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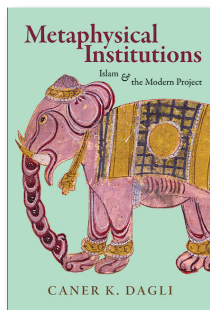
BOOK REVIEW ESSAY

Returning to the Central Question of the Humanities: What Does It Mean to be Human and to Share Human Consciousness?

Metaphysical Institutions: Islam & the Modern Project. By Caner K. Dagli. SUNY Press. 2024. ix+391pp. ISBN: 978-1-438-49700-6. $99.00 (hardback). $34.95 (paperback).



Caner Dagli's *Metaphysical Institutions: Islam & the Modern Project* is an interdisciplinary treatise on the nature of shared thinking—with an emphasis on *interdisciplinary*. What strikes the reader first and foremost is both the many topics Dagli covers—religion, modern philosophy, human consciousness, and of course Islam and modernity, inter alia—and the rationally coherent employment of various disciplines—from various subdisciplines of the humanities and social sciences to linguistics and the physical sciences—by which he explores them. Dagli examines the modern academic project of defining and conceptualizing Islam and offers critical and constructive interventions along the way. However, this is not another monograph on the question, "what is Islam?" Rather, Dagli creatively employs the encounter between Islam and the Modern Project to pen a philosophical treatise on the metaphysics of consciousness and meaning. His book thus reads not merely as descriptive or explanatory, but also as prescriptive and normative. Therefore—and true to his point—depending on one's own metaphysical presuppositions (explicit and acknowledged or implicit and unacknowledged), one may come to deeply appreciate this work as a much-needed intervention into the hegemony of modernity's false universalism or simply relegate it to another parochial exploration of "what is real, possible, and good when it comes to human beings thinking together about the real, the possible, and the good" (1). This reviewer belongs to the former group, while the latter group—indeed, perhaps card-carrying members of the Modern Project—may simply analyze his book as data added to their research question, "what is Islam?", or rather, what does this *particular* Muslim have to say about the

human condition and how does it add to our conceptualization of "the Islamic"?

Dagli opens by noting how scholars employ four key terms to describe Islam: it is a religion, a culture, a civilization, and/or a tradition. However, these concepts, despite their ubiquity in both academic and popular contexts, remain undefined—or, if they are defined, their definitions logically fail. Instead, Dagli develops a theory first of the institution and then of metaphysical institutions, "realities that constitute the social dimension of human beings navigating ultimate questions of what is real, what is possible, and what is good." In this ambitious project, Dagli argues that this results in a universal rubric "that enables one to navigate the conceptual space of the religious, the cultural, the civilizational, and the traditional" (2).

Now it may seem that Dagli is replacing one universalism—"the Modern Project"—with another one. Perhaps so, but his universalism considers precisely that which the Modern Project refuses to explore, and through a truly interdisciplinary path: "*What is a human being?* More specifically, how is the social element of human consciousness conceived?" (2). Instead, as Dagli will go on to argue, the Modern Project's universalism is an "*exclusivist universality*—the idea that some human beings have found [a] way of being human that is *uniquely* free and unhindered by authority or by prior beliefs while other ways of being human are still in their chains or in their intellectual childhood" (201–202); and let me add that this was a fundamental tenet of European Enlightenment thought that rationally justified all manner of horror across the globe, to boot. Furthermore, the Modern Project reduces the human condition largely into two reductive paths, both of which he calls "antidualist" (as opposed to materialist, physicalist, naturalist, or monist; see discussion on pages 83–86). The first is the "ontological or objective antidualism" (94) of the physical sciences that reduces human behavior to determinative bio-chemical physical interactions, and the second is the "psychosociological or subjective antidualism" (94) that "sees human subjects as constructed and determined by social structures of domination and control…constrained by culture, language, or other social factors" (88). If I am reading Dagli correctly, then, the Modern Project fails precisely when it (implicitly or explicitly) takes these two paths as absolute and totalizing explanations of the human condition as opposed to treating them for what they are, viz., partial and descriptive explanations for how human behavior emerges.

The book, which is divided into three parts, has eight chapters and a conclusion. Readers will be eternally grateful to Dagli for his provision

of succinct, bulleted synopses at the end of each chapter that clearly and cogently review the principal points made.

In Chapter 1, "What Kind of Thing is Islam?," Dagli explores the definitional tribulations around "the things Islam is said to be" (9)—namely, religion, civilization, culture, and tradition. Previous definitions and uses—academic and popular—have been either too simple, too complicated, or poorly demarcated. Instead, Dagli proposes a new rubric to make theorizations of these concepts clearer and more fruitful: the metaphysical institution, an institution "that is not itself 'metaphysical'" but rather "*concerns* the metaphysical" (28) in that it deals with ultimate presuppositions around what is real, possible, and good. Even when an institution rejects metaphysics or does not consider itself an institution (such as the Modern Project), it is still a metaphysical institution because those stances themselves are metaphysically presupposed, even if implicitly.

Chapter 2 offers Dagli's comprehensive and astonishingly clear presentation of "The Nature of Institutions and Shared Thinking." It is the longest chapter of the book and one that will likely be the subject of extensive scholarly conversation. Dagli proffers a methodical and logical definitional division of an institution that is capacious and versatile enough to facilitate sharper and more coherent theorizations of religion, culture, civilization, and tradition. Rather than attempt to summarize his 27-dimensional model of a metaphysical institution—which, despite this seeming complexity is in fact explained clearly—I offer his concluding point for readers to whet your appetite and explore the book, specifically this chapter: "A culture, civilization, religion, or tradition is an instance of shared thinking with respect to ultimate questions, existing in a relationship of community, practice, and legacy; characterized by stability, dynamism, and purpose; and constituted by accounts, heuristics, and norms" (80). It should be noted that "shared thinking" is central to this rubric because of a metaphysical presupposition—to wit, that all human beings always also think together, and that "the relationship of *I* [thinking] and *we* [thinking] is a question of consciousness—of meaning and understanding—for which no mechanical or structural metaphor is fully adequate" (36). I cannot become an *I* without participating in a *we*, and no *we* can exist without many entities in it who say *I*. Rather than focusing on what differentiates humans and various human cultures, this rubric attends to what makes us the same: human consciousness.

The subject of Chapter 3, "The Metaphysics of Antidualism," has already been mentioned. In short, Dagli displays the logical fallacies at work in the Modern Project's twin reductionisms—the socio-cultural structural

reductionism and the bio-chemical physical reductionism. Despite the implied metaphysical presuppositions of antidualists, viz., neither is there human consciousness nor therefore are humans free agents in the world, they "will make arguments *as if* they possessed a consciousness that can operate freely in relation to the structure of the physical reality or the power structure of social relationships," which becomes a sort of "methodological (or folk) dualism" (89). Dagli's conclusion is that metaphysical antidualism tied to folk dualism is logically incoherent and must be abandoned if we wish to rationally make sense of how human beings actually experience shared thinking.

While Dagli does not explicitly note this, it would seem he does not take logical issue with how, say, theories of social constructionism *help us in part explain* certain patterns of behavior, or how, say, a cognitive neuroscientist presents biological processes and aspects *that in part explain* what we call cognition. Rather, it is the logical incoherence of metaphysical claims that *reduce* human thinking and behavior to these theories. Thus, in Chapter 4, "The Metaphysics of Meaning," Dagli explores how these reductive accounts of human thinking/behavior effectively result in, well, meaninglessness (my phrase, not Dagli's)—not in the "life is meaningless" way (though a bit so), but in a more robust way. That is, psychological/subjective antidualism and ontological/objective antidualism both presuppose a structure-behind-structure metaphysics of consciousness that renders all meaning deterministic, random, or some (logically incoherent) combination of the two. This model fails to explain how "institutions remain stable, how they change, or how they are oriented toward a purpose" (114). Because the nature of institutions and shared thinking, one needs a metaphysics of consciousness that "neither reduces thinking to bodies"—biological or socio-cultural—"nor consciousness to mere thinking" (114) precisely because institutions, as Dagli defined them, depend on bodies and consciousness to exist.

Chatper 5, "The Metaphysics of Paradox," underscores the paradox of defining the nature of human consciousness, which is "the act of the conceptualizer conceptualizing the conceptualizer in its very conceptualizing, the definer defining the definer in its very ability to define, the theorizer theorizing the theorizer in the very attribute of theorizing" (118). Despite the circular paradox of attempting to understand what *individual* human consciousness is and how it works, it is often ignored when it comes to defining and conceptualizing social systems, which are made of an aggregate of *many individual* human consciousnesses. The modern social sciences have adopted a certain model of the physical sciences to understand social

systems, particularly the "structure" metaphor (127ff). Modern science in large part accepts the "gap between predictive theories and descriptive understanding" (though, a folk or popular understanding of science is often ignorant of this gap and assumes modern science has total, absolute knowledge). For example, the behavior of electrons "can be predicted with incredible accuracy under experimental conditions, but no one claims to *grasp* what an electron is" (127). One can predict the behavior of 10,000 coin flips, but not any given coin flip; we predict the aggregate behavior (function) of the 4,500 to 11,000 white blood cells per microliter of blood in a human body, but not of any given white blood cell. Many social scientists "approach human aggregates as if they were analogous to such physical systems" (129). Given a large enough data set of human beings, individual idiosyncrasies and unpredictable, even incomprehensible behavior, can be ignored and a "structure" can be theorized. However, with these models, neither the physical nor the social scientist has actually explored the paradox of human consciousness; they have merely prescinded from it. Modern philosophy and philosophy of science have at least recognized "the hard problem of consciousness," whereas the social sciences do not bother with it. But Dagli sees in this a fundamental error: the paradox of consciousness perdures within aggregate systems. This leads to his constructive conclusion for the chapter: "The social sciences should begin from the fact that they deal first and foremost with mysterious entities (human beings) and build paradox and mystery into their conceptualizations of large collectivities. The 'structure' metaphor should be abandoned" (133).

From a social science perspective, I imagine this proposal is bold; some might even suggest it undermines the purpose of the social sciences.[1] This relates to Dagli's overall critical engagement with the social sciences, however. Again, it would seem Dagli is not opposed to the social sciences in that they, in part, may explain how systems and structures—discourse—"do real work" on individuals and their aggregates. Yes, the structure metaphor fails at defining human behavior. However, certainly it facilitates understanding how social systems and their concomitant discourses and structures shape behavior, variously restricting or liberating human freedom. As a Catholic theologian myself, the structure metaphor permits

1 I am not sure if advertisers, who wish to maximize profit by predicting human behavior for their corporate clients, would find use in this proposal; but this proves Dagli's point, at least as I would render it—that is, the advertisers and their corporate clients operate within an implied metaphysical institution called neoliberal capitalism, a normative order of reason that renders the human no longer *homo sapiens* but *homo oeconomicus*, no longer *imago Dei* but *imago œconomici*.

a constructive understanding of social sin—how evil is not merely personal and individual but can become endemic to social systems as such. It would seem, once again, that Dagli's critique is with reducing human behavior—consciousness even—to "structure" and not necessarily for how the social sciences explain how discourse in part shapes human behavior (even while many global religious traditions propose practices to escape the delimitations of these artificial structures).

Chapter 6, "The Language Analogy," begins Part III of the book wherein Dagli applies the conclusions from Part I and II and applies them to the encounter between the Modern Project and Islam. In this chapter, he directly unfolds the analogy of one language studying another as a way to understand how one institution encounters another. However, the language analogy is already occasionally found in a basic way in the previous two parts; natural languages, such as English, German, and Arabic, are examples of institutions as defined in chapter two. The first part of the chapter unpacks this analogy in detail by applying each element of an institution to language (137–153). In the second part (153–170), Dagli employs the "salient features of the institution of language—correctness, creativity, and hierarchy—[to] illuminate some aspects of Islam as a metaphysical institution" (153). In this chapter, Dagli writes far more prescriptively, that is, as an insider, a Muslim scholar who makes normative representations of the tradition (i.e., "if compassion, courage, patience, and understanding are not part of one's concept of Islam, or do not seem to fall under the category 'correctness,' then one may want to revisit what one deems 'correct' Islam to be" [162]). The chapter is long, rich, and complex. Dagli skillfully demonstrates that, at the root of all conceptualizations of Islam is determining and "identifying the standard community of Muslims." If the output of any research query is to be Islamic/un-Islamic, orthodox/heterodox, or religious/cultural, then one must identify the "ultimate arbiter who decides or assumes the initial input;" or, as Dagli concludes, "Who determines the standard Muslim?" (170).

One minor question concerns Dagli's employment of the language analogy throughout the book (and specifically in this chapter) to understand the nature of institutions, especially as analogously applied to religions as institutions. The language analogy is instructive; however, I am curious about two, related linguistic features that Dagli does not directly address vis-à-vis religion or does so only cursorily. One is the nature of dialects and the second is the related historical question of when one language becomes a different language. In the case of linguistic dialects, we see the nature of community, practice, and legacy, along with stability, dynamism,

and purpose, as well as accounts, heuristics, and norms, to vary across the various subsets of languages that exist. The more common usage of dialect, which reflects how a particular group of language speakers employ vocabulary, syntax, and grammar at odds with the standard version of their language (often based on social class, ethnicity, and/or region), would have, for instance, differing norms and legacies even while overlapping with the base language. In the case of diglossic dialects, the speakers become, as it were, dual members: one of the diglossic dialect, say, Sicilian, and the other (if they speak it) of modern, standard Italian, in this example. Who, then, determines the standard speaker? Whose Italian? Presumably Dagli would suggest that diglossic Sicilian is one institution and modern, standard Italian is another. But this relates to the second feature: historically language is always changing. The rubric of an institution is capacious enough to handle this constant change, especially through features such as dynamism and purpose, inter alia. However, at a certain point historically, one language "becomes" another. When? How? When did Latin become Italian? When it comes to religious traditions, this question is important. When did the early Jewish Jesus movement "become" Christianity (the so-called "parting of the ways" question)? When did the early movement of Jewish, Christian, and pagan followers of Muhammad, the early believers, "become" Islam? The same can be asked about the development of South Asian and East Asian religions. Religions are porous, even if some insiders claim impermeable walls. There are tremendous merits to Dagli's proposal and his use of the language analogy, and these questions do not erase those. I pose them as further questions to be explored and avenues for corrective explanation—I am aware enough of my own epistemological limitations to recognize that I may be missing something. These questions, such as how to reconcile the practical use of referring to multiple religious traditions as "Judaism," "Christianity," and "Islam," inter alia, when theologizing, on the one hand, with, on the other, the historical fact that they co-produce each other, hound theologians of religions in particular.[2]

Chapter 7, "Project and Tradition," is an exploration of how the Modern Project has normatively encountered Islam. Dagli convincingly argues that the humanities and social sciences subdisciplines of the Modern Project have typically not viewed themselves as "one metaphysical institution studying another" (198). Rather, and here Dagli describes Orientalism without dwelling on it (naming it only in the footnotes), "the Modern Project cannot see itself as a metaphysical institution because it cannot properly cope with the reliance, authority, dogma, imitation, and particularity—its

2 See https://coproduced-religions.org.

own traditionality—that status entails" (203). Indeed, it must view itself as universal, a view from nowhere. Or, as Dagli puts it, members of the Modern Project assume the following:

> When "we" think, we *think*, but when *they* think, they think *Islamically*. "We" reason and imagine as such, but Muslims reason and imagine as *Muslims*. They are always particular and constrained in their Islamic-ness. "We" do not deny them their reason and imagination entirely, but it is a *folk* rationality and a *folk* imagination (187).

Returning to the language analogy, English speakers may study German, Italian, and Arabic; but they do not hierarchically rank those languages or assume a universal view of languages. (Let us prescind from the ethno-nationalist and racist trends of 19th-century comparative philology). That is, "there is no such thing as a metalanguage" (201). In fact, "one can approach another language only form within one's own" (201). Similarly, Dagli concludes that "there is no metaphysical metainstitution or meta-metaphysical institution" and that "one can approach another metaphysical institution only from within one's own" (201).

The problem is that the "humanities and social science subproject functions, intentionally or otherwise, to maintain the universal-particular and superior-inferior imbalance in relation to Islam that the Modern Project sees as a defining trait and consequence of its unique universality" (209). This is because the Modern Project sees itself as meta-metaphysical institution, a sort of universal chimerical metalanguage (209). In this chapter, Dagli offers a remedy to the false, universalistic theories and methods of the Modern Project in its encounter with Islam: recognize one's own place within a metaphysical institution along with its concomitant metaphysical presuppositions (what is real, possible, and good), acknowledge that you are encountering other humans and therefore human consciousnesses themselves are part of a metaphysical institution, and then get particular, both in input and output.

> Rather than chasing after an imaginary universal view from nowhere or from everywhere, one must push deeper into the particular to make it as explicit as possible. What one calls definitions, theorizations, conceptualizations, or demarcations are all different permutations of the same type of intellectual *act of consciousness*. This act always has several inescapable parameters, because each is a *particular* communication or expression from a

particular speaker to a *particular* audience for a *particular* purpose in a *particular* place at a *particular* time (204).

Indeed, what Dagli describes—once again not naming it—overlaps with the goals of decolonial approaches to the study of religion, culture, society, and theology, and likewise some aspects of comparative theology that seek to zoom in and stay particular, both in sources and in conclusions. Hence, he asserts, "there are no conceptualizations of Islam *as such*; one must be able to specify these particulars" (205). Dagli proposes the metaphysical underpinnings for these approaches and successfully demonstrates not merely the hubris of the Modern Project, but also its failure in understanding how human consciousness and shared thinking relate to implicit metaphysical presuppositions—whether we recognize or like them.

In Chapter 8, "One Islam, Many Islams, or No Islam?," Dagli reviews and critiques significant and representative contributions to the academic project of conceptualizing Islam. These include Marshall Hodgson's *The Venture of Islam*, Shahab Ahmed's *What is Islam? The Importance of Being Islamic*, Talal Asad's "The Idea of an Anthropology of Islam," and A. Kevin Reinhart's *Lived Islam: Colloquial Religion in a Cosmopolitan Tradition*. He offers careful summaries and sharp criticisms for each conceptualization, even while noting that each is not without some merits and insights. Many of the deficiencies Dagli notes in each could have been remedied had the authors taken his advice—that is, had they gotten particular. For instance, Dagli notes that Reinhart's anti-essentialist approach—lived Islam—presupposes certain metaphysical principles that lead to "performative self-contradiction" (245). I would add, however, that focusing on lived religion in the study of Islam is a particular remedy to a particular error: that of assuming that the core or essence of Islam can be found in texts *alone*—in the Qur'ān and *tafsīr* literature alone, or in the *sharī'ah* and *fiqh* literature alone, or in the intellectual traditions (*falsafa, ḥikmah,* and *ṣūfī* literature) alone, and so on. Once again—and at the risk of oversimplifying Dagli's otherwise complex and intellectually nuanced book—one of the major problems is the hubris of reductionism. Human consciousness is complex and therefore so are shared thinking and metaphysical institutions. Reinhart's approach is therefore helpful insofar as it encourages scholars to attend to lived religion, but unhelpful, and even harmful, insofar as it may reduce Islam to "that which Muslims *believe* unites them" (244) or to various Islams that are colloquial versions of a non-thing, a non-essential Islam that—illogically—*must* be some*thing* for living Muslims to produce therefrom a colloquial version thereof.

Something similar could be said of Ahmed's *What is Islam?*, on Dagli's analysis of which I will spend more time. I am most familiar with Ahmed's monumental monograph and—having had him as a professor and having led (with fellow graduate students, many of whom had him as a professor and mentor) a reading seminar on this work after it was posthumously published, I still wrestle with its meaning. There are times I wish I could ask him what he intended by this or that, how he positioned himself as insider or outsider, and so on. These questions will never be definitively answered as, sadly, we have all had to deal with the literal rather than figurative "death of the author."

Dagli notes that Ahmed relies on profound logical errors regarding the nature of paradox and contradiction, going so far as "to declare contradiction to be inherent to the very essence of Islam," which "is exactly tantamount to saying that no standard of exclusion from the category of Islam is even possible" (220). However, Dagli adds,

> It was not inevitable for Ahmed to commit this logical error. He gets many things right. To describe Islam—as *What Is Islam?* correctly does—as a "multi-dimensional phenomenon" or to note that there exist "different registers of truth for different people" in society where there is "a hierarchy in which people are arranged according to their capacities to know" does not at all require any talk of "inherent contradiction," yet Ahmed insists on making that unjustified leap. He fails to realize that to recognize that there are multiple *dimensions* of truth is precisely to avoid many problems of contradiction, because there is more than one dimension or parameter by which entities can be related to each other. Since he uses a dimensional metaphor, he could have mentioned that no value for height could contradict a value for width, for example (221).[3]

Ahmed could have used the phrase "apparent contradiction" but instead *reduces* (once again!) Islam to inherent contradiction. Indeed, it would seem that in Ahmed's conceptualization of Islam, which takes into account multiple hierarchies of meaning, an inward/outward dynamic, and a multi-dimensional spatial-temporal dynamic to the Revelation received by the Prophet Muhammad, there is a capacity to understand contradiction not as outright contradiction *as such*, but as different levels or aspects of Truth:

3 Citing Shahab Ahmed, *What Is Islam? The Importance of Being Islamic* (Princeton University Press, 2015), 363, 373.

particular truth for particular Muslims for particular purposes but all in epistemological and ontological relation, as source, to Revelation. We could formulate Ahmed's theory in the form of an equation:

> Divine Revelation as Pre-Text, Con-Text and Text
> + Hierarchy
> + Interiority/exteriority
> + varying sources of truth and meaning
> + varying epistemologies to produce truth and meaning
> + varying social locations (public/private, elite/common)
> + varying types of language (literal/metaphorical/paradoxical)
> = Islam conceptualized in terms of contradictory meaning-making, and Muslims living in those contradictory terms of Islam.[4]

Depending on the variable inputs, one would obtain a varying output, but all, Ahmed claims, relate to Islam qua hermeneutical engagement with Divine Revelation. This is accurate to an extent. However, Dagli's critique suggests that Ahmed fails to "get particular," and instead proposes a conceptualization in which anything and everything is potentially Islamic. "Ahmed has a principle of inclusion, but no principle of exclusion, which means he offers no principle at all" (220). For Dagli, principles of exclusion would be obtained through the rubric of a metaphysical institution.

However, it is possible to assert that Ahmed approaches Islam as a metaphysical institution, especially with regard to his exploration of the Self in Islam, which resonates with Dagli's exploration of human consciousness.[5] As Ahmed notes, the self is not just a modern, Western object of study that arose from Descartes's *cogito* moment; rather, making meaning of the self is a natural concomitant of the human engagement with the phenomenon of Revelation to Muhammad and one's access to Truth thereby. To endeavor to comprehend the Truth of Revelation implies a certain set of metaphysical presuppositions concerning the nature and constitution of the self vis-à-vis the Divine.[6] Ahmed then proceeds to look at the comparable *cogito* moment found within Ibn Sīnā's and al-Suhrawardī's corpora, each of whom posit the centrality of self-knowledge.[7] However, the bulk of this section is dedicated to the Sufi, anthropocosmic concept of the Complete Person or Perfect Man (*al-insān al-kāmil*) elaborated by Ibn ʿArabī and given further

4 See Ahmed, *What Is Islam?*, 404.
5 See Ahmed, *What Is Islam?*, 329–43.
6 See Ahmed, *What Is Islam?*, 329–30.
7 Ahmed, *What Is Islam?*, 330–333.

explication by subsequent members of the so-called Akbarian tradition: "The Perfect Man comprises in his self the Truth and Meaning in the universe such that his act of self-knowledge is knowledge of the very Truth and Meaning of the universe: the Perfect Man is the perfect self and the perfect knower, his perfect knowledge is precisely perfect self-knowledge."[8] This individual self-knowledge is obtained—let us draw from Dagli now—through the nine individual elements of Islam qua metaphysical institution and results in *taḥqīq*, which is Ahmed's subsequent topic. *Taḥqīq* becomes the means by which the Self recognizes and realizes the Truth, the relationship between the two, and things other than the self "as they really are" (*kamā huwa huwa*). In Sufi thought and practice, this is "the process of a person carrying out original personal investigation of a given matter by the rigorous holistic exercise of the holistic capacities of existential knowing, by the imaginal-experiential knowledge of the individual mind-body."[9] In my reading, recognizing the self, the Truth, and the relationship between the two and everything else is none other than self-consciousness, self-awareness, and thus the nature of human consciousness that is *not* reduced either to bio-chemical processes or socio-cultural structures.

Were we to apply Dagli's proposal regarding shared thinking and the metaphysical institution, we could say that Ahmed is deriving the nature of human consciousness through the metaphysical institution known as Islam. That is, Ahmed explores how Islam derived the nature of human consciousness—using emic concepts—and uses it to propose an etic conceptualization of Islam. He is approaching one metaphysical institution (Islam) on its own terms through and for the purpose of explaining it to another (the humanities and social sciences subdisciplines of the Modern Project). Dagli's critiques regarding contradiction still stand, of course, however it would be unhelpful to ignore the many ways Ahmed hits the mark (and Dagli notes this throughout his engagement with Ahmed).

Finally, what of the accusation that there is no principle of exclusion? Ahmed argues that "*Something is Islamic to the extent that it is made meaningful in terms of hermeneutical engagement with Revelation to Muhammad.*"[10] Dagli's main logical criticism: "What does it mean to *make* something meaningful? What is the nature of that 'making'? What *wouldn't* or *couldn't* be meaningful? There seems to be no way to say" (227). Furthermore, when is something *not* Islamic? If someone says, "I am Muslim," and then makes a claim about

8 Ahmed, *What Is Islam?*, 333.

9 Ahmed, *What Is Islam?,* 339.

10 Ahmed, *What Is Islam?*, 405 (*emphasis original*).

Islam, or acts and then says, "I am doing this because I am Muslim," must they be included as "making meaning" of and through Islam? Dagli makes excellent points and raises important questions, and here we see Ahmed's project diverging from Dagli's, which in fact proves the latter's larger thesis in *Metaphysical Institutions*. If we turn to Ahmed's next chapter, which does not enter into Dagli's analysis, we see a possible response.

For Ahmed, the theory of Pre-Text, Text, and Con-Text of Revelation should provide principles of exclusion. However, we need to understand Ahmed's project as a response to previous conceptualizations that reduced Islam to the legal-prescriptive *fiqh* literature and/or to the Qur'ān, *ḥadīth* literature, and their commentaries. Rather, Ahmed brings the "Sufi-philosophical amalgam" into the framing, which consequently opens "the Islamic" to far broader and inclusive possibilities (perhaps *too* inclusive). "A society perfused with the Sufi-philosophical amalgam," as most of Islam historically and geographically was, "is a society in which the Truth of Revelation/Islam is conceived as a limitless Reality whose meanings are susceptible to and available for exploration, and not merely as the limited and limiting reality of prescription…a society in which the metaphorical truth of this world is conceived as the bridge to the Real-Truth: a bridge on which one is forever crossing back and forth in the act of meaning-making."[11] In other words, an Islamic society is one in which people *explore* and *express* potential meanings of Truth found in the Revelation to the Prophet Muhammad and inclusive of Pre-Text, Text, and Con-Text. Here, we begin to see the workings of metaphysical institution *avant la lettre*, as it were. That is, it seems Ahmed is describing what Dagli calls "a metaphysical institution," but of course without the specific details and theorizations provided by Dagli.

Ahmed, however, is more concerned with how author and audience—be they insiders (Muslims) or outsiders (scholars of the humanities and social science subdisciplines) understand any given phenomenon of Islam as Islamic. So, vis-à-vis Islamic Art: "How is this art made valuable or meaningful in terms that arise from the hermeneutical engagement with Revelation as one or more of Pre-Text, Text, and Con-Text?...What does this art object mean in terms of Islam (and, thus, *how* does it mean)?"[12] Another way of understanding how we analyze Islamic art is to ask what additional meaning, value, and truth emerges when we understand the object in terms of various meanings, values, and Truth(s) available to us in Pre-Text,

11 Ahmed, *What Is Islam?*, 406.

12 Ahmed, *What Is Islam?*, 409.

Con-Text, and Text. In other words, something *new* emerges from the object when this is done, something that would have otherwise remained hidden to us if analyzed as a mere secular or cultural or profane *appendage* to some putative *core* or *essence* of Islam.

For example, how is the work of art *Humāy and Humāyūn in a garden* Islamic?[13] Because meaning, value, and truth is discovered when it is contemplated through the hermeneutical lens of the Islamic *madhhab-i ʿishq* (School of Passionate Love). In this tradition, *love has a particular meaning and value* constituted by the Pre-Text and Con-Text and Text of Revelation.[14] If the original audience was not fully aware of the Pre-Text, Text, and Con-Text of the artwork *Humāy and Humāyūn in a garden*, then the artist would have wasted his time.[15] Ahmed later interprets three Arabic couplets by Amīr Khusraw in such a way that it become apparent they cannot be meaningfully understood without the key vocabulary of Islam, including the concept of the resurrection and multiple verses to the Qur'ān.[16] Ahmed demonstrates that "[Amīr Khusraw's] couplets on music constitute and make normative statements that are at once philosophy, Sufism, theology, Qur'ānic exegesis and law—[they] are blended and amalgamated to *explore and generate meaning for the self in music in terms of Islam.*"[17]

Later Ahmed gives pertinent case studies for Dagli's critique, such as, what is the principle of exclusion? Ahmed suggests that Arisṭū (Aristotle) and Aflāṭūn (Plato) are *Islamic* even if they were not Muslim, the Persian epic poem, the *Shāhnāmah* of Firdawsī (d. 1020) is Islamic because it became

13 See Ahmed, *What Is Islam?*, 411. The image depicts Humāy meeting Humāyūn in a Dream-Garden. Miniature painted in Herat circa 1430, depicting a scene from the poem Humāy va Humāyūn by Khwājū-yi Kirmānī.

14 See Ahmed, *What Is Islam?*, 410–415.

15 "Understanding very well the language of this figure [*Humāy and Humāyūn in a Garden*]—of this figural language—the audience of the painting were able to pass from the figure and go on to its meaning in terms of Islam. The Islamic meaning is articulated by the painting's explorative hermeneutical engagement with the full matrix of Revelation: with **Pre-Text** (expressed in the relationship between the figure/*majāz*/Seen and the meaning/real-truth/*ḥaqīqat*/Unseen that lies beyond the figure), with **Text** (the allusion to 'There is nothing like His likeness' [Qur'ān *al-shūrā* 42:11]), and with **Con-Text** (Majnūn and Laylā—who would later be joined as elements of Con-Text by Humāy and Humāyūn). In committing itself to the process of meaning-making by hermeneutical engagement with Revelation, *Humāy and Humāyūn in a Garden* is unmistakenly and meaningfully (and beautifully) *Islamic art*" (Ahmed, *What Is Islam?*, 413–14, **bold added**).

16 Ahmed, *What Is Islam?*, 426–28.

17 Ahmed, *What Is Islam?*, 430

the exemplary epic of kingship for the Muslim rulers of the Balkans-to-Bengal complex, and the Sikh wrestler's battle cry, "*Yā ʿAlī*" is Islamic even if he is not Muslim.[18] He later addresses the topic of violence and so-called Islamic terrorism, which is instructive. If scholars or a self-described Muslim actor uses the phrase, "Islamic violence," and makes meaning of the violence through Divine Revelation (even a reading that runs against the interpretation by Islam qua metaphysical institution), then we can speak of the violence being Islamic. However, "the point of the designation is *not* that Islam *causes* violence," or that the Divine Revelation supports any given act of violence, "but that the violence is made meaningful by the actor in terms of Islam."[19]

It seems we have a principle of inclusion that does have *some* exclusionary mechanisms. It is not that *anyone* can claim *any act* as Islamic so long as they are Muslim; rather, they must make that claim through some engagement with Divine Revelation (Pre-Text, Text, and/or Con-Text), or, alternatively, other Muslims must receive that phenomenon as Islamic through a similar engagement (the case of Aristotle and Plato, for instance). So, to Dagli's hypotheticals: given Ahmed's conceptualization, is it logically coherent to include "assertions such as 'We are *Muslim* pork-eaters" or "We are *Muslim* gamblers' or 'We are *Muslim* pimps'" (220)? It would seem that if the Muslim making this claim engages Divine Revelation as a way to make meaning of these statements, then yes. In other words, there is a soft principle of exclusion: any statement or act must engage, in some way, Pre-Text, Text, and/or Con-Text. However, there is a hard principle of exclusion, at least: a Muslim who makes meaning of these assertions *outside* the content of Divine Revelation must be excluded from "the Islamic" ("I, a Muslim, eat pork because I like the taste of bacon," therefore, is not an Islamic statement).

I offer this extended analysis of Ahmed's book in response to Dagli's erudite and critical engagement not because I found Dagli's criticisms unwarranted. They are, in fact, very warranted. Rather, it seems Ahmed was more concerned with what the work "Islamic" did as an adjective in scholarly discourse and less with the conceptualization of Islam as a religion or tradition. This is noted in concluding remarks:

> The basic question to be asked when we confront any given phenomenon or object or statement is: what meaning is added by

18 See Ahmed, *What Is Islam?*, 436–45.

19 Ahmed, *What Is Islam?*, 452.

> qualifying that phenomenon or object by the word Islamic? (How) does the term Islamic enhance or clarify the constitution of that phenomenon, object or statement? Obversely, how does *not* using the term Islamic deplete or distort the constitution of the phenomenon, object, or statement?[20]

It would seem that Ahmed's project, then, while overlapping with Dagli's, is answering a different question. However, as Dagli notes, Ahmed's response comes with certain logical and metaphysical incoherencies. Furthermore, Ahmed is not asking the question, "what does it mean to be human and to share human consciousness?", a question Dagli concludes should be central to the humanities, and one I venture to surmise Ahmed would not find problematic. Indeed, there are times when it seems Ahmed was stuck between being an insider and outsider himself, and perhaps that is where the logical inconsistencies emerged (would that we could have had extended conversations with him after the book's publication!). Rather, positioning oneself explicitly within a metaphysical institution would in part preclude these inconsistencies from emerging.

This is precisely how Dagli concludes his book. As humanities scholars, we have a responsibility to be honest and up front with our metaphysical presuppositions about what it means to be human. When we mask our particularities, we inadvertently presume a universal place from nowhere; we ignore our own limitations and presume to have absolute, totalizing views of what it means to be human. Instead, Dagli calls us to consider ultimate questions of what is real, what is possible, and what is good, and I would add what is beautiful. "One lesson of this work is that there is no standpointless place from which to theorize the concept of 'institution' and certainly not ultimate institutions such as Islam" (248). We are "always already" part of an institution (250). This seems similar to cultural determinism or relativism, but only if one's implied metaphysics reduces human behavior and consciousness to "structures," which is precisely what this book argues against:

> The arguments of this book—that there can be no *I* that does not grow and flourish in a *we*, that no human being can explore metaphysics without being within a metaphysical institution, that all conceptualizations are necessarily by someone for someone for some reason at a particular place and time—do not lead to relativism

20 Ahmed, *What Is Islam?*, 545.

> when they are understood against the background of the right metaphysics (252).

What is this right metaphysics for Dagli? He details this in a short section entitled "Tradition and Traditional." Those who know Seyyed Hossein Nasr's work will find this section familiar. "For Tradition, the fullest actualization of potential and the realization of a true together-journey is not a question merely of a historical cascade of material or social factors but also and ultimately of the presence of the sacred and transcendent in the world that awakens and makes possible certain human possibilities" (254). More could be said in this short section, and one imagines Dagli will offer more in future work. Suffice it to say, the "right metaphysics" is one in which human consciousness is *not* reduced to bio-chemical or socio-cultural processes or structures.

However, Dagli gives scholars a rubric that offers a reasoned method and purpose for exploring Islam—or any religious tradition—more "deliberately and rigorously" (260). He offers a heuristic for defragmentation, for disambiguation, and for metaphysics (260–261). As a heuristic for defragmentation, his 27-dimensional model of a metaphysical institution allows us to see what aspect of Islam is an account, how this account implies norms, what the legacy of these norms are, how the community practices them, what is stable and dynamic in it, and so forth. As a heuristic for disambiguation, when a scholar encounters or employs adjectives such as "religious" or "Islamic," Dagli's rubric allows us to clarify *in what way* something is religious or Islamic and how those terms mean different things in different contexts. Finally (and, in my view, most importantly), as a heuristic for metaphysics, it encourages humanities scholars to recognize their implied metaphysical presuppositions—or, better yet, to detail them explicitly—for any given research question regarding the ways in which human societies have conceptualized "the human." Rather than prescind from questions of human consciousness or from questions of what is real, possible, and good (and beautiful), we need to recognize the value of shared thinking explicated in this book. This will enable us "[to] displace in one's mind the all-too-common metaphors of 'structure' as well as the misapplied physical science metaphors, allowing one to recall that institutions are not mere mechanical systems but are constituted by thinking beings thinking together in a whole world in which such beings are capable of existing" (261). Rather than attending to indefinite permutations on the question of power, authority, and discipline, humanities scholars would do well to

return to asking a fundamental question: what does it mean to be human and to share human consciousness? Dagli has given us a robust and nuanced framework to do just that.

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