

GB11 Curatorial QA

Conversation with Anoush Ganjipour, Azar Mahmoudian, and Maria Lind

Anoush Ganjipour (b. 1978, Tehran/Paris) is a scholar whose work focuses on a comparative study of Islamic and modern Western philosophy, with particular attention to the French canon. In this context he has engaged with the work of Henry Corbin (1903–78), whose notion of “*mundus imaginalis*,” or the eighth climate, has lent the title to GB11. Viewing both Western and Islamic philosophy as two modes of “becoming” that emerged from Greek philosophy, Ganjipour reads modern European philosophy through the lens of traditional Islamic thought. In doing so, he attempts to reactivate such traditions through their confrontation with modern issues of philosophy in Western history. In his comparative approach, Ganjipour gives a leading role to theory of subject and forms of subjectivation. His reading of Islamic philosophy places him in continuity of Corbin and, Corbin’s pupil, Christian Jambet.

Azar Mahmoudian and Maria Lind: We are borrowing the title of GB11, “The Eighth Climate,” from Corbin’s famous 1964 text “Mundus Imaginalis” where he talks about the eighth climate, or *mundus imaginalis*, or “*Na-koja-Abad*.” The eighth climate is an addition to the seven climates of the earth identified by ancient geographers, proposed by Persian philosophers and mystics, and elaborated by Corbin. An in-between world, between heaven and Earth, it is far from unreal or nonexistent; instead it establishes real imaginative knowledge and function much needed in this time of urgency, while escaping rationalism as we know it. It is not based on a separation of matter and spirit, practical and imaginary, history and myth – it is ontologically real but beyond our ordinary way of perceiving and understanding things. In other words, it entails both a visionary knowledge and an “inter-world,” and as such provides a parallel to how art is operating today.

Can you describe the eighth climate as you see Corbin addressing it?

Anoush Ganjipour: There are a couple of different understandings of the eighth climate even in Islamic philosophy. The first point we must keep in mind is that they are all completely consumed in a very traditional episteme: in order to understand the imaginal you have to accept the distinction between intelligible, imaginable, and sensible worlds as three levels of existence. Traditionally there is a distinction between the sensible world and intelligible world, the world of ideas for example of Plato (c. 428–348 BC) and Aristotle (384–22 BC) – the world of universal forms – and the material world as a realm of perishable appearances. The invention of Islamic philosophy consists of introducing a third level between the first two, “the imaginal.” This world is neither the sensible world nor the intelligible world.

Why is this in-between world developed? Because it is necessary for Islamic belief, to conceptually provide a world through which you can rationally explain certain things like bodily redemption or the angelic aspect of human beings which are essential for Islamic anthropology and then in a particular way for Imamology in Shi’ism. More precisely, the imaginal allows human beings to achieve their full individuality beyond the particularity of material life. For this to happen, you need

a world qualitatively different from ours where everything has a particular existence because its existence is a mixture of matter and form. If I should formulate in other words the starting point of Islamic thinkers, I would say that they were convinced that human beings are only conceivable as “being-in-a-world.” So, in order to think of the human being in a radically qualitative different way, it is necessary to think of another world.

AM: But apart from the function of articulating this in-between world in Islamic philosophy, it seems that Corbin is interested in the specific *mode* of imaginative perception that corresponds to this order of reality in Islam. So, the eighth climate or the term imaginal – in contrast to imaginary – offers a potential for a new way of thinking about imaginative consciousness. What exactly do you think Corbin’s eighth climate offers in terms of this potential means of perception outside of Islamic philosophy?

AG: If we try to translate, as Corbin did in a very ingenious manner, the discourse of Islamic philosophy into a modern philosophical language, subjectivation stems from the perception of this qualitatively different world. In fact, as soon as you become capable of perceiving the reality of beings you accomplish your own reality as a human being. In this condition, perception itself would no longer be a passive operation of the soul, but it takes an active dimension. It would be better to speak here of an active and creative imagination whose production is not an image, but the imaginal: you imagine something and it is there with its full effectiveness and as the truest reality. And insofar as your soul is now capable of this creative imagination, you have already overcome this world as well as your material identity in order to realize the perfection of your being human. This is the only real event through which an individual could become a true subject who is at the same time the subject of truth. That is actually for Corbin the most relevant insight of the Iranian philosophers who gave to Islamic philosophy its real autonomy after Avicenna (c. 980–1037).

AM: The presence of god is a focal point, both in the 12th-century Iranian philosopher Sohrevardi’s (1155–91) writing, which Corbin relates to intensively, and in Corbin’s writing around the imaginal in the eighth climate. How can we separate the presence of god and use their ideas in a different secular context?

AG: Indeed, this is the main point you should deal with when you want to dialogue with this tradition from a modern point of view. For instance, the transformation of the passive perception of sensible data into an active imagination that itself produces data is a direct divine donation. That happens where, according to Peripatetic and Neoplatonic models adapted to Islamic monotheist faith, your soul rejoins the agent intellect that is itself the mediator between god and the human soul. I think a solution may be to choose an indirect trajectory for our comparative reading of Islamic and modern philosophies, i. e. to pass in a regressive move through the Greeks who are a common source and original interlocutor for both traditions in all their respective histories. In the case of Islamic philosophy, the monotheist god is conceptually forged in a complete analogy with the one beyond being as its notion is elaborated by the Neoplatonic tradition, particularly in Plotinus (204–70) and Proclus’s (412–85) systems.

In this perspective, we also need to take into account our comparative approach of three different but related manners in which the Neoplatonic one has been translated into the concept of god respectively in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Corbin's reading emphasized spirituality as the very dimension of subjectivation. He was of course inspired by a strong tradition of German philosophy as well as anti-philosophy ranging from Jakob Boehme (1575–1624) and Johann Georg Hamann (1730–88) to Karl Barth (1886–1968) through a brief but decisive meeting with German phenomenology. Anyway, his main concern was to show through his reading of Sohrevardi, Sadra (c. 1571–1640), Ibn Arabi (1165–1240), and Avicenna himself that the historical dimension of the human being or social and political implications of its existence are not constitutive of his being as a subject, but, on the contrary, one has to elevate the self from historical conditions in order to reach true freedom and become a subject of truth.

The imaginal actually signifies for Corbin a spiritual realm where the event of subjectivity does take place. From this point of view, the imaginal couldn't naturally have any significance for an atheist or a materialist *Weltanschauung*. But, I think that other ways of confronting Islamic philosophy with modern readings of ancient philosophy are conceivable. One example is the way Michel Foucault (1926–84) tries in his last works to trace forms of subjectivation in what he calls "techniques of self" in Greek discourse as well as in the primitive Christian tradition. But it is just an instance for illustrating what remains to do with Islamic philosophy. Otherwise, I'm not sure that imitating Foucault's approach or other ones of this kind could be really fruitful in the case of Islamic philosophy regarding its discursive specificities.

AM & ML: In addition to the interesting parallels which we mentioned at the beginning, and which are given additional nuances in your elaborations, there are several differences between Corbin's understanding of the imaginal and how contemporary art is functioning. For example, the focus on the purely spiritual is dissimilar from how the category of art today encompasses both the material and the mystical, as in the non-rational, with the material articulation of artworks being essential to art's status as a form of understanding. At the same time, Corbin is sharing an emphasis on absolutes and universals with his contemporaries, including the European artistic avant-garde of the early-20th century whose discourse on the abstract and the concrete resonate with aspects of mundus imaginalis. An emphasis which appears rather distant to us. Can you describe the philosophical and political atmosphere which Corbin was part of?

AG: Corbin starts by developing his philosophical interest in two domains which are apparently quite different: since the '30s he was seriously working both on German philosophy and Protestant theology and at the same time on Islamic philosophy. The fact that in the late '30s he was the first translator of Martin Heidegger's (1889–1976) work into French has largely misled his contemporaries in interpreting the significance of his project concerning Islamic philosophy. But there is another aspect of Corbin's intellectual work in the same period which is much more relevant for his global philosophical project: he is invited to École Pratique des Hautes Études, which was at that time the most vanguard philosophical institution in France, in order to replace Alexandre Kojève (1902–68).

His teaching focuses on the German tradition of hermeneutics which goes back to a Lutheran legacy. In fact, Corbin and Kojève were supposed to each teach one of the two main branches of German philosophy after Immanuel Kant (1724–1804). At the same time that Kojève's teaching was renewing entirely a Marxist reception of Hegelian philosophy in France, Corbin taught the spiritual hermeneutics of an anti-modern but influential figure, even for Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770–1831) himself: Johann Georg Hamann. Between these two teachings, there was both a connection and of course a convergence. Corbin himself attended Kojève's seminar where the latter interpreted Hegel's development on master-slave dialectics in terms of a Marxist theory of historical subjectivity. It would be easier to understand Corbin's philosophical choices, if one remembers that Kojève's audience included crucial figures of what would be later the postwar renewal of French philosophy, figures like Jean-Paul Sartre (1905–80), Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908–61), and Jacques Lacan (1901–81).

Corbin's aim was to show to his European and especially French peers that if philosophy has only one vocation, it is to prevent humanity from being alienated in social life and especially in politics. He agreed that subjectivation is due to an eventual moment, but he refused to accept that such an event could take place in historical time. History and historical horizon are both for Corbin the very obstacles before the accomplishment of human essence for humans. This essence would be entirely effective, the human being would attain its real freedom, only if one overcomes history in order to reach what Corbin calls the realm of metahistory which is nothing but the imaginal world. By the same token, he strongly opposes any political conception of theology because in his view theology is precisely the foreclosure of politics. On this point relies, according to Corbin's interpretation, another originality of Islamic tradition. Because, while Catholic theology, by its idea of trinity, has unfolded the theological aspect and divine existence in a historical becoming of the *esprit*, Islamic metaphysics, by inventing the imaginal world and a metahistorical level, has been able to realize the original mission of metaphysical discourse vis-à-vis human existence.

ML: Can you elaborate on the relevance of Corbin's thinking for our time?

AG: It seems to me that it is possible to continue the way opened by Corbin without sharing necessarily his concerns or his conclusions. It is very interesting to see that finally Western philosophy starts to consider one of its most inventive but widely neglected *moments* – I mean the Neoplatonic tradition. For instance, I was quite surprised when I saw that the influential contemporary philosopher Giorgio Agamben (b. 1942) had concluded his great philosophical project, *Homo Sacer* (1998), by rejoining fundamental characteristics of Plotinus's metaphysical doctrine. By replacing social link, historical agency, or subjective will with his concepts of use and of "make use," Agamben wants to challenge the very historical inscription of the subject. Yet his arrival point reveals an incredible affinity with the starting point of Islamic philosophers leading them to the invention of the imaginal. In a discussion I had recently with Agamben, I tried to undertake a symptomatic reading of *Homo Sacer* from the perspective furnished by Islamic philosophy. To give just another example, I shall mention Lacanian theory of subject, because another way of dealing with the question of god consists of trying to rethink it in terms of the other, as Lacan has elaborated the concept. That is actually the way in which Corbin's successor, Christian Jambet (b. 1949), tried to approach Islamic philosophy.

AM: Comparing topographies of visionary experiences in different philosophical traditions, Corbin proposes how the eighth climate is different from a “utopia.” How does Corbin differentiate the pursuit of Na-koja-Abad/the eighth climate from a utopian project as discussed by philosophical figures preceding him?

AG: The eighth climate is qualitatively different from historical and geographical unfolding of our world. If, as the imaginal world, it corresponds to a metahistorical realm, it cannot be thought of as somewhere taking *its* place in historical time (neither in the future nor in the past). That is the reason why Corbin wasn't really interested in the messianic aspects of Islamic metaphysics, namely in Shi'ism. Because the messianic interpretation of the imaginal does precisely translate its metahistorical dimension into a utopian dimension. In this regard, if utopia corresponds to a messianic overtaking of historical time, it is better to say that the imaginal world is not a utopia but rather an atopia compared with historical time and material topography. By the way, the Persian term, Na-koja-Abad, exactly means atopia, that is somewhere which is essentially a non-place.

ML: This desire to reinterpret the event and other fundamental notions is very interesting, whether it is will, thought, action, or subjectivity. This is what a lot of art is doing today.

AG: The main challenge in linking art and the imaginal is imagination. This link cannot be taken for granted. At the most, it can be a programmatic issue for comparative metaphysics and aesthetics. In classical Western philosophy, the imagination is traditionally related to the representative faculty of the human mind. I know that art theory in our time distinguishes between the representative image and another one that proceeds rather from presentation. But the imaginal is due to a completive activity that happens in a pure and eternal presence. This contemplative activity doesn't mean an action and even less a praxis.

As Islamic philosophy conceives it, this is due to an absolute passivity vis-à-vis god or the one beyond being. Accordingly, criteria such as likeliness or modeling of reality lose their validity in the case of the imaginal. Let's remember that the refusal of any kind of realistic representative image and the elaboration of the imaginal are two sides of the same metaphysical position. As regards the imaginal, the only criteria is that contemplative instant and therefore perfection of man takes place through it. As you see, this cannot be by itself an autonomous criteria, because both contemplative instant and human perfection involve a dual relationship whose other term is god or at least a divine presence as absolute otherness. Finally, what characterizes the imaginal is its independence from the physical realm and its completely belonging to the extent of metaphysics.

ML: But metaphysics can be seen as physics...

AG: A very good point, because it brings us to the original moment of Islamic philosophy characterizing its discourse. After Avicenna, Islamic philosophy becomes independent from Greek philosophy by concluding that physics is not necessary as a preliminary part of metaphysics. Sohrevardi and other Iranian philosophers' attempts consist in tracing a direct path to metaphysical discourse so that it becomes independent from physics. That is the reason why the Islamic

philosopher remains completely indifferent to the emergence of modern physics. What counts for them is to elaborate a metaphysics that is in its very discursive unfolding a theory of subject. Such a discourse is supposed to give a direct access to the truth of everything, without involving a passage through physical investigation of nature. This in fact provides an anti-analytical approach of nature insofar as the understanding of phenomena as constituting a causal mechanism gives way to contemplation of the same natural phenomena now considered as an infinite series of epiphanies. In other words, the invention of the imaginal may be understood as a principal piece of a more global project through which Islamic philosophy has tried to rethink the very concept of nature.