



TOWARDS AN ANALYTIC, FĀRĀBIAN CONCEPTION OF ORIENTALISM

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, I attempt to develop what I call an ‘Analytic, Fārābian’ conception of Orientalism. The motivation for this conception is that it helps us with the task—identified by Wael B. Hallaq—of going beyond ‘rudimentary political slogans’ attached to the theory of Orientalism and instead to identifying Orientalism’s underlying ‘psycho-epistemic pathology’ (Hallaq 2018, 4). In order to do this properly, according to Hallaq, we need to find a methodological alternative to that which makes Orientalist discourse possible. Hallaq identifies the underlying problem as a commitment to secular humanism, and the solution its abandonment. However, I think the problem is a deeper one, which can roughly be stated as follows: how can we accept the pervasiveness of ideological influence without abandoning the idea that our theories aim (and to some extent succeed) at representing objective reality—such that we can say that Orientalism is a real phenomenon, and not merely something we happen to believe is a phenomenon. Conceiving Orientalism from within a Fārābian epistemology and using analytic tools to understand it (which I argue constitutes a unique and distinctive kind of fallibilism) makes head-way here where other conceptions fail.

Keywords: analytic philosophy/theology; Fārābian epistemology; Orientalism.

1. Introduction

In this paper, I attempt to develop what I call an ‘Analytic, Fārābian’ conception of Orientalism. By ‘Orientalism’ I have in mind, of course, the thesis famously articulated by Edward Said (especially in his canonical 1978, *Orientalism*) that studies of the ‘Orient’ (and Islam in particular) have been deeply corrupted by ideological influence. ‘Ideological’ in the Marxian sense (Said explicitly owes a lot to the work of Antonio Gramsci) that these studies really reflect and perpetuate the subterranean power-dynamic, and politico-economic reality which comprise the context in which these studies were executed. The relevant underlying power-dynamic and politico-economic reality for studies whose object is ‘the Orient’ is, of course, colonialism and its continued legacy. The vast significance and impact of Said’s work is difficult to overstate, and this article will take it for granted that there is something extremely penetrating in Said’s critique. The aim of this article, instead, is to attempt to give the theory of Orientalism (not the negative, ideological practise denoted by the theory) a sounder epistemological-methodological footing than that offered, indirectly, by Said himself with his seeming commitment to the work of Michel Foucault. I attempt to secure that footing through the prism of contemporary analytic philosophy, and, especially, the work of the Medieval Islamic Philosopher Abū Nasr al-Fārābi (b. 870/257) interpreted through an analytic lens. I will say more about what I mean by ‘analytic’ shortly, but before I do that, let me summarise why I think this epistemological project is required.

The well-known contemporary scholar Wael B. Hallaq has recently made a very compelling case for the claim that ‘Orientalism’ and its cognate terms have, since the figurative canonisation of Said’s *Orientalism*, become used as ‘rudimentary political slogans’ more often than not. These slogans’ probative force of critique, according to Hallaq, reside in the *ad hominem*, correlated with the “perceived or real ethnic and religious backgrounds or the authors associated or charged with Orientalist leanings. The more distant such backgrounds are from the object of study, the more vulnerable authors are to this charge” (Hallaq 2018, 3). And the critique is such that the charge then becomes non-evadable for those with the relevant background: “any scholar who depicts Islam negatively or positively is an Orientalist, the former emerging as a bigot, the latter as an exoticizer” (Hallaq 2018, 3). A white, North American male (for example) admitting that Islam is not perfect will be considered a bigot, but one who fails to admit this will be an exoticizer. This sends the cultural message that it is wrong for, say, North American white males to study Islam *at all* and that will have the corollary of opening a structural *cause* (not mere symptom)

for Orientalist discourse. I will say more in §4 (with respect to important work by Muhammad Ali Khalidi) about Orientalism via a discourse of omission. To avoid this Hallaq thinks, rightly in my view, that we need to look deeper into the *structural* causes and epistemic conditions that make Orientalist discourse possible. Hallaq identifies the smoking gun to be secular humanism and its attendant form of political liberalism (which Said himself is ultimately seen as an apologist for).

I agree with Hallaq that a better understanding of Orientalism will come with not only a diagnosis of what are the structural epistemic conditions for its possibility, but also a remedy and an alternative epistemology and methodology. In this paper, the relevant object of study will be Islamic Philosophy—and the problem is how we can approach it in a non-Orientalist manner. But my diagnosis as to what are the problematic epistemic conditions is not that we are overly committed to secular humanism, but rather a deeper problem that will affect sectarianism too. The smoking gun, I will argue, is what might be called an absolutist conception of knowledge according to which knowledge does not come in degrees: one either knows that Hama is in Syria, or one does not. With this conception of knowledge on the table, we become unable to accept the pervasiveness of ideological influence without abandoning the idea that our theories aim (and to some extent succeed) at representing objective reality. The latter comes at a tremendous cost, I believe, since it would entail the claim that the content of *Orientalism* does not denote any real colonial discourse camouflaged as scientific study, but merely some *beliefs* that there has been colonial discourse camouflaged as scientific study.

I take a lot of Anglo-American ‘analytic’ philosophy to be committed to this absolutist conception of knowledge (partly due to the grammar of the English word ‘knowledge’, which works differently for the Arabic ‘*ilm*’). However, I take an ‘analytic’ approach in this matter to represent an acceptance that we must not completely abandon the idea that our theories represent objective reality. Thus, it is not unusual for example, for the critical race theorist Charles Mills to be labelled ‘analytic’ despite his insightful and comprehensive excoriations of ‘analytic’ political philosophy. This is because Mills thinks that accepting broad epistemic relativism (a thesis often associated with ‘continental’ philosophy, rightly or wrongly) would be contrary to a truly progressive political philosophy. As Mills puts it:

Rejecting abstraction and generalism deprives one of the apparatus necessary for making general theoretical statements of one’s own, and indeed critiquing those same hegemonic

misleading abstractions. One is ghettoizing oneself in a self-circumscribed intellectual space, rather than challenging the broader mapping of that space. One also risks the dangers of relativism, which makes it difficult to affirm that, objectively women and people of color are indeed oppressed - not merely that they believe they are oppressed. (Mills 2005, 173-174)

However, Mills does not explain how we can both accept the claim that the possibility that our theories are likely to be ideologically compromised is something we cannot ever rule out, and the claim that our theories can represent objective reality. Together the claims seem to comprise a contradiction: we can never know whether our theories objectively represent reality (the more we think they do, the more likely it is that they are ideologically compromised), and our theories represent objective reality. What I think we need here is an epistemology that can explain why these claims look contradictory when really they are not. This paper argues that al-Fārābī's epistemology, when understood through an analytic prism, is a good contender for delivering these goods.

In §2 I will in further explain why this approach is 'analytic'. I will identify three relevant features and make the case for each. I then present, in §3, in greater detail what I think is the underlying problem for the theory of Orientalism: how can we accept that our theories are likely to be under ideological influence while at the same time avoiding epistemic relativism? In §4, I present some of what I take to be al-Fārābī's main epistemological breakthroughs, and present them as comprising a distinctive kind of Fallibilism. In §5 I show how this epistemological position can make head way with the epistemological problem for the theory of Orientalism in ways that other attempts have fallen a little short. In particular, I will in this context discuss Muhammed Ali Khalidi's case for a Baconian (and not Foucauldian) understanding of the operative catchphrase 'Knowledge is Power' and Jose Medina's appeal to (the more received conception of) Fallibilism to solve a very similar problem to what I have called the epistemological problem for the theory of Orientalism. §6 concludes.

2. Why 'Analytic'?

As I mentioned in the last section, I think there are three important senses in which the present study takes an 'analytic' approach. Here they are:

- (i) An Analytic approach employs maximum rational reconstruction in the history of philosophy (contra, say, the methodology advocated by Skinner).
- (ii) An Analytic approach uses tools and concepts from what is—sociologically speaking—recognised as contemporary analytic philosophy (in this specific case, concepts from the epistemology of testimony, and formal epistemology).
- (iii) An Analytic approach is committed to the claim that one ought not to abandon the notion of objectivity altogether.

Let me take each of these in turn, starting with (i). I think a good—and very stark—contrast to my approach can be found in Quentin Skinner’s 1969 famous article “Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas”, an article which can be thought to constitute a methodological manifesto to the concomitant “Cambridge School” of Intellectual History. In this article, Skinner excoriates the “rational reconstructive” kind of history of philosophy which he saw published by analytic philosophers. Skinner cites as examples here Russell’s *A History of Western Philosophy* and Arthur Danto’s *Analytical Philosophy of History* (inter alia). The “rational reconstructive”, philosophical approach employs as a methodological principle that we are to employ maximum charity when interpreting historical philosophical texts and ideas, and thus to seek the interpretation that renders them most coherent. About this search for coherence, Skinner writes:

(...) it remains hard to see how the whole enterprise of looking for the “inner coherence” of a given writer’s doctrines can yield anything except a mythology of coherence - a mythology, again, in the sense that the history written according to this methodology can scarcely contain any genuinely historical reports about thoughts that were actually thought in the past. (Skinner 1969, 22)

What is important instead for Skinner, as the passage above makes clear, is that we discover the actual *intentions* of the authors concerned in writing their texts. To do this we will have to be sensitive of course to the historical contexts they were writing in, but yet the historical context *alone* will not determine what these intentions are (Skinner also excoriates a tendency in non-analytic history of philosophy to look only at historical context¹). Further, Skinner wants to revive a sobriquet attributed to Collingwood that

¹ As he puts it, the school of thought according to which “it is the context of religious, political, and economic factors” which determines the meaning of any given text, and so must provide “the ultimate framework for any attempt to understand it” (Skinner 1969, 3).

there are no perennial problems in philosophy: there are only individual answers to individual questions, with as many different answers as there are questions, and as many different questions as there are questioners. (Skinner 1969, 50)

However, Skinner is quick to finesse the point, and claims that a correct understanding of the sobriquet (unlike Collingwood's own) is that this is not to concede that there are no perennial *questions* in philosophy when they are framed with sufficient abstraction.

All I wish to insist is that whenever it is claimed that the point of the historical study of such questions is that we may learn directly from the answers, it will be found that what counts as an answer will usually look, in a different culture or period, so different in itself that it can hardly be in the least useful even to go on thinking of the relevant question as being "the same" in the required sense after all. More crudely: we must learn to do our own thinking for ourselves. (Skinner 1969, 52)

So, according to Skinner, we are not to treat historical pieces of philosophy as pieces that can help us make progress with contemporary philosophical questions. As he says, we must "do our own thinking for ourselves". Instead, we need to concentrate on the actual authorial intentions as well as the historical context these works were written in. I do think that the kind of analytical approach I favour here does treat historical pieces as pieces that can help us directly with some of the problems we currently face, philosophical or otherwise. We are not as alone as Skinner seems to think. I won't be able to fully defend this claim here, but I draw attention to Skinner to help make the contrast clear. I will, however, make a small point in the analytic approach's favour. I think that Skinner sets up a false dichotomy between either thinking that historical figures can help us with respect to contemporary philosophical questions, or holding instead that we must take into account these authors' cultural context and their actual intentions in writing what they did. I cannot see any reason why we cannot believe both these things. Historical philosophers aren't *only* interesting because they contribute to contemporary questions and indeed their ideas can help us precisely *because* they start out with assumptions, and are embedded in cultures, different from ours. As such, understanding historical context and authorial intention are essential to the analytic

approach's ends. It is precisely by celebrating difference that we have a hope that our forbears saw things that we presently do not.²

The second way that my approach is analytic is that it will use tools and concepts from what is—sociologically speaking—recognised as contemporary analytic philosophy. As I've already mentioned, I will use concepts from formal epistemology and contemporary epistemology of testimony in trying to understand al-Fārābi. Of course, and one can only imagine a Cambridge-School member being quick to point this out, we heavily risk anachronism by doing this. I accept that there is a risk here and that we have to tread carefully. However, the fact that there is a risk does not mean that the project is doomed to fall foul of that risk. First, because, as Skinner himself in the end concedes, there are universal questions that litter the history of philosophy. As such we should expect that, at least sometimes, historical thinkers will be occupied with questions that are similar to our contemporary ones. Second, the approach I am advocating here is not one where we try to straightjacket a historical figure's thought into fixed 'analytic' concepts. Rather, as I hope will become apparent, engaging with historical philosophers in the manner I suggest can result in useful new distinctions within the analytic corpus, as well as modifications and additions to the existing concepts. This is a function of not merely doing *history* by employing the analytical approach, but rather doing philosophy by engaging in the history of philosophy.

Finally, I want to suggest that my approach is 'analytic' in the sense that it does not disavow completely the idea that our theories—scientific or otherwise—can represent objective reality. The contrast to an 'analytic' approach is meant to be a 'continental' one—the term 'analytic' seems to have been coined to contrast a kind of philosophy from one that was being done in the European continent in the 20th century by figures such as Martin Heidegger. I will have no time to devote to the history of the rift between the two schools of thought, nor to the tenability of the distinction which I think is tenuous at best, and likely morally problematic. Nevertheless, even

² I also think it is really most peculiar that in discussing authorial intention that Skinner explicitly claims to be heavily indebted to Elizabeth Anscombe's work *Intention*. Of course, for her intentions are not to be conceived of as some inner state, a "bombination in a vacuum" that do not "guarantee some action or another". Anscombe, is no behaviourist, however: attributing an intention, roughly, is a matter of providing a description of an agent's mental states that "rationalises the actions" of that agent. As such, at the level of ascribing intentions to agents, we must engage in rational reconstruction! What is really bizarre is that Skinner himself praises Anscombe's "use of the practical syllogism to elucidate intentionality" (Skinner 1969, 44). One could reply that the 'rational reconstruction' we engage in attributing intentions is of a different order than that which is in use in doing analytic history of philosophy. I think it is an open question, however, whether a defender of Skinner can make sense of that difference in a non *ad hoc* manner. For more penetrating criticism of Skinner on some of these points, see Finlayson (forthcoming).

people who are not convinced that the distinction is useful for philosophical purposes are all able to identify which philosophers, sociologically speaking, are considered to be ‘continental’ thinkers. One such, very paradigmatically ‘continental’ philosopher is Michel Foucault. I think he is incredibly important for the present context, since his ideas have been so influential in the development of the theory of Orientalism—in philosophy, but especially in other disciplines in the humanities, and development studies. In Muhammed Ali Khalidi’s interpretation of Foucault’s endorsement of the phrase ‘Knowledge is Power’ “there is no such thing as knowledge beyond what various power systems of power disseminate as their vision of reality” (Khalidi 2006, 32). Khalidi proposes instead a “Baconian” analysis of that phrase according to which there is such a thing as a real knowledge, and it is “instrumental in the projection of power, its perpetuation, and sustenance: it both feeds and is fed by the exercise of power” (Khalidi 2006, 32). Khalidi even defends the view that Edward Said, despite his explicit endorsement of Foucault, is really committed to a Baconian and not Foucauldian understanding of knowledge (I will say more about why in the following section). Whilst, as we shall see, I think that the Baconian account of knowledge does not give us a rich enough epistemology to account for the workings of Orientalism, Khalidi is right to resist an overly relativistic conception of knowledge. I think this latter point suffices to qualify my approach as analytic—as least sociologically speaking—since we have a precedent in the work of scholars like Charles Mills and Jose Medina who, partly because they do not endorse a full-blown relativism (despite their suspicions about the ideological nature of objective discourse), are also considered to be ‘analytic’ thinkers. This is not to rule out the existence, future or past, of ‘continental’ philosophers who take a similar stance. It is just that paradigmatically, and sociologically speaking, they tend not to.

3. Orientalism and Objectivity

The theory of Orientalism, especially as articulated by Edward Said, has of course been subject to extensive criticism and discussion, especially perhaps by those who in different manners are very sympathetic to Said’s overall project (I take myself to be in that category, incidentally). Hallaq has really usefully summarised that extensive body of work as follows:

The critiques have mainly been on the following grounds: (1) *Orientalism* adopts the deterministic Foucauldian theory of discursive formations that does not account for authorial individuality and individualistic contribution; (2) it does not

give due credit to predecessors who have levelled weighty critical attacks on the discipline, notably Anouar Abel-Malek and A. L. Tibawi; (3) it commits the same fallacies of essentializing and totalizing as that which it critiques; (4) it is profoundly lacking in historical and historiographical method, Said himself being a literary critic who had no historical training; (5) it relies on divergent theoretical apparatuses that stem from contradictory epistemological assumptions; (6) it fails to take into account large bodies of writing by the prolific German Orientalists, by women, and by “Orientals” themselves; (7) it does not account for distinguishing features in the various types of Orientalism, again the German component being particularly noted for its formidable output within an alleged context of lack of empire; and (8) it harbors ideological biases against Zionism and Judaism. (Hallaq 2018, 7)

Given that I have described my approach as ‘analytic’ and given how I have characterised ‘analytic’ as denoting a departure from Foucauldian epistemology, it’ll hardly be surprising that I very much endorse criticisms (1, 3 and 5) which I take to be related. About these points, however, Hallaq makes what I think is a very apposite observation—that these critical points require for their probative force that a viable alternative epistemology for the theory of Orientalism is offered:

What is worth noting, however, is their general nature; critiques 1, 3, and 5 take aim at methodology, but do not even come close to providing an alternative, since those who take these stances are a great majority that tends to reject the very premise Said adopts, and since they seem to have made their critiques in the first place to exclusively refute Said’s premise.³ (Hallaq 2018, 7)

I think it is no surprise that there has not really been an alternative presented. This is because if you accept that there is something right about the theory of Orientalism, and more broadly, the idea that our theories are subject to ideological bias and distortion, in such a way that is not transparent to us, then there seems to be very little room left for the idea that our theories can in any way represent objective reality. This point is exacerbated by the fact that the theory of Orientalism predicts that the more we claim that what our theory presents the objective truth the more likely

³ I think Hallaq is using the word ‘premise’ here quite liberally to denote Said’s commitment to Foucauldian methodology/epistemology.

it is that we are under ideological influence. It is of course no co-incidence that colonial propaganda would be presented under the banner of putatively objective studies about the so-called ‘Orient’. Propaganda is hardly effective if it wears on its sleeve the fact that it is propaganda! It is far more effective when it looks totally objective, an irrefutable part of the fabric of our physical world (hence why Lenin, for example, thought architecture such a perfect vessel for delivering what some scholars have called ‘positive-sense ideology’⁴). And since the theory of Orientalism is a theory, it must too be subject to this formula. But yet, as Charles Mills has forcefully put the point, if we abandon the idea that our theories can ever purport to represent objective reality, then we cannot say that there really is a Colonial distorting influence on studies of the ‘Orient’—all we can say is that we believe there to be such distorting influence. Correlatively, we would not be able to assert “that, objectively women and people of color are indeed oppressed” but merely “that they believe they are oppressed”. Given that there would be no objective reality for Orientalism to represent, then it is also no co-incidence that “it commits the same fallacies of essentializing and totalizing as that which it critiques” since there is nothing else a discourse could do—it would merely assert one point of view whose ultimate purpose is to dominate, another instance of the will to power, and not to represent reality veridically.⁵ And whilst theorists like Mills are clear that we should not succumb to this, and not throw out objectivity altogether, he never gives us the epistemological framework in which it would make sense to heed his advice.⁶

A valiant attempt at providing such an epistemology, however, comes from the work of Jose Medina. Here he succumbs to what I think should be a very natural temptation that in the wake of the fact that our theories are likely to be under ideological influence we ought to exercise *epistemic humility*. The latter denotes the idea that we ought to recognise that we may be mistaken in our beliefs, and/or the grounds for them. The view is related to, and depends on I think, what is currently thought to be the way to understand Fallibilism in contemporary Epistemology (though it is not

⁴ See Geuss (1981) for an elaboration of the idea of ‘positive sense’ ideology.

⁵ For instance, the well known Syrian scholar Sadiq al-Azm claims that Said’s position amounts to the claim that the “‘European mind’, from Homer to Karl Marx and A. H. R. Gibb, is inherently bent on distorting all human realities other than its own and for the sake of its own aggrandisement” (Al-Azm 1981, 8). Here Said seems to be essentialising the ‘European Mind’ and by its contrast the ‘non-European’ mind. Given the underlying problematic, again it is hardly surprising that we find similar criticisms of the idea that ‘ideal theory’ in political philosophy is ideological via the claim that ‘real theory’ is guilty of the same thing (see for instance Adams 2021).

⁶ Though he does famously recommend that we eschew what he calls ‘ideal theory’. I will not have the space to elucidate what he means by this, though, I will point out that it should be pretty obvious given some of the comments Mills makes that I have quoted, that ideal theory is not ideal theory merely because it claims to represent objective truth.

identical to it). While there are a number of ways of understanding Fallibilism, the currently most common, I think is the following:

Fallibilism: *S* can know that *p* even though *S*'s evidence that *p* does not entail, (or guarantee, or make certain, or give probability 1 to) that *p*.

Epistemic Humility: *S* believes that *p* while recognising that their belief that *p* may be mistaken.

Fallibilism so understood does not entail epistemic humility: that one's evidence is less strong than to entail *p* does not entail that one recognises this. However, epistemic humility does entail Fallibilism, on pain of skepticism (at least on internalistic accounts of knowledge), since Fallibilism allows that *S* can know that *p* even if *S* believes that they might be wrong to believe that *p*. Medina thinks epistemic humility is not just being open to the possibility that one's beliefs are mistaken, but also the conscious recognition that there are standpoints that we may not be able to comprehend, or ever inhabit, but which may nonetheless be essential to the probative force of certain bits of evidence.⁷ He calls the state where we are humble in such a way that we acknowledge that there will *always* be standpoints that we cannot comprehend "kaleidoscopic consciousness":

What is needed is a *kaleidoscopic consciousness* that remains forever open to being expanded, that is, a subjectivity that is always open to acknowledge and engage new perspectives, and always open to strive toward a better balance among possible perspectives. (Medina 2013, 200)

We might then think that so long as we maintain this stance of *kaleidoscopic consciousness* in the wake of the threat of Orientalism when exploring the history of Islamic Philosophy, we can still maintain that we do uncover some objective truths, and that the theory of Orientalism itself presents an objective truth. Here, however, a new problem presents itself. For don't we make ourselves especially germane to ideological influence when we believe ourselves to have achieved kaleidoscopic consciousness (as we are especially so germane when we believe that in virtue of our theories being objective, that we are not under such influence)? Correlatively, one is not epistemically humble if one believes oneself to be maximally epistemically humble! We might, after all, be wrong that we are epistemically humble. And believing ourselves to be humble when we are not puts us in an especially epistemically poor position. But, of course, the

⁷ For this reason he thinks that solidarity does not require taking the same epistemic position, and that marginalised groups then to be more epistemically humble (see also Medina 2021; Pohlhaus 2002).

problem of infinite regress presents itself: we have to be not only epistemically humble about our belief that we are humble, we also have to be epistemically humble about the belief that we believe that we are humble, and so on.

Medina is sensitive to this point and responds (effectively biting the bullet) that we cannot really attain a state where we justifiably believe ourselves to be maximally epistemically humble:

(...) *complete meta-lucidity is unreachable*, for the process of cognitive and affective melioration does not have an end and there are always blind spots that remain unnoticed. (Medina 2013, 200)

Thus, the person who is embarking on a quest to become more epistemically humble should believe that they will be unable to become properly humble. In a way that is compatible with a humble stance. However, it does have a bit of a whiff of self-deception about it: that one is consciously trying to achieve something one ought to believe is impossible—for one ought really to aim to achieve perfect humility in order to achieve something less than perfect humility. More worryingly, the original problem remains in this form: we are more likely to be ideologically vulnerable when we believe we've reached the best, available kind of humility available even where this is less than perfect 'meta-lucidity'. That is, we are likely to be more ideologically vulnerable when we believe of ourselves that we are in a state of seeking ongoing epistemic melioration and that we're as epistemically humble and open-minded as it is possible to be. We might well be mistaken about that belief! So it will act as ideological cover in the same way that objective discourse is meant to do. The problem with respect to reconciling the theory of Orientalism with an epistemology that will allow us to say that the theory of Orientalism denotes a least some objective truths and not just some people's beliefs then persists. It is precisely here that I think an analytic understanding of al-Fārābī's epistemology can help us. I move now to articulate it.

4. Fārābīan Fallibilism

I think that al-Fārābī's epistemology is motivated, at least in part, by the following problem that arises from within a 'rationalist' (or

‘evidentialist’⁸) understanding of Islam: how can we both maintain that true Prophet’s claims be all vindicated by reason and evidence and yet maintain that the Prophet’s epistemic state is in some way beyond our, ordinary intellects, such that there is a unique epistemic purpose to Prophecy. As I have argued in other works (Booth 2016) this problem is a version of a problem in modern epistemology with regard to expert testimony. The problem here concerns how we can know which experts’ testimony to trust without becoming experts ourselves and thereby obviating the need for expert testimony (see especially Godman 2001 who calls this the ‘novice/2expert’ problem, and see Lackey and Sosa 2006 for an overview of the epistemology of testimony). The correlative problem for the ‘rationalist’ understanding of Islam then is that if every proposition in Islamic scripture is discoverable by independent reason, why do we need scripture?

Al-Fārābi’s solution to this issue is ingenious, I think. It is a version of what I have argued is broadly the Falsafa school’s solution: the appeal to a moderated type of evidentialism or rationalism. That only a certain cognitive elite are able to use independent reason to acquire the truths contained in scripture. Everyone else will need to believe on the basis of allegories and dialectical strategies—not Aristotelian demonstration, which is meant to yield full apodictic certainty—the delivery of which is the purpose of scripture. In Fārābi’s hands, distinctively, there is no simple binary between elite and non-elite. Rather, we have grades of certainty (mirroring how the Arabic word for knowledge can be graded, whereas the English cannot⁹)—with only the Prophet being able to attain absolute certainty. What makes the Prophet have this state of certainty is that through his enhanced faculty of the imagination, he is able to apprehend all the knowable truths all at once.¹⁰ Thus he is able to *understand* the truths of the world, not just know that they are true, and how they all fit together. It is this that makes him have the rhetorical capacity requisite to create the allegories in scripture. Further, it allows the Prophet to satisfy a strict K-K requirement that al-Fārābi sets out for absolute certainty. Aristotelian demonstration demanded for full certainty that knowledge be the product of a sound syllogism whose middle premise was a ‘first principle’ grasped, apodictically, by *noûs* (the intellect). But Aristotle does not require for demonstrative certainty that we understand how *noûs* works and how it is that from the armchair we can learn truths about the actual

⁸ I prefer ‘evidentialism’ since the position here is really neutral with respect to the rationalism vs. empiricism debate (see Booth 2016).

⁹ For details about the grammar of the Arabic word for ‘knowledge’, see Rosenthal (2006).

¹⁰ This happens through an ‘emanation’ from the so called ‘Agent Intellect’ a concept developed from Aristotle’s *De Anima* (this was common in Falsafa). I will not unfortunately have the space to develop his account with respect to these things.

world. But this is precisely what I think al-Fārābī demands in his short but important work *The Conditions of Certainty*.¹¹ This has the important upshot that while the Prophet can have absolute certainty, ordinary humans will have to make do with something less perfect. Further, it purports to solve the previously mentioned problem regarding the Prophet's testimony: each individual proposition asserted by the Prophet can be independently known by reason. But what is unique about the Prophet's epistemic state is not *what* he knows but the mode of his knowledge. What scripture gives us that is cognitively beyond us is a picture of how all the different truths of the world fit together, what some contemporary epistemologists have called 'narrative testimony' (see Fraser 2021). Hence the need for God to have sent down a Koran.

The idea that humans can never be absolutely certain, but yet be certain enough for knowledge gives us some of the resources needed for how to marry up the theory of Orientalism with the idea that we can know that the theory of Orientalism is at least in some respects objectively true. Contemporary formal epistemology models belief along what is sometimes called the 'Lockean conception of belief'.¹² The idea is that beliefs can come in degrees, which we can model along the lines of assigning probabilities: 0 – 1 (where a 0.5 degree of belief would be a paradigmatic suspension of judgement). The question here is what degree is necessary for paradigmatic 'full belief' in any given proposition? According to the Lockean conception, it is a degree that is greater than 0.5 and equal or smaller than 1.0. In other words, complete certainty is not required for full belief (but completely certain beliefs have not been ruled out). The Fārābīan picture is sympathetic to this, I think, but makes a vital amendment: full belief involves a degree of belief that is greater than 0.5 but smaller than 1.0. In other words, beliefs that are 1.0 are *always* defective (unless you are a Prophet or God). The Fārābīan model then introduces the following normative condition: beliefs of a 1.0 degree are always defective.¹³ The point here is that this conception of belief, and some of its normative conditions, accords very well with the idea that, and explains how, we can both hold the theory of Orientalism and maintain that the theory constitutes knowledge. If the theory of Orientalism is true, then we ought never to be certain of our beliefs, since whether they are influenced by bias is not transparent to us. However, we can still maintain *full* belief, and have full knowledge of, say, the theory of Orientalism.

¹¹ For a detailed discussion of this work, see Deborah Black (2006).

¹² See for instance Foley (2009).

¹³ The Lockean conception can sometimes be thought to be descriptive of what belief is, though it comes from Locke's normative thesis that one ought to "proportion one's beliefs to the evidence".

This Fārābian Fallibilism is slightly different from contemporary Fallibilism, according to which one can know that p even when one's evidence does not make the probability of p 1. The Fārābian view I think entails this, but is stronger in that it tells us that we should *never* be certain in our beliefs. It is also not quite the view that one ought to be always open-minded, since being open-minded is a position one takes in response to further evidence (see Fantl 2008 for an elaboration of this point). One can have Fārābian full beliefs but not be open-minded (but perhaps one cannot be open-minded without at least a Lockean account of belief). In that sense it is not demanding epistemic humility. As such, the account does not face the threat of prescribing self-deception when one has to attempt to become epistemically humble in the knowledge that the minute one thinks one has achieved it one will automatically fail to be humble. So unlike the Lockean account of belief, we accord with the theory of Orientalism by saying that we should never be certain of our beliefs, and unlike the appeal to epistemic humility, we evade the charge of relying on a sort of self-deception to make it work.

Still, since the Fārābian account here is normative we might still be prone to the other objection to the appeal to humility: that just as we are especially prone to ideological bias when we believe our theories to be perfectly objective, we will be especially prone to ideological bias when we think we have met the normative recommendation made by al-Fārābi. Indeed, we can re-calibrate the central problem I have been raising as follows: an epistemology that makes no normative recommendation will not be able to heed the lessons of the theory of Orientalism, but so long as we make a normative recommendation in its wake we will have the problem as regards our second-order impression of our epistemic state vis a vis that recommendation: we will be especially ideologically vulnerable when we believe we have met the requirement. How I think al-Fārābi's epistemology deals with this problem can be seen when we look at how Orientalism would be understood in its terms.

5. The Fārābian Conception of Orientalism

Muhammed Ali Khalidi has proposed that the underlying epistemology for the theory of Orientalism is better understood as a 'Baconian' rather than 'Foucauldian' one, despite Said's explicit debt to Foucault:

In my view, Said is more of a Baconian than a Foucauldian (...). That is to say, he is interested in the way in which the academies and the think-tanks conspire in the projection of

power—namely by misinterpreting, misrepresenting, misinforming, and omitting what does not fit into their world view. Despite his obvious debts to Foucault, Said generally sees power-laden discourse as a distortion of a fuller and more accurate picture, not just as one more assertion of a will to power, whose only possible response is another. (Khalidi 2003, 32)

Orientalism works, under Khalidi's rendering of the Baconian view, by distorting objective reality (by 'misinterpreting, misrepresenting, misinforming, and omitting') in order to maintain or construct certain power-relations. Here, Khalidi seems to understand a 'world-view' as being a set of believed propositions, which are to be assessed relative to their truth conditions, and where the absence of some propositions within the world view is thought to be a distortion of reality, or as giving the world view in question at best an incomplete picture of reality. Khalidi has in mind as Orientalism in the history of Islamic philosophy the tendency for scholars to in some way distort the truths pertaining to Islamic Philosophy. For instance, by down-playing the "place [of Islamic Philosophy] in Islamic culture as a whole" and presenting its historical proponents as "restricted to a small group of free thinkers" (p. 26), or by presenting it as "monolithic and essentially different from Western Philosophy" (p. 26). The example of Orientalism by omission that Khalidi gives is the way in which Islamic Philosophy is so noticeably absent from the curricula in contemporary Philosophy programmes, conspiring with the attitude of intellectual historians (working along the lines of Skinner's manifesto) to the effect that (and here he brings to bear an excellent quote from Mushin Mahdi):

One of the strangest criticisms that continues to be made by some of the representatives of the older, historical, and philological tradition of Islamic studies in the West has to do with the validity of attempts to think or rethink the thoughts of a philosopher such as Alfarabi, Avicenna, or Averroes. This means that one can treat their thought historically, biographically, sociologically, and so forth—that is good scholarship. But to think philosophically when dealing with the works of the philosophers, that is said not to be scientific. This view makes no sense, of course. (Mahdi 1990, 93)

I very much agree with Khalidi and Mahdi that the former attitude represents a very important kind of Orientalism—perhaps the central and most insidious kind. Where I disagree—with Khalidi at least—is that this

can be made sense of from within the Baconian view of what a world view is, and its attendant account of why omissions are epistemically problematic. That is, that what makes a world view problematic where it contains glaring omissions is that it fails to represent reality by failing to represent certain portions of it. The trouble arises when we attend to the fact that for humans a complete picture of reality is impossible. It is way too demanding for the adequacy of a world view that it represents *everything* in the world (including, say, what we characterise as paradigmatically trivial matters such as how many grains of sand there are on the beaches of the world, at $t_1 \dots t_x$). This will extend to world views in some domain, such as ‘Islamic Philosophy’. Less demanding is the idea that world views need to represent the ‘important’, or ‘significant’ facts about a given domain. But what determines whether some fact is deemed important enough to be essential to the correct characterisation of the world, or in our case Islamic philosophy? Appeal to the facts or some epistemic notion such as the evidence is unlikely to do the requisite work.

According to the picture of al-Fārābi I gave earlier, what makes the Prophet’s epistemic state different to ordinary humans has to do with how, by seeing all the facts of the world at once, they can see how these facts are related to one another. What is esoteric in Prophecy then is not some particular fact (or set of facts) that we cannot independently verify for ourselves, but rather an account of how the facts fit together—a world view, or a *narrative* testimony. The particular picture of the relation of how these facts fit together cannot be just another fact or proposition (on pain of it then being a fact whose relation with others needs to be explained, *ad infinitum*). So the world view is made up of propositional beliefs (which can be independently verified) and a picture of how those propositions fit together which is non-propositional and cannot be verified by evidence. Putting this back into the theory of Orientalism, we can think world views as constituting ideologies and that scripture for al-Fārābi will of course be a “positive-sense” ideology. Under this account, a negative ideology would be one that contains false propositions, or else contains a picture of how the facts of the world come together in such a way that is, for non-epistemic reasons, problematic: e.g. that it enables subjugating power structures. Or else it contains a mixture of both problems.

I think this helps us explain two related things: how it is that Orientalist (and other ideological) discourse can persist in the face of strong counter-evidence; the determinants of what constitutes *what* evidence to attend to (what facts are significant for us, in other words). Because world views then in part *influence* (though do not completely determine) our first-order evidence, we can at least partly explain why Ideologies persist even where

strong counter-evidence against some of the claims embedded in their attendant world views exists. For people in the grip of such ideologies (such as Orientalism) that counter-evidence will simply not be part of their first-order evidence. What is problematic about the omission of the study of Islamic philosophy as *philosophy* is the world view that deems the Islamic Philosophy as non-important as philosophy, not simply as non-existent. The wrong then is not in this case simply an epistemic wrong.¹⁴ But yet this is not to abandon the notions of truth and objectivity—world views do comprise propositional content which can be assessed against evidence. The point is that such content is not the only thing they comprise, and that affects both how confident we can be in each proposition we believe, as well what we should be evaluating when we are trying to determine whether a work is Orientalist or not.

This brings us back to the issue of how vulnerable we would be once we heed, and recognise that we heed, al-Fārābī's epistemic prescription. Believing that we have done so does not represent the blind-spot it does in other epistemologies, I think, because we ought to heed the prescription in light of recognising the non-epistemic dimension to our views of the world. That is, that propositional beliefs do not come packaged to humans as individual, discreet entities, and that what non-propositional picture they come ensconced in affects what is our first-order evidence, but yet cannot itself be evaluated against the evidence. So we can heed al-Fārābī's epistemic prescription *in toto* and *believe* that we do, but yet—if we have followed the justification for the prescription—not believe that having satisfied the epistemic requirement that there is nothing left for us to do. That is, even if we believe ourselves to be epistemic angels we cannot believe we have exhausted the question of whether we have the right view of the world (and so, indirectly, because world views influence evidence, the right beliefs).

6. Conclusion

The pressing question we are left with is of course: what are the normative non-epistemic criteria for good world-views? I think it is likely that I have gone way beyond al-Fārābī in moving from the idea that the relation between propositions in a world view is itself non-propositional to the idea that world views are to be assessed along moral criteria such as whether they enable domination. Al-Fārābī might well instead have thought that while that relation is non-propositional, there is still a brute, non-

¹⁴ To the extent then that 'secular humanism' is committed to the denial of this claim, my view will accord with Haqq's diagnosis of Orientalism's origins.

propositional truth out there about their proper relation that the Prophet comes into direct acquaintance with on grasping all the truths of the world all at once. Further, one could rightly wonder that if there are non-epistemic criteria that determine the correct non-propositional criteria for world views, then do we again make ourselves ideologically vulnerable when we believe ourselves to have met them? If there is a correct Prophecy, then what room is there for people to have non-Islamic beliefs? And if my account allows there to be such room, have I not secularised al-Fārābī in a way that might even be Orientalist? I think a lot will depend on what exactly the non-epistemic criteria are; whether we can maintain that hard distinction between the epistemic state of the Prophet and the epistemic state of ordinary humans; and whether the distinction between secular and non-secular can be easily made sense of within Islam. Arguably, perhaps, the view that there is a hard division between ordinary humans and Prophets, and all humans and God is one that is in accord with robustly theistic Islam (where the denial of the distinction might be tantamount to polythesism). I have not attempted to address these difficult issues here, since some of these moves likely depart significantly from what al-Fārābī said, and I have not even been able to properly defend why I think Fārābī's epistemology is as my reading says it is. So my account here is programmatic. But given the deep difficulty of the problem at hand, I think it constitutes some progress, and some vindication of how we can use the history of philosophy to *help* us solve problems. Though, of course, that is no short-cut to having to do some of the thinking for ourselves.

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