

Beyond Cultural Parodies and Parodizing Cultures: Shaping A Discourse

Mona Abul-Fadl

~~Contrasting Epistemics~~

"Why if a fish came to me and told me he was going on a journey, I should say, 'With what porpoise?'" "Don't you mean 'purpose?'" said Alice. "I mean what I say," the Mock Turtle replied in an offended tone.

(Lewis Carroll, *Alice in Wonderland*)

Consider this analogy: There was a man beneath a tree. He wished to collect his thoughts, but the sparrows disturbed him with their chirping. He would chase them with his stick and then resume his train of thought, but the sparrows would come back and he would have to scare them away. . . Eventually someone told him: "This is like being a slave at the wheel going round and round forever. If you want to escape the vicious circle, you should fell the tree."

Imām al Ghazālī,
(*Ihyā' 'Ulūm al Dīn*)

~~Cultural Parodies: Shaping a Discourse~~

Abstract

It has been the practice for the dominant paradigm to set the terms of rational discourse and for the "Other" to defer in reverence—if it wanted to be admitted to the circle of respectability. In this case, the tables are turned

Mona Abul-Fadl directs the Research Project on Western Thought at the International Institute of Islamic Thought, Herndon, Virginia and is the chairperson of the Political Science Discipline Council of the Association of Muslim Social Scientists.

and the dominant paradigm, which is secularist, is viewed critically through the lens of a re-emerging *tawhid* paradigm. The purpose is not to engage in a test of will or vision, but to lay the ground for a discourse which can accommodate a genuine diversity-in-dignity for all, and which would include Self and Other in a re-formed world of inter-relatedness developed through new categories and points of reference. In a common human heritage rich in communicable symbols and transitive experiences, cultivating the terms of a hermeneutic of mutuality is imminent. Its objectives would be to redefine and assure worldly morality and rationality at higher levels of reality. Only then can the self-imposed constraints, constrictions, and anomalies which are inherent in the prevailing culture be transcended. The context for shaping this discourse can be as broad and encompassing or as concrete and particular as the response in the concurrent fields of the humanities and the social sciences will admit.

Following on a theme already introduced in a previous issue of *AJISS* addressing Contrasting Epistemics, we take the initiative to launch such a discourse. We select our examples from a range of options in popular culture and social theory, and pave the way for bridging the schisms and the anachronisms which have long divided Islam and the West.

1

Introduction

The prevailing secularist culture identified with modernity and with the historical Occident subverts morality to power and principles to expedience. Unchecked in its morbid dynamism, it has become a global threat as its influence spreads to englobe every other culture, and its voice rules. Into this glut, a deadly silence falls, a silence which goes unnoticed in the distraction that attends a virtual monopoly of discourse. Dominance cannot be equated with truth, although it no doubt benefits from the old confusion of right with might. What is needed is to lay the woof and warp for a new discourse, one immune to its own perversities. Minds fed on the myths of the dominant culture need to be provoked into rethinking their complacencies, and weaned to the idea that whatever the culture which might prevail at any given moment, there is always another possibility, an alternative to understanding and to virtue. The possibility for recovery and renewal, whatever the cultural givens/constructs might be, is a function of this openness and orientation which goes beyond the Self to embrace the Other.

This is where a Contrasting Episteme is advocated as an approach to and a strategy for bridging cultures and for laying the foundations for a dynamic

of critical reflection and reconstruction. It is inspired by a hermeneutic of mutuality which takes difference as a dialectic for convergence. Contrasts can be conducted at any level of discourse and within any of its strands. The purpose, however, is to launch it at a foundational level which addresses the major presuppositions of cognition and affection, and to proceed from there to see how the ground rules for a reshaping discourse can develop. There are three major assumptions which condition this premise: (1) Present civilization is at a crossroads, as it must deal with the existing chasm between its material accomplishments and its moral failures; (2) It is not enough to critique the prevailing culture, but the challenge is to transform it; and (3) The sources for meeting such a challenge cannot be reinvented from the debris of extant cultures, but must be sought in the transcendent.

Two basic culture types are projected to take their distinct stance from an outlook and understanding of the fundamental categories of existence: man, nature, and life. Are these essentially autonomous or dependent categories? In the one case we encounter a culture mode that takes its bearings from a *horizontal axis*, while in the other the bearings are projected onto a *vertical axis*. The dominant paradigm today has been shaped against the horizontal axis, whereas the *tawhídí* episteme, which is the subject of recall and recollection from the depths of a universal and generic human history, evokes the vertical axis. Modes of thought and apprehension are projected into their socio-cultural and historical plane in terms of variants of an Oscillating Culture-type and of a Median Culture-type. One further caution should be noted here: Muslims and Islam are not interchangeable conceptual referents, and the Oscillating Culture and the West are not immutable conflate. With the predicament of modernity, the Oscillating Culture is a common but not invincible fate, and the Median Culture is the source for a wholesome recovery and renewal/reconstruction for all those with a stake in the future of humanity.

We have already explored some implications of these assumptions and have introduced certain concepts suggesting areas in which new perspectives could be developed. Social theory as a vocation was proposed to re-orient attitudes in the field.¹ A hermeneutic of mutuality was predicated on an ethos of renunciation and reconciliation that paved the way for transcending the Self/Other dichotomy. This was referred to as engaging in a co-substantiating mode of discourse.² In this presentation, another forum for developing these concepts is sought as the resources of a contrasting episteme and of its instrumental culture-types are further mined. The focus is on the elements of a cultural discourse that is critical of the dominant secularist culture.

¹Mann Abul-Paál, "Contrasting Epistemies: Tawhídí, the Vocationist, and Social Science," *JISS* 7(1):15-38.

²Mann Abul-Paál, "The Art, the Artifact, and the Artist" in *Where East Meets West*, forthcoming.

understood here essentially in terms of a diminishing and diminished sense of value and a pervasive disorientation. Interest shifts to modes of discourse. A vocabulary for the recognition of the malaise and its articulation is sought both within the Western tradition and from Muslim sources. One lesson of an integrated and synthetic approach is to see continuities not simply within each tradition, but also among historically differentiated traditions. Another lesson is to see how enriching for the current discourse in the West it might be to become attentive to other voices. A third lesson is to suggest that in recovering a voice from the Muslim tradition in particular, that discourse can be significantly enlightened because reason in the Muslim tradition was not subverted by pretensions to autonomy or by indulgences in excess. In that tradition one could doubt without being cynical; and one could hope without abandoning reason. Above all, the alternative to rationality was not absurdity. Common sense was grounded in a *fi'ric* and empirical/pragmatic sensibility reinforced by the pervasive principled convictions in a revelation which provided the impetus to the individual and to the group at all levels of activity and creativity. This, in brief, is what commands attention to voices articulated in the Muslim tradition.

In the makings of an intercultural discourse, the parameters of rationality are implicitly invoked, as are the boundaries between the humanities and the social sciences. The implication is that social sciences must be grounded in a discourse that is morally conscious, and that the humanities must reinterpret their material and domain so as to become historically relevant. This too is a lesson which cannot be learned in isolation or deliberated upon in a presumptuous self-sufficiency. A hermeneutic of mutuality would sharpen the sensibilities of areas of complementarity and enrich perspectives on the human condition and its potential for morality. The above lessons are significant in themselves and can be demonstrated in any number of ways by recourse to sophisticated and specialized arguments. The presentation here, however, opts for a simplicity and a directness in the illustrations it selects as it moves from one plane to another to show how evolving a discourse in the perspective of a Contrasting Episteme can reveal much that is pertinent within each tradition. At the same time, it points to the direction where convergence can be a virtue, as it invites a critical reflection of the dominant paradigm. The background to this reading relies on techniques as much as on the interface of culture types and modes of discourse. Its aim is to show the range and possibilities which are inherent in such a perspective.

2

Parables, Metaphors, and Heroes Re-Membered

A Contrasting Episteme would be a timely check against the random distortions which might have occurred in cultural encounters in the past. It would also contribute significantly to re-locating the distorted element of the misrepresented culture to the benefit of the modern encounter. An example may illustrate this point. The negative transfiguration of Ibn Ṭufayl's hero into Daniel Defoe's precursor of *homo economicus* is an eloquent testimony to what happens when one party appropriates to itself the prerogative of interpreting the tradition of the Other—and in the process manages to completely deform it.³ Obviously, it would be naive to contend that Crusoe on his desert island was deliberately conceived in the mold of Ḥayy Ibn Yaqzān nor is it even adequate to speak of a reductionist *detransfiguration* of role and images between a *homo sapiens* and a *homo faber*. This would be too crude for intellectual justice, and it would also miss the point of the nuanced readings within the respective traditions. Yet, because Ibn Ṭufayl's story could be seen to epitomize much that is significant from the perspective of Contrasting Episteme, a brief account may yield some refreshing insight which could be followed up elsewhere.

Ḥayy Ibn Yaqzān, the living, son of He who is ever-awake, ever-watchful (which is the literal meaning of this hero's name), found himself on an island deserted of all human habitation. His very conception and survival were tokens of a providential care. (He was, it will be recalled, nurtured by a doe that had lost her cub and that had chanced upon the suckling babe just at the right moment.) As he grew into consciousness, he became steadily aware of the qualities of a divine sustaining presence until he was led, through his yearning and untiring search, into an encounter with it. In substance and in form, the story was entirely consistent with the worldview of the culture which spawned it, and it was conspicuously representative of the mood of its times. After all, Ḥayy Ibn Yaqzān did not reach the highest truth through mere contemplation, nor through the tireless speculations of the *philosophes*.

³As Will Durant observes, "Abu Bakr Ibn Tufail (1107-1185 A.C.) [the Andalusian philosopher-scholar] found time to write, among more technical works, the most remarkable philosophical romance in medieval literature . . . and (through Ockley's English translation in 1708) may have suggested Robinson Crusoe to Defoe." From *The Age of Faith* quoted in M. Fazlurrahman Ansari, *The Qur'anic Foundations and Structure of Muslim Society* (Karachi: World Federation of Islamic Millions, 1977), 1:211. Very few of those working on Crusoe would recall such a possibility, as is shown by default in one of the more recent studies on the subject which is construed in a hermeneutically meaningful context. See Bernard McGren, *Beyond Anthropology* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989).

Rather, it was through his active and practical involvement in his daily mundane surroundings that his journey began from a concrete and visible world to the reality beyond it. It began with a systematic, patient, and persistent curiosity that took him through a fascinating progression of stages in practical and intellectual inquiry, engaging him in a full-fledged exercise of first his sensory perceptions, and then his rational faculties, and leading to the ultimate discovery of the extrasensory with the consummation of the "theosophical." It was a journey in interiority and self-transcendence where the leitmotiv, demonstrated at every turn, was that the world of the visible pointed to a world beyond it. This in fact was the summation included in al Ghazālī's own highly original theory of knowledge, and al Ghazālī was the grand synthesizer of a tradition conceived in the pale of the Median Culture. Only by seeing the story of Ibn Ṭufayl within its cultural tradition is it possible to grasp its integrating and synthetic dimensions and bring them to bear on a retrospective reading of both modernity and the Muslim legacy.

In acknowledging the genuine intellectual contribution of al Ghazālī and his peers, it would be wrong to attribute the synthesis to their genius or to their ingenuity and to overlook its elements in the culture they breathed. The culture which became the hallmark of Muslim civilization was certainly a historical product of its times open to the spectrum of influences at play from within "constituent" and surrounding cultures as assumed in Hodgson's "Islamicate." But, what was genuine and unique about it was constituted by an ideal core in which it was originally conceived and which continued to sustain it. The *Tawhīdī* Episteme was the node, or nexus, and sustaining mode, or operational parameter and frame, within which the divergent influences crystallized and modulated. The closer the great thinkers proximated this core, the more authentic their expression. In this sense, the ideal-typical culture that corresponded to the *Tawhīdī* Episteme was a median culture favoring a proportion and measure, averse of excess (*ḥaḍārāh al mīzān, mazājuhā al 'iddāh*). The actual historical culture as it was lived and experienced at any given moment was a proximation to this "median" that might vary in degree, but not in kind. Its lapses were behavioral rather than structural, and its deviations could be addressed from within the system. The unitary sources and their homogeneity, their internal coherence and integrity, secured stability and continuity for the ideal core as a mainstay of both episteme and culture, and was ultimately reflected in practice.

The giants in that tradition were great to the extent that they were capable of articulating aspects of that core culture. Even the controversial *falāsifah* were representative of the tradition to the extent that they were conditioned by the persistent dimensions in the ideal core as they interacted within the "Islamicate." What distinguished the great synthesizers or system-builders in the cultural history of Islam, however, was their ability to identify and

formulate the elements intrinsic to that core in a manner that replicated the integrality of the whole. In this sense, in *fiqh* jurisprudence, al Shāfi'i became the instantiation and expression of a synthesis which was already there defining the field of action. It might have been popularized, fragmented, and diffuse, but it was nonetheless intrinsic to the habits of mind and thought engendered through the Median Culture. In the same way, a Fakhr al Dīn al Rāzī, an Ibn Ḥazm, an al Shātibī, or an Ibn Taymīyah, each in his own way and in his respective field of knowledge and expertise, left his indelible marks. Each brought together the elements of knowledge accumulated to his time and welded the disparate arguments into a systematic whole, thereby producing a rationalizing and integrating totality whereby the rationale and logic provided there could assure a systemic coherence to the parts.

The great synthesizers or system-builders all belonged to the same great tradition embodying a distinctive way of knowing in its sources, modes, and conceptions. Each would leave his imprint on the paths crossed, beginning with the monumental contribution to laying the foundations of a *fiqhī* jurisprudence by Imām al Shāfi'i and ending up, five centuries later, in a science of human culture and civilization with Ibn Khaldūn. The range of rationality spanned the ethical and regulative premises that structured the bounds and solidarity of the political community to the principles that shaped its historical consciousness of itself.

A discourse shaped in the perspective of a Contrasting Episteme is deferential to the internal logic of cultures and seeks to relate the elements to the whole with an eye on ulteriority. Ibn Ṭufayl's account invoked a re-interpretation of the culture which spawned it to the benefit of recovering elements of the median (cf. *wasāfiyah*) which could be meaningful in reassessing the culture of modernity. In such a medium, impetus is given to a range of rationality seeking comprehension/comprehensiveness within a radius set by an integrating center. Ibn Yaḳzān's ascent to interiority was not bought at the expense of negating the external: and for every step of the way the medium of access called for measure and proportion. In the same way, the growing complexity of the edifice of learning in the Muslim legacy was accompanied by its centripetal tendencies. The "mid-point" is institutionalized to assure a verticality to expansiveness and to serve as a check on fragmentation and dissipation.

3

The Oscillating Culture Refined

In launching the discourse, a preliminary distinction was made between two culture types: an Oscillating Culture and a Median Culture, with the

former identified with a secular humanist paradigm of knowledge and the latter projecting and instantiating a *Tawhīdī* Episteme. The task is to reassess the one in terms of the other so as to highlight dimensions which might otherwise be missed. Internal reflection and criticism are reinforced by a cross-reflexive critique which is to be ultimately relegated to a higher court of appeal (history/praxis or a new discursive tradition). In the meantime, a co-substantiating mode calls for reading a culture from within, with the purpose of gaining common ground. The following illustration further clarifies this technique.

From the *tawhīdī* premise which informs a Contrasting Episteme, the secular humanist dynamic was projected as being subject to fluctuations, animated by polarities, and given to excess. It is interesting to see that evidence for such a reading can be found from very different sources exclusively developed within that secularist culture mode. Contemporary critical self-assessments in the West perceive the force of this pendular rhythm within their intellectual tradition; they recognize the antinomies and admit the inclinations to excess. Some will even see in the irreconcilable tensions which feed that tradition a source of vitality, and will support their various theoretical predications on the purging fires of these counter-flexing surges. For those within the Oscillating Culture, it is hard to conceive of the historical process or the human condition in any other way. The scourge of a *horizontal axis* in an episteme lies in its perennial want of measure and, indeed, in a persistent elusiveness to all measure.

In the event of reading the Oscillating Culture from within, as a co-substantiating mode would require, one can take any moment to illustrate its thrust. Adorno's and Horkheimer's perspicuous reflection on the Western intellectual tradition is as authentic and original as one can get. Its force and resonance come from its context as much as from its content. *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*, where the criticism of enlightened reason is developed, was written in the 1930s in an attempt to explain how fascism could have developed in a nation that was seemingly the embodiment of liberal ideals. The fact that they were so easily displaced by giving way to irrationality seemed to be an indictment of more than a particular conception of rationality ("instrumental reason"); it seemed to be an indictment of an entire intellectual tradition. At about the same period, the Marxist humanist critic George Lukács was already wrestling with the problematic of the vulnerability of reason and the rationalization/bureaucratization processes attending it. While liberating man's productive powers, they saw man himself enslaved by being reduced to his relations of exchange ("the reification of social relations"). Adorno and Horkheimer took up this critique and radicalized it as they traced this process of reification back to a flaw at the core of the Western idea of reason. This flaw is represented in various ways, but in accounting for it, the critics

unknowingly assume the vocationalist perspective. In Alford's words, it is that *Western reason finds no midpoint between idealism and realism:*

Reason and its object are divided into two realms. Noble ideals, values, discourse over the good life . . . are removed to the abstract realm of the intellect and the spirit. Like religion, which is an instance of these ideals, these themes are often applauded in the abstract. However, precisely because these values come to be seen as an expression of our "higher" selves, they are disconnected from the everyday material world. The material world in turn is given over to crass materialism that brooks no opposition to the contingently given.⁴

Our own construct of the culture-mode associated with the positivism epistemic, whether in its humanist or naturalist variants, derives from our understanding of this schizomorphic structure of perceptions which undergirds the Western tradition. It is hardly surprising that this structure should be projected in social theory and that it should provide the "meeting ground" among the heterogeneous elements from both the left and the right of the spectrum as will be noted below. More significant, however, is that the "midpoint" can neither be sought from a culture which defies subjectivity, such as is the case with modernity, nor can it be secured under an order that mistakes its own shadows for objectivity. Only a *vertical axis* can assure the human psyche and the social order alike that necessary point of fixity around which the whole can cohere, and to which the parts can relate. Only then is it possible to conceive of some reliable measure which can reduce the vulnerability of "instrumental reason" that is at the root of modern rationalism.

There is a moral to maintaining the above distinction between culture-types and epistemic bearings which could be usefully drawn upon for making other inferences in social theory.⁵ According to the Oxford dictionary, "moral" is an adjective concerned with character as well as a noun designating a moral lesson. It is in this latter sense that the West will need to reach beyond itself if it is to circumvent or overcome its oscillations. Clearly, opinions vary on this score. There are those who maintain the incommensurability of traditions and defend their circularity and closure.⁶ Others confess to a certain obduracy

⁴This insightful passage is abstracted by C. Fred Alford from *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. See his *Science and the Revenge of Nature: Marx, Freud and Habermas* (Tampa: University Presses of Florida, 1985), 16-17.

⁵See Mona Abul-Fadl, "Contemporary Social Theory: A Critique," Paper presented at the 18th AMSS Annual Conference, Detroit, Michigan, 26-28 October 1990.

⁶As with Heidegger's remarks in an interview with *Der Spiegel* 214:62 cited in David Kolb, *The Critique of Pure Modernity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 231 ff.

within the tradition which makes it difficult to communicate with the Other, whose right to differ is only grudgingly conceded in muted tolerance.⁷ The periodic interest in a mystique of the Orient may well be taken to point to a hovering consciousness in the Western mind which goes beyond mere curiosity to defy its own diffidence. Admittedly, this impetus is more often associated with a romantic drive which strikes at the height of a bout of excessive rationalism, as with a Goethe in the eighteenth century or a Fritjof Capra in our own times.⁸ However, unless this orientalizing compulsion takes its cue from substantiative rather than spatial moorings, the search will be in vain. Failing that essential act of self-transcendence, the West will remain hostage to its own grand, but tragic, tradition.

4

Back to the Lobster Quadrille and to Juḥā

In its present incarnation, this predicament is played out in the conflicting pulls between the splintering shafts of a post-modernity and the sterility of a self-eulogizing neo-Conservatism. The literature in the social sciences and the metatheoretical debates they occasion can be diagnosed in such a perspective. The essence of this conflict can perhaps be best conveyed in an idiom that draws on an elemental and unpretentious chord in the Western experience which can easily be shared by others. In the case of the flight from modernity, we remember the poor and wretched Hans of the Alsatian folktale who is forever frustrated in his elations: he knows not what he wants, yet wants it badly all the same, and spares naught in a pursuit from which he knows there can be little gain. He is the paragon of a modernity deprecated for its emptiness and directionlessness as much as for its insatiable appetite for "more and more." In the case of the nostalgia for the past, we recall the perplexity of little Alice in Wonderland as she puzzled over the meaning of the Lobster Quadrille among a dozen other perplexities she encountered in her metamorphosis: she wondered whether in a world of so much

⁷Ibid., 130-31. Kolb remarks that "We (the West) can enter into a dialogue with the other traditions, but this is a matter that requires more delicacy of intellectual touch than is typical of Western attempts to understand others." On the other hand, some critics from the "Orient" are critical of those more sympathetic attempts to read into their tradition. Cf. Claude Alvares, "We Have Been Here Before," *Inquiry* (April 1987): 39-42, commenting on Fritjof Capra's *The Tao of Physics* (London: Plenum, 1975, 1986).

⁸For a provocative, and perhaps somewhat unjustified critique by an avant-garde Indian intellectual of the nostalgic turn taken by Capra in his works *The Tao of Physics* and *The Turning Point*, see Claude Alvares, "We Have Been Here Before," *Inquiry*, *ibid.*

⁹*The Critique of Pure Modernity*, op. cit., passim.

her,
The
it to
ere
fen
of
of
kes
be
ain

"nonsensical common sense" anything would ever be normal again. Or perhaps after all, the modern West has finally arrived with all its sequence of "ends in history, philosophy, and metaphysics to the point where Alice found herself at the *beginning* of her journey. There she had stopped at the signposts to figure out whichever way to go, not quite knowing her destination, but hoping all the same that in the end she would get somewhere.¹⁰

The global nature of the modern world extends the predicament of the Oscillating Culture beyond its original bounds and confirms Heidegger's insight on the debasing potential of Westernization/modernization. Partly as a result of a universal imposition, and partly as a response to their own malleability in a manipulative global amoral economy, Muslims, like many An/Others in the Third World, are ineluctably caught in a catch-up game. In some ways they have ended up more confounded than their counterparts in the West who have at least come to doubt some of the virtues of their own prodigy. Entrammelled in their infatuated pursuit, they cannot venture to reflect upon the gains, or indeed, upon whether in the struggle for survival, selfhood itself has become a computable value worth its pain. The modern Muslim has more often than not turned himself/herself into a shadow chasing shadow in a breathless Monty Python shadow play.

Asked where his ears were, so the tale in the Muslim legacy goes, the simple and conscientious Juhā heaved a sigh, caught his breath and, in painstaking precision, turned to wind his right arm around the back of his head in order to point to the lobe of his left ear. Or, again, wherever the roads or lanes run into a holy maze, Juhā's tortuous sense of geography come to mind. The moral is that sometimes we search far and wide to arrive at a truth or to discover our destination, when in fact it is right there before us. Juhā was no simpleton. In fact, he was a *hujjah*, a learned scholar, who travelled up and down the land to entertain and instruct. There is much that can be learned from folk wisdom about the epistemic, and one does not have to delve into the "serpentine windings" (Kant) of philosophy for instruction. This evokes some of the frequently missed nuances in our own intellectual heritage.

Ibn Khaldūn had contrasted the gruffness of the Bedouin culture with the refinement that was brought about in the course of civil living. In doing so, he was not deploying the contrast to demean the essential dignity and inborn wisdom that went with it. Rather, his whole point was that cultural

¹⁰This stance clearly evokes themes associated with the post-positivist re-turn analogous to the Angelina category of *anamnesis*, or the Gnostic remembrance, the Heideggerian forgetfulness and retrieval, or what Leo Strauss addresses in his essay on "Progress and Return" first published in *Modern Judaism* 1 (1981). Lewis Carroll was clearly no ordinary author writing stories for children, and by every count, his style dealt in paradigms as the titles of his books suggest: *Through the Looking Glass* might outlast many a post-modernist treatise.

c-
ty
es
a
in
n
it
n
i,
h
d
z
l
:
l
i

could build and edify on the stock of nature but, at the same time, that culture could also become the victim of its own accomplishments and lose sight of qualities that were essential to its survival and nobility (which could be paralleled to the contemporary concern for "humanization" in the face of the threats of rationalization and bureaucratization). The intervening layer of acculturation, as we might now say, could easily come between man and his *fitri* nature. In this way, the cultivation of the sciences as conceived by Ibn Khaldūn in the state of *umrān* was not simply a corollary to this state but it was also a way of ensuring that created *insān*, *homo sapiens*, did not lose some of its essential insights by the inevitable distancing that ensued. Yet, there was little that could safeguard the sciences from a potentially corrupting/stultifying momentum implicit in their rationalization and institutionalization; these were conditions essential to their initial edification but could ultimately defeat their purpose as they came between the access to knowledge and the pursuit of truth. Aspects of a *fitri* nature, reinforcing a basic common sense and *fitri* values—including primary solidarities—were more in evidence in the life of the nomads if only on account of a diminished sophistication in the conditions of their existence.

Yet, this muted note constitutes a subtle shade in Ibn Khaldūn's writing which frequently evades modern readers who tend to de-contextualize author and text alike and so distort their rationality.¹¹ In suggesting a relationship between the mode of thought and the material existence of the group, Ibn Khaldūn was at the same time working on his anthropological/sociological philosophy from a host of other premises about human nature and the laws of God in creation, subsuming such categories as *fiṭrah* and *sunnah*. These have no place in the reductionist grid of a materialist sensibility which pervades the Oscillating Culture at the moment of the Khaldūnist revival. A Contrasting Episteme conscious of the intrinsic and the common can highlight them for the cultural encounter.

From Culture Types to Modes of Discourse

The trouble with social scientists and most professionals who are, by definition, "modern," is that they are overtrained. In their surfeit, they have not only lost much of their humor, but also a good deal of a plain stock

¹¹An example of a recent critical reading of Ibn Khaldūn placing him in the heart of his tradition is found in Aziz Azzami's work which is, unfortunately, marred by its own modernist bias in taking a stance on the question of the "historicity" of the text. In re-orienting Ibn Khaldūn in the context of a historical tradition, he strives to rehabilitate the thinker only to discard a culture. See his *Arabic Thought and Islamic Societies* (London: Croom Helm, 1986), chapter 1, for an interpretation of the metaphysical foundations of Arabic thought.

of common sense. The idea that a Contrasting Episteme can constitute its own approach and that it calls for improvising techniques and modes as well as concepts provides a refreshing opportunity to break out of conventional modes. At a time when rationalism itself has become a suspect category—and Janus-faced at that—there is every need to turn to alternative sources of understanding and knowledge, and to explore other modes of expression to this end.

The indirectness implicit in the recourse to parables, metaphors, and symbolism has nothing to do with the mental passes, impasses, and blind alleys which might be the privilege of the intellect as well as the bane of philosophy. Its point, as the *Juhā* technique illustrates, is to induce reflection and to tap indigenous sources that stimulate rather than pre-empt reasoning. It is a mode of reasoning where a seemingly irrelevant digression can, by way of association, dissociation, and other such processes, drive home a substantial point; one is enlightened in a practical manner about the same truths in a given culture. Conversely, the philosophic mode is frequently conducive to a type of empty circular reasoning which ends up obfuscating the point it sets out to elucidate. This was what al Ghazālī discovered after his own peregrinations in the field and, not unlike Hume after him, he demonstrated how the ways of unaided human reason ended up distracting rather than enlightening the human mind.¹² The testimony of Fakhr al Din al Rāzī (d. 606 A.H.) to this effect is made just as poignantly as the rigorous theologian waxes poetic.¹³ When, towards the end of his life, he laments the mediocrity and vanity of a knowledge sought through an "instrumental reason," al Rāzī sounds the notes which have echoed throughout a tradition before

¹²His two classic tracts, *Tahāfut al Falāsifah* (In Refutation of the Philosophers) and *Al Muqaddim min al Dalāl* (A Refuge from Straying), both containing the rational arguments which question the validity of the ways of the philosophers of his times, might stand to benefit from a sociology of knowledge perspective which would not lose sight of their general validity, but at the same time give proper due to the historical context to which they were addressed. This is an area where a re-formed social theory can have more to contribute than the conventional static approaches applied from theology, philosophy, and orientalism which are scarcely relevant in an active life-world impregnated/impregnating tradition like the Islamic. The lunge popularized in the orientalist litany of Islamic civilization/culture as stagnant, stylized, and moribund would in retrospect tell us more about the methodology than the subject matter.

¹³When rendered into English, the general meaning of that moment of light which arrived shortly before his death would be something to this effect: "Reason's bold ventures at long last come to a halt! And man's vain labors in the end come to naught! Petty, petty is the gain indeed, of a life long muscled to the meed (= research/ and scholarship)! Where the end yield is little more than so it was said this and thus it was said that!" *Al Maḥsūl*, edited by 'Īlāh Jābir al 'Alwānī, vol. 1.