mysticism and to spirituality, contributed to the lack of interest in it on the part of historians of philosophy. In that respect he is not very far removed from al-Jabiri whom, it must be added, he cites in the epigraph of his article.
19. With regard to this, one may consult Badiou (1989), for example.
20. Remember that many a philosopher writing in the Arab language was not Moslem: Isaac Israeli, the disciple of Alkindi, was Jewish; Abu Bisr Matta, the founder of the Peripatetic school in Bagdad, and Yahya Ibn 'Adi were Christians.
21. As Alain Badiou notes (1989: 7 ss.), many contemporary thinkers conceive of philosophy as being a practice belonging to a past era.



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