



The Current State and Possible Future of Philosophy in Iran

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During the last century, philosophy in Iran has been dominated by two correlated questions: first, a general question examining the place philosophy itself holds in relation to other modern sciences; and second, a more specific exploration of the Iranian way of being and its proper place in the modern world as well as its continuing course into the future. These two important questions will determine the shape of philosophical enquiry in Iranian society.

To answer these two questions, we should examine where philosophy is taught in Iran. Officially speaking, there are two main venues for philosophy in Iran: one is the modern universities, which are no more than eighty years old, and the other is the traditional Islamic seminary (*Houze-ye 'Elmiye*), which has centuries of history but has only recently during the last decades officially opted for philosophical studies. Before that, clerics who were interested in philosophy studied it independently, outside the ambit of these religious schools. However, today philosophical studies still face obstacles in traditional circles, such as in Qom and, more especially, in Mashhad.

To date, modern universities in Iran have seen at least three generations of philosophy scholars. The first generation, who can be considered the founders of academic philosophy, can themselves be grouped into two periods: the first period is the generation of thinkers with one foot in the philosophical programmes offered outside traditional Islamic schools and one foot in the Western modern philosophies. Their acquaintance with the modern evolution of science and philosophy inspired them to found modern universities in Iran, specifically integrating philosophy into universities. Mohammad Alī Forūghī (1877–1942) is the prominent figure in this period. Scholars from the second period were

faculty members of the philosophy department at the University of Tehran and Mellī University (now Shahīd Beheshī) up until the Islamic Revolution in 1979 – people like Yaḥyā Mahdavi (1908–2000), Ali Morād Davūdī (1922–1979), Sharf-oddīn Khorasanī (1928–2004), Seyyed Hossein Nasr (1933), Gholāmḥosein Ebrāhīmī Dīnānī (1934), Rezā Dāvāri Ardakānī (1933) and Karīm Mojtahedī (1930). This group of scholars wrote various academic textbooks and a considerable number of philosophy students in universities graduated under their supervision; accordingly, to this day they are considered the first generation of professors and fathers of philosophy in Iranian universities. Their students graduated in the 1980s and 1990s and have now become faculty members of these and other universities: I would call them the second generation of academic philosophers in modern Iran. After them comes the third generation of young researchers and philosophy enthusiasts who have graduated in the last decade or are now studying philosophy in the universities.

Yet to what extent is this classification a suitable one and what are its identifiers? I see a lot of similarities, but not an absolute similitude, between agents of these three generations. The first generation's scholars were philosophy puritans: with grand perseverance they attempted to offer an understanding and present monumental works of classical philosophy from both West and East. Some of their writings are still looked upon and considered reference works among philosophy students.¹ Compared to them, the second generation usually did not have the dedication and conviction to undertake such strenuous tasks; we may detect among this generation a sense of discouragement caused by

¹For instance, Forūghī's *Course of Wisdom in Europe (Seyr-e hekmat dar Orupa)* or Mojtahedī's textbooks.



external efforts to make philosophy ideological. They satisfied themselves with simply translating secondary sources and even avoided directly reading key philosophical texts. An extreme fear of expressing one's personal philosophical inclination is evident among them as well; philosophizing often devolved into teaching various philosophers' viewpoints. As a result, there are not many writings by them that would later become reference texts, and they have not even written any memorable books. However, the most important achievement of this generation was to safeguard philosophy from total extinction in the turmoil of the era. Their struggle to implement philosophy into the academic system by placing a particular focus on teaching and supervision – with whatever quality – at least means that today it seems impossible to suppress the pursuit of philosophy in Iran.

The third generation is much more complex. Curiosity, a sense of discontent with the conditions of the past generation, the opening up of the social environment and improved access to the latest developments in and sources of philosophy on a global scale have shaped their work. The universities' expansionary policies in admitting more students in all academic fields have significantly added to the number of young people active in the circle of philosophy. In the last ten years, we have seen a remarkable increase in the translation of works by Western philosophers, even if their quality is varied. Translation of secondary sources has also increased. An abundance of philosophy graduates is a characteristic feature of this generation and may indeed be a general characteristic of Iran relative to the contemporary world of philosophy. These graduates clearly need jobs and a share in the academic sector. At the same time, a variety of philosophical sub-disciplines have emerged, particularly in applied and practical philosophy. These include philosophy of science, philosophy of art, ethics and philosophy of education, and it is most likely that the popularity of these sub-fields will further increase in the near future.

In addition to concrete fields becoming popular, the philosophy audience is expanding too. In recent years, we have seen different levels emerging within this new audience as well. First among

students and lecturers in other academic fields, whereby people active in fields like sociology, psychology, art, political science and economics are now concentrating more on philosophy. In the West, philosophy was originally the mother of all social sciences or the father from whom these fields sought their autonomy. In Iran, however, philosophy among the newly emerging social sciences looks like a stranger that has only been acknowledged and respected very recently. On a daily basis, I witness social circles and academic groups among students in these fields being formed for the purpose of discussing and studying philosophy. Second, philosophy has also now found its peculiar audience among the public as well as among students from fields other than the social sciences. For this second audience, philosophy has become a way to answer their existential questions and to find reasons for why Iran is lagging behind in the modern world and why the radiant and rich world of tradition is disappearing and going astray. Again, from personal experience as a university lecturer in philosophy, about 50 per cent of the graduate students in MA philosophy programmes previously graduated from academic fields other than philosophy.

The spread of philosophy among its new audience on the one hand and the internal and external difficulties facing universities in Iran on the other have given rise to independent and private institutions for teaching philosophy,² a development that was also fostered by the fact that public institutions started emulating these societies. Although studying at these schools does not demand extensive technical and professional training in philosophy, prominent and successful translators and writers have also come out of these schools, to the extent that in some cases they are better than their official university counterparts. Yet most philosophy enthusiasts in these schools are somehow in contact with the official universities. In these schools contemporary and modern philosophy is well received, with postmodern philosophies being especially popular.

In Qom, where the greatest focus is on classical traditional philosophy, two main trends are active:

²For instance, Porsesh, Rokhdad-e-Tāzeh, Panjar-e-ye Hekmat, Mohājer, Ahd, etc. Their approaches and supporters are very different.



first, there are the ubiquitous official classes offered by the Islamic schools, and second, there are the independent free courses of philosophy. The first only consist of relatively short introductory classes at the preliminary stages of the clergy's educational curriculum. This only covers the study of textbooks on propaedeutic Aristotelian logic followed by a rather descriptive account of the philosophy of Mullā Ṣadrā designed in a scholastic style: for instance, Moḥammad Ḥosein Ṭabāṭabā'ī's *Beginning of Wisdom (Bidāyat al-ḥikma)*. The second trend is mostly based on reading classical Islamic philosophy texts, with each class devoted to one seminal text.³ The number of these classes is increasing day by day, mainly because there are three important authoritative and influential high rank clerics⁴ behind this movement, who, by way of establishing the so-called "Supreme Association of Wisdom and Philosophy" (*Mağma 'e 'ālī-ye ḥekmat va falsafe*), support and sponsor these classes. It is worth mentioning here that in these classes masterpieces of Western philosophy are not studied, not even the classical works of Greek philosophy by Plato or Aristotle. Although it is apparent that some of the ideas that these scholars divulge have some modernistic twists to them, be it intentional or unintentional, they still do not read and contemplate modern philosophies seriously. In spite of this, however, there exist a few universities in Qom, other than the traditional Islamic seminaries, that are under the supervision of some high-ranking clerics who explicitly foster the study of Western philosophy.⁵

Turning to Tehran again, we witness a still-heated debate between the continental camp and the analytical camp of Western philosophy on the validity of their schools of thought, although a way out of this dichotomy is slowly becoming apparent. The dispute on the acceptability of either Islamic philosophy or Western philosophy has to a certain degree waned: people in philosophy circles either remain silent on this issue or engage in a comparative study of the two philosophical traditions in order

to avoid this dispute. Outside universities, the story might be told differently but no one takes it seriously. There are very few who would discredit either Islamic philosophy or Western philosophy as a whole. The prevailing tendency among intellectuals is to stay away from confrontational disputes and focus on their own research and practices. It should be mentioned, however, that this wave of comparative studies has its roots in the efforts of Henry Corbin in 1960. Corbin has directly influenced Rezā Dāvarī Ardakānī, Gholāmḥosein Ebrāhīmī Dīnānī and Karīm Mojtahedī, who come from the second period of the first generation, as well as the second generation. The third generation is, to a certain degree, either critical of these tendencies of comparative studies or is seeking new approaches to comparative philosophy. Furthermore, it is important to note that while Corbin was very well versed in phenomenology as a method for comparative studies of Western and Islamic philosophy, his followers – especially the second generation – did not rely on any particular philosophical methods for this. That, I think, is why their comparative studies were not rich and meaningful.

In addition to the disputes so far mentioned, we should add another dispute. The struggle between pure philosophy and social intellectualism has also had its ups and downs. A lot of people from philosophy circles in Iran have nothing to do with public intellectualism, even though they are somehow subconsciously guided by the two questions I put forth at the beginning. While, at the same time, public intellectuals have no clearly defined stand on philosophy, they have sometimes critiqued philosophy because of its intrinsic inertia and sometimes use or even abuse it for their own ends within contemporary intellectual discourses. Because of the current social conditions in Iran, I suppose this struggle will continue in our society.

In conclusion, the study of philosophy is still on the rise in Iran, particularly with regard to the number of people engaged in it. However, the most important factor that will influence the future course of this discipline and can bring significant outgrowth is the interdisciplinary communication between philosophy and other scientific fields.

³Popular teachers of such classes are, for example, Hasan Hasan-zādeh Āmolī and Moḥammad Ḥosein Heshmat-pūr.

⁴Namely, Javādi Āmolī, Mesbāḥ-e Yazdī and Sobḥānī.

⁵Mofid University, University of Religions and Denominations (Dānešgāh-e Adyān va Mazāheb), Qom University.