

Philosophy, Art and Critique: A (short) Conversation with the “other”

*Arshin Adib-Moghaddam Ph.D. **

Abstract

The article sketches a nexus between philosophy, art (poetry) and critique with a particular emphasis on the contribution of classical Muslim philosophers. At the same time, it demonstrates how luminaries such as Omar Khayyam and Ibn Sina, contributed to the renewal of philosophy as a freedom seeking exercise and as a means to pursue happiness through knowledge. In the second part of the article this discussion is geographically de-located to include critical theories from mainland Europe. The conclusion focuses on the comparability of these contemporary critical theories with the philosophies of the “east”.

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* Professor in Global Thought and Comparative Philosophies, SOAS, University of London.
aa106@soas.ac.uk

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Arshin Adib-Moghaddam *

Art and philosophy have a common effect on the human mind: They detach the subject from “reality” and hijack him into another realm.¹ Philosophy and art are “theories” of what is possible. In this way they suggest a libertarian impulse. They simulate another world to which the individual could escape. They are intoxicating because they always also chime with our romantic and utopian yearnings, at least when philosophy and art are forcefully freed from the shackles of conformity. There is a second factor that makes philosophy and art comparable. Both human pursuits are located in historical contingent constellations that defy simple definitions. Of course there have been efforts to “define” philosophy and art, but their trajectories escape artificial encampment. As such, philosophy and art do not have an origin. There is no text or object that could be consolidated as foundational despite stringent efforts in the western canon to that end. But even Eurocentric depictions which claim

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* Professor in Global Thought and Comparative Philosophies, SOAS, University of London.
aa106@soas.ac.uk

philosophy and art for the “west” have failed to mute the critical promise that many artists and philosophers believe in. The emergence of cosmopolitan theories of art, comparative philosophies and global thought are contemporary scholarly manifestations of this rather more inclusive trend. Hence, the systematic effort to reduce the history of art and philosophy to the “west” and to gentrify its genealogy from the impact of the “other” has failed, exactly because art and philosophy have to escape the mould of (western) “art” and “philosophy” in order to exist. Whenever a limit is defined for artists and philosophers, it is immediately

My rather abstract introductory suggestions will become clearer and more specific in the next paragraphs when I will explore the nexus of art, philosophy and critique with insights that are taken from several cultural loci. This is to show that the freedom that art and philosophy simulate and call for is a universal sentiment and not merely “western”. Every philosophy and artwork is an interregnum, a suspension and an interruption and interference in the humdrum affairs of society. This is why they elicit responses, for instance emotions such as happiness, anger or repulsion. In this way art and philosophy continue to entice despite of the vulgar commodification of the university and the art-world.² Once art and philosophy cease to provoke, they cease to exist as human activities. We have not reached this point yet. Today, the western “self” and the “other” are engaged in a dialectic, which is productive and which creates novel forms of critique and negation. This dialectic has thrown a lifeline to the making of art and philosophy. It is in this constructive interaction that art and philosophy find their true calling and hybrid “identity”.

God and critique

Art and philosophy as critique can be adequately explained by focusing on the way classical Muslim philosophers dealt with contentious subjects such as religion and God. The confines of this article do not allow me to give a full account of these issues of course. But I hope to sketch a forward looking modality in classical Islamic philosophy which I think inherently critical and inclusive. In the philosophy of polymaths such as Abu Nasr Farabi and Ibn Sina and in their poetry, life takes on a forward-looking modality adequate to this idea of the capacity for change which is always the pre-requisite for any critical theory and practice. Their emphasis on learning and constant renewal created hope and

possibility, an optimistic call for the betterment of human existence. In that vein, in his *uyun al-hikmah* Ibn Sina writes that *al-hikmah*, (which he uses as being the same as philosophy) is the perfection of the human soul through conceptualisation [*tasawwur*] of things and judgment [*tasdiq*] of theoretical and practical realities to the measure of human ability.³ Learned individuals are encouraged to follow a path of finding this supreme knowledge, not at least in order to transcend the humdrum affairs of their everyday reality and to attain a higher form of contentment or happiness.

Ibn Sina went on in his later writings to distinguish between Peripatetic philosophy and what he called ‘Oriental philosophy’ (*al-hikmat al-mashriqi’yah*) which was not based on ratiocination alone, but included revealed knowledge (it also set the stage for the influential treatises of Sohrawardi, and here especially his *kitab hikmat al-ishraq*). There is a particularly striking poem by Ibn Sina about the fate of the human soul, which exemplifies this emphasis on congruence between rational analysis and metaphysical opportunity which was central to the canons of the classical philosophers of Islam:

Until when the hour of its homeward flight draws near,
And ‘tis time for it to return to its ampler sphere, It carols
with joy, for the veil is raised, and it spies Such things as
cannot be witnessed by waking eyes. On a lofty height
doth it warble its songs of praise (for even the lowliest
being doth knowledge raise). And so it returneth, aware
of all hidden things In the universe, while no stain to its
garment clings.⁴

The ultimate object here is the perfection of the intellectual faculties of the individual, who does not carry an exclusive identity, who is only presumed in his or her physical constitution. There is no realm of knowledge that is exclusive to Muslims in the writings of Ibn Sina, no discernible schematic dichotomy that permeates his narratives. Ibn Sina searches for a supreme truth, not a supreme civilisation or race. He and many of his contemporaries managed to write their poetry and philosophy without the emergence of a discourse that would legitimate subjugation of the “other”, without a hysterical call for arms. In this sense their message was not “identitarian.” Rather the contrary, their writings

called for freedom of thought through the pursuit of knowledge, primarily in the form of philosophy.

It has been established in the scholarly literature on the subject matter that all of this happened in close dialogue with the Aristotelian tradition and ancient Greek philosophy in general. Classical philosophers of Islam (*falasifa*) such as Ibn Sina, Ibn Arabi, al-Kindi, Ibn Rushd, Farabi, and others employed complex methods explaining how ‘truth conditions’ can be rationalised through the study of language, judgement, nature, syllogisms, deductions and inductions. *Falsafa* (philosophy) was considered to lead to the knowledge of all existing things qua existent (*ashya' al-maujudah bi ma hiya maujudah*) and philosophy itself was deemed to be the art (*sind'ah*) of arts and the science (*ilm*) of sciences. What came surreptitiously into existence in the writings of these philosophers, in short, was nothing less than the renewal of philosophy as a critical practice, world-view and form of life.

All of the classical philosophers of Islam under scrutiny here were polymaths, both poets and scientists, engaged in theology and mysticism, interested in philosophy and “metaphysics” as much as in the empirical worlds. Yet despite their wide-ranging studies they did not advance a concrete concept of “identity” that could signify a monologue within the *umma* or that would organise Muslims within a militant, coherently formulated ideology. Theirs was an emancipative philosophy almost entirely depleted of identity politics or a concrete and dichotomous notion of self and other. The historical circumstances they were writing in, the presence of functioning Islamic polities, the absence of a direct threat to their ‘Muslim identity’, did not merit, or require them to write in a stridently ideological mode. The violence exercised over the Islamic worlds during the colonial period changed all that.

I have suggested that for the classical philosophers, in many ways up until Ibn Khaldun (1332-1406), reality is not exhausted by explaining what offers itself to immediate knowledge and perception. The understanding of the surrounding world must also include an aspect of future potentiality, a utopia wherein the discrepancy between the present and the future opens up. This is why in the philosophy of Farabi and especially in Ibn Sina’s intricate *danish-namaha-ye alai* (Treatise on Knowledge) philosophy takes on a forward-looking modality adequate to this idea of the capacity for change as indicated. In the words of Ibn Sina: the contingent existent (*mumkin al-wujud*) is always relative to the necessary being (*wajib al-wujud*).⁵ Within such a dialectic one is alerted

to criticise the present in order to bridge the gap between the ontology surrounding the individual and the transcendental promise which is relegated to God, without, however, forcing a total causality upon this process. The world Ibn Sina sees is secular exactly because God is conceptualised to another realm of human existence.

The world of the philosopher and poet Omar Khayyam (1048-1123) is a good place to unravel further the contribution of the idea of God to critical art and philosophy and to invite him to contribute to a global understanding of their “identity”. The world-view of Khayyam can be called “critical” because of the libertarian momentum that his concept of God elicits. To his mind, God was the necessary being or *mumtani al-wujud* in Arabic (Ibn Sina termed God *wajib al-wujud* as indicated). By necessity human beings were relative to this other-worldly constant. In the world portrayed in the poetry of Khayyam, there is freedom because in relation to God, reality is socially engineered. In the absence of the godly ordained, perfected order, we are at liberty to live our lives in pursuit of happiness. For Khayyam the necessary being, that is God, continuously entices the relative being, that is the individual in his/her pursuit of such perfection. In Khayyam’s world there is doubt exactly because in relation to God, this world we are living in is disorderly, intransigently complex and not comprehensible in its entirety. ‘Whenever it is said that such and such an attribute has a necessary existence in such and such a thing,’ Khayyam writes, ‘what is meant is that it exists in the mind and the intellect, *and not in reality*. Similarly whenever it is said that the existence of such and such an attribute is dependent upon the existence of some other attribute, what is meant is *existence in mind and the intellect*.’⁶ Khayyam reveals himself here as an early ‘postmodernist’. He is convinced that our surrounding world is constructed because the realm of actual reality belongs to God. In other words, in his philosophy Khayyam alerts us to the fact that relative to God, the self-concocted world surrounding us appears ‘unreal’. Khayyam expresses the momentum thus ensued, the critical effect that the unavailability of Godly reality created in him, in his world famous quatrains:

Since neither truth nor certitude is at hand
Do not waste life in doubt for a fairy land
O let us not refuse the goblet of wine
For sober or drunk in ignorance we stand⁷

Khayyam's quatrains and philosophy serves as a measure of what poetry and art might yet bring about in this irresistibly critical mode. Khayyam expresses his alien reality, thus giving the lie to notions of religion (including Islam) as a total system immune from the grim realities of historical events. In his own words:

Eternity! – for it we find no key;
 Nor any of us past the Veil can see.
 Of Thee and me they talk behind the Veil
 But when that parts, no more of Thee and me.⁸

The very failure of Khayyam to redeem himself, the fact that neither his poetry nor his 'drunkenness' can bring him closer to God, is also, paradoxically, the source of the irresistible critical merit of his poetry and philosophy. Khayyam presages that the individual is constantly obliged to bridge the gap between this alien world and the necessary and absolute Divinity designated as God. Yet this utopia is by definition unattainable, sameness with God is the 'impossible ontology' or *mumtani al-wujud* in Ibn Sina's words. In this way, Khayyam and the Avicennian tradition establishes 'an ontology based on the "poverty" of all things before God and their reliance upon the Source of all being for their very existence'.⁹ Mysticism (Sufism), poetry, the arts and philosophy become the inevitable routes to seek respite from the mundane world and to simulate closeness with God. They hold out the promise, never to be kept, of a realm of consciousness where the individual could at last find an image of perfect equilibrium, of sensuous pleasure that would rescue her from the antinomies of her present existence. As such, philosophy and poetry embody a much perfected form of ontological negation. The idea of God functions as a propeller for a productive form of criticism and as an incubator for progressive expressions of art and philosophy.

Embraces of self and other

Let me expand this discussion now and relocate it at the same time. To my mind the music of Wagner, Bach and Beethoven's late style express the same power of negation, the ethos of a sensuous escape from the ontological order, that the radically transcendental philosophy (and poetry) of Rumi, Khayyam, Hafiz, Saadi, and Ibn Sina embodies. I would

even go one step further, following Adorno. In the aesthetic expression of utopia the construction of dichotomous identities, whether of Orient and Occident, is minimised, because works of art with maximal aesthetic value are depleted of 'tribal identities'. This is why Rumi, Hafiz, Khayyam, Bach, Wagner, Beethoven are almost universally revered. Their art positions itself beyond categories. They give us a glimpse into the 'Natuschöne', the naturally sublime, a sign of reconciliation between self and other.¹⁰

The German Marxist thinker Ernst Bloch expresses a similar belief in aesthetic reconciliation especially with regard to the mediating power of music. 'Only the musical note, that enigma of sensuousness,' he writes, 'is sufficiently unencumbered by the world yet phenomenal enough to the last to return — like the metaphysical word — as a final material factor in the fulfilment of mystical self-perception, spread upon the golden sub-soil of the receptive human potentiality.'¹¹ Bloch alludes to the dual constitution of music, which has both formal properties and transcendental ones. In this he concurs with other German thinkers such as Schopenhauer and Nietzsche who coined the term 'musical ecstasy' in his *The Birth of Tragedy*. They all agree that music is 'at once the most humanly revealing form of art and the form most resistant to description or analysis in conceptual terms.'¹² From this perspective, music both rationalises and mystifies, it has both mathematical structure and emotional power. If musical aesthetics could hitherto not negotiate between these two extremes, it is an indicator that music brings both to the fore, without reconciling them in a final, grand synthesis. There is no transcendence or unity, for what music potentially presages is a 'figuring-out *in fonte hominum et rerum* that is utopian and fermenting, in an area of intensity that is open only to music.'¹³ For Bloch, especially Beethoven's compositions are anti-Hegelian, even contra-Enlightenment because they do not mimic perfect harmony. Beethoven may touch and tease the irreconcilable, but he finally keeps them apart. In this, music is the most successful of the arts 'succeeding visuality and belonging to the formally eccentric philosophy of inwardness, its ethic and metaphysics'. For Bloch this means that '[b]oth the existence and the concept of music are only attained in conjunction with a new object-theory, with the metaphysics of divination and utopia.'¹⁴ Thus the transformative force of music lies in its unreconciled vigour which defies capitulation to Hegelian totalities.

Art expressed in this form is ‘trans-historical’ without prescribing tribal passions. I get emotionally aroused when I listen to Wagner, so did Hitler. The pop singer ‘Madonna’ is fascinated by the poetry of Rumi, so was Ayatollah Khomeini. It is in this sense that art embodies the potentiality of change without, however, falling into the trap of Hegel’s big promise that it can bring about the final reconciliation of opposites, the great myth of perfect harmony. This is art as continuous renewal that does not usher in a grand synthesis. For Adorno there is

more pleasure in dissonance than in consonance: and this repays hedonism in due measure. What is incisive is dynamically sharpened, differentiated from itself and from the monotony of affirmativeness, and becomes an attraction. This attraction, no less than a disgust with optimistic nonsense, leads the new art into a no-man’s-land that represents the inhabitable earth. ... Negation is able to transform itself into pleasure, not into what is positive.¹⁵

Once it is realised that the contrapuntal composition of art is not reconcilable, the Hegelian promise reveals itself as a fallacy. Here we can establish a nuance between Bloch and Adorno. Whereas the former professed in the ability of music to effectively respond to emergent social and historical configurations, the latter’s negative dialectic is notably more pessimistic. For Adorno, the ‘promise held out by the work of art that it will create truth by lending new shape to the conventional social forms is as necessary as it is hypocritical.’ It is necessary because art unleashes irresistible transcendental powers:

That factor in a work of art which enables it to transcend reality certainly cannot be detached from style; but it does not consist of the harmony actually realised, of any doubtful unity of form and content, within and without, of individual and society; it is to be found in those features in which discrepancy appears: in the necessary failure of the passionate striving for identity.¹⁶

And it is hypocritical because with the advent of the modern ‘culture industry’ the emancipatory and redeeming forces of art are subjugated to the cult of consumption (e.g. pop shows such as the ‘X Factor’ or ‘American Idol’). Instead of exposing itself to the intrinsic resistance of art to loose the power of negation and critique, the culture industry pushes art towards conformity with the status quo; art as commodity and ‘obedience to social hierarchy. ‘Today,’ Adorno writes, ‘aesthetic barbarity completes what has threatened the creations of the spirit since they were gathered together as culture and neutralised.’¹⁷ The only way the critical theorists could escape this conundrum, is to free himself from the determinations of his day and age, to seek the powers of negation, if necessary in music and literature (Becket in Adorno’s case). It is true, that Adorno famously concluded that writing poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric. But this does not mean that he advocated cultural, political and social apathy. Like Khayyam, who tampered his despair by positioning himself within the realm of Islamic mysticism (if necessary by drinking a few carafes of wine), Adorno identified radical negation as the only means to prepare ourselves for the massive process of ‘final displacement’ that will be brought about by the messianic utopia awaiting him:

The only philosophy which can be responsibly practised in the face of despair is the attempt to contemplate all things as they would appear from the standpoint of redemption ... Perspectives must be fashioned that displace and estrange the world, reveal it to be, with its rifts and crevices, as indigent and distorted as it will appear one day in the messianic light.¹⁸

Critical theory reveals itself here as a prophylaxis to prepare humanity for the experience of the absolute realm of possibility, *mumtani al-wujud*, encapsulated in the ‘suridealistic’ encounter with God. According to Adorno, this final encounter will evaporate all residues of our superstitious belief in an ‘orderly’ world. As long as the poet, composer, artist, mystic, philosopher and intellectual do not despair in their effort to bridge the gap between the status quo and that utopia, they are compelled to search for the ‘truth’ which engenders a critical attitude towards the status quo. Adorno agrees with both Ibn Sina and Khayyam here. To

their mind, it does not if it is History or God which constitutes the horizon, the place towards which all meaning strife in the quest for the ‘ultimate surideal’, the ‘end of history’ or ‘judgment day’. It does not matter if it is the dialectical materialism of Marx or Jesus’s ‘Kingdom of God’, the Buddhist Nirvana or the Hindu Karma, that animates critique. It only does, when the continuous transformation towards a future potentiality is monopolised by the state, the party or another polity or when values such as equality, social justice and human rights are compromised. It does not really matter which utopia inspires us, as long as it compels us to sustain a global impetus against reification, against quests for authenticity, against hegemony, against totalities, against the deification of power. As long as utopia holds out the promise of continuous transformation towards a better tomorrow, where the relation between knower and known is a dialectic potentially open for contrapuntal re-imagining, it is not something that we should be afraid of.¹⁹

It was Immanuel Kant who asked whether one should leave the comforting bosom of one’s own rationality and venture out to discover the ‘other’. After some serious critical contemplation he remained where he departed from. Others did dare to venture further. Some of them paid a heavy price—delusion and insanity in Nietzsche’s case, melancholy and despair in the case of Khayyam. Optimistically, I do believe—and in my rather more recent writing have tried to demonstrate—that today we can appreciate the archives filled with the work of eastern and western, northern and southern thinkers in a truly comparative manner. It is not at least thanks to the availability of a counter-archive to Eurocentric readings of philosophy and art, that we have enough knowledge at hand to free ourselves from the shackles of tribal thinking. So that the next time we read a history of the ‘west’ or ‘Islam’, we immediately ask how the ‘other’ is represented; if she is not abused as a supplement in order to enunciate what the ‘self’ stands for. Next time we attend a seminar or lecture, we would pierce the speaker with questions about the validity of categories such as race, nationality, religious confession etc. We would ask her if it is analytically unproblematic to place ourselves inside such suspicious totalisations.

No discourse is innocent, nothing in the social world is apolitical and I hope that some of the ideas in the foregoing have indicated that all unities

are dubious. Freeing oneself from their totalitarian impact is utterly rewarding. Mind you, it does shatter the infinitesimally small mosaics out of which we have created our identities. But once we pull our self together and start the process of picking up the pieces, they will appear clearer to us; we will be able to analyse and comprehend them more easily and to reconfigure them within a wider frame than before. And so it is that we can attain to a multicultural consciousness without committing any pagan betrayal of our own Mosaic composition. At that stage of our intellectual journey, we are truly liberated.

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