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READING KANT IN TEHERAN. TOWARDS A RECEPTION OF THE IRANIAN RECEPTION OF EUROPEAN PHILOSOPHY

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*Abstract**

The purpose of this article is to furnish insights into the variety of ways in which European philosophy has been, and is being, received in Iran. The reception of Kantian thought in Iran exemplifies in significant ways the transmission of European philosophy into a non-European context, since the philosophy of Kant is discussed by a variety of intellectuals and scholars and in many different ways. The article first briefly discusses the motives of this study along with some methodological questions concerning comparative philosophy. It also gives some information about the issue of philosophy in Iran. It then focuses on two specific approaches to Kant provided by two different Iranian thinkers: on Mehdi Ḥā’erī Yazdī’s critique of Kant’s critique of the ontological proof of God’s existence, and on Mohammad Moqtahed Šabestarī’s references to Kant’s idea of freedom and autonomy.

On the Purpose of Studying the Reception of Kant in Iran

In the year 2004 scholars, intellectuals, and politicians all across the world celebrated the 200th anniversary of Kant’s death. It may appear to be yet another curiosity from the land of the Ayatollahs, that there have also been reports on several international Conferences about Kant in Teheran.¹ But is the pheno-

* This article is based on a paper that was originally prepared for the conference “Kant in Asia. The Unity of Human Personhood” organized by the department of Religion and Philosophy of Hong Kong Baptist University, 20–23 May 2009. I am grateful to Ralph Weber (Zurich), Ulrich Rudolph (Zurich) and Anke von Kügelgen (Berne), who commented upon an earlier version of this article.

1 In the years 2004 and 2005 there have been at least three international conferences on aspects of Kantian philosophy held in Teheran. The first of them was conducted by the Department of Philosophy of the ‘Allāmeh Ṭabāṭabā’ī University, Teheran, under the topic “Two Hundred Years After Kant” (Nov. 20th–22nd, 2004), see *Gorūh-e falsafeh, dānešgāh-e ‘Allāmeh Ṭabāṭabā’ī*, 1383/2004–5. The second conference was organized by the Iranian In-

menon of Iranians spending lots of their time studying a German thinker of the 18th century of any further interest? Is it really astonishing that this eminent thinker is read in Iran like he is read in many other places as well? Does it not simply prove, that “our thinker” and his philosophy, “the symbol of European enlightenment”, “the foundation of any liberal thought” of “Western democracy” and human rights, as “we Europeans” like to see him, has to be studied wherever people seek to reach for “Western values”? And furthermore, why should it then be more than an interesting anecdote, why should anyone, from a Western scholarly perspective, be interested in studying Iranian accounts of Kant’s writings? What can we learn from their readings? Should they not rather learn from us when it comes to the interpretation of a thinker, who has been studied in the west for over two centuries? Is it not simply a waste of time? I am convinced that it is not. One purpose of a study of Iranian interpretations of Kant is to get an idea of how and in which different ways doctrines from the European philosophical tradition were perceived in Iran. Not in the sense that European thought penetrated the intellectual tradition of Iran – as if it was an inflexible and dominant invader and the Iranian tradition a clearly defined set of outdated doctrines – but rather in the sense of an encounter that led to transformations in the understanding of both traditions. I would therefore argue that the transmission of ideas should not be regarded as a simple reproduction, but rather as a creative adaptation of knowledge, taking place in a specific context.

Furthermore, one underlying motive for a study like this is to question the still dominant European or “Western” bias within the general project of the

stitute of Philosophy (*mo’asasse-ye pažūhešī-ye hekmat va falsafe-ye īrān*) to which eminent Western Kant-Scholars such as Manfred Baum, Otfried Höffe and Sally Sedgwick contributed. See MOVAHED, 2007. The third one entitled “Kant-Seminar. Peace through justice” was conducted by the Institute for Political and International Studies in Teheran in collaboration with the Orient-Okzident-Forum of Potsdam University on 6th and 7th of February 2005. To each of them there have been reports, also in German media. For an account of the first one see the report of one the German participant CLAUS LANGBEHN in: *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* 30.11.2004 (online-version published at <http://www.qantara.de/webcom/show_article.php/_c-469/_nr-244/i.html>; for the English version see <http://en.qantara.de/webcom/show_article.php/_c-478/_nr-208/i.html>, last access 2010-05-06). For the second see Otfried HÖFFE’s very informative personal report in *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* 19.06.2004 (No. 140, p. 39). A report on the third conference was published by Carolin EMKE in *Der Spiegel* 20.2.2005, No 8, p. 144–148. For a reaction to that report by the German co-organizers see *SSIP-Mitteilungen* 1, 2005, S. 8f. (online <wwwSSIP-web.de/main/downloads/ika05-1.pdf>, last access 2010-05-06).

history of philosophy. A quick look into compendia for the history of philosophy reveals that the intellectual history of regions lying outside Europe and North America are usually marginalized. The same picture appears, when one looks at the curricula being taught at departments of philosophy at Western universities. The history of philosophical thought from “Asian civilisations”, for instance, commonly falls into the realm of the so-called area studies. That may be reasonable as long as the necessary sources are not yet accessible to a wider range of scholars. But the results of these area studies in the field of intellectual history are often ignored by scholars representing philosophy in an academic context. One reason for that may be that they are, from a Eurocentric perspective, not interested in whatever “non-Western” intellectual tradition, another one that researchers in area studies are themselves often not interested in presenting their results in a way that may attract the attention of Western academic philosophers.

Nevertheless, there are philosophers with a specific interest in non-European traditions just like there are scholars who follow the idea of intercultural or comparative philosophy. Their perspective is based on the principle that philosophical thinking is a universal human quality, and that the intellectual heritage of mankind is therefore not necessarily to be split into disjointed regional or cultural fragments. Their comparative approach aims at expanding the canon of philosophy, and thereby the scope of philosophical research. Yet intercultural philosophy has, at least, to struggle with two major problems: one of them being practical, the other one rather systematic in nature. The practical one arise from the fact that inter-cultural philosophers are often marginalized, so their influence on the community of academic philosophy and on its research agenda turns out to be rather limited. The systematic problem lies in the fact, that the notion of the “intercultural” often evokes the idea of distinct cultures being responsible for the differences in intellectual doctrines. This bears the risk of overemphasizing “the (cultural) other”, which is taken as something “authentic” and can only be understood in the horizon of “the other”. By arguing that the intellectual world of “the other” is inaccessible to anyone who purportedly does not belong to that horizon, this approach may result in a kind of essentialist discourse within intercultural philosophy which leaves little room for constructive exchange. I would like to distinguish the idea of intercultural philosophy from the approach of comparative philosophy where, in my understanding, a philosophical issue is discussed via the comparison of different intellectual traditions not necessarily determined by a specific culture. I am convinced that research in the field of intellectual history could support the principle of philosophical thinking as a

universal human quality by showing that it always has been part of the human business of thinking to overcome cultural, political and ideological borders within reciprocal processes in the reception of ideas.

Western and Islamic Philosophy

The relation between European or Western and Islamic Philosophy may serve as a good example to show, that there has been, on the one hand, a long history of such transcultural processes and that, on the other hand, obstacles to overcome ideological borders are always present. It clearly makes sense to distinguish different traditions of thought, but this often means stressing differences only and disregarding or marginalizing the long tradition of mutual influences. Sometimes these influences, if considered at all, are perceived as trite imitations or simply as translations transmitting a given content from one language to another. Therefore adoptions of “Western philosophical thought” are often not considered to be original acts of philosophical thinking bringing different traditions of thought together.

In the long tradition of mutual influence between Islamic and European thought there are roughly three periods of this intercultural transmission of knowledge. The first began with the translation movement from the 8th century onwards, when a huge amount of scientific literature was translated from Greek into Arabic and thereafter commented and transformed.² The second period would be the reception of Arabo-Islamic philosophy (especially of Ibn Sīnā and Ibn Rušd) by thinkers of the Latin Middle Ages from the 11th century onwards.³ The third period started with the reception of modern Western thought by thinkers in the Muslim world. Especially the significance of this 3rd period in the general context of the history of philosophy has yet to be examined.⁴

2 For a short introduction to the translation movement see D’ANCONA, 2005: 10–31; ENDRESS, 1987: 24–61. See also Dimitri Gutas’ outstanding monograph GUTAS, 1998.

3 For that period see BURNETT, 2005.

4 Although there are several important studies of the impact of “European thought” on Islamic societies (for the Iranian context see for instance BOROUJERDI, 1996; VAHIDAT, 2002), they do not focus on a systematic account of the reception of European/Western philosophy in the general context of the history of philosophy. It may be added, that the new edition of the *Ueberweg. Grundriss der Geschichte der Philosophie* is dedicating three volumes to the history of philosophy in the Islamic World (*Geschichte der Philosophie in der islamischen Welt*, general editor Ulrich Rudolph, University of Zurich). Vol. 3.2. shall focus on

Against this background a study on the reception of Kant in Iran, which obviously belongs to the third period, aims, at its least, at freeing European intellectual history from its isolation within territorial borders by taking the impact of its reception in non-European contexts into account. This could, in the long run, even serve current social political purposes. If the cultural history of the Muslim world, for instance, were no longer regarded as part of the “radical other”, as it is the case in many current debates on Islam and Europe, this could support an integrating image of Islam, which is often claimed but at the same time prevented by public discourse. For one thing, this is highly important for overcoming the logic of “we” vs. “them” and “the self” vs. “the other”, without neglecting differences in tradition and culture.

Philosophy in Iran

For anyone interested in intellectual traditions and current debates in the Middle East the spectrum of intellectual discourses in Iran is itself highly interesting. Besides the variety of religious and political voices, which often invoke philosophical concepts of Islamic and Western thinkers, philosophy as an academic discipline plays an important role in Iran’s intellectual life. At Iranian universities philosophy is, following the East-West-paradigm, split up into “Western Philosophy” (*falsafe-ye garb*) and “Islamic Philosophy” (*falsafe-ye eslāmi*) and thus represented and taught as two separate subjects, although in recent times a dialogue between these disciplines is becoming more common and the number of scholars well versed in both fields is increasing. The reason for this division of philosophy in Iran’s academic system is historical. Western philosophy is a relatively young discipline, which rose together with the new European-style institutions of learning set up in 19th century Iran partly with the help of European administrators and teachers.⁵ It was also propagated by Iranian intellectuals who had studied abroad, mainly in England, France, or Russia. They presented Western political thought and philosophy (especially the materialistic account of it, which was *en vogue* at that time in France and England) as the only remedy

philosophy in the 19th/20th century, also explicitly dealing with the reception of “Western” philosophy.

5 For an account of the reformation of the educational system in Qajar Iran see RINGER, 2001. See also *EIr* “Dar Al-Fonūn”.

for the suffered political and cultural inferiority towards the West, and blamed the adherence to traditional Islamic thought as the reason for this perceived backwardness.⁶

Western Philosophy grew within these new institutions of learning constituting a challenge to the traditional educational system, which used to be under the control of the '*ulamā*', religious scholars. When the first universities developed out of this new educational system, philosophy as a subject essentially meant Western philosophy. Today a large number of students and learned people welcome this discipline, and translations of a remarkable number from classical up to recent Western works of modern thought are available on the Iranian book-market.

Islamic philosophy, although often disfavoured by representatives of religious seminaries, was nevertheless constantly taught and transmitted by Muslim and non-Muslim scholars in the social environment of Islamic institutions of learning.⁷ Here again Iran turns out to be a most interesting area of study, because it has an unbroken and multi-faceted tradition of Islamic philosophy up to the present. The idea that the tradition of Islamic philosophy ended with Ibn Rušd is still widespread, disregarding the fact that in the eastern part of the Muslim world, especially in Iran and the later Shiite dominated regions, another branch of philosophy survived, which goes back to a contemporary of Ibn Rušd namely Šihābadīn as-Suhrawardī (d. 1191) whose doctrines later merged with the peripatetic tradition of Ibn Sina (first of all represented by Naṣīr ad-Dīn at-Tūsī), mystical thought (Ibn Arabī) as well as shi'i and mu'tazili theological doctrines. This tradition, especially in the time between the 13th and the 16th century remains to be studied in greater detail. In the 17th century, we encounter a thinker who is regarded to be the master of this integration process, who managed to integrate these different traditions into one philosophical system. His name is

6 The most important intellectuals representing Iran's 19th century reformist thought are Mīrzā Malkum Ḥājān (1833–1908), Mīrzā Āqā Ḥājān Kermānī (1853–1896), Mīrzā Fath ‘Alī Āhundzādeh (1812–1878), Abd al-Rahīm Ṭālebof (1832–1910) and Seyyed Ǧamāl ad-Dīn Assadābādī known as al-Afḡānī (1838–1897). The literature on these Iranian reformers is copious; a concise account of their doctrines is provided by VAHDAT, 2002: 30–61; see also MOĞTAHEDİ, 1384/2005–6.

7 For a study of the formation of Islamic institutions of learning, see MAKDISI, 1981; ARJOMAND, 1999. An account of religious learning in pre-revolutionary Iran is given by FISCHER, 2003.

Şadr ad-Dīn aš-Şīrāzī, commonly known as Mollā Ṣadrā.⁸ In contemporary Iran he is recognized as the symbol of an authentic Iranian-Islamic Tradition of philosophy. Whether his exclusive status as an extraordinary thinker is overestimated can only be judged after having examined the aforementioned period in more detail. But today, one will hardly find a traditional Iranian philosopher who has not dealt with Mollā Ṣadrā's thought. Therefore, anyone who investigates the reception of Kant by traditional Iranian philosophers, will be confronted with this eminent thinker, Mollā Ṣadrā, as well, and will come across the most intriguing accounts, in which doctrines of these two thinkers are explicitly or at least implicitly compared.

Significance of Kant in Iran

But this still does not explain why a study on the reception of European thought in Iran should almost exclusively focus on Kant. It might have been as reasonable to focus on the reception of "Western thought" in general or of another eminent Western thinker in Iran. Besides the writings of Kant, especially the thought of Hegel and Heidegger had an enormous influence on various intellectual circles. Also Nietzsche, Popper, Arendt, and – more recently, for example – Wittgenstein, Levinas, Gadamer, Ricoeur, Rorty, and Habermas are being widely read in Persian translation, and introductions to their thought are available, too. What all these thinkers have in common is the fact that the philosophy of Immanuel Kant played a decisive role for their thought in one way or another. Therefore it makes perfect sense to concentrate on the influence of a thinker who is regarded as a milestone in modern intellectual history.

Besides that, the advantage of focussing on only one thinker enables the researcher to provide a more extensive text analysis, in this case of texts by Iranian commentators on Kant and the respective text by Kant itself. Thereby, the line of argumentation, its intensions, and contexts can be elucidated much better than by comments on rather short paraphrases. In my analysis of the reception of Kant in Iran, I therefore adopt the following pattern⁹: First, I discuss

8 Important studies of Mollā Ṣadrā's philosophical thinking are RAHMAN, 1975; RIZVI, 2009. For a survey of his life and works, see RIZVI, 2007.

9 The author of this article is currently completing his PhD thesis, in which he – following the pattern to be presented here – analyses the reception of Kantian philosophy in Iran in greater detail.

the account of a specific Iranian thinker and try to display his line of argument. I then refer to the respective Kantian source, in order to identify critical or problematic aspects of the reading at hand. But the aim is not simply to discover inconsistencies of the respective reading, but rather to elucidate its context and intensions. Finally, I try to give an evaluation of the significance that the specific reading may have for the Iranian and/or the European/German context. If the study were to focus on the reception of a wider range of thinkers, this kind of close textual analysis would simply not be possible.¹⁰

Furthermore, what is most intriguing about Kant in Iran is that he is studied by a broad spectrum of scholars and intellectuals in very different manners. Traditionalists and liberal intellectuals equally make reference to Kant, though not in the same way. Even conservative Islamist thinkers, belonging to the ruling political class, sometimes refer to Kant. Among them there are two prominent figures: the former speaker of parliament, Ǧolām ʿAlī Ḥaddād Ḥādī, who is professor of philosophy at Teheran University and who translated Kant's *Prolegomena* from an English version into Persian¹¹, and the present speaker of parliament, ʿAlī Lārīgānī, also philosophy professor at Teheran University, who wrote at least two academic monographs on Kant.¹² All in all, the literature on Kant in Iran is very diverse and the number of publications is constantly increasing.

Before presenting two examples of different approaches to Kant, it might be helpful to outline very briefly how Kant was introduced to the intellectual tradition of Iran. The name of Immanuel Kant was mentioned for the first time in a book of an influential traditional philosopher in 19th century Iran, Āqā ʿAlī Zonūzī Tehrānī, who gave no further explanation of his thought, but erroneously associated him with a group of atheist thinkers.¹³ In the early 1930s ʿAlī Forughī, a minister of Reza Shah, published the first elaborated introduction to Kant's writings within the context of his still influential *History of European Philosophy* (*seyr-e ḥekmat dar orupa*).¹⁴ About three decades later, two prominent ideologists of the Islamic Revolution, Mortežā Moṭaharrī and Allāmeh Ṭabaṭābā'i, offered the first important critique from an Islamic background in

10 The author of this article is currently completing his PhD thesis, in which he – following the above mentioned pattern – analyses the reception of Kantian philosophy in Iran in detail.

11 KANT/ḤADDĀD ḤĀDĪ, 1367/1988–9.

12 LĀRĪGĀNĪ, 1383/2004; LĀRĪGĀNĪ, 1383/2004–5.

13 For the first reference to Kant in writings of Iranian thinkers, see MOĞTAHEDĪ, 1384/2005–6: 238–244; KADĪVAR, 1384/2005: 551–578.

14 FORŪGHĪ, 1318/1939.

their extensive critical assessment of Western thought (*osul-e falsafeh va ravesheh-e realism*).¹⁵ But it was not before the late 1970s that a traditional Iranian philosopher would study Western philosophy intensively and give a critical evaluation of some of Kant's doctrines by referring to Kant's writings themselves and not merely to some paraphrases of his thought. The first translation of Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* appeared in the early 1980s.¹⁶

Kant and Metaphysics: Critical Reception among Recent Islamic Philosophers in Iran

Mehdī Ḥā'erī Yazdī, whose critique of Kant's approach to ontology I will discuss in the following, was born in 1923. He had a traditional education in jurisprudence, theology and especially Islamic philosophy. His father was the renowned Ayatollah Abdol Karīm Ḥā'erī Yazdī, the founder of the theological seminars in Qom. From the early 1960s on, he lived for about 20 years in the U.S. and Canada, where he studied Western philosophy and earned a Ph.D. from the University of Toronto in 1979.¹⁷ Shortly after the Iranian revolution he returned to Iran. There, he soon distanced himself from the political doctrines and practice of Khomeini and his followers, which led to a break of the formerly friendly relationship between him and Khomeini.¹⁸

Ḥā'erī's firsthand access to Western philosophy was unique at that time among traditional Iranian 'ulamā' trained in Islamic Philosophy. Ḥā'erī's writings show indeed a considerable acquaintance with the Western texts he deals with. But his aim is not a trans-cultural point of view, but rather an apologetic one, and his comparative discussions are often quite polemic.

- 15 For an evaluation of the importance of this work in the context of Iranian reception of European thought, see GÖSKEN, 2008.
- 16 This translation was prepared by Mīr Šams-ad-Dīn Adīb Soltānī and appeared shortly after the Islamic Revolution in 1980, KANT/ADĪB SOLTĀNĪ. It is no longer available on the Iranian book market, and to date it has not been translated another time. The main source for the study of Kant's theoretical philosophy in Persian is Haddād 'Ādel's translation of the *Prolegomena*.
- 17 His PhD thesis, written in English, first appeared in Teheran in 1982. In 1992 it was published again in New York in the *SUNY series in Islam* edited by Seyyed Hossein Nasr, who also wrote a foreword to that edition, see ḤĀ'ERĪ YAZDĪ, 1992.
- 18 For an overview of Ḥā'erī's life and work, see HAJATPOUR, 2005: 15–24.

A few years before his death in 1999, however, he wrote his last monograph, *hekmat va ḥokūmat*, which still has no permission to be published in Iran and for that reason was printed in London.¹⁹ This work argues for an understanding of the human as a responsible citizen who has the task of self-determined government as the vicegerent of God on earth. It can, consequently, be regarded as the attempt of a philosophical refutation of the Islamic Republic's state-doctrine *velāyat-e faqīh*, from a rather subjectivist and liberal Islamic perspective.²⁰ Although this political work might be his most popular one, its underlying doctrines are already developed by him in his earlier ontological, epistemological, and ethical works. What is most intriguing about his practical and political thought is that he seems to rely somehow on a Kantian notion of autonomy without giving any explicit reference to Kant in that context, whereas in his metaphysical writings, he criticizes Kant directly. It would be most interesting to discuss Ḥā'erī's ambiguous relation towards Kant, but in the following I will confine my discussion to metaphysics, since Ḥā'erī's arguments in this respect represent an important strand in the reception of Kant in Iran.

The point of departure in this discussion is the assumed diminution of Being by Kant, which can be especially observed in a chapter of the transcendental dialectic of his *Critique of Pure Reason*, entitled "On the impossibility of an ontological proof of the existence of God".²¹ For Ḥā'erī, following a main argument common to the manifold tradition of Islamic philosophy, Being is the fundamental component of reality. He therefore regards, as he repeatedly states, ontology or the study of Being as the very foundation of philosophy.

In the following I will sum up some of Ḥā'erī's ontological views, which he himself understood as essential for all of his philosophical reflections.²² The concept of Being, he argues, is the most comprehensive and universal concept which can possibly be imagined. Any definition of a thing is based on it, while it cannot be defined by anything more universal and is therefore lacking any kind of definition. The subject of each science is finally defined as something 'being' and it is therefore grounded in ontology.

19 ḤĀ'ERĪ YAZDĪ, 1995.

20 For a study of Ḥā'erī Yazdī's political thought see HAJATPOUR, 1998: 234–304.

21 KANT, 1998: KrV A592/B620–A602/B632.

22 Ḥā'erī Yazdī, therefore, discusses his ontological doctrines in almost all of his major works, these being ḤĀ'ERĪ YAZDĪ, 1347/1969a; ḤĀ'ERĪ YAZDĪ, 1347/1969b; ḤĀ'ERĪ YAZDĪ, 1360/1981a; ḤĀ'ERĪ YAZDĪ, 1360/1981b; ḤĀ'ERĪ YAZDĪ, 1995.

Ḩā'erī further distinguishes between the “concept of Being” (*mashūm-e woğūd*) and the “reality of Being” (*haqīqat-e woğūd*). Whereas the concept of Being, as Ḥā'erī argues, can easily be accessed by human reason as a mental phenomenon related to every phenomenon in the world, the “reality of Being” as its correspondent counterpart is therefore not accessible to human reason as such. In addition this reality of Being has to be understood as a single unity or as the “unity/unicity of being” (*wahdat-e woğūd*), an idea which has been introduced into the Islamic philosophical tradition by the followers of Ibn 'Arabī. The idea by which Ḥā'erī tries to explain the relation between the unity of Being and, plurality of Being is the concept of *taṣkīk al-wuğūd* ‘gradation of Being’. This concept, which Ḥā'erī associates with Mollā Ṣadrā, still holds Being as one single unity, but a unity having different grades of intensity. Ḥā'erī compares this to a beam of light, which may appear in different grades of intensity, while it still remains the same light. All the different existents, which can be observed in the outside world by way of their representation in the mind, do not differ from each other in their being existent but rather by their different grades of Being. The different entities therefore represent different shares of Being (*hisas al-wuğūd*), like the waves in the ocean, which are existent by one and the same ocean but appear as different and limited shares of it. What constitutes or frames a specific share of Being is its Essence or Quiddity. Whereas Being shows *that* a certain entity is, Quiddity shows *what* it is. The mind (*zihن*) has the capacity to analytically discern these Quiddities from Being and regard them as independent universals (*kullī*), but in reality they cannot be separated from Being, since it is Being which makes them real. Although Being and Quiddity are inseparable from each other they are not one and the same. Except in the case of the supreme or ultimate Being, since here Being is the very Essence of itself. This supreme Being is, furthermore, the only Being which necessarily is existent through itself (*wāgib al-wuğūd fī dātihi*). All the other beings are contingent or possible beings and do not necessarily exist through themselves, because in their Quiddities Being cannot be included, it is added to them by an external cause. This cause, the necessary and supreme Being, is regularly associated with God, which constantly brings all the existents into being in an creative act.²³

Kant's discussion of Being in the above mentioned chapter, to which Ḥā'erī refers almost exclusively, constitutes a double challenge to Ḥā'erī's ontological doctrine. First, because of Kant's argument that Being cannot be a real predicate,

23 For a discussion of the relation between Existence and Quiddity in Islamic philosophy, see NASR, 1989.

and, second, because he argues that even if Being may be part of the concept of God, the supreme Being, that still would not necessarily prove his real existence.

To understand Kant's line of argument let me first briefly introduce the so called ontological proof, which goes back to Anselm of Canterbury. It is an attempt to prove God's existence out of the concept of God alone. Put simply, the argument runs as follows: if God is defined as the most perfect entity that one can imagine, then he has to be existent, because if he would not be existent, he would no longer be the most perfect entity, since he would be lacking an important attribute, namely existence, which would contradict his definition. This argument, which has a long history of modifications and refutations, I do not want to discuss any further.²⁴ The point here is Kant's reaction to this kind of arguments. He says, Being can never be a real predicate, since Being does by no means extend or broaden the concept of a thing.²⁵ For the concept of something it makes no difference whether it is existent or not, since there would be no contradiction concerning the concept of a thing if you deprive it of Being. If we talk, for instance, about a red chair and then say that it exists or does not exist, we will still be talking about a specific red chair, but if we say it is not red, we will not be talking about the same chair anymore. Because of this, Kant argues, Being cannot be a real predicate, and, therefore, not be an attribute that defines God. Someone who says "God is" does not add a new predicate to the concept of God, but he simply claims a relation of the entirety of possible predicates for God to an object. This kind of relation between concept and object can only be proven by experience. But experience is bound to the world of senses (intuition/ *Anschauung*). As far as the meaning of Being is concerned, Kant says that it plays the role of the Copula – and it may seem that he means it exclusively –

24 The literature on the ontological argument is immense. For an overview of the issue, see for example RÖD, 1992.

25 Kant discusses this argument in the context of his refutation of the ontological proof, the respective passage is this KANT, 1998: KrV A597/B625 – A602/B632, especially A598f./ B626f. For Hā'erī's Persian version of this passage, see HĀ'ERĪ YAZDĪ, 1347/1969a: 203f. Hā'erī's source of Kants *Critique of Pure Reason* was the translation of Norman Kempt Smith, see Immanuel Kant, Norman Kempt SMITH (trans.), *Critique of Pure Reason*, London 1958: 504f. (Online version: <<http://humanum.arts.cuhk.edu.hk/Philosophy/Kant/cpr/cpr-open.html#cpr-toc-B>>, last access 2010-05-09.)

Hā'erī was also aware of the Arabic version of the *Critique of pure reason* translated by Ahmad as-Šibānī, which he considerd to be inaccurate. See HĀ'ERĪ 1347/1969a: 40-42. For a most interesting account of Arabic translations of Kant see the article "Kant auf Arabisch" by Michael Frey and Aysun Aly in this issue.

which connects subject and predicate. The central role as a philosophical concept, which the notion of Being used to have, thereby seemed to be abolished and ontology as first philosophy to be dismissed.

For Ḥā’erī, to whom Being is the central philosophical concept, this kind of a claim could not be left unanswered. So how does he react to Kant’s statements concerning Being? First of all, he associates the above-mentioned relation between concept and object with the relation between Essence (*māhiyya*) and Being (*wuġūd*). Within this highly important discussion in the context of Islamic philosophy, he follows those who argue that Quiddity cannot include Being, since it is Being as the all-embracing reality that grants the reality of all Quiddities. Adhering to that doctrine, Ḥā’erī follows Kant when he states that Being cannot be a predicate in the sense that it broadens the concept of something, because, Ḥā’erī argues, a certain concept or Quiddity would indeed not be broadened by its Existence.²⁶ But in another sense, he further argues, an extension takes place, though not for the concept, but for the knowledge about the concept. It is the knowledge that there really is a corresponding object to the concept or Quiddity. In reality, it makes a fundamental difference whether something is existent only as a concept in one’s mind or also as an object outside the mind. The knowledge about the concept’s real existence is not part of the concept itself but, like the concept, it is a mental phenomenon or – as Ḥā’erī puts it referring to Mullā Ṣadrā – a mental being (*woġūd-e zehnī*).²⁷

The corresponding object is, as Ḥā’erī states, yet nothing other than the predicative being of the concept. Therefore, according to Ḥā’erī, it is misleading to represent a judgement like “a certain thing is”, in which Being is, as even Kant admitted, logically and grammatically the predicate, in the form “a certain thing is this object”. To transform the judgement in that way would obviously serve only the purpose of showing that Being is not a real predicate but merely a Copula. But in fact, as Ḥā’erī says, not only in the first form of the judgement but also in the second, predicative Being has to be presupposed, since the Copula would not make sense, if one would not, at least, assume the existence of the subject and the predicate. Ḥā’erī is therefore convinced that Being has to be more than merely a Copula.²⁸

I shall not attempt to delve further into the discussion of predication here. The example should simply display some of Ḥā’erī’s strategies to re-establish

26 ḤĀ’ERĪ YAZDĪ, 1360/1981b: 17f., 34f., 159; ḤĀ’ERĪ YAZDĪ, 1347/1969a: 333f.

27 ḤĀ’ERĪ YAZDĪ, 1360/1981b: 18f., 35f.; ḤĀ’ERĪ YAZDĪ, 1347/1969a: 211f., 334f.

28 ḤĀ’ERĪ YAZDĪ, 1360/1981b: 68; 159f.

the fundamental role of Being by criticizing Kant's line of argument in his chapter on the ontological proof.

It is true that Ḥā'erī may in some respects not have done justice to Kant's understanding of Being. For instance, to discuss it almost exclusively in the context of Kant's critique of the ontological proof means to neglect other passages in which he deals with the question of Being in a more constructive manner. Furthermore, Kant did not really argue that Being is to be understood as a Copula only, although he has often been misinterpreted in that way. Kant argued in the respective passage to which Ḥā'erī is referring that Being can be either a Copula or Being as a position, meaning the relation between a certain concept, with all its predicates, and a certain object.²⁹ But it is also true that in the chapter on the ontological proof, the positive meaning of Being as position is not further developed. It is therefore not surprising that one may read it as a definitive attempt to overcome the central role of Being. But still, Ḥā'erī's critical assessment in which he argues against Kant can also be used in order to support another reading of Kant's ontology. Let me only point out one interesting aspect: Ḥā'erī's argument that predicative Being has at least to be assumed and the knowledge about a certain concept as a mental Being will be broadened as soon as one knows about its real existence, may be read in the context of Kant's transcendental doctrine of epistemology. Put simply, Kant argues that an object can only be known as an object by the representation (Vorstellung) of it in the knower's mind. Only through this representation is the knower capable of understanding the perceived sense-data as a single unity, i.e. a single object.³⁰ Something similar applies to Ḥā'erī's notion of mental existence, which he links to Mollā Ṣadrā.³¹ To what extent Ḥā'erī really is close to Kant's transcendental doctrine of knowledge has to be further investigated, but at least one similarity can be claimed: Being as a mental representation makes the knowledge of external Being possible.

I will refer only briefly to Ḥā'erī's reaction to Kant's second argument against the ontological proof of God's existence. Kant argued that even if we consider Being to be part of the concept of God that could not prove God's real existence. Because as a part of the concept, the judgement "God is existent" would be an analytical judgement. But an analytical judgement is by definition

29 "Es [Sein, R.S.] ist bloß die Position eines Dinges, oder gewisser Bestimmungen an sich selbst. Im logischen Gebrauche ist es lediglich die Copula eines Urteils." KANT, 1998: KrV A598/B626.

30 KANT, 1998: KrV A92/B124–A94/B126; NEUMANN, 2006: 306–312.

31 ḤĀ'ERĪ YAZDĪ, 1347/1969a: 219–297.

restricted to the conceptual level. If one wants to prove its existence in reality, a proof by experience would be necessary. In the respective context, one could argue that the existence of God is part of the concept of God, but still his real existence could only be proven under the condition of his existence, which has to be proven by experience. That, Kant argued, cannot be considered a proof but is a tautology. An existential judgement is always a synthetic one. And as in each synthetic judgement, you can negate the predicate without causing a contradiction in the subject.³²

Ḩā’erī follows Kant in his argument that one can never infer from an analytic judgement the necessity of the subject’s existence and that each existential judgement has to be a synthetic one.³³ But he opposes Kant’s conviction that existence can be proven only *a posteriori*, i.e. by experience, since he denies the consequence that only the existence of sensual objects can be known. Furthermore, he criticizes that the manner in which Kant displayed the attempt of a proof of God’s existence is not correct, since he described it as if it were the proof of a contingent being, namely by trying to relate an object of the sensual world to a concept. That must fail, because God obviously does not belong to the sensual sphere. Furthermore, in the case of God as the supreme Being, relating the concept to an object, i.e. relating Quiddity to Being, is not feasible, since in the case of the supreme Being they are one and the same. Ḥā’erī argues that Kant is finally restricting Existence to the sensual world, which contradicts the idea of Being representing a comprehensive concept and the totality of reality at the same time.³⁴

This is not an exhaustive discussion of Ḥā’erī’s reaction to Kant’s argument against the ontological proof of God’s existence, and it is not about who is right and who wrong. Its aim is rather to indicate how knowledge of the intellectual background of a thinker can be helpful in order to understand his reception of someone else’s thought. In this case, it constitutes an example for a transaction between modern Western and Islamic thought.

Let me evaluate this account of Ḥā’erī’s positions: first of all, it has become clear that both thinkers have a different understanding of the meaning of Being. Whereas for Kant Being – or at least the knowledge of it – necessarily corresponds with objects of the sensual world, for Ḥā’erī, following his meta-

32 KANT, 1998: KrV B621–B626.

33 ḤĀ’ERĪ YAZDĪ, 1347/1969a: 331f.

34 ḤĀ’ERĪ YAZDĪ, 1347/1969a: 215–217.

physical tradition, Being can certainly not be restricted to the perceptible world of senses only. It has to include ideas that may be thinkable but lie beyond the scope of what can be known by experience. Whereas Kant shows that one has to distinguish carefully between what can be thought by the human mind and what can be known by it, Ḥā’erī is convinced that the Kantian notion of Being, as it is displayed in his discussion of the ontological proof, has to be reconsidered. What is most intriguing about Ḥā’erī’s approach, especially in the context of transcultural reception of knowledge, is the fact that there are some recent studies of Western Kant-experts firmly rooted in the tradition of a metaphysical or ontological interpretation of Kant’s thought.³⁵ This tradition has its origins in the beginning of the 20th century, with Martin Heidegger being one of its most prominent exponents.³⁶ These thinkers are in a somewhat similar, although not identical, manner concerned with re-establishing the role of Being within the system of Kantian thought.

It would be a promising task to, for instance, compare Ḥā’erī’s approach to Kant and his references to Molla Ṣadrā with recent ontological readings of Kant in a German academic context. This may be but one opportunity for a dialogue between European and Iranian scholars interested in Kant, since for both of them there would be a whole tradition to become aware of, the Iranian tradition of Mollā Ṣadrā, and the German tradition of ontological interpretations of Kant.

Kant, Freedom and Autonomy

I now turn to another aspect of Kantian thought, namely his practical philosophy, and its reception in Iran. Again, there are many thinkers working on Kant in this context. I shall discuss an account of an Islamic intellectual from Iran, who may serve as a good example for the liberal religious spectrum.

Mohammad Moḡtahed Šabestarī, an Iranian intellectual and critic of the current political establishment, started his career in the theological seminars of Qom, studying Islamic Law and Theology as well as philosophy and mysticism. In 1970, Šabestarī became director of the Shiite Islamic Center in the Imam Ali Mosque in Hamburg, where he was later succeeded by the former Iranian President Mohammad Khatami. He also learned German and was able to pursue his

35 See for instance FICARA, 2006; BICKMANN, 1996; NEUMANN 2006.

36 For an overview of the ontological interpretation of Kant in the 1920ies, see BAERTSCHI, 2004.

interest, already evident in Qom, in Western philosophy and Christian, especially Protestant, theology. He studied the writings of theologians such as Paul Tillich, Karl Barth, and Karl Rahner, as well as the thought of philosophers such as Immanuel Kant, Wilhelm Dilthey, and Hans-Georg Gadamer.

His thinking underwent a transformation, from confidence in the popular dogma “Islam as solution” to a more emancipatory understanding of religion, which is critical towards ideology. This change of direction was virtually paradigmatic for a whole group of leading religious intellectuals and reformist thinkers of the time, all of whom had formerly been staunch supporters of Khomeini and proponents of the Islamic Republic. As a Professor of Islamic and Comparative Theology at the University of Teheran, he later (from the 1990s onwards) introduced modern philosophical hermeneutics into the religious and political discourse in Iran and strongly supported the Christian-Islamic dialogue.

Besides the merits of having introduced the discussion of philosophical hermeneutics into the religious intellectual discourse of contemporary Iran, he has largely written about the idea of faith as being a concept entirely rooted in freedom, which he understands as an essential human attribute. In elaborating this doctrine, especially in his book *Faith and Freedom* (*īmān va āzādī*)³⁷, he obviously relies on the notion of free will, as it is discussed in the mu'tazilite tradition, and beyond that on a Kantian notion of autonomy, although he does not refer to it explicitly. For the Mu'tazila, the rationalist school of Islamic theology, the assumption of a free human will was of crucial importance. Because, in their rational-causalist worldview, it would have contradicted the idea of God's justice, which together with the idea of *tauhīd* (God's unity) belonged to their most fundamental principles, if he were to punish someone in the hereafter for deeds which were not grounded on free choice (*ihtīyār*) or free will (*īrāda*). Relying on these principles, the Mu'atzzilites, to whom Šabestārī dedicated some scholarly work, developed different theological systems, which intended to do justice to the idea of free human will.³⁸

With his reference to Mu'tazilite thought, Šabestārī intended to root his concept of free faith in the tradition of Islamic thought. But his discussion of freedom goes further, since his idea of freedom is deeply inspired by the notion of autonomy and human subjectivity. An autonomous will, he argues in a Kantian manner, is a will which is free of all external influence and based on itself

37 ŠABESTĀRĪ, 1378/1999.

38 For a discussion of the Mu'tazilite doctrine of free will and its deduction from the principle of justice, see NAGEL, 1994: 110–114; SCHMIDTKE, 1991: 99–135 (esp. 125ff.).

exclusively. This has, of course, to be considered an ideal form of free will. In real life, man is naturally always influenced by personal, emotional, cultural, social, or historical factors. The task is, therefore, not to get rid of these factors, but to become aware of them in order to reflect upon the principles of one's acts and to judge their moral status.

Whereas the mu'tazilite idea of free will was based on the argument that humans, in order to act morally, are in the end free to choose whether or not they like to follow divine law, the principles of which can be acknowledged by human reason, Šabestarī, following Kant, goes one step further when he argues that freedom means moral and inner freedom, which includes the capacity of autonomous lawgiving. At the same time, Šabestarī states, man is an imperfect being, neither all-powerful, nor all-knowing, nor even immortal. Faith, therefore, means the search for salvation from one's own imperfection in the perfection of God.

Furthermore faith is a conscious decision for stability in God that is based on the inner freedom of man. This does not mean a one-time decision that is valid for all time, but, instead, one that, in face of the constantly changing conditions of life, must be renewed again and again. The faithful must continually reflect upon what belongs to real faith and what does not. This means that they must distinguish between behavior based on a freely made inner decision, which is hence the result of a spiritual or religious experience, another key concept of Šabestarī's thought, and conduct that is ultimately a purely superficial imitation of religious acts and truisms. In order to achieve such awareness, one must seriously and openly come to terms with contemporary criticisms of religious thinking – whether coming from Muslim or non-Muslim sources. Šabestarī thus combines highly self-critical and emancipationist aspirations with the concept of faith. At this point, we finally face the idea of enlightenment within the Iranian reception of Kantian thought. It is the demand for being capable of self-criticism, and the task of constantly questioning one's own principles – which is one key element of Kant's idea of enlightenment.³⁹

Based on these ideas, Šabestarī, like many other liberal thinkers, argues for a more democratic political system, for the implementation of human rights, and for a reconciliation with both religious beliefs in general and the Islamic tradition in particular. In this context, we also encounter discussions trying to prove the necessity or at least reasonability of believing in God's existence,

39 For Šabestarī's discussion on freedom and autonomy as a precondition of faith, see for instance ŠABESTARĪ, 1378/1999:11–42.

which refer to Kant's so-called moral proof of God, an argument which does not attempt to prove God's existence, but to argue for the necessity of the assumption of God's existence for the sake of human morality.

Conclusion

Of course, the two examples discussed here do not represent the whole spectrum of the reception of Kant in Iran. There are many other thinkers whom I have not mentioned, and there are other approaches with different foci, which should be taken into account in order to display a more complete picture. But as a preliminary evaluation of this broad spectrum, one could argue, that it may be roughly divided into two major fields of interest. The first is represented by thinkers who read Kant with a special emphasis on metaphysics. They usually come from a traditional Islamic background and are scholars of Islamic philosophy. In order to defend their tradition, they either try to disprove Kant's critical assessment of ontology, or they attempt to reconcile it with their view of Islamic metaphysics. The second field of interest is represented by scholars who are more concerned with Kant's practical philosophy, his ethics and political thought. Here again we encounter many different perspectives. There are radical Islamist thinkers who oppose Kant's ethics in principle, since he is not building it on divine law,⁴⁰ other supporters of the Islamic regime, like Haddād 'Ādel, try to criticize some of Kant's doctrines, or they attempt to interpret them in a way that supports their own view of Islamic government. Liberal Islamic or secular intellectuals rather prefer readings supporting the idea of self-determined government and autonomous human subjectivity. For instance, for Šabestarī, as for other Islamic liberals, the adaption of a Kantian account of autonomy does not contradict its reconciliation with the Islamic tradition, where as even secular liberals usually do not refer to the Islamic tradition – which does not necessarily mean that they advocate its abolishment. Although it is often the case a traditional position in metaphysics does not necessarily lead to authoritarian position in politics. Hā'erī, for instance, serves as a good example for a scholar who has quite conservative views regarding Islamic metaphysics, while his political ideas, although being confident to the notion of Islamic government, are dwelling on concepts of freedom and autonomy, whereas some of his contempo-

40 The radical Ayatollah Mešbāh Yazdī, who categorically refutes Kant's ethics in his book *falsafe-ye ahlāq* may serve as an example for this category. See, Mešbāh YAZDĪ, 1380/2001.

raries would support most of his metaphysical positions but harshly oppose his political ones. Therefore the adherence to Islamic metaphysics or the Islamic tradition in general does not necessarily lead to a refutation of Kant's practical thought and vice versa.

To conclude: What does the examination of Iranian accounts of Kant's writings demonstrate? First of all, it demonstrates that his philosophy is being studied by a wide range of scholars in very different ways with different purposes and in different contexts. It shows that the comparison with the tradition of Mollā Ṣadrā, for instance, might lead to interesting new perspectives. But beyond that, it may support an awareness for the fact that no one, may he or she be arguing from a Western or a non-Western intellectual context, owns the authentic reading of Kant, that even efforts to present something like the essence of Kant's philosophy are but specific readings of his writings stressing certain aspects and marginalizing others. Some of them will certainly seem more reasonable than others, but each of them shows that there is always a specific intellectual context and a specific intention behind an interpretation.

Overemphasizing authenticity bears the risk that one ends up in essentialist discourse. Speaking of something like *the German* or *the Iranian* philosophy often means – at least implicitly – promoting one specific strand of thought as being the authentic one. But this means neglecting the fact that in each cultural tradition of thinking we encounter a variety of approaches to philosophy existing simultaneously. The fact that one may be predominant in a specific period does not make it more authentic than others. This is not meant to simply equate plurality and cultural differences, but to look out for the significance of specific differences and similarities in the context of a specific philosophical issue, rather than to link difference in general to a certain, say the Iranian, culture. Therefore, I would prefer to speak of several traditions of thinking and to identify them with regard to their systematic foundation or their ideological context rather than to a vague cultural background. Since culture seems to be much too broad and much too complex a concept, a comparison between different specific traditions of thought, be they from one or from various geographical origins, or an analysis of their potential mutual influence, seem to me much more fruitful. Analyzing the reception of Kant in Iran could be but one example of a kind of comparative approach which might encourage more constructive dialogues among philosophers from different intellectual origins bringing different traditions of thought, rather than different cultures, onto the stage of discourse. After all, this kind of active exchange of ideas across the ideological border between a “Western” and

“non-Western” history of ideas may also lead to a critical reassessment of one’s own philosophical self-perception.

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