Falsafa, Tajdīd, and the Primacy of the Ethical:

A Reflective Tour of Taha Abderrahmane's Life and Thought

Part 1

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This annotated essay presents a reconstruction of a recent long-form interview with Moroccan philosopher Taha Abderrahmane, originally conducted in Arabic by al-Sharq Podcast.[1] *I have translated and edited the interview, restructuring it into an essay format that maintains the natural flow of Taha Abderrahmane's reflections, in the first person, while omitting interviewer prompts, filler expressions, and other redundancies. Minor linguistic adjustments have been made to enhance clarity without altering the substantive content. Clarificatory and critical annotations appear as footnotes throughout. The aim of this edition is to offer Anglophone readers an accessible and reflective presentation of the original conversation, which deftly weaves together Taha Abderrahmane's personal and philosophical journeys into a rich and engaging narrative.*[2] *The essay will be published in two parts, with the second in a forthcoming issue of Ḥāshiya.*

Childhood, Early Education, and French Colonial Rule

I was born in 1944 in the city of El Jadida, Morocco, during the period of French occupation. Although my upbringing was not marked by extraordinary events, it was richly instructive. In the early stages of my education, I struggled with memorizing the letters of the Arabic alphabet, causing my father considerable concern that I might not learn at all. He would take me to accompany him to the gatherings of the *awliyāʾ* and the righteous, requesting their prayers

1. Taha Abderrahmane, "Al-Faylasūf Ṭāhā ʿAbd al-Raḥmān: Sīrah Fikriyya | Būdkāst al-Sharq," *Al Sharq Youth*, YouTube video, November 20, 2024, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=msfbQt4NQCU.

2. For a complimentary and more academic biographical-intellectual sketch of Taha Abderrahmane's life, see the introduction in Mohammed Hashas, "1 The Trusteeship Paradigm: The Formation and Reception of a Philosophy," in *Islamic Ethics and the Trusteeship Paradigm* (Brill, 2020), 37-61. Aqil Azme's notes accompanying a translation (in subtitles) of the same interview that is the focus of the present article—published independently after the first draft of this piece was complete—are also insightful. See Aqil Azme, "Taha Abderrahmane: Philosophy, Language, Ethics, and the Renewal of the Islamic Tradition (al-Sharq)," *ʿAqil Azme*, YouTube video, May 3, 2025, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5k6WTbQHn34.

for me. Deep down, I remained confident that I would one day succeed, and, in time, I did. I studied at my father's *kuttāb*, where I memorized nearly two-thirds of the Qur'an before proceeding to formal schooling.[3]

My initial years of schooling took place in French institutions. From an early age, I was deeply zealous (*ghayūr*) regarding my religion, and while I did not harbor hatred, I nurtured a strong resentment toward the French occupiers. One incident remains etched in my memory: the day after a general strike called for by the local resistance, our French teacher directed us to construct sentences in French. I wrote, "I saw people instructing the shopkeepers to close their stores." Enraged, the teacher struck me with such force that I fell to the ground. I was barely twelve years old. That moment engraved itself upon my soul and had a lasting impact on me; I swore to myself that when I grew up, I would exact retribution.

I completed part of my secondary education in El Jadida, then moved to Casablanca for the remaining part. There were many events here that also shaped me, like the aforementioned incident, just as there were in my university years. Generally, I prefer not to speak about my personal life, for reasons I have mentioned to close friends, except when I recall some incidents in the course of discussing other matters, which serve as examples or bear lessons worthy of mention.

The 1967 Defeat and Intellectual Awakenings

After completing my studies in Morocco, I travelled to France to pursue further education. I arrived during the period of the 1968 student revolution, carrying with me two principal concerns. The first was the question of how the Muslims and Arabs might overcome the devastating defeat of 1967. I sought to understand how we could attain the scientific capabilities—as I thought at the time—necessary to surmount their enemies. The defeat of 1967 left a profound impact on me and shaped my direction.[4] The false narratives that accompanied it—triumphal claims of victory where there was only humiliation—left an indelible mark.

Around the time I completed my first degree in Morocco, I attended a conference for students from countries around the Mediterranean Sea. I was sent to represent Morocco. To my surprise, an Israeli student

3. The *kuttāb* or *maktab* is a traditional elementary institution of Islamic learning, primarily dedicated to the memorization and recitation of the Qur'an. It served as the most widespread form of early education across the Muslim world before the expansion of modern schooling systems. In Morocco, as in North Africa more broadly, *kuttāb* institutions functioned as community-based alternatives to French colonial education, helping preserve Arabic literacy and Islamic knowledge despite the pressures of colonial assimilationist policies.

4. The *Naksa* (setback) of 1967 marked a pivotal rupture in modern Arab intellectual history. The rapid and demoralizing loss to Israel in the Six-Day War, including the occupation of Jerusalem, led to widespread disillusionment with Arab nationalism and prompted a wave of introspective critique among Muslim and Arab intellectuals. Many came to see the defeat not merely as military, but as civilizational and epistemological. For a detailed survey of the post-1967 Arab intellectual landscape, see Ibrahim M. Abu-Rabiʿ, *Contemporary Arab Thought: Studies in Post-1967 Arab Intellectual History* (Pluto Press, 2004).

was among the attendees. Though she exhibited no hostility, her mere presence sharpened my conviction: the adversary had now intruded even into our intellectual and academic spaces.

The second concern that preoccupied me was epistemological: to understand the nature of the intellect and its tools, so as to utilize them properly and effectively against my adversaries and those of the Muslim Umma. My motivations were deeply rooted in the *īmān* that my father had implanted within me from an early age. That faith continued to propel me throughout my life. I have always maintained that the seed of faith is crucial for a child. If a child loses faith, he is truly lost—unless Allah wills otherwise.

I decided I must develop tools that would allow me to construct a philosophy truly rooted in Islamic principles—not just sourced from Islamic texts, but embodying Islamic values.

In France, I studied philosophy extensively—from Western sources of course—and I noticed something peculiar: the philosophies differed from one language to another. Reading English texts gave me one impression and set of ideas, while French texts delivered another, and German yet another. Where, then, I asked myself, was Islamic philosophy? When I turned to the traditional Muslim philosophers, I found that many of them simply reproduced Greek thought, translating Greek categories into Arabic. There was no *original* Islamic philosophy here. In turn, I decided I must develop tools that would allow me to construct a philosophy truly rooted in Islamic principles—not just sourced from Islamic texts, but embodying Islamic values.

I had begun studying philosophy in 1963 and continued through to 1966 in Morocco, completing degrees in both Arabic and French. I pursued further degrees in France, including the third cycle doctorate in 1972 and the *Doctorat d'État* in 1985.[5] My aim in choosing philosophy was twofold: to help establish a genuinely Islamic philosophy and to master logical tools that could empower me and others to engage intellectually with our adversaries.

5. Taha Abderrahmane studied at the Sorbonne between 1967 to 1972, where he completed a *Diplôme d'études supérieures* (a postgraduate degree roughly equivalent to a Master's) in philosophy and a *Doctorat de Troisième Cycle* (a research doctorate similar to a PhD at the time) in 1972, focusing on the influence of language on philosophy. In 1985, he was awarded the *Doctorat d'État* (a higher doctorate required for full professorships in France) for his dissertation on the logic of argumentative and natural reasonings.

Philosophical Training and Critique of Traditional Islamic Philosophy

My first doctoral thesis was on the influence of language on philosophy. I showed that many philosophies are not universal, as we often assume, but tied to specific cultural and linguistic contexts—German, English, French. Similarly, I demonstrated that what was labeled "Islamic philosophy" was largely derivative, drawing too heavily on Greek sources. The medieval Muslim philosophers did not develop a philosophy whose concepts and values were rooted in Islamic culture and language. Instead, they sought to reconcile Islamic creed with Greek categories—a futile task given that the two derive from different cultural and linguistic contexts. It is critical to distinguish between traditional "Islamic philosophy," which is in essence Greek philosophy, and the Islamic philosophy that I advocate for—a philosophy derived directly from Islamic culture, its concepts, themes, and methods of reasonings.[6]

This is what led me to adopt a critical stance toward Ibn Rushd (d. 595/1198). Although many have lauded him as the philosopher who inspired modern Western thought, I contend that he accomplished this by stripping Islamic philosophy of its distinctly Islamic elements. He "purified" the philosophical legacy he inherited from al-Farābī (d. 339/950), Ibn Sīnā (d. 428/1037), and others, removing its Islamic elements and restoring it to its original Greek form. In doing so, he rendered it suitable for the Western Renaissance. Ibn Rushd succeeded in reintroducing to Europe a purified Aristotelianism—one that goes back to Aristotle himself—along with valuable commentaries. Nevertheless, I discovered in his writings significant misunderstandings of Aristotle. Through direct comparison with the original Greek texts, I was able to verify that many longstanding assumptions regarding Ibn Rushd's grasp and understanding of Aristotle were, in fact, unfounded. Although the history of philosophy was not my primary field of specialization, these investigations became integral to the broader trajectory of my intellectual project.

As for al-Ghazālī (d. 505/1111), readers often assume that I am a follower of his school. In truth, however, I only turned to his writings later in life, after undergoing a personal spiritual transformation. Upon engaging with his work, I found that we shared much in common: both of us studied logic and advocated for its adoption in *uṣūl al-fiqh*, both undertook critiques of philosophical fallacies,

6. The idea that medieval Muslim philosophy was derivative of Greek thought is not without precedent. It has also been cogently argued, however, that this view underestimates the internal debates, methodological shifts, and doctrinal innovations present in the works of thinkers such as al-Fārābī, Ibn Sīnā, or Suhrawardī. Scholars have shown that many of these figures sought to Islamize Greek concepts in creative and rigorous ways, giving rise to a distinctly Islamic philosophical tradition rather than simply reproducing Hellenism. See, for instance, Peter Adamson, *Philosophy in the Islamic World* (Oxford University Press, 2016).

and both traversed a spiritual transformation. In Turkey, some have even referred to me as a commentator on al-Ghazālī, though in reality, my intellectual trajectory only came to resemble his at a later stage.

In reading al-Ghazālī, I found much that was of benefit. Nevertheless, one element particularly surprised me, namely, his uncritical adoption of Aristotelian logic. He regarded it as universal, applicable to all rational beings—even to those in other possible worlds. I strongly reject this view and have refuted it thoroughly in my works. Aristotelian logic has clear limitations; even within the confines of our actual world, let alone other worlds, there are domains in which it offers no benefit. Modern developments in formal logic have long surpassed its framework.[7] Al-Ghazālī's deep attachment to Aristotle, however, prevented him from recognizing alternative structures and modes of reasoning already latent within the Islamic tradition.

Ibn Taymiyya (d. 728/1328), in contrast, did better in this respect. He tried to develop forms of reasoning grounded in the Qur'an and Islamic culture—like *a fortiori* analogy (*qiyās al-awlā*) and analogical reasoning (*qiyās al-tamthīl*). He critiqued Aristotle soundly, in ways that align with modern theorization in logic. Sadly, many of his admirers today don't have the technical training to fully grasp his logical innovations.

Al-Ghazālī, in contrast, adopted Aristotelian logic and then searched the Qur'an for verses that could be seen as aligning with its methods of reasoning. He called these "balances" (*mawāzīn*), which he presents in *al-Ṣirāṭ al-mustaqīm*. In reality, these "balances" are none other than Aristotle's logical syllogisms. On the whole, then, al-Ghazālī was not able, as others have noted, to move beyond the philosophical paradigms of his time (*lam yakhruj min baṭn al-falsafa*), which were dominated by Greek thought.[8] His critique of philosophy is a rejection of some of its particulars: he critiques the position of Ibn Sīnā and others on the eternality of the world, on divine knowledge of particulars, and on bodily resurrection. He is correct to do so—albeit I disagree with his *takfīr* here—but he remains within the dominant philosophical paradigm of the time.[9] His more innovative thinking is in his work on *akhlāq* and *taṣawwuf*.

Ethics is another area in which the impact of Greek thought was detrimental. There is a near absence of a fully developed ethical philosophy in both traditional Islamic philosophy and the broader Islamic intellectual tradition. This is a mysterious fact that few have noticed, the main obstacle to which was the uncritical adoption of

7. On the history and critique of Aristotelian logic in Islamic thought, see Khaled El-Rouayheb, *Relational Syllogisms and the History of Arabic Logic, 900–1900* (Brill, 2010). For an account of al-Ghazālī's work on logic, see Azmi T. al-Sayyed Ahmad, "Al-Ghazali's Views on Logic," (Ph.D. diss., University of Edinburgh, 1981), https://era.ed.ac.uk/bitstream/1842/7415/1/237015.pdf.

8. The statement that al-Ghazālī "entered the womb of the philosophers, then intended to leave but was unable," is widely attributed to Abu Bakr Ibn al-ʿArabī (d. 543/1148), but I could find no source validating the attribution. Ibn Taymiyya is the only classical source that relates the statement but without attribution to anyone in particular. See Ibn Taymiyya, *Majmūʿ al-fatāwā*, ed. ʿAbd al-Raḥmān ibn Muḥammad, 37 vols. (Majmaʿ Malik Fahd, 1425/2004), 13:238.

9. For a different account of al-Ghazālī's relation to Greek thought, see Ebrahim Moosa, *Ghazali and the Poetics of Imagination* (University of North Carolina Press, 2005). Moosa argues that al-Ghazālī did not adopt Aristotelian logic uncritically but strategically reappropriated it within an Islamic epistemological framework.

Aristotelian ethics. When Aristotle's ethics were translated into Arabic, they were widely adopted and deeply shaped our intellectual discourse—including the work of jurists, theologians, and philosophers alike.

The result was a distortion. Take the four cardinal virtues—courage, temperance, wisdom, and justice—Greek virtues codified by Plato and refined by Aristotle. These became central in the ethical writings of Muslim thinkers such as Miskawayh (d. 421/1030), al-Ghazālī, Ibn Rushd, and even Ibn Taymiyya.[10] But these are not the foundational virtues of Islam. They are branch virtues. In Islam, the root virtues, the foundational values, are *taqwā* (Allah-consciousness), *amāna* (trustworthiness), and *ṣidq* (truthfulness). By adopting the Greek structure, Muslim scholars reversed the ethical order; the foundations became branches and the branches became foundations.

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When jurists speak about chastity or courage, they often treat these as independent virtues. But these are merely branches of the core ethical values Islam upholds. Even *īmān* is often not listed as a virtue in such frameworks, though it is the supreme virtue (*faḍīla*) and value (*qīma*). What we inherited, then, was an alien ethical framework that obscured the inner structure of Islamic moral thought. Al-Ghazālī, despite his immense contributions, was also shaped by this framework. Even in *Iḥyāʾ ʿulūm al-dīn*, he reproduces these Greek virtues and treats them as foundational. Yet *Iḥyāʾ* is one of the richest texts of Islamic ethics, if read correctly. It does not construct an ethical theory as the philosophers do, but it contains the material from which one can develop a comprehensive ethical philosophy—something we are in dire need of.

In this regard, I often reflect on the period following the fall of the Berlin Wall. At that time, Eastern Europe was in dire need of religion and a new ethical framework. Had Muslims possessed coherent ethical theories and a well-developed religious philosophy, the peoples of Eastern Europe—severed from their religious roots under communist regimes—would likely have been receptive to them. Yet the tragic reality was that Muslims and Arabs were engrossed in their own concerns, detached from the broader transformations unfolding in the world around them.

10. The four cardinal virtues—wisdom, courage, temperance, and justice—originate in the works of Plato (especially *The Republic*) and Aristotle (*Nicomachean Ethics*) and are later integrated into Islamic ethical discourse by Miskawayh, al-Ghazālī, and Ibn Rushd. For background on the transmission and adaptation of Greek ethics in Islamic thought, see Part Three ("Philosophical Ethics") of Majid Fakhry, *Ethical Theories in Islam* (Brill, 1991).

Tajdīd, Language, and the Cultural Embeddedness of Philosophical Concepts

When I went to the Sorbonne [in 1967], I immersed myself fully in study as my singular pursuit. I registered in multiple departments, earned certificates in the history of science and the history of art, and studied various languages, including Greek and German, in order to read philosophical texts in their original tongues. I would sit for 14 hours at my desk, studying, for days on end. These were four years of severe dedication to knowledge alone. Despite living in the Latin Quarter of Paris, I hardly visited its famous landmarks. I walked along the Seine only to clear my head and return to study. My room had a sign on the door, "Do not disturb."

From France, I returned to Morocco, because I had a clear and specific mission. I did not go to study abroad to excel in or enjoy life—I went to gain the intellectual means to serve the Arab and Muslim Umma. After returning to Morocco, I took up a professorship in Rabat and dedicated myself to teaching and research. By the 1980s, I had become deeply concerned with the need for renewal (*tajdīd*), a concept I consider original and fundamental to the Islamic tradition, as evidenced by the hadith, "Renew (*jaddidū*) your faith."[11] The word *tajdīd* is thus more appropriate than *ibdāʿ* (creative origination), even if the intent of *tajdīd* is *ibdāʿ*.

The point of my investigation here, more importantly, was to extract whatever remained useful in our intellectual tradition, especially for confronting the current crises facing the Umma. In my work on *ʿilm al-kalām*, for instance, I paid no attention to the doctrinal disputes.[12] Instead, I focused on the methodologies that our theologians used—how they reasoned, how they structured their thought, and so forth. These methods still offer value for our efforts to reconnect past and present.

During my studies, I learned six languages with the aim of reading and understanding: Arabic, French, English, German, Greek, and some Latin. I selected these as philosophical languages. My purpose was to extract what I needed from philosophical texts to evidence my claims. Each language has its unique elements. German, for example, more than any language I know, is suited for philosophy, for conceptual analysis, precise argumentation, and philosophical invention. German philosophy in turn is impressive. But this does not

11. Related in *Musnad Aḥmad*, no. 8710 and others, with a chain adjudged weak by most hadith authorities. The complete narration is: "Renew your faith." It was asked, "O Messenger of Allah, how do we renew our faith?" He replied, "Increase your saying: *Lā ilāha illā Allāh*."

12. *Fī uṣūl al-ḥiwār wa-tajdīd ʿilm al-kalām* [On the Fundamentals of Dialogue and Renovation of Islamic Theology] (Al-Markaz al-Thaqāfī al-ʿArabī, 1987).

mean I blindly adopted German philosophical styles. Rather, I absorbed how German thinkers constructed concepts and arguments, then reconstituted that methodology within our own intellectual structures. The same is true of the other languages.

The point to note is that philosophical concepts are culturally embedded; one must pay attention to their particularities.[13] Take, for instance, the seemingly universal notion of "existence" (*wujūd*). Western languages, such as French, render it as *existence*—derived from *existere*—which implies a standing forth or rising up. Western philosophers then define "being" in terms of a thing's self-standing presence (*al-qiyām bil-dhāt*), which leads naturally to the Greek notion of *ousia*, or substance, translated by Muslim philosophers in Arabic as *jawhar*. Yet *jawhar* in Arabic does not signify self-standing presence at all. It's a word of Persian origin that connotes the core or essence of a thing (*lubb al-shay'*). Likewise, the word used in the Islamic texts, *wujūd*, does not imply standing forth or self-subsistence at all. It derives from *wajada*, meaning to find, to encounter, to attain. Therefore, to speak meaningfully about *wujūd* in Arabic, one must recover the notion of attainment or discovery. Thus, whereas the concept of "existence" in Western philosophy attaches to notions of self-standing, in Islamic thought it attaches to notions of attainment and discovery. The assumption of universality occludes these crucial nuances.

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A deeper problem, evident in both medieval and modern currents of Islamic philosophy, is that when writing in Arabic and addressing the notion of *wujūd*, philosophers often define it in accordance with its counterparts in Western languages. This practice generates confusion and internal contradictions between the Arab's native cultural background and the foreign intellectual frameworks he has adopted. Consequently, creative originality is severed, rendering him incapable of producing genuinely new philosophical thought. Communication between the two cultural horizons becomes untenable, resulting in an intellectual stagnation characterized by the proliferation of endless commentaries—glosses upon glosses—without substantive innovation. Philosophy, as it has thus been transmitted to us, has induced a rupture, effectively arresting the intellect's connection to its own cultural authenticity. What is

13. The observation that philosophical ideas shift across cultural-linguistic contexts resonates with broader trends in the philosophy of language and translation. Wilhelm von Humboldt and later thinkers like Charles Taylor have argued that each language embodies a distinct worldview, shaping what can be thought and said. This insight also parallels work in comparative philosophy and translation theory, which challenges the assumption that philosophical categories are universally translatable. For a detailed but accessible account, see Charles Taylor, *Philosophical Arguments* (Harvard University Press, 1985), especially section III.

needed, rather, is the generation of new conceptual frameworks rooted in Islamic culture itself, enabling an authentic mode of philosophizing and the renewal of our intellectual creativity.

Consider Descartes's cogito—"I think, therefore I am"—as another example. When rendering this into Arabic, it has commonly been done with no regard for this linguistic and conceptual disjunction. In *Fiqh al-tarjama*, I devoted over a hundred pages to demonstrating how even foundational phrases like the cogito have no meaningful resonance in Arabic without deep semantic reconstruction.[14] Standard translations like "*ana ufakkir idhā ana mawjūd*," cannot be considered Arabic constructions. They are meaningless in the Arabic semantic world. I translated the cogito as "Look and you shall find," (*unẓur tajid*) not merely as a poetic alternative, but because it integrates the Arabic semantic fields of *naẓar* (looking, contemplation) and *wujūd* (discovery, finding). *Naẓar* in Arabic also carries a dual valence: perceptual and intellectual. Thus, in my rendition, we recover the unity of perception, thought, and spiritual encounter—elements fractured in the Cartesian tradition.

The point, in short, is that we cannot simply copy Western ontological frameworks into Arabic without critically re-evaluating the semantic, epistemological, and moral assumptions that accompany those frameworks.

Philosophy, Spiritual Practice, and Ethics

As we noted above, there is a near absence of a fully developed and original ethical philosophy within the Islamic intellectual tradition. A key part of my philosophical project was to contribute to this project, to recover the Islamic moral imaginary through rooting values in practice and the prophetic example, rather than through abstraction. The Sufis, though they didn't produce a formal ethical theory, did give us a rich corpus of lived ethics, spiritual refinement, and inner transformation. My task was to extract from that corpus the principles that could support a philosophical ethics truly grounded in Islamic belief and practice.

This required, of course, that I first undergo the transformation myself. Philosophy had shown me the limits of reason. Logic, for all its value, revealed its own boundaries. To go beyond, I had to act—

14. *Fiqh al-falsafa, 1: al-falsafa wa-l-tarjama* [The Essence of Philosophy, Vol. 1: Philosophy and Translation] (Al-Markaz al-Ṯhaqāfī al-ʿArabī, 1996).

not just act in the general sense, but perform righteous action, for only through practice can reason expand beyond itself. This is what led me to *taṣawwuf*. After studying logic and philosophy in depth, I discovered that action—not theoretical speculation—opens new horizons for thought. Reason alone cannot transcend itself. Only by acting with sincerity can one reach the realities that reason falls short of grasping. But not every action qualifies. It must be *ʿamal ṣāliḥ* (righteous action) guided by prophetic example.

Here, we would do well to reflect on the very conception of philosophy—what is philosophy? I would contend that it is best understood, in simple terms, as *ḥikma* (wisdom)—not in the sense later employed by the Islamic philosophers, but rather in the more primordial sense preserved within Islam itself. Historically, the term *sophia* (wisdom) predates Greek usage, originating in the ancient cultures of the Middle East, particularly the region between the two rivers (Mesopotamia), from where it passed into the Hellenic world. In its earliest usage, *ḥikma* denoted not mere speculative knowledge, but practiced knowledge (*al-maʿrifa al-maʿmūl bi-hā*)—knowledge that was acted upon and safeguarded by priests and scholars.

Philosophy had shown me the limits of reason. Logic, for all its value, revealed its own boundaries. To go beyond, I had to act—not just act in the general sense, but perform righteous action, for only through practice can reason expand beyond itself.

Thus, wisdom in these earlier traditions was inseparable from ethical action and religious devotion, a conception also affirmed in the Qur'an (2:269): "He grants wisdom to whom He wills, and whoever has been given wisdom has indeed been given much good." This understanding of *ḥikma* subsequently permeated the cultural matrix of the Torah and persisted within it.

In the pre-Socratic Greek context, wisdom likewise referred to practiced knowledge—a form of knowing that entailed living in accordance with truth.[15] After Socrates, however, a shift occurred. Philosophy came to signify not wisdom itself, but the *love* of wisdom. Socrates famously disavowed the title of *sage* (*ḥakīm*), insisting instead that he

15. The concept of *sophia* in pre-Socratic thought primarily referred to practical and technical knowledge or excellence, often associated with craftsmanship, political prudence, or poetic insight. It was linked to the ability to master a particular skill or art, such as that of artisans or statesmen, and also had religious connotations as a divine gift of insight. For a good account of pre-philosophical and philosophical usages of *sophia*, see David Wolfsdorf, "'Sophia' and 'Episteme' in the Archaic and Classical Periods," in Nicholas D. Smith (ed.), *Knowledge in Ancient Philosophy* (Bloomsbury, 2024), 11-15.

was merely a lover and seeker of wisdom. This transformation reflected a profound reverence for wisdom, which was now viewed as an unattainable ideal that could only be approached through ethical striving. Consequently, Socratic philosophy assumed a distinctly ethical character, seeking to merit wisdom through a mode of life rather than claiming it by mere possession of knowledge.

Thus, one who engages in *taṣawwuf* is in fact returning to the primordial practice of philosophy: the lived embodiment of wisdom.

This historical evolution brings us to the question of *taṣawwuf* and its relation to philosophy. Though it may seem surprising to some, the truth is that philosophy, in its origins, stems from what would later be termed *taṣawwuf*. Before the philosophical rupture initiated by Socrates, the cultivation of wisdom was inextricably linked to religion and religious practice. Knowledge and action were united; religious devotion was understood as the enactment of true knowledge. The Arabic term *taṣawwuf* was coined to describe this original union, drawing upon the ancient meaning of *sophia* prior to its philosophical transformation. In contrast, philosophy eventually severed wisdom from practice, retaining only theoretical contemplation and abandoning practiced knowledge. In this sense, philosophy betrayed its roots, confining itself to speculation divorced from praxis.

Thus, one who engages in *taṣawwuf* is in fact returning to the primordial practice of philosophy: the lived embodiment of wisdom. Sufism preserves the original spirit of philosophy, while philosophy, in its later development, represents a betrayal of its own foundational ethos. My turn to *taṣawwuf* is thus a return to the earlier model of philosophy—the integration of knowledge and practice.

Thus, this was the path that led me to seek out *ʿamal* (action). Just as I had previously pursued *naẓar* (intellectual reflection) and reached the recognition of its inherent limits, I turned to action in search of what intellectual reflection could not deliver. For me, action finds its fullest realization in the spiritual experience, in the Sufi path, provided that one undertakes it with the proper conditions and prerequisites.

Stated differently, if intellectual reflection establishes a relationship with things that is merely ideal—that is, theoretical—then action establishes a relationship based on *iqtidāʾ* (emulation). Emulation fundamentally differs from a theoretical relationship with reality; it necessitates concrete imitation and practical guidance. One cannot simply approach action independently; as when encountering a strange machine, one requires an instructor to explain its workings and demonstrate its correct usage. In the same way, a human being cannot access the realm of true action alone; rather, it is necessary to have a teacher who guides one to its realities.

Thus, just as I had apprenticed myself to masters of intellectual reflection in my philosophical pursuits, so too did I apprentice myself to guides in the domain of action. From the 1980s onwards, *taṣawwuf* has represented—for me—the practical and spiritual realization of philosophy that had been lost.

Part 2 of this essay picks up from this point, moving on to Taha Abderrahmane's critique of modernity, his construction of an original Islamic philosophy in the form of his trusteeship paradigm and some of its applications to contemporary issues, before discussing his emphasis on the primacy of the ethical, some recent political thought, and finally his reflection on his legacies and personal struggles.