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COGITO AND THE SUBJECT
OF ARAB CULTURE

I am going to try to develop the thesis of a confrontation between two rationalities, between two sciences: that of the Western world and that of the East.¹

Islam is rational, but what type of rationality does it involve?

A book was published several years ago: *Contre Averroes*.² According to this thesis, Saint Thomas of Aquinas was forced to respond to his adversaries, teachers of “Latin” philosophy, who had opted for Averroes against all odds, that is, against the Patristic tradition.

The Averroistic theses were circulating at the Sorbonne and becoming dangerous. For Thomas Aquinas, “the double foundation of thought in man and outside man in a relation of internal exclusion to its object,” intended to preserve the immateriality of the subject of thought, and the very thing Averroes claims, seemed a theoretical deficit.

The crippling vice of Averroism is that it is unable to grasp thinking as thinking, but only as thought. For Averroes, there is only a subject as thought by the Other (*il n’y a de sujet que pense par l’Autre*). For the author of *Contra Averroes*, Thomas Aquinas posits with his response the premises of the Cogito.

The Cogito is not the same according to whether it involves a thinking subject or a thought subject. For Averroes, the Cogito is an “I am thought therefore I am . . .” Islamism poses another radical variation which is, “I am thought therefore I am not.” In these variations of the Cogito of the subject of Arab culture and in the Cartesian Cogito, the position of the subject confronted with science and economics (for there is no science without economics) is not the same. In the Cogito of the subject of Arab culture, a paradox is outlined, the paradox of the Cogito of the Arabic language, itself organized by Writing and by the speech of Revelation, that is to say, the Qur’an.

¹ Originally published in French as “Cogito et sujet de culture arabe,” in *La Célibataire, La psychanalyse et le monde arabe* 1.8 (2004): 155-60. Translated with kind permission.

² Thomas d’Aquin, *Contre Averroes*, trans Alain de Libera (Paris: Flammarion, 1999).

The Qur'an is a revelation and a window onto the real. It poses the real of structure through the Revelation. This Revelation performs an extraordinary violence on the subject whether it wants it or not, for the Revelation is conveyed by a sacred speech and, besides, the Qur'an says that if Allah reveals a letter of the Great Book, the source of which the Qur'an is a part, if this letter was revealed at a mountain, the mountain would crumble. The thing that highlights the violence of the Revelation is that the Qur'an as Revelation does not speak to the subject, but speaks of the subject. And here I would like to underline the immense debt that every subject of the Arabic language, whether Muslim, Jew or Christian, owes to the Qur'an. This debt has had a decisive weight in the confrontation of Islam with the Greek sciences and others. Throughout the golden age of Islam (and of its expansion), there were two sciences that directed what would become the Muslim empire: on the one hand, the science obtained from the Greeks, Indians and others, and on the other, the science of the Qur'an; the science of grammatical language, the science of sacred language. One of these two sciences succumbed. The subject of the Arabic language must find a solution to the paradox posed by the "I am thought therefore I am," because the existence of being *qua* thought is threatened: either the subject resigns itself, abandons itself to its fate—and moreover, this is the very definition of the word Islam—or there is the solution of Islamism which is a literal reading, a rationalism, in which it becomes, "I am thought therefore I am not." And on this point, Islamism has nothing to do with Islam—the Islamist in fact is the one who refuses to give up. He fights. The subject of the Arabic language is faced with Islamism, or else the solution of negativity. In order to explain this negativity, I will refer to Kojève's reading of texts by Nietzsche, Heidegger and Hegel.

In 1920, after a night of working in the library at Warsaw, Kojève had a "revelation" identical to that of Nietzsche's in Sils-Maria. He was thinking about two cultures, the East and the West, and aimed to oppose Buddha and Descartes, each seeming to be each other's opposite as "the irony of the Cogito," that is, as the challenge of the inexistent aimed at the ontology of the Ego. It is what he was to define later as negativity: "I think therefore I am not."

Kojève will define negativity through a vindication of Nietzsche's Superman and the worship of "Being toward Death." In Heidegger, this negativity becomes "the great negativity" of all human progress. In reading Hegel, Kojève is going to demonstrate that the itinerary of consciousness is a movement: in order for consciousness to become Spirit, it must accept disappearing as subject of certitude so as to leave space for the work of Spirit as truth without subject.

For Kojève, this effacement of the subject of certitude constitutes the negating subject, and by this effacement, by this negating, this allows it to exercise its negativity through the joint forms of struggle and work. Kojève will add his reading of Marx and of Heidegger and will therefore succeed in giving an anthropological interpretation of the itinerary of consciousness as a movement: this will be the reading of Hegel that takes note of an end of history through an allegorical commentary on the master-slave dialectic. But from this, Kojève will deduce a possible abolition of man himself, which will lead him to return to the theory of insatiable desire, and to negativity in terms of which he had understood humanity in

the beginning of his work. From the beginning, he returns to this topic in order to be able to make man accede to the status of a “sage” and “idle scalliwag.” It is in this way that the true end of History is reached, Being returned to the Nothingness of its animality and having accepted the order of the world as such, with its princes and tyrants. In Hegel, all revolution becomes impossible and the intellectual philosopher (the sage) has nothing more than a choice between two attitudes: either to enter into anonymity and pass into action in the service of the State, or to continue to dream, like the beautiful romantic soul, of a revolution that has already passed. At that time, Georges Bataille, who attended Kojève’s seminars, will refuse this dilemma and reproach Kojève for condemning intellectuals to a “negativity” without use (*sans emploi*). Put differently, to the animality of the sage, he will oppose the extreme form of a Nietzschean madness and a sacred terror capable of subverting anew the social order.

As for Maimonides, what is his definition of negativity? In the *Guide to the Perplexed*, one reads: “when we say that God lives, it means that God is not without life.”

For his part, Eckhart—and his interpretation explains negativity to us a little more—interprets the “negation of negation” as “privation of privation” (*privatio privationis*), “marrow of affirmed being” (*moelle de l’etre affirme*), “attribution of the One as negation of all multiplicity.” Eckhart makes the *negatio negationis* the supreme mode of the “divine predication” (*praedicatio indivinis*). He thus equates “the negative attribution of the One” and “the affirmation of divine being” as an absolute identity. Thierry Freiburg, himself influenced by Maimonides, agrees with Eckhart, making the opposition of affirmation, or being, and of negation, or non-being, “the premier and fundamental opposition,” but he gives another definition of the One. For Thierry de Freiberg, the “privation of privation” is a “negative,” not positive, “suppression” of the “first contrariety.”

Why “negative”? It is negative because a privation remains which, far from “reaffirming” being, subordinates “being” and “non-being” to what he calls the “metaontological” transcendence “of the One.” This might be reminiscent of the two definitions of the One in Aristotle and Plato. Through the theory of the *negatio negationis* we arrive at the distinction between the transcendental convertible One—the “One according to Aristotle”—and the transcendental and non-convertible One—the “One according to Plato,” or again the “One in an other distinction” in the Parmenides.

Let us return to the subject of the Arabic language in its relation to negativity. I refer myself now to two Suras, Al Fatiha and “the Cave,” in which among others, the legend of the Seven Sleepers of Ephesus is told. I will try to bring out these two axial dimensions of Islam that are, on the one hand, the negativity of the subject in relation to the negativity of the Other and, on the other, the negativity of Allah inherent to Islam on account of the debt of the Arabic language toward the Qur’an.

The Al Fatiha Sura (the Opening) is constituted by the mode of a “command” that summons the subject to recognize itself in a negativity, that is to say, that the Arabic language which structures it (in sending it back to the letter) returns it to a

radically prescribed “Elsewhere” as an impossible access for every subject. This sending of the subject to an impossible “Elsewhere” can only be revealed by reading the text in Arabic since the Sura, up until verse 6, deprives the subject of all reference to an existence, with the exception of Allah, in order to reach in the last verse the only container, a negative form. Moreover, in French, it is translated as “*non pas le chemin de cuex qui encourent la colère*” [“*Not (the path) of those upon whom Thy wrath is brought down*”], and the frank negation: *laa*. There would be a lot to say about these two last negations which are not the same for, in the interpretations of the Qur’an, it specifies that the first concerns the Jews and the second the Christians.

Let us say that, in the Al Fatiha Sura, what is expressed in an affirmative (extremely positive) form is that there is no “place of existence” except for Allah.

As for the Cave Sura, it specifies that Ahl El Kitab (the people of the book) challenged the Prophet Muhammad to relate the facts concerning three legends: those of the “Seven Sleepers of Ephesus,” of “Musa and his servant” and of the “Two proprietors of the two gardens.”

Muhammad answered that he would reply the following day. It took fifteen days before the “revelation” manifested itself. Muhammad became the laughing stock of Christians and Jews, to the point of “introducing doubt in his breast.”

The specificity of the Cave Sura lies in the two verses 23 and 24:

Nor say of anything, “I shall be sure to do so and so tomorrow”—

Without adding, “So please Allah” and call thy Lord to mind.³

It is necessary to say, and this is to be developed, that Allah is not God. The second remark of great importance is the translation, “I shall be sure to do so” which introduces a verb that originally in Arabic is nothing more than the word “subject,” which is only translatable by a verb that does not exist in the original formulation of this verse.

The statement of this verse is a “command” to the subject and can be read under the form, “Never say ‘I am subject’ (never say ‘I’) without adding *In Chalah* (So please Allah).” Beyond speech, the transcendent entity, Allah, who defines himself only by absence in “Revelation,” returns the subject of Arabic language to its negativity. By these four negations that form the Shahada, the Other is inscribed in negativity.

I will end on the final invocation of the subject in the last Sura of the Qur’an where, at the beginning and end of this Sura, the same signifier designates the unicity of Allah and names the subject. The signifier *Ahad* designates the absolute unicity of Allah and defines the subject of Arabic language.

A final question: can religion remedy the division of the subject? There is something in Islam that tends towards this attempt at the unicity of the subject and which does not cease to insist, in order to remedy the division of the subject without ever attaining it.

³ *The Holy Qur’an*, trans. Yusuf Ali <<http://www.islamicity.com/mosque/Surai.htm>>