



المنتدى العالمي للشباب والبيئة (GEYC)
تحت رعاية السيدة الفاضلة/ سوزان مبارك
حرم السيد/ رئيس الجمهورية
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Learning and Unlearning – Nature versus Culture

Keynote address at the GEYC, Alexandria 2004-09-12

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Abraham – the young terminator in his father’s workshop

Once upon a time there was a young man by the name of Abraham. He had come to believe that his parents and their friends were mistaken in their religion, that they worshipped powerless idols instead of the Living God. But Abraham loved his father and his mother and did not want them to live and die on a lie. So he wondered how on earth he could show his parents how badly misguided they actually were.

(Muslims know this story very well from the Qur’an, and Jews know it from the rabbinical traditions, but most Christians haven’t heard it, since it’s not recounted in the Bible.)

Abraham’s father earned his living by making idols, statues of stone (*asnam*) or wood (*awthan*), who were sold in order to be worshipped as if they were real divinities. One day Abraham was left alone in the workshop and instructed to keep watch over the idols. As soon as his father was out of sight, he smashed all the statues and figurines to pieces – all but the largest one.

When Abraham’s father came back with his friends they were appalled to see the chaos of destruction in the workshop. But when they asked Abraham: ”Who did this?” he just pointed to the big, unscathed idol and said ”He did it!” Then they scolded Abraham and said ”He couldn’t have done it – he’s just a piece of old stone with no power.” And all Abraham needed to do now, was to agree, softly: ”Quite so. And yet you worship him as if he were a god...” (Qur’an: Al-Anbiya’ vv 51-75)

You may say that Abraham opened his parents’ eyes – he made them look at themselves and their beliefs in a new light: *Ma hadhihi l-tamathil allati antum laha ’akifun?*

There comes a time in the life of every reflecting human being when we face this challenge: the choice between clinging to the old truths we have learnt – and throwing them overboard in order to start seeking the truth afresh.

Wisdom versus revelation

The leading personalities in the history of religions offer exemplary illustrations of this [evolutionary psycho-social] phenomenon. They force their contemporaries to choose: either you stick to the accumulated wisdom of old proverbs and traditions and thus preserve the status quo – you or open your ears to the new revelation and thus give change a chance. Either you put on blinkers – or you look around and discover new horizons. The Buddha did this, Moses and Jesus Christ did it, and so did the Prophet Muhammad. Revelation means new knowledge – sent down by God as a prophetic message or as a scientific discovery – in order to teach humankind what we did not know before, and could not have known by ourselves.



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And this, my friends, is exactly what the French thinker Descartes talks about in his *Meditations on First Philosophy*: "Some years ago I was struck by the large numbers of falsehoods that I had accepted as true in my childhood, and by the highly doubtful nature of the whole edifice that I had subsequently based on them. I realized that it was necessary (---) to demolish everything completely and start again – right from the foundations..."

The history of science is full of unexpected – sometimes dramatic – moments of enlightenment. 600 yrs ago, people believed that the earth was flat, but by sailing towards the imagined "edge", Columbus showed that the earth is in fact a ball. In fact Erastotenes, a Greek scientist working here as chief Librarian of Alexandria, had already suspected as much 2000 years ago...

For many centuries people also believed – with Aristotle and Ptolemaios – that the earth was in the middle of the universe, and that the sun (the planets and the stars) rotated around us. A Polish monk by the name of Copernicus demonstrated that Ptolemaios' model was wrong. As you may know, Copernicus was sentenced to death (1543) for making his discovery public... Many prophets in the history of humankind have suffered the same fate.

One hundred years ago, physicists believed that they had all but perfected their science, based on the works of Newton. And then suddenly, in 1905, (26-year-old) Einstein published three papers, each of which represented a quantum leap in our understanding of matter, including the famous (special) theory of relativity.

Seventy years ago, leading philosophers and mathematicians (Hilbert, Russel, Whitehead) believed they had established a complete and coherent system. Then came the young Gödel (25 years old) and proved that there is no such thing as a self-sufficient system of mathematics.

These are only some of the most memorable break-throughs in the exciting history of scientific thought. Thomas Kuhn called them "paradigm shifts", but this is not the place to go into all the implications of that idea. It's enough for us today to be inspired by those key persons who were brave and clever enough to open windows on new horizons. Most of them were quite young when they did it, and many of their senior colleagues were just as upset and embarrassed as Abraham's father and his friends... Well, this is what happens when you dare challenge the establishment, the powers that be. Sometimes those authorities decide to kill you, or send you into exile. Sometimes they just cut your salary.

Nature and culture

But can we unlearn all things we have learnt? The answer is no, and we shouldn't even attempt it. Because nature has equipped us with a number of instincts which are absolutely necessary for our survival. Breathing, being thirsty, feeling pain, or falling in love, are among



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those instincts. Human language is perhaps the least obvious but surely not the least important. Because, believe it or not, language is deeply inscribed into our genes.

To quote Steven Pinker (*The Language Instinct*, 1994): "[language] is part of our biological birthright; it is not something that parents teach their children or something that must be elaborated in school". As Oscar Wilde once said: "Education is an admirable thing, but it is well to remember [---] that nothing that is worth knowing can be taught"....

In other words: the ability to acquire a language – to speak and to understand speech – is not the result of human culture. This is quite unlike the written word, that late development we call literature, which is, indeed, a most impressive artefact: the fruit of thousands of years of trial and error, the most powerful symbol of human civilization.

So, we have human nature on one hand, and human culture on the other. How are they related to each other? Let's stop at this point and take a mental coffee-break. Let's sit down at our hosts' table, and listen to what the Arabs have to say about these matters!

Human nature – what is that?

The Arabic language offers a set of synonyms for "nature", words which seem to mirror a certain progress, a gradual development, in our understanding of the human being. First we have *fitrah* – from *fatara*, the rapid action of a clever smith or a carpenter... as if we were roughly hewn images, like those statues which Abraham's father designed... (Cf Iraqi coll. dial. *zalame* "male person, man".)

Then we have *gharîza* – from *gharaza*, the patient action of the planting farmer. Here we get the feeling that certain things are laid down in us, which will only come to bloom later... This word seems to indicate an understanding that a human being is not something static, but a dynamic organism, capable of growth and change.

Finally we have *tabî'ah* – from *taba'a*, to do with the technology of stamping or printing. This is an advanced concept. It's related to the idea that the human soul – or psyche – is like a blank sheet of paper, on which our Maker stamps an ineradicable imprint, that particular pattern which is our individual character. As an ancient Arab poet expressed it: "Every soul proceeds according to its imprint" (*Kullu nafsin tagri kamâ tubi'at*)

Learning and unlearning – what?

Now, it's time to ask a more general question: if we are not scientists, what do we need to unlearn? On one hand, we must accept the basic make-up that nature has given us. If we try to struggle against biology, we do so at our own peril. But among those things we have been taught, some may not be necessary for our survival; some of the knowledge we have acquired may actually be outdated and thus stand in the way of progress. It is convenient – altho risky – to label such knowledge as prejudice.



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Prejudice, as you know, is an idea we hold about someone – or something – based on what we believe to be facts. So we can use the word prejudice only when we know better, when we know more.

I guess many of you come to Alexandria for the first time. Maybe this is even your first visit ever to North Africa? I am sure that you – like me – had some ideas about this region, what an Arab country would be like, what Egypt would be like. And I am just as sure that, like me, you will change your opinion according to actual experience – not once, but many times. You will meet charming people here, you will make new friends and maybe even fall in love. But you will also meet difficulties and problems – maybe stomach trouble – and these will also affect your mental image of Egypt.

If Alexandria is the only place you get to see during this visit, then you will be tempted to generalize and think that the rest of Egypt is like this city. But Egypt, one of oldest civilizations on earth, is much, much more...

You are staying at the Arab Academy, a modern, well-equipped institution of research and higher learning, whose teachers can actually live on their salaries. You may be tempted to believe that all Arab universities are like that.

Today we are meeting in the marvellous conference facilities of Bibliotheca Alexandrina, a unique institution, only two years old, but already famous for its vast international network and variegated programmes. You may be dazzled by this "iconic place" and tempted to forget that Egypt – like many other Arab countries – is involved in a difficult struggle against illiteracy, especially among girls.

Ambassadors for truth

If you are blessed with an open mind, you will be able to learn a lot during your days in Alexandria. Of course, this is a historic site, full of memories of a glorious past... But maybe you should just be a bit rebellious, close the guide-book and zoom in on the present time and its people instead. Forget Alexander the Great, forget the wars and the catacombs, forget for a while what you have read or heard about ancient saints and scholars of the great monotheistic religions. Yes, forget the old stones of tombs and temples – for they have no power.

Focus instead on the live person in front of you. Sit down with Mustafa or Amani – meet them eye to eye, listen and talk. Let the living be your source of knowledge. If they shatter your world-view – confront them with your own ideas. You may find that you were both mistaken. Don't be shy, don't be aloof. Go into dialogue – to meet is to grow!

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