



On Philosophy And Religion: Problematizing The Popular Opposition

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Abstract

In this paper, an attempt has been made to challenge the popular opposition posited between religion and philosophy, namely the idea that the two are mutually exclusive. The primary line of argumentation in this paper is to establish the diversity within philosophical traditions, which is otherwise overlooked due to a narrow and reductive approach to defining the scope, aims, and objectives of philosophy. By reiterating the element of “practices” (or “spiritual exercises”) centered around the transformation of the self, a case for the intersection between philosophy and religion is argued.

Key Words: religion; philosophy; spiritual practices; philosophy as a way of life; *hikmah*

Introduction

The supposed antithesis between “philosophy” and “religion” often surfaces, thanks to a worn-out cliché, that philosophy is supposedly a rebellious, rationalistic, linguistic discourse. This is one of the most common misconceptions about philosophy when made in an exhaustive manner. This paper will attempt to introduce a much wider canvas of philosophy, which puts in relief the possibility of intersection between philosophy and religion.

Philosophy within the popular discourse is often reduced to the tradition of Descartes, Kant, or Hegel; in other words, under this misconception, the entire philosophy is equated with the Western philosophical tradition, specifically post-Aristotelian. This misconception is a product of a reductive, Eurocentric view of philosophy, reduced to its modern formulation. On the contrary, we should note that there are diverse philosophical traditions worldwide, including the Indian tradition, the Chinese tradition, the Islamic philosophical tradition, and the Pre-Socratic Greek traditions in the West, among others.

Philosophy as a Way of Life

It is worth mentioning that philosophy, etymologically, means “cultivating love for wisdom.” Philosophy, as traditionally understood, is wisdom, that is, *hikmah* in Islamic tradition. *Hikmah*/philosophy and *kitāb*/law, within the Islamic tradition, both stem from the same revelatory source.¹ The Prophet, according to the Qur’anic universe of meaning, comes to teach both *kitāb* (law) and *hikmah* (wisdom) (*yu’alimuhumul kitāba wal hikmah*). The first clarificatory disclaimer, therefore, that we need to put out is that philosophy is not what Descartes or Kant said—that is in fact only a small portion of (modern) Western philosophical tradition, rather philosophy as traditionally understood is *Sophia*/wisdom/*hikmah* which every religion comes with and which then is explicated upon by the sages/hukama/philosophers who live and breathe within a particular religious tradition—fleshing out the deeper, essential truths of religion. *Hikmah*, in accordance with this scheme of things, is the final fruit of religion rather than being antagonistic to it.

One of the most commonplace misconceptions, as we have already mentioned above, that has gripped, for instance, the Muslim mind² about philosophy is that it is equated with pure rational inquiry. They fail to realize that such a perception is informed by an extremely narrow definition of philosophy, dominated by post-Aristotelian traditions (as even pre-Socratics may not be fully in congruence with the above definition of philosophy that equates the discipline with pure rational discourse). In fact, the word “discipline” is key here; as we shall see, philosophy, traditionally within the Greeks and other philosophical traditions of the world, was seen as a *discipline* of life, a life-practice, a way of life, and not merely a mental exercise. In fact, the mental exercises were seen broadly under the ambit of spiritual practices for a specific engineering of self: a transformation of one’s subjectivity.

As we know, Islamic philosophy, or traditional philosophy, conceives the meaning and task of philosophy to be completely different from the narrow definition of philosophy as rationalism.³ Equating philosophy with mere “reason” is problematic for the reason that the traditional philosophical account does not reduce human beings down to mere “reason”. A human being is considered to have a higher *noetic*, gnostic, intuitive, and intellectual faculty. This is what Iqbal criticized Kant for, who had reduced human knowing down to mere twelve categories of understanding,⁴ as a result of which metaphysics faced a significant blowback in the modern Western philosophical tradition. In contemporary times, however, scholars such as Pierre Hadot⁵ and others in the West have re-emphasized the “lived” aspect of philosophy, in addition to the popular conception of philosophy as a theory or discourse.

Philosophy, in traditional understanding, is not merely a rational, *dry* logic-chopping exercise, but rather it can be characterized as a *moist* tradition of *hikmah*/wisdom/Sophia. Ancient Hindus, for instance, defined philosophy as *darshana*, that is, a direct vision of reality/Truth rather than merely an abstract ratiocination.⁶ Plato defined philosophy as a “preparation for death”.⁷ The implications of such an objective, as we shall see below in detail, are religious and mystical. As such, Plato is a mystico-philosopher/sage rather than a purely rationalist thinker. This is also true of most pre-Socratics, whose traditional symbolism is literally and thus wrongly translated into naturalism by later post-Aristotelian commentators of Western philosophy.⁸

Philosophy within a traditionalist cosmos is a proper way of life. One can refer to the works of Pierre Hadot, as mentioned above, who reclaims ancient philosophy as a way of life rather than a merely rationalistic “discourse”. Hadot explains in detail how philosophy in ancient Greece comprised a set of spiritual practices aimed at transforming the self, that is, “becoming” a wise person. Systematic philosophy, what Hadot calls “discourse,” was only adopted in order to simplify the teachings into a few codified/sequential propositions to ensure their easy transmission to students. Slowly but surely, this latter tradition of “discourse” became an end in itself, whereas the former, actual purpose of philosophy, that is, “a way of life” involving personal transformation, was pushed into oblivion.

Philosophy as a “Theosis”

Continuing the above discussion, within the Islamic tradition, it is primarily ethics that Hamiduddin Farahi and Anwar Shah Kashmiri interpreted as “*hikmah*,” in reaction to Imam Shafi, who attempted to restrict “*hikmah*” (sophia/wisdom) to only “*hadeeth-sunnah*.” Ethics is a way of life: a way of being. Traditional philosophy, rather than being a dry, logic-chopping exercise, demands ethical discipline because it is a vision/*darshan*. But the question arises: what is the vision, and what is the ethical discipline for it? It is to see the limitations and nothingness of one’s own ego before the (much vaster and powerful) Reality/God—The One/Whole. Philosophy, traditionally, amounted to “theosis,” i.e., “likeness to God,” which means leaving ego-centrism and adopting God’s perspective, that is to say, seeing the world/life/reality from God’s eye that amounts to shunning one’s egotistical, rational, partial, sentimental presuppositions and instead participating in reality (as totality) as it is. This is what traditional philosophers mean by “cleansing of perception” or “new vision”/“enlightenment,” that is, escaping the confusions and assertions of the ego and seeing the disclosure of God/Reality as it truly is. To adopt this “theosis” and see things as they are without creating mental abstractions is what Plato means by “preparation for death,” that is, coming out of ego (constituting an “ego death”) and seeing reality as it is in totality, that is, being completely open to the disclosure of Life/world/experience without demanding/abstracting anything. This is what Spinoza means when he asks us to see the world as *sub specie aeternitatis*,⁹ that is, under the aspect of eternity (one complete

totality from God's eye where binaries dissolve). To achieve this, one needs to cultivate ethical discipline to transcend egocentrism.

To enjoy life, one actually has to come out of ego tantrums since all the moments of joy are moments of spirit and not of ego, that is to say, all moments of joy are moments when one lives outside of himself/herself, for example, conversing with family/friends, watching an intense drama/movie/story, playing a game or watching one, participating in a collective function/feast; when one leaves ego tantrums, that is, comes out of ego, forgets it and lives in "collective" *spirit* (what Hegel calls *Geist*)—joy erupts on its own. This is what philosophy as "contemplation" means because every act of contemplation is "ego death" insofar as one comes out of the ego whilst contemplating on the "other."

To achieve this "theosis," joy, wisdom, and preparation for death, one needs not merely rationalistic, linguistic, or logical techniques, but an ethical discipline and a humble acceptance of one's nothingness before God. One cannot attain joy if one is not ethical/humble. Ethics is first philosophy, as Levinas would say.¹⁰ This is how Muslim sages understand *hikmah*/philosophy to be. One can see that ancient philosophy, as Hadot points out, predominantly subscribes to "virtue ethics" rather than deontological or consequentialist approaches, which focus on "actions" or "will." Virtue ethics is centered upon "cultivation" of certain modes of being (virtues) that lead to an organically good life. This practice of the cultivation of virtue is philosophy.

Philosophy, therefore, is not mere "jargon"; in fact, if one is caught in the cobweb of "jargon", it amounts to a bad fever of the mind, as it were, that is to say, one may soon find oneself trapped in words. As Ludwig Wittgenstein, in his later turn, alludes to the job of philosophy as a therapy to cure one from the bewitchment of language.¹¹ Traditional philosophy liberates us from all the fever of the mind by showing us our ways out of our egos and all their dualist, binary, linguistic, and representationalist confusions, skepticisms, doubts, uncertainties, and trappings. Aim of philosophy, as traditionally understood, is *moksha/nirvana*/liberation, which is seeing things in a new light and not merely a linguistic rambling of words. Seeing Reality as it is, that is, escaping ego-centrism, its binaries and confusions, causes perception to ultimately dissolve into objects such that only "seeing" remains, and thus all notorious problems of epistemology are dissolved. Western philosophy, particularly after Descartes and then Kant, boils down to epistemology, with consequent confusions and abysses that it has not been able to recover to this day, as pointed out by thinkers like Heidegger. Traditional philosophy bypasses these routes and saves us from all such trouble.

Traditional philosophy ultimately intersects with poetry and meditative thinking, the way Heidegger argues in his later work.¹² The reason for it is that in "calculative thinking," a subject is already divorced from an object, which it tries to figure out in isolation, and thus, to put it metaphorically, is perpetually caught up in Plato's cave (dictated by the metaphysics of representation). It tries to get more and more clarity of details as to what this "object" is all about, not realizing that the whole energy is spent on studying the way that particular object is *appearing* to someone, rather than on the "object" itself. In other words, we struggle with proving the existence of being rather than with the being itself. In "meditative thinking," however, the subject, as it were, "flows" with the object, that is, "participates" in it and with it, and thus allows Being to disclose itself organically. This is the reason why Heidegger prioritizes poetic/meditative thinking over propositional thinking. In poetic thinking, language has greater vastness, freedom, and participation, as well as more expressive power through various nuances, metaphors, and unusual styles of speech, to express Being. Being/Reality/Life is complex and diverse; therefore, it is better disclosed by complex poetic language, whereas propositional calculative thinking tries to make things as "specific" as possible, during the course of which many other aspects of Being get neglected, marginalized, or concealed. Here, Heidegger, here, is following Nietzsche's lead, who opened the Being to its founding question. Liberating Being from traditional metaphysics that captures it within a static concept, the diversity of Being, its protean nature, as revealed by the idea of "perspectivalism" is opened up such that Being becomes an event rather than a thing/entity. Being, as an event, cannot be captured by a static concept. One can only remain open to the Being that always already is arriving by virtue of being an event. This is precisely why Heidegger gives up his early project of Being and Time, wherein one was supposed to perform an existential analysis of Dasein to open Being up, as it were. But later Heidegger realized that for Being to appear in light (as per Plato's apparent "idea") there must be first "clearing" (what he calls *lichtung*).¹³ Thus, Being is not Being but always already a "clearing." Thus, one

is not supposed to open Being up but instead open oneself up to Being, which is always already an arriving or revelation. This explains Heidegger's shift to meditative or poetic thinking.¹⁴

Can we classify Pythagoras, Shankara, Ibn Arabi, Suhrawardi, or Mulla Sadra as logic-chopping, purely rationalistic philosophers? In Islamic tradition, philosophy (understood as *Irfan*) and *tassawuf* can be argued to be two faces of the same coin.¹⁵ Under the traditional philosophical worldview, philosophy is not reduced to armchair academic rational logic chopping philosophizing (for its own sake), but rather it defines philosophers as sages/*hukama*. A true philosopher, as traditionally understood, requires both intellectual insight and spiritual purification. The more heart/nous/*ayn-al-qalb* gets purified, the clearer the higher orders of reality become. The kind of critiques we find in Ghazali and Ibn Taymiyyah against philosophy are largely critiques of over-ambitious projects of speculative reason/ratiocination (rationalism) and not wisdom/philosophy as traditionally understood. Both of these intellectual giants subscribed to a form of intellectual/intuitive/*noetic* faculty of knowledge, known as *dhawq* or *fitra* knowledge. Philosophy is not merely the opinions of specific philosophers of a particular era; rather, philosophy is the very mode of being that prepares one for meeting with God.

Traditional philosophy, therefore, has its own notion of “intellect” (*aqli kulli*) which is not to be confused with mere “reason”; rational faculty is a separate faculty which helps us survive; intellect is something else; it refers to “nous” or the “eye of the heart,” that is, the direct rootedness of human being in sacred/reality/being; it directly participates in Reality such that knowledge intersects with being—avoiding all epistemological spin-offs.

Notes

¹ See Qur'an 2:151; Qur'an 3:164.

² To take one case example of the perceived interface between religion and philosophy by religious believers in general.

³ See Nasr, *Islamic Philosophy from its Origins to the Present*.

⁴ Iqbal, *Reconstruction*, 4.

⁵ See Hadot, *Philosophy as a way of Life*

⁶ See Chatterjee and Datta, *An Introduction to Indian Philosophy*.

⁷ See Plato's dialogue *Phaedo*.

⁸ See the work of Algis Uždavinys, specifically *The Golden Chain: An Anthology of Pythagorean and Platonic Philosophy*.

⁹ See part V of Spinoza's *Ethics*.

¹⁰ See Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*.

¹¹ See Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, para 109.

¹² See Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*; Heidegger, *On the Way to Language*.

¹³ See Heidegger's essay *The End of Philosophy and Task of Thinking*.

¹⁴ See Heidegger, *What is Called Thinking?*

¹⁵ See Ali, *Philosophical Sufism*.

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