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A Logic-and-Meaning Approach to Culture as a New Interpretation of Universalism

Quite often two types of cultural studies are not differentiated. Researchers and philosophers may investigate a culture of their own; and they may investigate a culture to which they do not belong. Those who take up the second type of investigation know how different the two situations are. They also know how risky it is to apply conclusions that result from the research of the first kind in the research of the second one. The aim of my paper is to offer a preliminary classification of methodological approaches in domestic and Western Islamic studies that target the problem of a cultural gap between a researcher and the object of his or her research.

Islamic studies can be divided into two major groups. Firstly, case studies; secondly, attempts to comprehend the object of research in a broader cultural context. I will focus on the latter.

In contemporary Islamic (and, generally, Oriental) studies there are two dominating approaches, not just connected, but both springing from the corresponding lines in philosophy of history and in understanding the paths of development for the human society and human culture. I mean the universalist interpretation, on the one hand, and the civilizational approach, on the other.

The universalist approach has an impressive record: in Europe, it dates back to, at least, the ancient Greek philosophy, and is closely connected with the Platonic and Aristotelian conception of the universality of human nature with its roots in the universality of mind. As for the civilizational approach, it appeared in its developed form in the second half of the 19th century, when Nikolai Danilevsky first published his *Russia and Europe* with the principles of this approach clearly set out. Later, this approach was further elaborated by Spengler, Toynbee and others. I will give a brief synopsis of how those two approaches are displayed in the way experts in Arabic and Islamic studies treat the object of their research.

The universalist approach proceeds from the assumption of an *essential unity of the humankind*, and considers cultures and civilizations to be forms of a singular line of development, ascribing their differences to their *specificity*. Specificity can never compete

with essential unity, which is prior to the former. In other words, specificity is secondary to universality, i.e., to what is posited as *common-to-humankind*. This assumption has a strong philosophical background: it is based on the Western civilizational experience, and it has a whole lot of practical applications and usage. But that is not what I would like to focus on right now; I would like to turn my attention to the consequences of this standpoint when researchers in the field of Islamic and Arabic studies prefer this position as the basis to deal with their object of research.

The two basic effects are the following. Firstly, a researcher (Western or Russian) of Arab culture has a priority access to a certain universal science. Why? The universalist approach naturally presupposes existence of a universal science. For example, if we make a research in the field of Arabic language, we need general linguistics; if we study Islamic poetry, we cannot do without general poetics; if we deal with Islamic history, we need the science of history, etc. And it is in the West that those universal sciences were elaborated. A Western researcher naturally has a priority access to this universal (universal in a sense that it applies to its subject matter in any culture) science that is fit to its object posited as universal.

It means that despite all the criticisms against Eurocentrism, either for political correctness or for other reasons, universalism, in its traditional sense, provides an unchallengeable epistemic foundation for Eurocentrism which, when cast out through the door, will be back through the window.

The second effect of the universalist position is the following. A non-Arab or non-Islamic researcher (Western or Russian) has the only language at his or her disposal, the language of European science. This point is often referred to as if it were the solution to the problem but not the problem in itself. But the immediate consequence is that all researched phenomena (of Arab Islamic culture, in our case) need to be reconstructed in order to fit the framework of categories of the European science.

The examples are numerous. Let me mention one. From the end of the 19th century up to the present moment, in order to characterize Islamic cultural phenomena, Arabic and Islamic studies have been using the famous triad — theology, philosophy, mysticism. Naturally, this triad is borrowed from the Western cultural experience; hence, it appears as self-evident. But only a few simple remarks are enough to put this self-evidence to question. What is “philosophy” in Islamic world? Is it just Falsafa? And what about theoretical discussions and findings of the early (pre-Ash‘arite) Mu‘tazila? They cease to be “philosophy” and become “theology”? And how about a mystical component in the treatises of Ibn Sīnā, the most prominent Falsafa representative according to Islamic

thinkers? Is it an illusion or a plain aberration, and Ibn Sīnā is purely a rational philosopher without a hint of mysticism, according to Dimitry Gutas' reasoning? And Ibn 'Arabī cannot be considered a "philosopher," but, alternatively, has to be classified as "a theosopher"? The endless failures to adjust the Arab Islamic dress to the Western model exceed the limit, beyond which transition from their quantity to their quality takes place and their subject matter becomes meaningless. But, as before, almost everyone who writes about the Mu'tazila, qualifies them as theologians; and Ibn 'Arabī is called a theosopher by every other researcher of Sufism... There must be something more than mere traditionalism in this kind of persistent dedication to lame classifications. It is the consequence that inevitably results from the universalist approach; a consequence that, paradoxically, justifies itself by its very inevitability.

As for the civilizational approach, its starting point is the distinguishing features of individual civilizations. These features make each of civilizations unique and *irreducible* to any other. The civilizational approach varies from theory to theory, but its fundamental principle remains — it primarily focuses on the *inner integrity* of each civilization. From that point of view, "humankind" or "universal *X*" (where *X* stands for "values," "norms," "patterns," etc.) are shallow abstractions, with no connection to reality.

The opponents of the civilizational approach call this tightness, but not uniqueness: civilizations, being unique integral entities, a kind of a monad each, remain totally alien, inscrutable and meaningless for each other, since any probing into a hermetic entity is impossible from another hermetic entity (civilization).

These two approaches make an opposition in both philosophy of history and Arabic and Islamic studies.

To demonstrate the universalist approach, let me mention the book *Deciphering the Signs of God* written by the outstanding Annemarie Schimmel. "This is one of Schimmel's most important books," William C. Chittick said. How is the book structured? The author proceeds from the religious studies general scheme, proposed by Friedrich Heiler in his *Erscheinungsformen und Wesen der Religion*. She uses the scheme as a universal one, therefore applicable to Islam *a priori*. Schimmel writes: "In order to give a form for a cross-section through different phenomena of Islam, the model used by Friedrich Heiler appeared to me to be most convenient." Religious experience is interpreted here as a gradual periphery-to-centre migration, as the model of the concentric rings, where initial experience encompasses outer rings off the centre with a gradual

progression towards the centre. This progression makes up the core of deciphering the signs of God.

It is an open secret that Schimmel's books make a very interesting reading. And yet it remains true, at least for the book I mentioned: the author proceeds from a universalistic scheme to its illustration. It appears, however, that a transcendent universalistic scheme is prior to the subject matter, logically at least. If we proceed from a general universal scheme to an object of our research, then Islamic culture is only relevant because it is suitable to illustrate the scheme, because it fits it. Subject matter does not come first; but the scheme is prior to it. This scheme does not result out of the subject matter, is not deduced from it, but rather is used as a transcendent one, picked up in the Western tradition and then given a universal validity.

In terms of quantity, traditional universalist approach in Arabic studies is more current. It is *comfortable* for a Western researcher. But it *cannot account for the inner affinity* of different segments of this culture — the observation put forward by Oswald Spengler, Louis Massignon, Seyyed Hossein Nasr, et al. Alternatively, the less current civilizational approach is trying to encompass this fact, though it has been giving in to the anti-Orientalist ideology in the West lately.

To illustrate the civilizational approach in the domestic Arabic studies, I would like to mention Alexander Ignatenko's *The Mirror of Islam* (Zerkalo Islama, 2004). The material of the book and the conclusions the author makes are both most interesting. The conclusions make it possible to qualify the book as a typical example of the civilizational approach: it characterizes Western and Arab Islamic culture as structured entities. According to Ignatenko, European culture belongs to a "discourse-to-imagination" type, as it proceeds from discourse, speech, theory towards imagination. With its progress from theoretical reasoning to imagination, this culture is prospective in nature — leaning forward, addressing the future, making up its image based on theory, and, then, constructing this image in reality. On the other hand, according to the author, Arab Islamic culture belongs to the "image-to-discourse" type, because it uses imagination to construct theoretical discourse; it turns reality into an image, a literary plot, and then goes on to exist in the sphere of imagination, but not in reality. Thus, Arab Islamic culture and Western culture are mirrored opposites. At this point it is interesting to return to the book's title: we will find that it produces a reflection of Islam in the Western mirror, for it creates the image of the targeted culture as a mirror reflection of author's native culture.

That will do for the moment to describe the two well-known approaches practiced in Arabic and Islamic studies today, to interpret an object of research in a broader context.

Yet there is a third approach that my colleagues and I are working on. We call it a logic-and-meaning approach. In this brief paper I will not elaborate on its exploratory procedure, methods and applications: the reader can have a detailed scrutiny in our publications.¹ However, I would like to give here a very general outline of its basic idea.

The logic-and-meaning approach defines culture as a sense generating “machine.” This is an attempt to analyze the ways that stand behind sense-deciphering procedures that run in our consciousness. We are seeking for an answer to the following question: “What are the mechanisms that explain encoding and decoding of the meaning of a text?” Naturally, a text is not just a verbal text, but any cultural phenomenon, including art, approached as a result of sense generating procedure. Do such mechanisms (procedures) exist? This is question number one. And if they do exist, what are the ways to catch and describe them? Are they similar or different in diverse cultures?

The essence of the logic-and-meaning approach could be described as following: it treats meaning as an entity-and-continuity; to be more exact, as an entity-and-continuity which discloses itself in fixed forms; and tries to discover mechanisms that stand behind this dynamics. There are two basic procedures that reveal it — opposition-and-unity and part-to-whole relations. (Here entity-and-continuity goes together with its disclosure and does not exist separately, even in thought: we do not proceed from entity-and-continuity to its disclosure, even logically, but we approach them as two sides of each other only). Though identical in this formula, those two procedures appear as variable when we try to discover the way they work in different cultures. It seems that in Arab culture these mechanisms are working differently, compared to their Western pattern: the

¹ Most of them are in Russian; of those that appeared in English I can mention here *Logic of Sense: Theory and Its Application in the Analysis of Classical Arabic Philosophy and Culture* (Chapter 1), published in *Ishraq: Islamic Philosophy Yearbook*, № 2 (Moscow 2011) and available at <http://smirnov.iph.ras.ru/eng/pube/ls_i.htm>; a paper *Cultural Diversity as Logic-and-Meaning Otherness: the Case of Knowledge and Faith in Knowledge and Belief in the Dialogue of Cultures*. Washington, D.C.: Institute of Philosophy, Russian Academy of Sciences; The Council for Researches in Values and Philosophy, © 2011, pp. 129-133 <http://smirnov.iph.ras.ru/eng/pube/kfaith_i.htm>; *Şūfī Hayra and Islamic Art: Contemplating Ornament through “Fuşūş al-Hikam”* <http://smirnov.iph.ras.ru/eng/pube/hayra_en.htm>; and *Care for Life in Medieval Islamic Thought: a Logic-and-Meaning Approach* (in print, volume 12 of publications of Institut International de Philosophie). They give at least some idea of what the logic-and-meaning approach is about.

same is done *the other way*; hence the formula “*the other sameness*” used in the logic-and-meaning analysis. This formula problematizes sameness as well as otherness.

The traditional universalist and civilizational approaches both have lingering constraints and limits which can be overcome by the logic-and-meaning approach.

The two traditional approaches may well interpret particular sets of facts in a target culture. But there is a touch-stone — an overall interpretation.

The traditional universalist approach always offers a selective interpretation (which is well observed in Schimmel’s work discussed above as well as in the works of other researchers who stick to it). Such a selective interpretation is always possible, and diverse epistemological theories may be chosen to back it (an interval theory of truth; an asymptotic approximation methodology; understanding language as a construct projected onto an object, etc.). The problem with the theories of the kind is that we have to already know an object to use these theories for its estimation — otherwise, how could we determine the interval in which particular truth value is applicable; how could we know that we are approaching the object of study, and not getting away from it, and so on. The cart is always before a horse here. The same is true for the civilizational approach: for example, it remains vague with Ignatenko how to use a detected characteristic, claimed to be fundamental, beyond the material of his book (for instance, how can it explain the distinctive traits of Islamic law, religious doctrine, etc?).

As opposed to this, the logic-and-meaning approach insists on the possibility, and even the need, of an uninterrupted, and not selective, interpretation of culture, proceeding from its inherent logic. This is why the criterion of *wide sections of culture* under interpretation is of ultimate importance in this context.

This should have made it clear that the logic-and-meaning approach is *neither* a civilizational *nor* traditional universalist type of methodology.

The scholars who follow the civilizational approach always pick up some *definite content matter* to characterize a culture or a civilization. As a result, such properties become peculiarities of a culture. When Nikolai Danilevsky wanted to point out the distinctive trait of ancient Greek culture, he specifically meant arts in which Ancient Greeks were the topmost experts ever. For other cultures, their specific individuality is fixed as another top achievement (with a fixed content matter) of human spirit. Spengler referred to it as the morphology of culture. Anyway, whichever topics or examples of the civilizational approach are taken, they are bound to be the properties of culture with fixed contents.

The logic-and-meaning approach follows a different path. It considers not the concrete content but the very *principle* that generates it; it never takes contents as a culture's key element. This approach cannot be characterized as an essentialist type theory or a theory that reifies cultural differences. A specific sense-generating mode (a key element in culture portraiture within the logic-and-meaning approach) is neither a specific form, nor a specific content—it is not what could be understood as an essence or a thing, as something *ready-made*, accomplished and *finished*. Instead, it is a *way* of sense-making and sense-generation, but not the generated meaning itself. In the logic-and-meaning perspective we never refer to any fixed or primordial essence of culture, grasped as its unchangeable “mentality” or anything of that kind that paralyzes a culture and deprives it of any movement.

Since the focus of the logic-and-meaning approach is the principle (“mechanism”) of sense generation, but not the concrete meanings as such, this approach is immune to criticism usually targeted at the civilizational approach. The core of such criticisms can be summed up in the following question: changing and developing, does a culture remain itself; or, is it, sticking to its authenticity, predestined to forever remain in the past, fixing itself as the spirit's top achievement once made (Danilevsky), or alternatively, as some unique integral morphology (Spengler), etc.? The civilizational approach, attached to some concrete content (but not to the way to generate it), is scrutinising the past, pushing a culture the same way, because it is in the past that the essence of a culture it tries to grasp is located. We may as well say that the civilizational approach is very good at explaining the statics but not the dynamics of a culture.

As opposed to this, the logic-and-meaning approach is good at both. On the one hand, it gives an explicit answer to the question “What is the limit beyond which a culture ceases being itself?” — it is the limit drawn by the sense generation procedure that constitutes this culture. On the other hand, it is never limited by any particular cross section of culture at any definite point of time with a fixed content matter, for any such cross section boils down to the sense generating mechanisms behind it, but never the other way round.

What is the difference between the logic-and-meaning approach and the traditional universalist approach?

From the point of view of the logic-and-meaning approach, cultures are differentiated as diverse types of sense generating procedure, i.e., as different

implementations of the same mechanisms of sense making.² These different sense-generating types *are present in the mind of every human being* and therefore are universal.

This is the crucial point for interpretation of universality within the framework of the logic-and-meaning approach. Universality is rooted not just in the common nomination of the sense generating procedures (opposition-and-unity, part-and-whole) — for any concrete implementation of these procedures makes us speak of variability, but not commonality. Rather, universality means that those concrete implementations (as such, not only different, but incompatible and irreducible) of the sense-generating mechanisms are present in the mind of any person and are not alien to human consciousness as a universal faculty. But, when we take a concrete culture, one or another specific sense generation type is on the agenda, while other types are marginalized, though not wiped off. At the same time, all of them can be traced in human inner experience as pure types.

That is the very reason why the logic-and-meaning approach does not deny universalism. It only denies its reduction to a specific type (on which point I will dwell on further). By no means does it imply that cultures are some locked, tight phenomena; this approach implies that cultures are the phenomena that develop one or another sense generation type, any of which we can trace in our inner experience.

Thus, different sense generation types make up architectonics of human consciousness, being present in the mind of every person. Cultures differ because their dominating sense generation types differ, but this dominance does not mean that other types disappear. So, our consciousness keeps “the genes” of any culture on default; no culture is *strange* to us. One should distinguish between *strangeness* and *otherness*. The strange, once its otherness explained, ceases to be strange, but becomes “*the other sameness*”.

So, the logic-and-meaning approach is *not* an anti-universalist one. It presents a universalism of a different kind which is *broader* than the traditional reading of universalism, because it overcomes its limitation by a certain form of rationality which was declared to be the basic constituent of universalism. Within the logic-and-meaning perspective, the universalist line has a more complicated path, which differs from the

² In their specific realization in Arab culture those mechanisms of sense generation are reflected through Arabic theoretical discourse fundamental terminology: the *ẓāhir-bāṭin* (outward–inward) pair that denotes a specific mode of opposition, and the ‘*aṣl-far*’ (root–branch) pair that fixes a certain mode of part-to-whole relations.

traditional universalism when it grasps a certain sense generation type and posits it as “universal.” In the logic-and-meaning perspective, universalism means not universality of a concrete type of rationality, but universality of the sense generation ability as a universal and specifically human ability.

The term “otherness” is being used here as an abstraction of one of two equally important parts of “*the other sameness*” formula. The change of a logic-and-meaning foundation makes it possible to perform “the same” but in a different, “other” way. As for Arab Islamic culture, this point is true for philosophy and religious doctrine (I can refer to my own works here, as well as to the works of I.R. Nasyrov, A.A. Lukashev, Yu.Ye. Fyodorova), and for music (G.B. Shamilli), and for fine arts (M.J. Nazarli), and philology (D.V. Frolov), and poetics (N.Yu. Chalisova). Thus, the “otherness” in the logic-and-meaning perspective is entirely different from the “otherness” in the context of discourse targeted by anti-Orientalist criticism.

Yet another difference between the logic-and-meaning approach, on the one hand, and the traditional universalist and civilizational approaches, on the other: while the latter (though with different backgrounds) both appear to be generalizations, the former is *not a generalization* in any sense whatsoever.

To conduct a logic-and-meaning research means to grasp a relevant sense-generating mechanism and then reveal how meaning, which makes up culture’s content, results out of those sense generation procedures.

Thus, all the objections against generalizations, that we often hear from scholars engaged in case studies, become irrelevant. A case study only gains by taking into account the sense generation mechanism within a target culture, for no “generalizing” constraints are thus imposed.

Furthermore, the logic-and-meaning approach is an independent line, which is targeted neither by criticism of the traditional universalism against the civilizational approach, nor by the anti-Orientalist criticism.

The universalist objections against the civilizational approach do not apply to the logic-and-meaning approach: the clarity of sense-generating mechanisms leaves no room for “tightness” and mutual “impenetrability” of cultures. On the contrary, everything which appears “impenetrable” within the traditional content-oriented civilizational approach, in the logic-and-meaning perspective becomes discoverable in anyone’s inner experience, and, hence, our *own*, clear and intelligible as a sense generating mechanism.

Anti-Orientalist criticism does not apply to the logic-and-meaning approach for two reasons. Firstly, the logic-and-meaning perspective has nothing to do with essentialism or with cultural differences reification theories in principle. Secondly, the “sameness” of cultures is no less important than their “otherness” (inseparability of both elements in “*other sameness*” formula): the logic-and-meaning approach makes it possible to reveal the mutual necessity of those two aspects which presuppose one another, and are not mutually exclusive, as it is usually considered.

After all, ironically, the universalist approach, in its traditional interpretation, turns out to be the civilizational approach in disguise: it takes something specific and characteristic for the Western culture and elevates it to the rank of universality. The civilizational approach, in its turn, appears to be the universalist approach in disguise: the image of a foreign culture is always based on the material of one’s own culture, and it is always one’s own culture projection (in its simplest form, a mirror reflection). Therefore, from the point of view of its content and logics, the civilizational approach keeps within the limits of researcher’s own culture, even when it seems to deal with irredundant differences and incomprehensibility of foreign cultures.

Consequently, the traditional universalist approach and the civilizational approach do not keep their promise: they demonstrate neither a true universality nor a culture’s authentic self.

Both those objectives are attained by the logic-and-meaning approach.

On the one hand, it shows a culture as an integral unity which rules out impenetrability, and which is an independent entity with its own “ego.” This metaphor makes good sense: human integrity is integrity of personality, i.e., of his or her “ego,” which is maintained notwithstanding the phenomenal ego diversity (psychological schism and decomposition of ego means mental disorder). *Integrity* means not a tightly closed impenetrability, but a *systematic continuity*. Human being is such an integrity, and this is true not only for a human being as a genus, but also for any individual; but that does not mean that a given individual is hermetically closed and sealed. On the contrary, he or she is open to both the environment and the future (is prospective). And yet, the human being is an integrity: probably totally changing (if we mean separate elements) from cradle to grave, we keep our integrity in the sense of being ourselves, preserving our ego. Not specific features, but namely the ego; and even if an ego manifests itself through specific features, it is the ego, but not those specific features, that human integrity and continuity depends upon. The same is true for culture: it also possesses its “ego,” and a culture remains itself until its ego is lost. It does not refer to any specific content matter, though

the culture's ego manifests itself through it; however, the culture's ego is not a specific content matter, but a concrete type of sense generation mechanism that produces that specific content matter, as well as any other. The logic-and-meaning approach and its "other sameness" principle make it possible to introduce the *civilizational equality* concept, understood as equality of irreducible cultural egos, which makes it impossible to impose upon them any predetermined pattern, proclaimed as universal.

On the other hand, the logic-and-meaning approach provides an opportunity to see the universal as the *pan-human*, and not as something presumably *common-to-humankind* (which, in fact, appears to be concrete-civilizational). The panhuman does not exclude any specific logic-and-meaning type of culture; contrariwise, it includes it as a possible variant of sense generation procedure. At the same time, no single logic-and-meaning cultural type is prioritized; all of them, developing from the same foundation (sense generation mechanism), are its equal, but different, irredundant and mutually irreducible implementations. It is exactly this approach (and not the traditional universalist one) that shows and defends the absolute value of any logic-and-meaning type of culture.