

Heidegger in Iran: A Historical Experience Report[※]

Bijan Abdolkarimi

In 2006, Iranian institute of Philosophy (IRIP) assigned a research project to me. The project title was “Heidegger in Iran”. It took approximately 4 years to complete the project, which was later published twice in 2012 and 2015 as a book with the same title and it is at the present (2018) under publishing for third publication. The book was highly attended and admired inside Iran and by other foreign Iranology centers like the University of Sofia in Bulgaria, University of Bern in Switzerland, Society of Intercultural Philosophy of University of Vienne in Austria, and Universities of Tōyō and Meiji in Japan.

Similar to some of the Meiji University professors, I also believed that a report on this research and Iranians’ experience regarding Martin Heidegger’s thoughts and ideas could be beneficial for the Japanese society especially young persons and those interested in philosophy and fields of humanities.

1. The Necessity of the research and its objectives

This research project aimed to investigate how Heidegger's thoughts are present in Iran, the way it influenced the contemporary Iranian thinking, and other questions raised regarding the same topic.

For Iranians, the reason for discussing Heidegger and the influence of his thoughts is not just academic curiosity or theoretical biases; rather, it stems from a fundamental necessity, which is how in the contemporary world we, Iranians, can achieve a decent understanding of the world, Being, historical tradition, identity, and modernity, that gives unity and discipline to the internal contradictions, turmoil, and chaos of the devastated traditional world of Iran.

In other words, the discussion of Heidegger in Iran is a pretext under which we tend to contemplate on “Iranian subject” in the contemporary world. In the present modern and

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post-modern world, how should we understand and define the “Iranian subject”? Japanese scholars, intellectuals, and philosophers are dealing with exactly the same question: In the present modern and post-modern world, how should we understand and define the “Japanese subject”?

Despite many differences between Iranian and Japanese societies, there are many similarities between the intellectual and cultural situations of the two societies such as the fact that both cultures are Eastern following intellectual, spiritual, and non-metaphysical, i.e. non-Greek metaphysical, traditions.

2. Why Heidegger?

Undoubtedly, there are many Western philosophers including classic and contemporary philosophers such as Plato, Aristotle, Descartes, Leibniz, Spinoza, Kant, Hegel, Marx, Nietzsche, Wittgenstein, Lyotard, Derrida, Foucault, etc. whose works and thoughts were translated into Persian and entered the Iranian society. However, the question is that why no other philosopher like Heidegger was popular and welcome in the Iranian community of philosophers and intellectuals, and why the focus of this research project was on Heidegger and his thoughts and not on Kant or Hegel. In other words, what elements or components made Heidegger’s thoughts attracting and challenging for Iranians? The answer to this question is precisely the central core of the experience that I intend to transfer to my Japanese audiences.

I believe the reasons for Heidegger’s importance for Iranians are as follow:

A. Heidegger is the most radical critique of the Western civilization, modernity, and modern rationality. In the contemporary era, the West has been criticized by many critiques like German romanticists, Marx, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Freud, the members of Frankfurt school, Jaspers, etc., whose criticisms were never as radical as those of Heidegger were. To put it metaphorically, all the intellectuals criticized the fruits and branches of the Western civilization, but Heidegger pointed his critiques towards the metaphysical traditions as the root of the Western civilization.

Heidegger does not consider the West (vs. East) as a geographical, political, economic, social, racial, theological, or ethical concept. Rather, it is an ontological concept, which is a special way of understanding Being that appeared in the Greek metaphysics and its history and, eventually leading to nihilism, neglect of Being, and crisis of meaning in Western modern civilization. In this sense, the East is also not a geographical, political, economic, theological, sociological, racial, or moral concept. It is rather an ontological concept, which

is a special way of understanding Being that appeared in the eastern theoretical traditions. Therefore, the East and West are two different types of ontology with different ways of understanding Being and the universe.

B. In my opinion, no thinker like Heidegger could convey concepts to us, the Easterners, through which we can conceptually re-understand, re-interpret, and reconstruct the eastern historical traditions. In the present time, it is only through the help of Heidegger's concepts that we can translate the fundamental insights concealed in the eastern spiritual and theoretical traditions to a universal language. For instance, Heidegger's attempts to overcome metaphysics and moving toward a way of thinking that he calls "No-longer-metaphysical-thought", is precisely what is called "Wisdom" in eastern traditions. Heidegger's *Dasein*, namely his conception of human existence and his perception of truth (*Aletheia*) are very close to the meaning of human being and truth perceptions in eastern traditions.

C. Considering Heidegger's interpretation of the western metaphysics tradition, one can see the whole history of western intellectuality from pre-Socratic period to the future of western way of thinking. We can make use of this history as a mirror to see ourselves and the whole tradition of eastern thinking.

3. Some of the research questions

Some of the most important questions, which were put in front of the research project "Heidegger in Iran" by Iranian institute of Philosophy — and they can probably be the questions for Japanese in their own society and culture — consisted in:

1. What were the primary reasons for the attention and appreciation of Heidegger's thoughts by Iranian thinkers and intellectuals?
2. How and with what interpretation(s) did Heidegger's thoughts enter Iran? What is the image of the German thinker, Heidegger, among Iranians? What are the main attributes of Heidegger's character in Iran?
3. Who was the first commentator of Heidegger, i.e., Dr. Seyyed Ahmad Fardid and what were the characteristics of his commentary and interpretations of Heidegger?
4. Are there any genuine philosophical and wisdom insights in Fardid's ideas? Or should he be considered only as an interpreter or even distorter of Heidegger's thoughts?
5. How valuable are the interpretations of Iranians and especially Seyyed Ahmad Fardid of Heidegger?
6. What is the relationship between the Iranian religious-spiritual interpretation of Heidegger and Western academic interpretations of this German philosopher?
7. In addition to religious-spiritual interpretations of Heidegger, what other

interpretations do exist in Iran?

8. What are the argumentations and reasons of disagreement between Fardid and his followers and those intellectuals opposing them? In other words, what are the argumentations and reasons of disagreement of intellectuals with religious-meditative interpretation of Heidegger by Seyd Ahmad Fardid?

9. What are the argumentations and reasons of disagreement of some Iranian intellectuals opposing Heidegger?

10. What is the position of Heidegger's thoughts in Iranian contemporary intellectuality?

11. What will be the future of Heidegger's way of thinking in Iran? What role can this way of thinking play in the Iranians' historical future?

These questions are the reflection of discussions and disputations among Iranians' philosophical, academic, and intellectual communities regarding the presence of Heidegger's thoughts in Iran.

4. Some of the most important results and achievements of the research

Some of the most important results of this research project are as follows:

4. 1. It is well accepted in Iran that Seyyed Ahmad Fardid was the first Iranian to introduce Heidegger and his thoughts in Iran, and it seems that everyone agrees that Fardid should be considered as the main hero of Heidegger's story in Iran. However, this assumption in my research was challenged seriously. During the research, I found that the interpretation of Heidegger's thoughts in the light of Iranian-Islamic wisdom and mysticism was influenced primarily by the French philosopher and orientalist, Henry Corbin. He should be considered as one of the most important sources of Fardid's thoughts. With the entry of Corbin to Heidegger's story in Iran, many issues, questions, and controversies that existed in this story, took a different form and meaning.

Based on the findings of this research, it was through Corbin that Fardid was acquainted with Heidegger and tried to interpret Heidegger in the light of Iranian-Islamic wisdom. In fact, Fardid followed the same project that Corbin wanted to do. In his book, *From Heidegger to Suhrewardi*, Corbin explicitly explained this intellectual path and project.

As you know, Suhrewardi (1154-1191) was a Persian philosopher and founder of the Iranian school of Illuminationism, an important school in Islamic philosophy that drew upon Zoroastrian and Platonic ideas. The "light" in his "Philosophy of Illumination" is a divine

and metaphysical source of knowledge. Mulla Sadra, the Persian sage of the Safavie era described Suhrawardi as the “Reviver of the Traces of the Pahlavi (Iranian) Sages”. Suhrawardi, in his “Philosophy of Illumination”, thought of himself as a reviver or resuscitator of the ancient tradition of Persian wisdom. Through the title of the book, *From Heidegger to Suhrawardi*, Corbin describes his intellectual journey, namely his philosophical thought began from Heidegger’s phenomenology and philosophical Hermeneutics and developed and ended to Suhrawardi’s Eastern meditative philosophy.

Those against Fardid believed that he has distorted the academic Heidegger image and portrayed an Iranian, eastern, and spiritual image of this western philosopher by religious-spiritual interpretation of Heidegger in the light of Iranian-Islamic wisdom. However, my research showed that if there is any critique or controversy over the religious-spiritual interpretation of Heidegger in the light of Iranian-Islamic wisdom, it is primarily related and addressed to Corbin and not Fardid.

4. 2. The second point is that Corbin was a unique person and his life was more like a legend. Throughout history, few such figures had the fortune to learn from so many great masters. In fact, Corbin had visited most of the prominent thinkers and scholars of his time such as Etienne Gilson (the remarkable professor of the history of medieval philosophy), Émile Bréhier (the great master of the Plotinus philosophy and Indian Upanishads), Louis Massignon (the famous French scholar of Islam and Shia studies), Joseph and Jean Barozi (two brothers who were prominent professors of the history of religions and Protestant theology), Rudolf Otto, Nicolai Bultmann, Karl Barth, Carl Levitt and Hamann, Ernst Cassirer, Heidegger, Karl Jaspers, and many other intellectuals who were experts in their own fields, such as philosophy of religion, eastern studies (orientalism), hermeneutics, the interpretation of sacred texts, Hegel studies, and phenomenology. He was also a companion of Heidegger himself. In fact, he was very fortunate to absorb and digest the essence of western thought in his time through the companionship of prominent figures and philosophers. Furthermore, he found the chance to live in Turkey for a while as well as in Iran for 30 years, and because of this experience, he was directly acquainted with the Iranian-Islamic intellectual and philosophical sources. Therefore, Corbin was not an ordinary individual with limited knowledge or ethnic and theological tendencies, who tries to interpret Heidegger’s thoughts in the light of Iranian-Islamic wisdom based on the historical complexes and backwardness of an eastern person or on a kind of reverse orientalism logic. As an intellectual coming from the heart of western thinking tradition, Corbin should not be considered as an orientalist in the common sense of this word that under the influence of his specialties and interests, tried to link Heidegger to the spiritual and wisdom traditions of

the East. He was rather a philosopher and thinker than an orientalist.

As a result, many of the charges that may be imposed on Fardid, cannot be accused on Corbin at all. He was a figure coming from the West whose thoughts were originated from the heart of western culture and metaphysics' tradition. Corbin is the one who presented a religious-meditative interpretation of Heidegger in the light of eastern theoretical tradition.

Corbin is not the only one presenting religious-spiritual interpretations of Heidegger. John Macquarie and many western theologians such as Paul Tillich and Nicolai Bultmann tried to use of Heidegger's thought and the fundamental, existential concepts of ontology of *Being and Time* for interpreting the holy book and theology of Christianity. These evidences show that any unspiritual interpretation of Heidegger is a false understanding of this great thinker of the era. It is believed by many scholars that his great and primary plan was to create a religious renaissance in the present secular-by-nature world.

4. 3. However, regardless of this historical matter, we should consider the hermeneutic point that we have by no means only one interpretation but many different ones of Heidegger's thought. In other words, we have the possibilities of different interpretations of each text. This hermeneutic point is true regarding every philosopher and thinker including Heidegger. Therefore, the religious-meditative interpretation of Heidegger can be well as a possibility of Heidegger's own thought.

However, I believe that the main spirit of Heidegger's thought is to respond to the most important intellectual crisis of the West civilization that is nihilism; a crisis that was correctly recognized by Nietzsche. Heidegger wants to reach the possibility of an "other beginning" of *thinking* that he calls "No-longer-metaphysical-thought". Considering these two fundamental features (overcoming nihilism and nihilistic interpretation of the world from one side and breaking up metaphysics in order to reach a way of thinking that is no longer metaphysical from the other side), we can find powerful religious-spiritual tendencies in Heidegger's thinking.

It should be noted that the departure point of Heidegger's thinking was theology. He was a student of a religious school during his youth, and entered the philosophy field to find answers for his theological questions. However, he gradually moved away from theology to phenomenology, and then to what he calls "thought". I believe if we take away the religious-spiritual concerns — definitely not theological ones — and Kierkegaardian concerns from Heidegger's thinking, nothing will remain except its spiritless corpse. Heidegger's non-theological tendency should be understood and interpreted in the context of the distinction between "metaphysics" and Kierkegaardian "faith", and not in the context of anti-tradition tendency of the Enlightenment era.

The most fundamental concept in Heidegger's thought is *Being*. But what is "Being" in his thought? Is it the same as "the material" or "the physical"? Is it the "nature" that Romanticists and Naturalists talked about? What is "Being" that in the light of which Heidegger interpreted the constitution of human being as *Dasein*? What is "Being" that in the light of which Heidegger defines "authentic thinking" and believes that thinking is nothing except dwelling in Being's destiny? Why does he emphasize the relation between "thinking" and "thanking"? What is the subject and components of "thanking"? There are many historical, philological, and interpretive reasons in Heidegger's works that make the spiritual (but certainly not theological) interpretation of Heidegger possible. In my opinion, contrary to the claims of many Iranian scholars and intellectuals, a secular Heidegger is by no means the true and academic Heidegger.

Jean Paul Sartre stated in his work "Existentialism is a Humanism" that existentialist philosophers are of two kinds: Theist existentialists like Kierkegaard and Gabriel Marcel, and atheist existentialists like me (Sartre) and Martin Heidegger. However, in the book of *letter on humanism*, Heidegger responded Sartre without any reference to his name. He stated that those who considered his philosophy inattentive to the "God" issue, in fact, did not have any understanding of his philosophy at all.

The conclusion that I am trying to reach based on the mentioned points is that — contrary to what many intellectuals, as well as Iranian ones, claim — a religious-spiritual interpretation and understanding of Heidegger in the light of spiritual eastern traditions is not only the distortion of Heidegger but also a necessary condition for an academically and scientifically true understanding of Heidegger as the greatest critique of the western thinking.

4. 4. Another important point is that the opponents of the religious-spiritual interpretation of Heidegger always refer to the constant opposition and criticism of this German thinker to theology and the theological characteristic of metaphysics, and his theology destruction plan that was parallel to deconstruction plan and radical critique of metaphysics in his thought. However, this group has never considered the fact that Heidegger's opposition to theology and theological theoretical systems was influenced by Kierkegaard. Heidegger's opposition to theology and theological theoretical systems by no means mean opposition to religious-spiritual interpretation of the world, as anti-theology and anti-system tendencies of Kierkegaard not only did not mean opposition to religious-meditative way of understanding the world but also was originated from a religious passion. There is a possibility of thought that an individual believes in none of the theological system like Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Buddhism, Shintoism, etc., and do not conceive himself/ herself as a Christian, Jewish, Muslim, and so on, yet does not accept a materialist, naturalist, physicalist, and secular

interpretations of the world. In fact, it is not necessary for an individual to understand the world, humanity, and throughout history of man from a framework of a theological belief system.

On the other hand, an individual's opposition to theological approaches and systems does not mean, in any way, opposition to religious-spiritual interpretations of the world. Indeed, Heidegger's thinking is not theological, and he tries to break up theological thought and destroys theological systems. However, theological thinking is one thing and having a spiritual interpretation is another one. Ironically, this kind of non-theological and non-secular thinking is precisely the same way that humankind is paving in the world at this age.

In fact, the humanity of our time is pessimist and distrust to all metaphysical and theological systems. In present world, no great thinker sees the world solely from the viewpoints of a metaphysical system like Spinozian, Kantian or Hegelian system or from the perspectives of theological frameworks such as Christianity, Judaism, Buddhism, shintoism or Islam. Our time is the era of the collapse of all metaphysical and theological systems. That is, no one would say that I am a Spinozist, Cartesian, Kantian, Hegelian, or Marxist. All these systems, in a way, have shown their inadequacies in interpreting the world. There may be *something* — i.e., *Being in itself* in Heideggerian discourse, to appear from behind the collapse of the systems.

Although humankind would never get back to theological systems, they will continue to exist as a part of people's culture or as a tool in politicians' hands for power game.

Human society, thinking, and the authentic existences are no longer led by theological systems. Theological thought may be the departure point for our thinking (and the departure point definitely affects the movement and the destination); however, it will no longer be heartwarming for humankind. In the present day, even the life of the followers of theological systems rotates around modern values. In fact, theology is a part of culture that acts as a mask or veil on realities. The corpses of theological systems exist though with no soul inside. The future thought of humankind will be of nonsecular-nontheological type.

5. Heidegger and the thought of future

What is the use of Heidegger's thought for us and what would be its role in our future? The most important point is to know that in the present world, what understanding do we have regarding ourselves and what are we going to do with our history, traditions, ourselves, and this disordered world?

Some people are satisfied with the current world and accept the modern western culture and civilization with all its results and consequences. These people are modernists

who are optimistic toward modern age and consider it as the best era with culmination in development and evolution in the history. In their viewpoint, humankind has reached freedom, science, technology, and prosperity. They also believe that only foolish and ignorant people do not accept the fact that the modern era is better than all the past eras in every aspect. On the other side, there are people who are not cheerful with the current world. They believe that despite scientific and technological progresses, humankind has experienced great failures in the modern era, been detached from its true self, and has not reached the freedom promised by the Enlightenment age. If satisfied with the present world, no one would come across the Heidegger's thoughts.

As mentioned earlier, the reason that many Iranians follow Heidegger's thinking path is the issue that in the current modern world — which is directed by modern, scientific-technological rationality and secularism, nihilism, and meaningless life are its most fundamental metaphysical characteristics — is it possible for us to maintain the spiritual, meditative thinking, some of the traditional values and insights, and the meaningful way of the life of our own tradition? This issue is not related to the past; rather it is a concern of our current time and future. We are still dealing with the question that what is our understanding about ourselves in the current world and what life style we want to or can choose.

The answer to the question “what is the relationship between our future and Heidegger?” depends on the answer to the question “what is the relationship between the future of the global thinking and Heidegger's thinking?”. Some of the intellectuals such as Deleuze and Foucault asserted that future thinking will be shaped based on our relationship to Heidegger's thought and we should determine our relation and standpoint to it. We can either accept or reject Heidegger's thinking, but we cannot ignore it.

What will be the path of our thinking in future? Either we should join the history of the West and their course of thinking — which seems that we have already joined them, and despite all negative and hindering factors, we become history-less and are continuously joining the global western metaphysical history; or we should resist secularism and nihilism that have taken over the West. Some trends, such as fundamentalists, criticize the modern world from a pre-modern position. However, Heidegger's critique to modernity is a post-modern one. It means that despite fundamentalists, Heidegger profoundly experienced modern subjectivist rationality and he never calls us to return to a past and impossible form of life existent in pre-modern traditions. Therefore, determining our position regarding pre-modern and fundamentalist critique or phenomenological description and post-modern critique on the West and modernity would have a profound and decisive influence on our thought history and future.

In other words, the future of our thinking depends on our position regarding the

radical critiques of great thinkers such as Heidegger and Nietzsche on the West and modernity. That is, we either accept the thinking path of such radical critiques, or in a way, preserve the order and culture of the present world.

However, if we accept Heidegger's radical critique on the West, then, how can we liberate ourselves from the domination of the Western metaphysical culture? One possibility is to attempt to go back to the past as many Salafist and fundamentalist movements such as Talibanism and Bin-Ladanism in the Islamic world, which invite Muslims to do. However, we well know that such a return to the past is essentially impossible. We should accept that the direction of time is one-way to the future and returning to the past is not possible. However, if we are not satisfied with the current situation and cannot return to the past, then, we can only wait for the emergence of a new horizon and possibilities of thinking in the future. Even so, how will be the future of thinking and the thinking of the future?

The future is undoubtedly bound up with our present and past possibilities. However, how can we look at our past and present time? We can be satisfied with the current time, but Nietzsche and Heidegger's thoughts open our self-consciousness eye to the deep and fundamental nihilism of our age. Besides, how can we look at the past? Based on the values and worldview of the Enlightenment era, is it possible to consider the past as merely an era full of ignorance, false thoughts and myths, and darkness? Heidegger's thought presents concepts and categories, which help us understand the worldview and the self-founded, nihilist values of the Enlightenment era. Furthermore, they help us better understand the insights and genuine possibilities present in the pre-modern historical traditions without attracting our thinking to the fundamentalism and captivity in the past. Therefore, Heidegger's thinking can help us understand our historical and non-metaphysical traditions as well as nihilism and the foundationlessness of the present world. In addition, it revives the hope for new possibilities and destiny in our hearts. He tries to show us that in the era of scientific and technological rationalism, how we can have a spiritual interpretation of the universe. This is a profound and breathtaking issue. The political, theological, and ideological tendencies simplify answering this question. Nevertheless, Heidegger's thinking liberates us from these unsophisticated tendencies, and invites us to an authentic way of thinking.