



CURATOR'S CORNER

A Reflection on the Importance of Philosophy and Ethics in the Gulf and in Saudi Arabia

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This essay offers a critical perspective on the future of the Arabian Gulf universities with respect to the humanities and philosophy. Although higher education institutions in Saudi Arabia and some other Gulf countries have begun offering some philosophy courses, there are too few degree programs for the humanities and philosophy. Most Gulf colleges still do not offer a bachelor's or master's degree in the Arts, Humanities, and Social Sciences (AHSS) based on the common assumption that the future is in STEM, and that degrees in engineering, science, technology, and medicine are more economically viable than their counterparts in the humanities. However, the latest results of the British Academy in its recent research report “Qualified for the Future: Quantifying demand for arts, humanities and social science skills” have shown that graduates in the humanities are more in demand in several areas of employment across the world.¹ Key findings are that people who hold AHSS degrees have similar employability rates to those of STEM graduates. As a result, humanities and social sciences graduates work in a wide range of industries, including education, science and technology, public administration, national defense, financial services, and the media.

It is also the case that women in the Middle East are more interested in STEM degrees and appear to be as competitive and confident as women in the west,² such as Hayat bint Sulaiman bin Hassan Sindi, the first Arab

¹ Jones, Molly Morgan, Harriet Barnes, et al., *Qualified for the Future: Quantifying demand for arts, humanities and social science skills* (London: The British Academy, 2020), accessed June 1, 2020. <https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/publications/skills-qualified-future-quantifying-demand-arts-humanities-social-science/>.

² The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, “Not a math person? ‘on gender equality in scientific disciplines worldwide where girls outperform boys (Qatar, in particular),” accessed March 20, 2019, <http://www.oecd.org/gender/data/notamathperson.htm>. For further

woman to become a biotech scientist. Arab women, according to a UNESCO report,³ account for about 34–57 percent of STEM graduates; the report indicates that their status in these fields is possibly better than that of women in the West. This reflects a step toward gender equality in the STEM field.

The statistical report by UNESCO also supports the thesis that Arab women have equal opportunities, and apply their STEM education in a variety of executive/decision-making roles. The data, however, may reflect some contradictions if education is seen as a marketized private commodity, which increases student competition and choice but lowers academic standards.⁴ Arab scholarship in applied ethics and critical thinking should offer a set of values to assess, discuss, and raise awareness around the causes of low standards in academia and the persistently low socio-economic status of women. Furthermore, some ethical questions revolving around the status of Arab women in the workplace should be addressed not only in business studies and law, but also in the humanities. For example, what is the gender of the person who leads the decision-making process? Are women collecting and maximizing data or are women using technology to address ethical issues? Are women able to deal with sexism in the workforce? How long do they stay in work, how much are they paid, and is there a gender wage gap with men? And who gets the top jobs?

Pedagogical Reflection on the Need for Philosophy in Middle Eastern Education

In my recent experience at an international private university in Saudi Arabia, lecturers and professors said that their teaching in critical thinking and psychology classes taken by all undergraduates was (in 2019) considered less important than the university's major STEM classes. The value of STEM degrees is esteemed more highly in Middle East societies than are degrees in the humanities. For example, STEM courses are more prominent and accessible to Arab women and men, who often do not have access to humanities degrees.

The cutting-edge research in contemporary philosophy is relegated to secondary or subaltern studies. Many consider philosophy, the humanities, and cultural studies to be less important than STEM studies, as Sumayya Ahmed wrote in her article "Reading *Teach for Arabia* in Qatar: Self-Critical University Studies."⁵ Ahmed, recalling Neha Vora's book *Teach for Arabia*:

reading, look at the UNESCO, "Girls and Women in Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics in Asia," *Report*, <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000231519>.

³ The World Economic Forum, "How women are transforming the Arab world's start-up scene," *Report* <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2018/07/start-up-middle-east-arab-women-transforming-entrepreneurship/>. Accessed on June 21, 2019. See also David Yarrow, "Lecturers aren't to blame for grade inflation – the government is," *Guardian*. July 12, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2019/jul/12/lecturers-arent-to-blame-for-university-grade-inflation-the-government-is>.

⁴ Daniel Callahan, "Principlism and Communitarianism," *Journal of Medical Ethics* 29 (2003): 287–91.

⁵ Sumayya Ahmed, "Reading *Teach for Arabia* in Qatar: Self-Critical University Studies," *Review of Middle East Studies* 53.2 (2019): 300–05.

American Universities, Liberalism, and Transnational Qatar, has made a significant discovery about how international higher education in the Middle East is colonized and westernized;⁶ if you are white, blond, blue-eyed, and English-speaking, you are more valued, and are more likely to ascend to senior career roles. American and British institutions in the Gulf perpetuate this imperialist ideology and patriarchal Western values, which favor academics studying in economics, engineering, mathematics, and computer science at the expense of minority ethnic groups and feminist scholars, writers, and critics working in the fields of history, philosophy, anthropology, literature, and gender and religious studies.

Having conducted research in humanities and post-colonial studies as an Italian woman in England, I believe that human sciences, and in particular philosophical and critical thinking studies, should play a significant role in Saudi Arabia and the Middle East. A variety of theoretical texts and perspectives on leadership, sustainability, globalization, social inclusion, existentialism, and postcolonialism helps to frame the relevance of topics in the humanities and social sciences with a focus on philosophy and ethics.

The importance of philosophy and related critical cultural programs and research consists of finding new or disregarded information, questioning assumptions, penetrating beyond the surface to uncover the truth, and mapping the interrelationships between the humanities and other sciences.

Philosophy undoubtedly offers a different set of insights from that of the natural sciences, which are based on the scientific method – the idea that theories are proved solely by experiment and observation. The key difference between philosophers and scientists is that philosophy can question data through rational argument or inquiry, while scientific methods cannot be modified. The investigation that philosophers conduct on the nature of existence and knowledge can be considered by some branches of philosophy – such as axiology, aesthetics, metaphysics, and ethics – less dogmatic than science; the philosopher tries to make sense of what science reveals through experimentation. Theoretical approaches in philosophy and ethics provide a way of asking the truth about, and making sense of, experience, source material, and data.

As a humanities and philosophy researcher, one of the approaches I have learned is to examine the mystery of human existence and to try, following different paths or alternative approaches, to understand humanity in its complexity, and to bring what is hidden to light. Philosophy has taught me, as well as many other graduates, to develop in different directions what technology and science have produced for the world. And, like other scientific subjects, the future of philosophy is likely to be richer than the past. The socioeconomic transformations that the world is currently facing, such as climate change, global pandemics, and the growth of social injustice, require the direct perception and intuition of philosophy and critical analysis, rather than merely scientific data and statistics that are the preserve of science, technology, and engineering.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 301.

If it is truly the case that Saudi Arabia is seeking to nurture a more diverse and dynamic nation, it is extremely important that the Saudi Vision 2030 plan (Saudi Government 2017)⁷ incorporate a more interdisciplinary, worldwide, and strategic educational setting⁸ in which the kingdom and the rest of the world present sustainable and humanitarian research projects. One of the pillars of Vision 2030 is to invest for the long-term in a responsible society with a strong cultural heritage as well as innovation. This would enable the leadership of the Kingdom to strengthen a national identity rooted in Islamic values, foster an international culture and tolerance, develop ethical decision-making, and enhance critical-thinking skills, and therefore achieve greater social responsibility. In the last decade, as the area of humanities, social sciences, and philosophy research has expanded, this emerging work continues to be a significant resource in pushing boundaries within the STEM field. It has also illustrated the need for further development in this field of study among a network of humanities and philosophy researchers. Humanities research across diverse nations and cultures may affect and contribute to STEM studies in several ways.

Developing Philosophy and Critical Innovation Thinking

The Saudi writer Fahad Shoqiran neatly sums up what Arab philosophy is about. He says that if the scholar Abū ‘Abdillāh Muhammad ibn Idrīs al-Shāfi‘ī (767–820 A.D.) had not read Aristotle’s logic, he would not have been able to write *Al-Risala*, which provided a foundation for the establishment of the principles of jurisprudence.⁹ Without Greek philosophy, Arab scholarly philosophical activity would not have unfolded in the way that it did. The Aristotelian doctrine of morality and the love of knowledge or wisdom belongs to ‘a philosopher, a person with an insatiable appetite for learning everything’ (Heraclitus, d.475 B.C.).¹⁰

Scientists should investigate the relationship between science and philosophy in order to understand how these two fields of study complement each other. It is important to know, as philosophical and scientific traditions continue to shape the human experience today as well as the environment and

⁷ Saudi Government, “Saudi Vision 2030,” accessed June 25, 2019, <https://vision2030.gov.sa/en/node>.

⁸ Rafidah Abd Razak, “Extent to which university complies with IES 2 in the development of education plans and curricula – Case of Saudi Arabian University,” *Journal of Business Studies Quarterly* 8.1 (2016): 115–28.

⁹ For essays on philosophical themes in Saudi Arabia in the writings of Saudi writers, see Fahad Shoqiran who established the Riyadh philosophers’ circle and writes blogs on philosophy, culture, and art. His writings have appeared in pan-Arab newspaper *Asharq al-Awsat* and *Alarabiya.net*, among others. I found this quotation in Fahad Shoqiran, “What does teaching philosophy in Saudi Arabia mean?”, *Alarabiya News*, December 12, 2018, <https://english.alarabiya.net/en/views/news/middle-east/2018/12/16/What-does-teaching-philosophy-in-Saudi-Arabia-mean-.html>.

¹⁰ Heraclitus, *The Fragments of Heraclitus*, ed. and trans. Randy Hoyt., accessed on July 1, 2019, <http://www.heraclitusfragments.com/files/en.html>. Heraclitus says: “Men that love wisdom must be inquirers into very many things indeed” (B35).

society. For example, philosophy studies the order of the universe by examining its implications and meaning and engaging in new and diverse ways of thinking, while cosmology uses scientific theories of the origin and evolution of the universe through observation and data collection.

Philosophy possesses a multifaceted theoretical framework with a wide range of different positions and methodologies. As a field of inquiry, philosophy is not a uniform area of study but rather a remarkably heterogeneous field that accommodates a variety of concerns, debates, questions, and opposite stances. Thus, it generates valuable attitudes and theoretical approaches for thinking about any economic, cultural, or social issue. Philosophy is the mother of all subjects, whether natural sciences, mathematics, economics, sociology, or psychology.

Philosophy, in line with other sciences, is the manifestation of human knowledge and wisdom, and it can immortalize the glorious achievements of a person.¹¹ But philosophy is not an exclusive theory in the strict sense of the term, which has itself been misused and misread by science. Furthermore, according to Foucault's definition, philosophy cannot be a form of 'deduction, based on a number of axioms, of an abstract model applicable to an indefinite number of empirical descriptions.'¹²

Philosophy cannot be reduced to mere empirical and statistical postulates; there are aspects of logic, but more specifically ethical problems with which the Arabs may deal. By examining in detail, a series of philosophical issues regarding beauty (aesthetics), being, ethics, morality, new technologies, and science, the Middle East may re-establish its philosophy in a living culture.

Despite an increase in Islamic scholarship on the ethics of issues such as the environment, economics, gender, media, medicine, migration, and human rights, universities of the Middle East have not yet launched the philosophical scholarship and courses that have developed widely in the rest of the world.

Similarly, in the Middle East, philosophy has been misinterpreted using the vague idea of 'dis-philosophy,'¹³ which has been conceived as a deviant and uninformative category or unit by mainstream commentators, and has been marginalized widely and intentionally within the Arab scientific world. In this respect, in the Middle East, philosophy from its first modern and secular incarnation has never been a grand discipline, but a dissident theory and discourse emerging in the West. In the Arab-Muslim context, philosophy has become problematic to conservatives and has been a secular weapon against local indigenous cultures.

Nevertheless, some contemporary Arab scholars and intellectual leaders have seen it as a tool for advancing their societies, but they have also been

¹¹ Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, trans. A.M. Sheridan Smith (London: Tavistock, 1972), 114. I found this quotation in Robert J.C. Young, *Postcolonialism: An Historical Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2001), 64.

¹² S. Tawfiq, *Azmat Al'iibda' fi Thuqafatina Almu'asirati. The crisis of creativity in our contemporary culture*, trans. Abdulrahman Al Lily (Beirut: Almu'asat Aljamieiat Lildirasat Walnashr Waltawziel, 2007), 73. He says that philosophy is seen as a "provocative woman, who seduces young individuals and spoil their morality and mind," 102.

¹³ *Ibid.*

careful to distinguish theology from philosophy. Sulaiman al-Shammari, a novelist and professor of media at King Saud University in Saudi Arabia, said in an interview in *Arab Weekly*:

The important thing is to appreciate the importance of the development of philosophy and critical thinking. Philosophy today has gone beyond the search for truth and has stepped into the world of aesthetics, logic and triumphant good and it is staying away from the absurd.¹⁴

Philosophy has an interest in understanding the world and aims to improve it, and from a Marxist perspective, it does not follow the needs of the dominant elite, but works for the needs of all, where human beings are free to fulfill themselves and enjoy freedom of expression. This area of study cannot express itself without the support of a system of public education capable of providing it with means of expression. Philosophy applies critical thinking in order to criticize hegemonic and stagnant forms of power, which inevitably dominate and put into the hands of the ruling elite the power to control the human condition and knowledge.

An important role for anyone is to develop their critical thinking, which is not about *what* we think, but *how* we think. This involves logic, which is the study of reasoning. Critical thinking enables problem-solving, intelligent self-awareness, and cultural identity. Critical thinking plays a major role in all areas of life, science, and business.

More recently, the Ministry of Education in Saudi Arabia has aimed to introduce a ‘Philosophy and Critical Thinking’ course into public education; the intent is to design a curriculum for teaching philosophy nationally, implying a progression through international accreditation by philosophical foundations – such as the British Dialogue Works and SAPERE. What the Saudi government wants to do is to introduce philosophy to the world of cultural and literary inquiry. A young Saudi woman educator, Dalia Abdullah Toonsi, has started a leading philosophy think tank in Jeddah, the Baseerat al-Afkar, where she provides a platform in philosophy for children, young people, and adults.¹⁵

In philosophy, the best and most interesting arguments, which cover every issue in contemporary ethics – animal ethics, artificial intelligence (AI), bio-ethics, biomedical ethics, business ethics, charity, food, fashion, sustainability, gender studies, and war ethics – reflect an up-to-date picture of the state of the world economy and societies. This certainly includes a diversity of interpretations, perspectives, and schools of thought, sharpening and reinforcing the debate on several controversial moral and ethical issues.

¹⁴ Zaki al-Soudeir, “What are the implications for teaching philosophy in Saudi Arabia?,” *Arab Weekly*, December 12, 2018, <https://thearabwee#kly.com/what-are-implications-teaching-philosophy-saudi-arabia>.

¹⁵ Basira Al-Afkar was founded by Dalia Toonsi, an accredited trainer in philosophy. This main cultural centre and think tank is in Jeddah, in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, and it uses internationally accredited projects to provide philosophical thinking debates and Socratic dialogue with a view towards the development of a national curriculum in education. For further information see: <http://baseera.com.sa/>, accessed on June 13, 2019.

Until recently, philosophical discourse and ethics have been dominated by the West. However, in recognition of the fact that philosophy and ethics are becoming enormously relevant to the international setting, particularly in a postcolonial discourse (such as that proposed in Edward Said's *Orientalism*), the interest in critical analysis in ethical issues, including black and minorities studies, has increased in other parts of the world. Unprecedented advances in healthcare, engineering, robotics, and technology have created the need for developing a new sustainable and ethical obligation and responsibility in most industrialized countries, and more recently, in the Middle East. We may find Arab ethical literature and critical thinking in the time of the philosopher al-Kindī, when ethics was at the center of the Arab world. While ethics should deal with human actions and resolutions, philosophy and theology focus on knowledge. As al-Kindī points out in his treatise *De Quinque Essentiis (Fl - 'l-Jawhir al-Khamsah)*,¹⁶ philosophy is both theoretical ('ilm) and practical ('amal) since the soul has two natures, intellectual and sensible. Mohammed Ghaly, scholar of Islamic Bio-ethics in the Research Center for Islamic Legislation and Ethics (CILE) at Hamad Bin Khalifa University in Qatar, states that the aim of philosophy is to lead to morality; 'the philosopher does not just seek truth but acts according to moral standards.'¹⁷

Ultimately, it is important that the Arab culture should not ignore some key ethical questions on gender issues, racism, and discrimination, employing for this an Islamic theoretical perspective. Regional and international scholarship has not yet addressed these issues concerning the ethical treatment of BAME people (Black Asian Minority Ethnic) and minority ethnic groups, which constantly face discrimination and social injustice. Obviously, the discussion of morality turns on the fact that some people may belong to a specific ethical community (perhaps rooted in religion), which may have different ideas from another ethical community (perhaps purely secular). The lack of critical thinking, and therefore philosophical discourse and applied ethics, is the source of racism and racial and gender inequality. Critical thinking, philosophy, and ethics can re-evaluate and contribute to the morals and values of the Muslim community. As a result, philosophy, along with critical thinking, might help the Middle East ethos and have a significant impact on Muslim leadership, creating a partnership for a more visionary, inclusive, and sustainable society.

Conclusion

In this essay, I have raised a variety of questions in seeking to understand why the emergence of rational thinking and ethics should be applied extensively in

¹⁶ This treatise has been lost and we have a Latin translation, "Die Philosophische Abhandlungen des Ja'qub ben Ishaq al-Kindi," *Beitraege zur Geschichte der Philosophie des Mittelalters*, eds C. Baeumer and H.F. Herting, and trans. A. Nagy, (Munster, 1897). See also Abu Ridah, *Rasa'il*, II: 8–35. See also, George N. Atiyeh, *Al-Kindi*, 143–44. Atiyeh says that this manuscript was made up and it is part of Aristotelian work on the five essences.

¹⁷ Mohammed Ghaly, "Islamic Signposts," *Qatar Today*, November 2015, <https://www.cilecenter.org/resources/cile-news/interview-about-cile-and-islamic-bioethics-qatar-today>.

humanities degrees in the Middle East. It also has explained how scientific and technological advance moves quickly, but even if science is morally neutral, it can have some controversial outcomes that people find difficult to understand and accept. Scientific results should be questioned de-ontologically by humanist researchers, and thus avoid outcomes that UNESCO declares can be “contrary to human dignity.” Ethical discussions should reflect whether it is unethical to select human babies, to encourage the eugenic and racial selection of humanity, to encrypt personal data, and to infringe privacy. Upon first sight, philosophy or ethics and science – such as artificial intelligence, cybersecurity, genetic engineering, and DNA testing – generally do not appear to be all that closely related, unless intergovernmental organizations and governmental institutions require such support because of environmental, public health, and socioeconomic challenges. As a result, the primary conclusion is that STEM research programs have a critical role to play in society, but it is also true, in my view, that scientific research cannot survive on its own without the work and contribution of philosophy and ethics. The Middle East should, therefore, encourage the development of a global social study of philosophy and science, by supporting the continuing growth of scientific and humanistic studies in order to promote new paths of collective research.

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