

# Orientalisms in the interpretation of Islamic philosophy

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The recent death of Edward Said has reignited the debate as to whether his landmark work *Orientalism* still has something to teach us about the study of Arab-Islamic civilization. In this article, I will argue that Said's central thesis in *Orientalism* has a direct explanatory role to play in our understanding of the work produced in at least one area of scholarship about the Arab and Islamic worlds, namely Arab-Islamic philosophy from the classical or medieval period. Moreover, I will claim that it continues to play this role not only for scholarship produced in the West by Western scholars but also within the Arab world itself. After recalling some traditional varieties of Orientalism in the study of Islamic philosophy, I will go on to isolate some neo-Orientalist theses and positions. Then I will identify what I call 'oriental Orientalism' in the study of Islamic philosophy, which originates in the Arab world itself. In conclusion, I will speculate as to why Orientalism persists in scholarship about the Islamic world, more than a quarter of a century after Said first unmasked it. Finally, I will distinguish two accounts of Said's interpretive stance and attempt to justify a particular reading of his philosophical framework.

## **Traditional Orientalism**

Traditional Orientalism is not difficult to find among the first European scholars who studied Islamic philosophy in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. It can be summarized in the form of a few salient theses that were prevalent among such scholars as Ernest Renan, T.J. de Boer, W.G. Tennemann, and others. For the sake of brevity, I will outline three.

Renan is well known for having considered the Islamic philosophical corpus as entirely derivative of Greek and Hellenistic philosophy. The view held by him and others was that Islamic philosophy was Greek philosophy in Arabic letters. As he put it: 'This philosophy was written in Arabic, because this idiom had

become the learned and sacred language of all Muslim countries; that is all.'<sup>1</sup> In Renan's view, although the Arabs imparted a national character to their religious creations, poetry, architecture and theological sects, they showed little originality in philosophy. Indeed, 'The true Arab genius, characterized by the poetry of the Kasidas and the eloquence of the Qur'an, is absolutely antithetical to Greek philosophy.'<sup>2</sup> Rather, Greek philosophy was introduced to Arab-Islamic civilization thanks to a combination of Persian and Syrian Christian initiative. T.J. De Boer expresses a similar viewpoint in *The History of Philosophy in Islam*:

Oriental wisdom, Astrology and Cosmology delivered over to Muslim thinkers material of many kinds, but the Form, the formative principle, came to them from the Greeks. In every case where it is not mere enumeration or chance concatenation that is taken in hand, but where an attempt is made to arrange the Manifold according to positive or logical points of view, we may conclude with all probability that Greek influences have been at work.<sup>3</sup>

Among these early students of Islamic philosophy in the West, departures from Greek philosophy were often considered misunderstandings rather than innovations; they even attributed to Islamic philosophers a failure to understand the Greeks, rather than consider that they might harbour different views from their illustrious predecessors. Moreover, this attitude took on a racial dimension in Renan, as when he contrasted Aryan rationalism with Semitic religious sensibility, charging that the Arabs are inherently incapable of producing original philosophy and have inherited what rationality they have from the Aryan Greeks.

Though not absent in recent Western scholarship, this attitude is less common among scholars writing in the twentieth century. Still, clear traces remain. To cite just one example, E.I.J. Rosenthal claims that

the reason Fārābī views democracy more favourably than Plato is that he has missed the irony implicit in Socrates' mock praise of democracy. The possibility that Fārābī holds different views from Plato on independent grounds is scarcely even considered. In fact, when Rosenthal allows himself to speculate that Fārābī may have differed from Plato, he holds that 'it is not impossible' that he has taken his views from Aristotle – despite the fact that Aristotle's *Politics* was almost certainly not known in the Islamic world during the classical period, and never reached these philosophers.<sup>4</sup> Apparently, even a nonexistent Greek text is a more likely source of ideas than the creative faculties of the Islamic philosophers themselves.

Another early Orientalist thesis is that philosophy held a marginal place in Islamic culture as a whole, and was restricted to a small group of elite free-thinkers. Some scholars who admit the originality of these thinkers nevertheless maintain that their innovative contributions were largely disregarded since they never went further than a minuscule audience. Renan is again the *locus classicus*: 'The philosophers in Islam were isolated men, ill regarded, and persecuted...'<sup>5</sup> The claim is sometimes supported by the esotericism of the Islamic philosophers themselves, since the major figures in the tradition clearly held that their views and doctrines should be revealed only to a class of intellectuals who alone could grasp their subtleties and abstruse deductive arguments. But one should not take this as an indication of the actual influence of philosophical ideas, since their indirect impact took many forms. First, numerous Arabic terms were coined expressly to denote philosophical concepts, including such ubiquitous terms as *kamīyyah* (quantity), *kayfīyyah* (quality), *wujūd* (existence), *dhāt* (essence), *jawhar* (substance), and so on. Second, given the seamless links between philosophy and natural science, including medicine – which was firmly grounded in notions of form and matter, the four elements, substance, essence and accident – philosophical doctrines and theories penetrated the culture at large thanks to the centrality of medical theory and practice. Third, many establishment figures in Islamic history formulated their mainstream attitudes, at least in part, in reaction to the views of the philosophers. Such central thinkers as al-Ash'arī, al-Ghazālī, Ibn Ḥazm, al-Shahrastānī, Ibn Taymīyyah and Ibn Khaldūn frequently occupied themselves in responding to the philosophers, in the process borrowing their concepts and inheriting their problematic. Finally, philosophical views on such matters as the best form of government, the relation between faith and reason, and the nature

of God, among others, were often taken up without acknowledgement.

A third thesis prevalent among traditional Orientalists is that philosophy in Islam was dominated by the struggle between revelation and reason, and obsessed with the dichotomy of intellect (*caql*), on the one hand, and tradition or revelation (*naql*), on the other. This feeds into the conception of Islamic philosophy as a defensive enterprise, embattled and encircled, rather than one that fashioned its own intellectual space. This amorphous thesis is hard to refute briefly, but anyone with a passing acquaintance with the content of Arab-Islamic philosophy will know that there is much more to this diverse tradition than a cultural war with orthodoxy. These philosophers did not see themselves as involved in a struggle as much as in an attempt to examine the relationship between revelation and reason, an enterprise they often shared with the theologians – despite their differences of opinion. Moreover, it is not even accurate to say that the theologians were uniformly more literalist or orthodox than the philosophers, as the philosophers themselves were often at pains to point out.<sup>6</sup> To the extent that the problematic of intellect and revelation did figure in the work of the Islamic philosophers, it did so no more than in medieval Christian philosophy, or indeed in early modern European philosophy. One need look no further than the 'Letter of Dedication' to Descartes' *Meditations* for a vivid impression of the fragile tension between the theologians and philosophers in seventeenth-century France.<sup>7</sup>

A more recent twist to the traditional Orientalist tendency in the study of Islamic philosophy is provided by the work of Henry Corbin. Corbin opposes the three theses that I have identified as being distinctive of traditional Orientalist interpretations of Islamic philosophy: its alleged derivativeness, marginality, and conflict with religion. But he continues to view Islamic philosophy as monolithic and essentially different from Western philosophy. Moreover, like some of the traditional Orientalists I have discussed, he links the 'essence' of Islamic philosophy to certain ethnic characteristics and culturally uniform traits. Corbin concurs with Renan in regarding the genius of the Muslims as residing primarily in the spiritual rather than the rational realm.<sup>8</sup> But rather than conclude that Islamic philosophy is therefore unoriginal, he takes the spiritual dimension as its defining characteristic, setting it apart from other philosophical traditions: 'In Islam, above all, the history of philosophy and the history of spirituality are inseparable.'<sup>9</sup> More importantly, he regards this allegedly dominant spiritual ten-

dency as a positive attribute, valorizing it and setting it up as the main contribution of Islamic philosophy. For him, Islamic philosophy represents a system of thought dominated by mysticism, a critique of rationalism, and an attempt to transcend the logical methods inherited from the Greeks. Corbin also characterizes this philosophy as ‘Oriental philosophy’, trading on the ambiguity in the Arabic adjective *ishraqi* (which is usually translated as ‘illuminationist’ rather than ‘eastern’ or ‘Oriental’).

Therefore, although Corbin dissents from traditional Orientalists in that he regards Islamic philosophy as being original, he concurs with them in considering it to be essentially different in nature from Western philosophy, and in holding that it is stamped by the ethnic character of the thinkers who were instrumental in its development (in his case, Persians not Arabs). Corbin writes that Islamic philosophy is fundamentally a prophetic philosophy: ‘A prophetic philosophy presupposes a type of thought which does not allow itself to be bound either by the historical past..., or by the limits imposed by the resources and laws of rational Logic.’<sup>10</sup> In addition, this type of philosophy is esoteric and its ‘esoteric meaning is not something one can construct with the support of Logic or a battery of syllogisms’.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, he insists: ‘The significance and continuance of philosophical meditation in Islam can be truly grasped only so long as we do not attempt to see it, at any price, as the exact equivalent of what we in the West have for our part called “philosophy” over the last few centuries.’<sup>12</sup> Though Corbin views Islamic philosophy positively, his interpretation distorts it by portraying it as exclusively mystical and anti-rationalist in nature, and represents it as being essentially alien and difficult to communicate to outsiders.<sup>13</sup>

### Neo-Orientalism

These views, at least in their extreme versions, have declined in prominence, but there is another attitude, very much in the spirit of Orientalism, that continues to play a central role in the study of Islamic philosophy. Though it may not appear overtly Orientalist in character, and may indeed seem opposed to traditional Orientalism, the net result of this attitude is to alienate and exoticize Islamic philosophy and to downplay its role *as* philosophy.

Before describing the trend I have in mind, I will distinguish it from another tendency with which it is sometimes confused. Some scholars proceed from the notion that philosophy in the Islamic world was so persecuted that the outward meaning of the text remains hidden and can only be divined through a close reading

by experts. Oliver Leaman seems to regard this as the pre-eminent manifestation of Orientalism in the current study of Islamic philosophy, attributing it to Leo Strauss and his followers. As Leaman puts it:

The assumption is that Islamic philosophy should not be regarded as philosophy primarily, but more as a code which needs to be cracked in order to discover the opinions of the philosophers. It is seen as a form of literature which disguises the real opinions of its writers, and it is the job of the interpreter to find out what these real opinions are, to pierce the layers of concealment and uncover the genuine beliefs of the author.<sup>14</sup>

Leaman regards this as ‘Orientalism at its worst’, adding that,

It implies that the philosophers in the Islamic world could not really be thought of as philosophers just like philosophers everywhere else, but should be regarded as capable only of a lesser and inferior activity, using philosophical language to present unoriginal views in convoluted ways.<sup>15</sup>

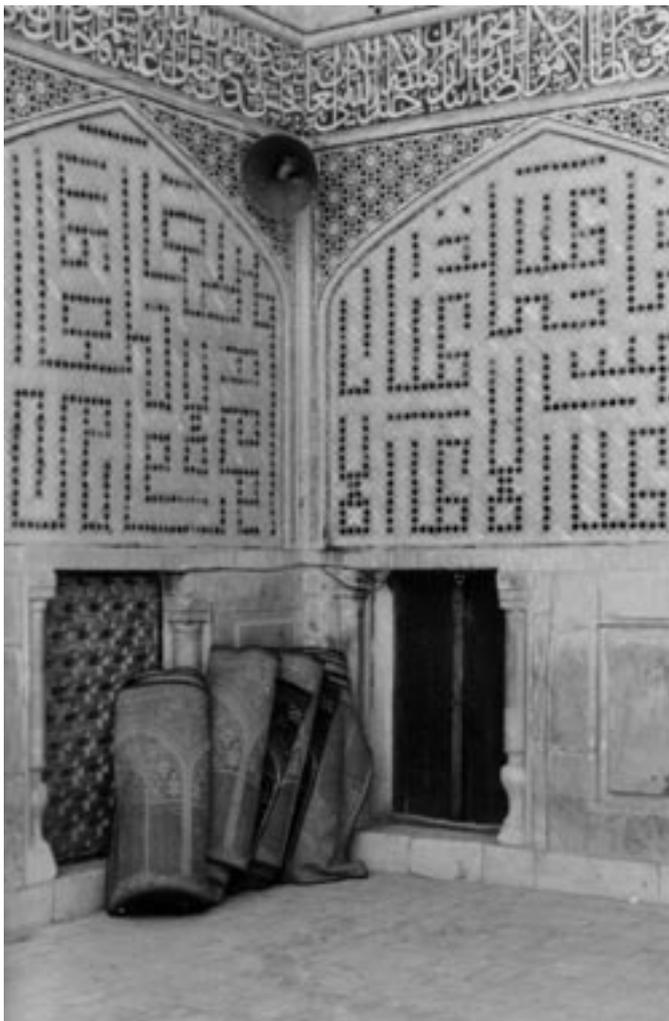
But it seems to me that this misunderstands the intent of Straussianism. Although the Straussian mode of interpretation that Leaman criticizes gives rise to an overly narrow view of Islamic philosophy and has often led to gross distortions, it is only fair to add that the method is typically applied across the board. That is to say, Straussians read Fārābī in this manner no less than Plato or Machiavelli. This makes it difficult to maintain that their method of interpretation is particularly Orientalist in character, since Strauss and his followers regard persecution to be a hallmark of *all* philosophical writing and consider philosophy to be engaged in a constant struggle with religion, in Christendom and the Islamic world alike. As such, they claim that philosophers in both traditions needed to hide their true views, which can only be discerned by reading between the lines and divining what these philosophers were really trying to say. In short, it does not seem useful to characterize an attitude as Orientalist if it is equally applicable to the Occident. At best, the attitude is Orientalist in practice because in the case of Islamic philosophy this method is more widespread and is applied to the exclusion of others. At one point, the Straussian mode of interpretation was dominant among those who studied Islamic philosophy in the United States. This meant that this became by far the most common way of reading these texts in the West, which led ultimately to an exoticization of the texts. The overall effect of the dominance of Strauss’s method when it came to Islamic philosophy may have led to a kind of Orientalism in practice, even though

the intention of the Straussians was to apply their method to all philosophical writing. Nonetheless, the fact remains that Strauss and his followers did not see the Islamic philosophers as different in this respect from non-Islamic philosophers.

There is another, more pervasive, tendency than the Straussian one among scholars of Islamic philosophy, which is more properly Orientalist in character. Although related to the attitude that Leaman identifies, it is importantly distinct from it; indeed, many of its practitioners are staunch opponents of Straussianism. There is a prevalent predisposition among those who study medieval Islamic philosophy today to regard their field of scholarship as an exercise in editing and comparing manuscripts, ascertaining their order of composition, paraphrasing texts, tracing lines of influence, and so on. Although such scholarly work is important and should not be neglected, it cannot be a substitute for the more substantive endeavour of critical engagement with the texts. And engagement means reading the texts as works of philosophy: assessing their arguments, uncovering their underlying assumptions, and understanding their overall projects. That is not to say that one school of reading should dominate

in the interpretation of Islamic philosophy, but those who study it ought to engage in the kind of interpretive enterprise that one finds in other areas of the history of philosophy. To be sure, there is no broad consensus today on what the method of history of philosophy ought to be when it comes to the Western tradition. But what characterizes most works of scholarship in the history of philosophy is a serious attempt to assess the intellectual strengths and weaknesses of the texts. Such work is conspicuously absent in the contemporary study of the history of Islamic philosophy. Strictly speaking, what passes for scholarship in Islamic philosophy today is usually neither what one would consider history of philosophy, nor indeed what is thought of as *intellectual history*. That is to say, there is also little attempt to reconstruct the historical context of these texts, to situate them in their intellectual milieu, to relate them to the social, political and religious debates of their time, and so on.

Interestingly, some of the most prominent contemporary students of Islamic philosophy have diagnosed this problem lucidly, but do not appear to have taken the steps necessary to overcome it. For example, Muhsin Mahdi writes:



One of the strangest criticisms that continues to be made by some of the representatives of the older, historical, and philological tradition of Islamic studies in the West has to do with the validity of attempts to think or rethink the thoughts of a philosopher such as Alfarabi, Avicenna, or Averroes. This means that one can treat their thought historically, biographically, sociologically, and so forth – that is good scholarship. But to think philosophically when dealing with the works of these philosophers, that is said not to be scientific. This view makes no sense of course.<sup>16</sup>

After saying that the ‘concentrated analytical and interpretive ethos’ is lacking in the study of Islamic philosophy, Mahdi adds that when he began seriously studying Islamic philosophy, ‘This seemed to me to be the task of the new generation of students who occupy themselves with Islamic philosophy: they must start with understanding the predicament in which they find themselves and figure a way out.’<sup>17</sup> But he never explains why ‘the new generation of students’ did not in fact carry this out. Similarly, Dimitri Gutas, a scholar who represents an opposing camp among scholars of Islamic philosophy, issues an indictment of ‘Arabist historians of philosophy’ who have failed ‘to present the results of their research, first, to historians of philosophy in a

systematic and rationalized way that will exploit the common points of reference and contact, and second, to their colleagues in Arabic and Islamic studies in a way that will make manifest the relevance of Arabic philosophy to Islamic intellectual life in general.<sup>18</sup> Again, Gutas puts his finger on the problem, but does not hazard an explanation as to why this task has not been undertaken. Both scholars, central figures in the contemporary study of Arab–Islamic philosophy, seem to shift onto others the burden of initiating a change in the way the subject is studied.

Although both Mahdi and Gutas are surprisingly silent on what makes their discipline unwilling to engage with the philosophical content of the texts under study, we can speculate as to why the unphilosophical manner of interpretation continues to dominate in the study of Islamic philosophy. The main impediment to philosophical engagement with these texts is the fact that Islamic philosophy is generally not studied in departments of philosophy in the West. Those who are engaged in studying it are either trained outside philosophy departments, or, if not, are employed outside them. Many (if not most) have appointments in departments of Middle Eastern (or Near Eastern) languages. This reduces the opportunity, either in their research or teaching, to engage with these texts as philosophical texts. Moreover, for the student who wants to specialize in medieval Islamic philosophy in the West today, it is almost impossible to do so within a department of philosophy. This presents formidable institutional obstacles to a philosophical examination of the works of medieval Islamic philosophy and goes a long way to explaining why such forms of scholarly engagement are conspicuously absent. Indeed, it also shows why, despite their keen awareness of the problem, Mahdi and Gutas do not themselves appear to take the necessary steps to address it. One should not leave the impression that every single piece of scholarship on Islamic philosophy has this character; indeed, one could cite notable exceptions to this attitude. But it does suggest that serious structural impediments make it difficult to get around the prevailing tendency that I have identified as ‘neo-Orientalist’.

While these scholars identify the problem and characterize it accurately, other writers seem to miss the point entirely in describing the Orientalist tendency in studying Islamic philosophy. In an article on ‘Orientalism and Islamic philosophy’ in a standard reference work, Ubai Nouruddin criticizes Western scholars ‘who are more interested in finding something new in the Islamic sciences than in attempting to understand the transmission of the corpus of human knowledge

from one people to another’.<sup>19</sup> Nouruddin adds that some scholars ‘expend much effort in finding faults within the Islamic philosophical system, rather than using their impressive abilities to develop a better understanding of the amalgamation and legacy that have been left by the Islamic philosophers.’ Needless to say, exclusive attention to ‘understand[ing] the transmission of knowledge’ and ‘understanding the legacy left by the Islamic philosophers’ is closely related to what I have been characterizing as the neo-Orientalist attitude, which is interested merely in tracing lines of influence and producing reverential paraphrases. By contrast, a thoroughgoing assessment of what is ‘new in the Islamic sciences’ and an objective examination of the ‘faults’ of Islamic philosophical theories would indeed be closer to the critical practice of the history of philosophy.

The fact that Islamic philosophy is studied neither as history of philosophy nor as intellectual history has led to its being viewed as a collection of ossified artefacts of a bygone civilization rather than as a set of ideas that are worth engaging with intellectually. The effect of this dominant, mainly philological, tendency is Orientalist for two main reasons. The first is that it regards Islamic philosophy as essentially different from Western philosophy, in that it is not worthy of active philosophical appraisal and evaluation. Though many of the practitioners of this type of reading seem to think that they are doing their subject matter a favour by treating it with such reverence – as though they dare not intrude upon the philosophers’ arguments – the outcome is to exoticize and alienate the texts. Another reason that this tendency is Orientalist in character is that it leaves the impression that Islamic philosophy, more so than Western philosophy, is inaccessible to a wider public and can only be read and studied by those who have the requisite mastery of a number of languages, religious traditions, and so on. This, in turn, is partly responsible for the continued exclusion of Islamic philosophy from the Western canon.

### **Oriental Orientalism**

Some recent work on Islamic philosophy by Arab–Islamic writers can also be classified as Orientalist, despite the apparent oddity of applying the label to thinkers from the ‘Orient’, which is why I am calling it ‘oriental Orientalism’. The main proponent of this attitude is the Moroccan scholar Muḥammad ‘Ābid al-Jābirī (Mohammed ‘Abed al-Jabri), whose influential writings on the so-called ‘Arab mind’ have generated considerable debate in the Arab world and also received some attention in the West.<sup>20</sup> One finds

in Jābirī's work a thoroughgoing reductionism that considers what he calls 'Arab reason' to be a unified whole whose only mode of thought is the 'analogy of the unknown after the known' (*qiyās al-ghā'ib 'alā al-shāhid*).<sup>21</sup> Jābirī writes:

This irresponsible practice of analogy has become the invariable element (the constant) that regulates the movements within the structure of Arab reason. This element stops time, suspends evolution and creates a permanent presence of the past inside the game of thought and inside the affective domain, thus feeding the present with ready-made solutions.<sup>22</sup>

This move to reduce an entire intellectual tradition to a single manner of reasoning, which is stagnant and inert by nature, is strongly reminiscent of Orientalism of a traditional sort, and Jābirī does little to dispel this initial impression. He supports his reductionist thesis by saying that 'theoretical thinking in a given society at a given time constitutes a particular unity endowed with its own armature inside of which the different movements and tendencies blend in, so to speak.'<sup>23</sup> But despite his attempt to justify this thesis by saying that a similar kind of unity of thought could be attributed to, say, Greek philosophy, Jābirī regards Islamic philosophy to be inferior to Western philosophy in its static and inert character. He puts this quite unequivocally: 'In other words, what we call "Islamic philosophy" did not enjoy a continual and renewed reading of its own history like Greek philosophy or like the European philosophy from Descartes until now.'<sup>24</sup> Though he acknowledges that Arab-Islamic thought in the realm of science did evolve and produce innovations, he claims that these advances in the sciences did not have an impact on philosophy.

Explicit discussions of the 'Arab mind' or the 'structure of Arab reason' are nowadays somewhat rare in serious Western scholarship – despite the persistence of such assumptions in political consciousness and in popular discourse. Therefore one is dismayed to find these phrases so casually deployed by a contemporary Arab thinker with such weak justification. But Jābirī's oriental Orientalism goes further, in at least two ways. First, his readings of classical Islamic philosophy are concerned only with what he calls its 'ideological content' to the exclusion of its 'cognitive content'. By his own admission, he has no interest in the arguments and theories of these philosophers, but is rather focused on 'the ideological function (socio-political) to which the author or authors of this thought subordinate the cognitive material.'<sup>25</sup> Jābirī is not only dismissing the substance of Islamic philosophy in favour of its alleged

socio-political role, he is also attributing a similar view to these philosophers themselves, namely that the substance of their work is unimportant compared to the socio-political function that they wanted it to perform. Indeed, the cognitive material contained in these texts is, according to him, highly repetitive and not innovative in the least.<sup>26</sup> Echoing traditional Orientalism, he writes: 'All the Muslim philosophers' creative activity centred around one problematic, which is usually referred to as the problematics of 'reconciling reason and transmission.'<sup>27</sup> He regards philosophy primarily as a 'militant ideological discourse' dedicated to the service of science and defending rationalism against a kind of irrationalist religious traditionalism.<sup>28</sup> For reasons that seem to have more to do with contemporary polemics in the Arab world and debates with proponents of political Islam, Jābirī relegates the entire Islamic philosophical corpus to a single ideological function.

A second aspect of Jābirī's reading, which is quite literally Orientalist in character, is the claim that there is a split among Islamic philosophers between those in the Eastern provinces, whose work was dominated by a kind of anti-rationalist mysticism, and those from the Western regions, who exemplify progressive rationalism and are the most effective representatives of the 'militant ideological discourse' that he favours. On his account, the split occurred as a result of the contributions of Ibn Sīnā (Avicenna): 'With his Eastern philosophy, Avicenna consecrated a spiritualist and gnostic trend whose impact was instrumental in the regression of Arab thinking from an open rationalism... to a pernicious irrationalism.'<sup>29</sup> That was the fate of philosophy in the East, but luckily rationalism asserted itself in the Islamic West, according to Jābirī.<sup>30</sup> He speculates as to why the West became rationalist while the East stagnated in a kind of irrational philosophizing, but the explanation rests on a facile reading of the relationship between philosophy and science.<sup>31</sup> Not surprisingly, the chauvinism that emerges in Jābirī's privileging of the Arab-Islamic West over the inferior East has met with a degree of resistance in some discussions of his work in the Arab world, and his response has been unrepentant. In some instances, it has served merely to exacerbate the problem:

I wish that all those who accuse me of being prejudiced [*ta'aṣṣub*, chauvinism] in favour of the rationalist West and against the mystical East (as they put it) would recognize that Ibn Sīnā, with whose philosophy I said, and repeat, Ibn Rushd made a break, is himself from the 'far east', from Bukhārā,

the land of the Persians. He [Ibn Sīnā], the gnostic physician al-Rāzī, and al-Ghazālī all belong to an ‘east’ that lies far beyond the area that extends from the [Atlantic] Ocean to the [Persian] Gulf, whose beating heart is: Egypt.<sup>32</sup>

This response is more incriminating than Jābirī’s original attempt to distinguish West from East, in that it seeks refuge in a kind of ethnocentrism that pits Arabs against Persians, insinuating that the ethnic origins of Ibn Sīnā, Ghazālī and al-Rāzī were responsible for their alleged irrationalism. This is quite literally an Orientalist reading of Islamic philosophy, since it defines an ‘Orient’ within the Orient, whose borders lie somewhere to the east of Mesopotamia. We have come full circle back to the cultural essentialism of traditional Orientalism, but unlike Renan, Jābirī attributes to Persians rather than Semites an incapacity for logical thought, and unlike Corbin he does not view this allegedly Persian irrationalism in a positive light.

Jābirī’s reading of Arab-Islamic philosophy is literally Orientalist both in attributing the deadening influence on Islamic philosophy to Persia and central Asia, and in a more extended sense: namely, in its reversion to a one-dimensional view of Islamic philosophy as being incapable of evolving and as fulfilling a single ideological function. Ironically, Jābirī himself accuses an earlier generation of Arab scholars of being insufficiently critical of Orientalism in the study of Islamic philosophy, but his critique is often bizarrely anachronistic and ultimately misses the mark. He berates Muṣṭafā ‘Abd al-Rāziq and Ibrāhīm Madkūr, Egyptian scholars writing in the 1930s and 1940s, for lack of sensitivity to the concept of ‘Orientalism’ as it is currently used, without ever acknowledging the fact they were writing several decades before Edward Said published *Orientalism* (1978). Although Said’s name goes unmentioned in Jābirī’s essay, he accuses these scholars of not going far enough in criticizing Orientalist readings of Islamic philosophy. He charges that they still talk in terms of reinserting Islamic philosophy into the Western tradition, rather than showing it as surpassing medieval Latin philosophy.<sup>33</sup> Presumably, it surpasses it only in terms of its ideological content rather than its cognitive content – since he elsewhere regards all medieval philosophy as of a piece.<sup>34</sup>

Yet rather than trying to demonstrate that Islamic philosophy is somehow superior, we would be well advised to take a leaf from the work of the earlier generation of Arab scholars whom Jābirī excoriates. Their call to reinsert Islamic philosophy into the Western canon serves as a refreshing reminder that

what we term the ‘West’ is more shot through with external influences than conventional taxonomies would have us believe.<sup>35</sup> As Edward Said observed in *Culture and Imperialism*, we all need to situate our history and tradition in a ‘geography of other identities, peoples, cultures, and then to study how, despite their differences, they have always overlapped one another, through unhierarchical influence, crossing, incorporation, recollection, deliberate forgetfulness, and of course, conflict.’ ‘The fact is’, he concludes, ‘that we are mixed in with one another in ways that most national systems of education have not dreamed of.’<sup>36</sup> The hybridity of the Western philosophical tradition and its interpenetration with Islamic philosophy is a more useful interpretive framework than the antagonistic one that Jābirī espouses.

### Bacon or Foucault?

I have outlined three genres of Orientalist interpretation of Islamic philosophy: a traditional sort dominant in the heyday of Orientalism, a more covert variety that continues to prevail in the study of Islamic philosophy today, and a home-grown version that is manifest in the work of at least one contemporary Arab scholar. In doing so, I have argued that the latter two modes of interpretation are genuinely Orientalist in Edward Said’s original sense, in regarding Islamic philosophy as essentially different from Western philosophy and in presenting it as a monolith with a single overriding character. The persistence of Orientalist discourse in contemporary scholarship and its incidence even in the Arab world itself calls for a word of explanation. In the conclusion to *Orientalism*, Said writes that ‘despite its failures ... Orientalism flourishes today.’<sup>37</sup> He adds that, ‘It is ... apparent, I think, that the circumstances making Orientalism a continuingly persuasive type of thought will persist: a rather depressing matter on the whole.’<sup>38</sup>

Said predicts the persistence of Orientalist discourse presumably because of the intransigence of the power relations that he identified as informing Orientalism in the first place. Despite the demise of colonialism of a traditional variety, the web of power relations that continues to govern the relationship between the West and the Middle East still largely reinforces and is reinforced by Orientalist discourse. The phenomenon can be glibly summed up in the slogan ‘Knowledge is power.’ But, rather than rest with this glib slogan, I want to suggest that there are in fact two readings of this phrase, which might be identified respectively with Francis Bacon and Michel Foucault. On the Baconian understanding of the slogan, knowledge is instrumental

in the projection of power, its perpetuation, and sustenance; it both feeds and is fed by the exercise of power. However, on the Foucauldian view, there is no such thing as knowledge beyond what various systems of power disseminate as their vision of reality. In my view, Said is more of a Baconian than a Foucauldian on this score. That is to say, he is interested in the way in which the academies and the think-tanks conspire in the projection of power – namely by misinterpreting, misrepresenting, misinforming, and omitting what does not fit into their world-view. Despite his obvious debts to Foucault, Said generally sees power-laden discourse as a distortion of a fuller and more accurate picture, not just as one more assertion of a will to power, whose only possible response is another. As he puts it in the introduction to *Orientalism*:

Perhaps the most important task of all would be to undertake studies in contemporary alternatives to Orientalism, to ask how one can study other cultures and peoples from a libertarian, or a nonrepressive and nonmanipulative, perspective. But then one would have to rethink the whole complex problem of knowledge and power.<sup>39</sup>

At the end of the work, he explains that ‘one way of opening oneself to what one studies in or about the Orient is reflexively to submit one’s method to critical scrutiny.’<sup>40</sup> Elsewhere, he has written that a ‘full intellectual process’ involves ‘historically informed research, as well as the presentation of a coherent and carefully argued line that has taken account of alternatives.’<sup>41</sup> The possibility of non-coercive interactions that lead to more nuanced, responsive and empathic interpretations is precisely what makes me think that Said does not embrace the more nihilistic aspects of Foucault – and is what makes him hold out hope for more meaningful intellectual engagements between the West and the Middle East based on a more equitable power relationship.

For the sake of completeness, I should add that some interpreters of Said have considered him to be propounding a kind of cultural relativism. Indeed, there is evidence in his work that may suggest as much. In a well-known passage in *Orientalism* he writes:

It is not the thesis of this book to suggest that there is such a thing as a real or true Orient (Islam, Arab, or whatever)... On the contrary, I have been arguing that ‘the Orient’ is itself a constituted entity, and that the notion that there are geographical spaces with indigenous, radically ‘different’ inhabitants who can be defined on the basis of some religion, culture, or racial essence proper to that geographical space is equally a highly debatable idea.<sup>42</sup>

Yet rather than betraying a kind of simple-minded relativism, I take this as an admission that no single account of ‘the Orient’ (or indeed of a subject as large as Islamic philosophy) could claim finality or comprehensiveness. That is not to suggest, however, that there could not be better and worse accounts of such subjects as Islamic philosophy, Arabic calligraphy or Mamlūk architecture. What renders some accounts better than others is not a simple matter to determine, and is likely to be domain-specific. I have been arguing in this article that an account of Islamic philosophy that analyses its central arguments and interrogates them is superior to one that merely indicates the provenance of its principal theories. Different standards and guidelines are undoubtedly more suitable when it comes to different subject matters and disciplines. In all cases, the accounts that we consider to be accurate, perceptive, and marked by superior understanding are likely to be ones that are not warped by being in the service of hegemonic power or colonial domination.

Finally, one might wonder why, given this explanation for the persistence of Orientalism, which is premised on asymmetries of power, a species of Orientalism finds its home in the writings of an Arab scholar, based in the Arab world, writing on Arab-Islamic philosophy. I will conclude by suggesting that these very same power relations do not just infect scholarship in the West, but have repercussions for the way that Arab scholars view their own intellectual traditions. Many contemporary Arab intellectuals seem to feel the need to set up their own version of the enlightened West *within* Arab-Islamic history largely because of an overwhelming sense of defensiveness and inferiority vis-à-vis the West. In addition, they sometimes seem wholly fixated on their differences with political Islam and regard this as the pre-eminent confrontation of their time, distorting their own intellectual traditions in order to fight this cultural war, at least partly because that is the confrontation that looms largest in the mind of the West. This is not an attempt to blame our own Orientalist discourse on the West, but rather a suggestion that the power relations that continue to define the West’s relationship to the Middle East have a ripple effect that influences not just Western discourse but Arab discourse as well.

## Notes

I am grateful to Tarif Khalidi, Diane Riskedahl, Peter Hallward and an anonymous referee for comments on earlier versions of this article. I would also like to thank audiences at the Conference in Honour of Edward Said, Université Paris 7–Denis Diderot, September 2004, and at the Civilization Sequence Program Forum at the American University

of Beirut, February 2005, for helpful feedback. The research and writing of this article were made possible in part by a summer grant from the University Research Board of the American University of Beirut.

1. Ernest Renan, *Averroès et l'Averroïsme*, Calmann Lévy, Paris, 1882, p. 90; original emphasis (my translation).
2. Ibid.
3. T.J. De Boer, *The History of Philosophy in Islam*, trans. Edward R. Jones, Dover, New York, 1967 (1903), pp. 10–11. He also writes: 'The earliest Muslim thinkers were so fully convinced of the superiority of Greek knowledge that they did not doubt that it had attained to the highest degree of certainty. The thought of making farther and independent investigations did not readily occur to an Oriental, who cannot imagine a man without a teacher as being anything else than a disciple of Satan' (ibid., p. 28).
4. E.I.J. Rosenthal, ed., *Averroes' Commentary on Plato's Republic*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1966 (1956), especially pp. 293–4.
5. Renan, *Averroès et l'Averroïsme*, p. 173.
6. For instance, Ibn Rushd (Averroes) points out: 'the Muslims are unanimous in holding that it is not obligatory either to take all the expressions of the Law in their apparent meaning or to extend them all from their apparent meaning by interpretation.' Ibn Rushd, *The Decisive Treatise*, trans. G. Hourani, in *Medieval Political Philosophy*, ed. R. Lerner and M. Mahdi, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, 1963, p. 170.
7. Descartes' Letter, which is addressed to the Dean and Faculty of Sacred Theology at the University of Paris, betrays a great deal of anxiety both about being accused of innovation (hence his insistence that his arguments are not new), and about venturing with reason into the province of faith (to which he responds by saying that faith is made stronger if the anti-religious arguments can be rebutted with rational ones).
8. There is an almost diametric opposition when it comes to the way in which Renan and Corbin make the link between ethnicity and philosophical style. For Renan, Greek philosophy penetrated Islam thanks to the 'Persian spirit, represented by the Abbasid dynasty' (*Averroès et l'Averroïsme*, p. 91), which was rationalist in character, in contrast to the 'lyricism and propheticism of the inhabitants of the Arabian peninsula' (ibid., pp. 90–91). For Corbin, it is the Persian influence (mediated largely through Shi'ism) that is central to the anti-rationalism and esotericism of Islamic philosophy. He writes: 'the fate of philosophy in Islam ... cannot be studied independently of the significance of Shiism', which he considers to have arisen and flourished in a distinctively Persian cultural milieu. Henry Corbin, *History of Islamic Philosophy*, trans. Liadain Sherrard, Kegan Paul, London, 1993 (1964), p. 4; see also pp. xvii, 19–21, 207.
9. Ibid., p. xvi.
10. Ibid., pp. 24–5.
11. Ibid., p. 25.
12. Ibid., p. xv.
13. Corbin's exegesis of Islamic philosophy abounds in Arabic and Persian terms that are supposedly untranslatable and can only be fully grasped by those who know the relevant languages.
14. Oliver Leaman, 'Orientalism and Islamic Philosophy', in S.H. Nasr and O. Leaman, eds, *History of Islamic Philosophy*, Routledge, London, 1996, p. 1145.
15. Ibid., p. 1146.
16. Muhsin Mahdi, 'Orientalism and the Study of Islamic Philosophy', *Journal of Islamic Studies* 1, 1990, p. 93.
17. Ibid.
18. Dimitri Gutas, 'The Study of Arabic Philosophy in the Twentieth Century: An Essay on the Historiography of Arabic Philosophy', *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 29, 2002, pp. 5–6.
19. Ubai Nooruddin, 'Orientalism and Islamic Philosophy', in E. Craig, ed., *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Routledge, London, 1998.
20. I will confine myself for the most part to quoting from the English translation of a selection of his work, Mohammed 'Abed al-Jabri, *Arab-Islamic Philosophy: A Contemporary Critique*, University of Texas Press, Austin TX, 1999. Despite problems with the translation (which however was approved by the author), the pieces collected in this edition are generally representative of Jābirī's extensive corpus in Arabic, chiefly his four-volume *Naqd al-'Aql al-'Arabī* and *al-Turāth wal-Ḥadāthah*. Where necessary, I will also make reference to some of Jābirī's untranslated writings in Arabic.
21. al-Jabri, *Arab-Islamic Philosophy*, p. 19.
22. Ibid., p. 22.
23. Ibid., pp. 32–3.
24. Ibid., p. 39.
25. Ibid., p. 36.
26. Ibid., pp. 38–9.
27. Ibid., p. 38.
28. Ibid., p. 55.
29. Ibid., p. 58.
30. Ibid., p. 60.
31. See ibid., pp. 121–2. Indeed, even before Ibn Sīnā supposedly distinguished the mystical East from the rational West, Jābirī finds fault with the work of Fārābī (in the east) whose account of the virtuous city is allegedly too closely bound to his historical circumstances to be of much use (see e.g. ibid., pp. 56, 104), and whose neo-Platonism is not sufficiently rigorous (see, e.g., ibid., pp. 96, 99).
32. Ḥasan Ḥanafī and Muḥammad 'Ābid al-Jābirī, *Ḥiwār al-Mashriq wal-Maghrib: Talṭhi Silsilat al-Rudūd wal-Munāqashāt*, Cairo: Maktabat Madbuli, 1990 (my translation). The reference to Egypt is included presumably because these remarks occur in an exchange with an Egyptian writer.
33. Muḥammad 'Ābid al-Jābirī, 'Al-Istishrāq fil-Falsafah Manhajan wa Ru'yatan', in *Al-Turāth wal-Ḥadāthah: Dirāsāt wa Munāqashāt*, Markaz Dirāsāt al-Wiḥdah al-'Arabīyyah, Beirut, 1991.
34. See al-Jabri, *Arab-Islamic Philosophy*, p. 41.
35. Here and elsewhere, I deploy the term 'Western' not as an essentializing adjective, but merely as a convenient label for the educational curricula, academic institutions, and so on, of contemporary Western Europe and North America.
36. Edward W. Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, Knopf, New York, 1993, pp. 330–31.
37. Edward W. Said, *Orientalism*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1978, p. 322.
38. Ibid., p. 326.
39. Ibid., p. 24.
40. Ibid., pp. 326–7.
41. Edward W. Said, 'The Politics of Knowledge', *Raritan* 11, Summer 1991, pp. 17–31.
42. Said, *Orientalism*, p. 322.