

# Introduction to *iqbal* philosophy

## The Quest for Science and the Challenge of Complexity

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### Abstract

The men and women of this century, whether in science and technology, the arts, culture or religion, are faced with a planetary problem of overheating and probably survival, which boils down to a question of mathematical optimization: how can we “pave” the plane of the world (i.e., cover its surface) without saturating or overflowing space and time? In this phase transition, suddenly short of space and time, how can we do better with less, much less? Our existence is now constrained by “catastrophes” - in the topological sense of the term, i.e. singularities occurring at the “edges of forms” (René Thom<sup>1</sup>). A *restrictive geometry* now imposes itself on us as an unsurpassable horizon. The next post-Western civilization - which will either be global or will not be at all - will have to transform the reign of quantity and growth into one of quality and sobriety.

### Keywords

‘umran, *iqbal*, haq, civilization, quest for science, meaning-making, foresight, complexity, agile rationality, active spirituality.

<sup>1</sup> René Thom (1923-2002) was a French mathematician and epistemologist, founder of catastrophe theory (Wikipedia).

## 'Umran, Filling Time and Space

If one word had to sum up humanity's current situation, for better or for worse, it is encapsulation in a dangerously contracted space-time. Science confirms that global warming is produced by an invasive and overflowing humanity, harmful and toxic activities, growths and outgrowths acting as geophysical forces disrupting the biosphere. The shrinking of space and the acceleration of time mean that, more than ever, the civilizational challenge of tackling the climate crisis is to find one or more ways of filling space and time, without smearing, saturating or consuming them. Even digital transformation, which has been falsely claimed to be an immaterial process, is over-amplifying this physical saturation through an acceleration that is now being pursued in the psyche of individuals. The bad news is that the equation to be solved - *how can we do better, with less?* - is not algorithmic, but has to do with a restrictive geometry in which complexity is no longer classically understood in terms of the mesh of its nodes and their reticular extent, but in terms of the arrangement of its folds after folds (*multi-plexity*) of matter, artifacts and filth. The Arabic word 'Umran expresses exactly this notion of "filled", which is fundamentally a spatio-temporal "folding"; Ibn Khaldoun's<sup>2</sup> concept precisely defines civilization as fundamentally a relationship to time and space, as a "type of climate" specific to a particular physicality (the "filling", according to a specific design or *pattern*, of a volume and duration) - and not really as a form of urbanity, civility or relationship to the Greek *polis*. According to the North-African historian, considered a precursor of sociology, a civilization enters a crisis, decays and dies when it no longer knows how to pave its immanent plane, i.e., how to truly fill it and bring it to life, and when its relationship to time and space breaks down its evolutionary landscape and horizon.

Faced with the crisis of civilization expressed in climate disorder, the Covid pandemic, growing inequalities, the scarcity of natural resources, the melting of the poles, the plastic sixth continent, migratory movements, identity-based tensions, extremism, etc., the temptation is great to curl up in a nostalgic posture and envisage the future (an "ahead") as a memory of the past ("a before"). This backward-looking posture - "it was better before" - is itself a reflex pathology of our globalized civilization, since it exposes in different cultures and religions once again the same contraction of the present on an earlier past, a fallen era, stale or out of reach, most often mythologized. It has to be said that the solution to humanity's current problems does not lie in an idealized past, i.e. one that has been extracted from the temporality of its initial conditions, knowing that time is fundamentally irreversible and that we never "bathe in the same river twice". The presence of such a past - of which we refrain from any critical rereading - marks a reinvention of tradition that neither transforms the world, nor anticipates future perils.

2 Ibn Khaldoun (1332-1406) was a historian, economist, geographer, demographer, precursor of sociology and statesman (Wikipedia). We devoted a chapter to the topicality of the Khaldunian reading, "Umran", in our book *Le Désarroi identitaire. Jeunesse, islamité et arabité contemporaines*, Paris, Cerf, 2004, Casablanca, La Croisée des Chemins, 2012, pp. 117-127, where we highlight the main features of his political science of civilizations (pp. 122-125).

## Salaf, Quest for Meaning and Idealization of the Past

In this globalized context, and more specifically in Islamic circles, the so-called Reform (*Islah*) has been, for over two centuries, a reactive movement to Western modernity, its hegemony based on its materialistic triumph and the rise of industry, science and technology. Muslim thinkers, wanting to break out of the traditional bind imposed by the colonial yoke and imperialist aims, opted for nationalism and mass education as a way of “upgrading” African and Asian societies. On a spiritual level, they have adopted a resourcing posture consisting of *idealizing and modeling* the historical phase of the first three generations of Muslims corresponding to the era of the pious ancestors (*al aslaf al salihin*). This modeling of the phase of origins, i.e. of a history emptied of its historicity and reflexivity, is today not only a largely predominant but also mentally *conditioning* factor for almost 1.7 billion Muslims. Its pervasiveness means that it operates as a “mythical” and “mystical structure” where, according to the etymology of the words, the “ancient” and the “religious” are akin to “loan” (*salaf*) and “debt” (*din*): belief is experienced and thought of as a “debt” owed to a glorious past. But it has to be said that this mythical structure, which permeates *all* the religious currents of contemporary Islam, has failed to produce an intellectual revolution, a renewal of rationality, a burst of creativity, or even the long-awaited religious and spiritual awakening proportional to the materialistic and consumerist reign that is devastating life, air, land and sea. “Awake, they sleep” (Heraclitus). We are a long way from what Islamic civilization, projected forward, was shaping as an enlightened globality, as quintessence condensing vast and profound bodies of knowledge, exploration and discovery, experimental science, physics and metaphysics. Here too, modernity in Islam resembles a Golden Age, a process that seems doomed to exist only a thousand years in the past.

## Iqbal, Quest for Science, Faith in Action and the Future

Faced with the current planetary impasse of our hypermodernity based on excessive commodification, laissez-faire and economic growth at all costs, the infotechnological control and manipulation of individuals (treated as cognitive cattle), faced with cogitations too often constrained by the “fear of thinking” (itself induced in Islam by the theological-political hold), *iqbal* emerges as a new mythical structure resolutely turned towards the future and the resolution of its unknowns. The product of a decade of research and fieldwork in the Maghreb, Sahel, Mashreq and Europe, *iqbal* philosophy expresses a rational yet spiritual way of being in the present, and a constructivist approach to possible, conceivable futures. In the eyes of most people, its value lies in the fact that this notion is in itself a production of meaning, inscribed in the semantic bundle of its Arabic/Semitic root *qa-ba-la*, whose family of words unambiguously signals an inclination to project oneself outside oneself, forward rather than backward, to set spatial and temporal horizons, to envisage all that is unaccomplished and that needs to be undertaken, towards otherness and the neighbor, to confront the opposite and the contradictory. *Iqbal* is not an imported notion, but an endogenous concept, intelligible and above all operative in redefining relationships to knowledge, the economy, ecology, politics, the law, otherness and gender. As it happens, this concept bears the name of an Indo-Pakistani thinker, Muhammad Iqbal, who, with a simple but highly fertile work, *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in*

Islam, 1930, immediately rose to the rank of the most important Muslim philosopher of the 20th century. The *iqbal* philosophy thus pursues the path of invention of modernity in Islam in dialogue with the sciences and knowledge of its time, as envisioned by this man of letters best known as the "poet of the East" (*cha'ir al charq*).

*Iqbal* thinking stems from an Islamic concept, the "quest for science" (*talab al 'ilm*), which universalizes it ("search all the way to China"). It is a philosophy of possibility and foresight, driven by agile reason: whenever it comes up against a paradox, an aporia or a contradiction, however profound, this thinking doesn't stand still, nor does it proceed backwards in time. It does not contract by fixing itself on things known in advance, by knowingly maintaining the confusion between memory and future, but rather triggers a cognitive process fully mobilizing the approaches of rationality, criticality and complexity. The Islamic concept of the "quest for science" is not an end in itself, but a heuristic way of exploring viable possibilities and identifying solutions to the immense societal, economic and environmental challenges of this century.

## *Haq, Reality, Truth, Law, Divinity*

If the quest for science is a means to an end, not an end in itself, then what is the purpose of an *iqbal* philosophy? Its purpose brings us back to the crossroads of reality, rationality and spirituality, fundamental axes structuring our modes of existence by putting faith in Islam at the service of a transformation of man, society and the world. The Quran peremptorily affirms that no change is possible if nothing in Man changes. This goal logically leads us to the Quranic text, to address both its complexity and its profound simplicity. Classical analysis of the Quran shows that it is structured according to topics (Medinan and Meccan verses), pretexts (cause, *asbab*) and, in some places, a mechanism for abrogating or updating (*al nasikh wal mansukh*) Revelation. The *iqbal* perspective suggests another way of approaching Quranic complexity, highlighting its logical depth deployed in levels: a) *meta-logical* (self-referential verses, where the Quran deals with the Quran) ; b) *anthropo-logical* (passages referring in particular to the fundamental nature of man, *fitra*); c) *bio-logical* (manifest and probative signs of a creative principle); d) *cosmo-logical* (perplexity and magnificence of continuous creation, *tajdid al khalq*). This logical depth stems from a central motif that organizes the entire onto-theo-logical architecture and engineering of meaning: *Al Haq*.

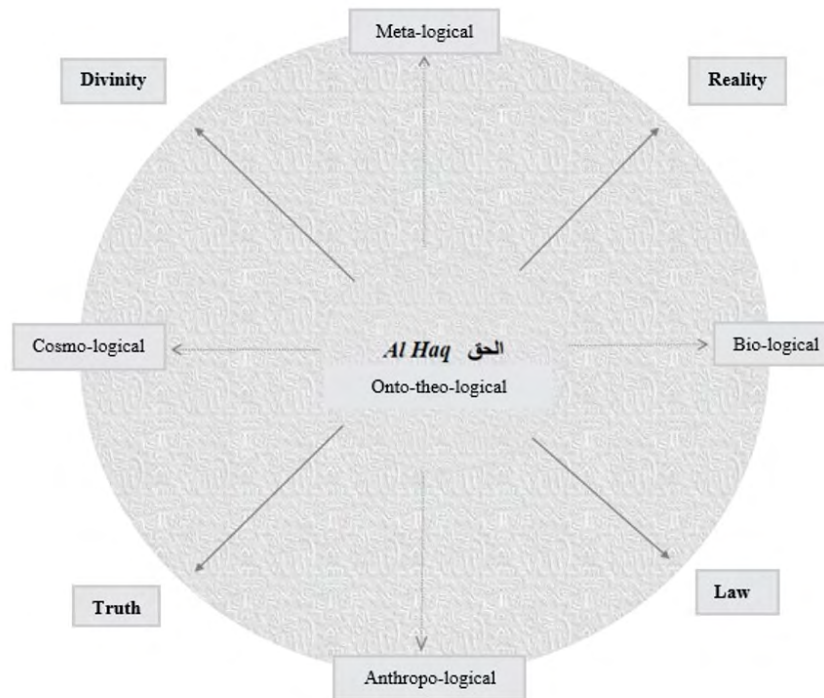


Figure 1: Quranic Complexity and Logical Depth

“We will show them Our signs on the horizons and in themselves until it appears to them that this is the truth.” (*al haq*). (Q, 41, 53).

سَنُرِيهِمْ آيَاتِنَا فِي الْأَفَاقِ وَفِي أَنفُسِهِمْ حَتَّىٰ يَتَّبِعَنَ لَهُمْ أَنَّهُ الْحَقُّ ۗ

And it is precisely at the heart of the Quranic text, where its organic pulsations emerge and the starry descent (*munajaman*) of its multiplex signs (*ayats*) converges, that the *iqbal* pursues its ultimate purpose. If, within the universe, God Himself works daily on the making and maintenance of the world, how can man abandon himself to a fatalism that is not active (always keeping up with events, dwelling with dignity on his misfortune or success) but passive (man would have nothing to do but corrupt the earth, with God alone working on creation), superstitiously worshipping the letter and the word? Everything in the Quran expresses a verb, from which the meaning is only extracted (*takhrij*) from its root to put signs and signifiers into action. The germination of the verb is only possible if it is carried out in action, in deed, in sign, insinuated into events and everything that occurs adventitiously (*muhdath*) as possible adjacents. A verb without the power to act is stripped of its vital impetus: at best, it consecrates an abstruse Platonism, and at worst, a fetish object. In the monotheistic purification brought about by Quranic revelation, adoration of the sacred text runs the risk of leading to idolatry of the language (Semitic languages have always been considered by their speakers as heavenly and eternal) if it is not immediately translated into acts that participate fully in the ongoing creation of the world. For, ultimately, it is the ways of acting and doing that determine the nature of relationships to a word of divine essence.

If, therefore, “every day he accomplishes a new work” (Q. 55, 29), *iqbal* thought also commits the individual to a perpetual movement, that of the initiatory journey of the *haq*, a polysemous notion whose every meaning and implication must be constantly explored and tested throughout the journey of being, from the most prosaic activities to the highest meditations. Paths towards the future are humbly traced, step by step, but they always aim for a perceptive knowledge of *haq*, i.e. an almost sensorimotor capture of physical realities, metaphysical truths, the rights of living beings and - perhaps as the ultimate promise of meaning - divine manifestations.

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