RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Between the Constraint of Particularity and the Freedom of Universality;  Contemporary Arab Philosophical Discourse and the Question of Impossible Change: Al-Jābrī as a Mode

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## Abstract

The subject area provokes intense intellectual tension between two opposing poles: the Constraint of Particularity (Privacy) and the Freedom of Universalism (Globalism), which is essentially the dialectic of authenticity and modernity. "The Constraint of Particularity" refers to the insistence on cultural and heritage identity, which often becomes an ideological obstacle or a "prison of thought," hindering flexible, critical openness to global developments. While this represents an attempt to protect the Arab self from dissolution, it frequently devolves into dogmatic closure or the mere regurgitation of the past. This renders philosophical discourse captive to absolute references or preoccupied with inherited issues at the expense of contemporary, lived realities. In contrast, there is freedom of universalism (global/globalisation), which represents openness to Western philosophical concepts and methodologies (such as modernity, postmodernism, deconstruction, and the creability of ideology), as well as major global transformations such as digitalisation and globalisation. Although this freedom is necessary, it often takes the form of "intellectual borrowing" or "methodological dependence," in which concepts are imported without a deep critical engagement with the specific Arab context. Consequently, contemporary Arab philosophical discourse swings between an absolute rejection of the universal model and an absolute infatuation with it. It has failed to create an "open authenticity" or a "rooted universalism" that could form a basis for theoretical renewal and transformation, and it has not yet managed to translate theoretical philosophical data into reality. This is the question of impossible change.

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Between the Constraint of Particularity and the Freedom of Universality; Contemporary Arab Philosophical Discourse and the Question of Impossible Change: Al-Jābrī as a Mode
Behloul Abdelkader

## 1. Introduction

Contemporary Arab philosophical discourse constitutes a vital space for the circulation of existential questions concerning the nation's being and its future. At the heart of this discourse lies the problem of "change," which appears suspended between the hammer of the "constraint of particularity" and the anvil of the "freedom of universality." The Arab nation, with its deep-rooted history and culture, now finds itself confronted by global currents and major human collectivities that propose dominant intellectual and political models.

The significance of the philosophical question at this moment lies in its capacity to dissect reality in depth and expose the epistemic and political structures that impede progress. Despite the theoretical enthusiasm, the realisation of such change remains fraught with impossibility in the Arab context owing to the weight of entrenched traditional structures and the dominance of authoritarian mechanisms that continually reproduce intellectual and social stagnation. Here, the role of the Moroccan thinker Muḥammad ʿĀbid al-Jābrī (1935–2010) emerges as a pioneering model in attempting to decode this impasse. Al-Jābrī engaged in an expansive critical project, especially in *The Critique of Arab Reason*, wherein he sought to deconstruct the epistemic structure governing the production of contemporary Arab thought, diagnosing the intellectual paths that led to the blockage of transformative horizons. By presenting the mechanisms of meaning-production, al-Jābrī attempted to pave the way for a new Arab reason capable of assimilating universality from a critical base of its own. This renders his intellectual project a central point of anchorage for studying the question of impossible change in contemporary Arab philosophy.

Here, the philosophical question of the possibility of radical change arises: Can Arab thought keep pace with the demands of the age and achieve a renaissance without relinquishing its identity and particularity? Is globalisation conceived as the restructuring of economic, political, and cultural systems through a shift from the structures of tribes, people, and nations to a broader, newly configured human order in which the concept of the state, as known in the medieval and modern eras, dissolves and is capable of providing successful models of change for the Arab world? Has culture become a universal culture, or does it retain its relative autonomy in the face of the increasing universality of the economy? Moreover, are we confronting a universal culture, or rather one or a few victorious national cultures in civilisational competition?

These questions, which problematically belong to the inquiry into the relationship between universality and particularity between the general and the specific in the field of producing material and symbolic values, provoke intellectual tensions.

## 2. Contemporary Arab Philosophical Discourse and the Question of Cultural Particularity

The question of identity and the relation of the self to the other constituted the fundamental problem underlying the remaining issues addressed by modern and contemporary reformist thought. The general framework of this problem is cultural particularity, which reflects a nation's historical characteristics. Cultural dependency is considered an indicator of total domination, which begins in other spheres; imitation in technical domains is reasonable and legitimate, yet once it shifts to cultural and axiological levels, its repercussions become perilous for the nation's and the homeland's cultural

1441 – www.imcra.az.org, | Issue 11, Vol. 8, 2025
Between the Constraint of Particularity and the Freedom of Universality; Contemporary Arab Philosophical Discourse and the Question of Impossible Change: Al-Jābrī as a Mode
Behloul Abdelkader

identities. What concerns us in this context is not material data, as some have termed "cultural pollution," which is deemed more dangerous than environmental pollution. From this arises "our need to renew our culture, enrich our identity, defend our particularity, and resist the sweeping invasion exercised globally through the media and, consequently, ideologically and culturally by those who possess knowledge and technology and who harness both for this purpose. We need modernisation, yet we are equally in need of resisting penetration and of protecting our national identity and cultural particularity from dissolution and disintegration under the influence of the waves of invasion practised upon us, and upon the entire world, by means of knowledge and technology."[1]

Projects of change in the Arab world have been synonymous with material projects and with the importation of foreign equipment, ideas, and programmes. Consequently, the absence of interaction between these projects and the community of thought and science has generated, among some Arab intellectuals, an alternative vision of change and progress. This vision is based on new models emerging from their own reality and from the renewed elements of their cultural dynamism, such that civilisational, self-derived foundations become the constant driving force of their developmental activities. In this way, development arising from inherent civilisational foundations becomes the reference framework for borrowing and exchange with other civilisations without fascination or complexes. There is no longer any doubt regarding this truth, affirmed by the lived experience of the developing world in general and of the Arab world, in particular, an experience declaring that change is not merely an economic or technological process but, above all, a civilisational construction through which societies affirm themselves and their characteristics and develop the components of their human identity within the framework of regional and international cooperation, in both giving and receiving. The ultimate purpose of development remains the fulfilment of the basic needs of human beings, physical, intellectual, and social needs, and, beyond that, the pursuit of modernisation, social justice, and democracy.

The establishment of a society in which the individual discovers the self, thereby respecting it and, consequently, respecting his or her human historical roots, gives rise to several political virtues such as love of the homeland and respect for the law as well as economic virtues, including mastery of work, valuing time, self-reliance, and the virtue of cooperation and collective mobilisation around projects of change and the determination to ensure their success. In other words, it entails laying the foundation for a promising future vision in which the individual contributes through orientations and creativity, within a national strategy at the state level and an Arab strategy at the broader Arab level, in cooperation with others on an equal basis. For the beginning must be with the self before the other, with the near before the far, with the inherited before the incoming, and with transcending fascination with the West and dismantling the myth of a universal culture that is, cultivating the self's capacity for creativity and interaction with its past and present, between its own culture and the culture of the age. This is achieved through the restoration of the self's confidence in itself and liberation from fascination with the other at all levels.

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[1] El-Sayed Yassin et al., *The Arabs and Globalisation* (Beirut: Center for Arab Unity Studies, 3rd ed., 2000), 307.

1442 – www.imcra.az.org, | Issue 11, Vol. 8, 2025
Between the Constraint of Particularity and the Freedom of Universality; Contemporary Arab Philosophical Discourse and the Question of Impossible Change: Al-Jābrī as a Mode
Behloul Abdelkader

What has been stated represents an optimistic standpoint affirming the possibility of achieving progress and change within the framework of cultural particularity. However, is the gap not wide between the theoretical proposition, even if its grounds are legitimate, and the practical proposition, whose dynamism derives from factual givens?

Pursuing the causes of progress is legitimate, yet the manner in which it is pursued remains a subject of contention. This has led some to view cultural heritage as an obstacle to modernity and modernisation. ʿAbd al-Rāziq ʿĪd holds that "accepting Western technology while rejecting the epistemic system that produced it (rationality, science, technology, an analytic–synthetic outlook, relativity) this consciousness, which from the time of Muḥammad ʿAlī until today has aspired to reap the fruits of modernity without possessing the tree of its knowledge, remains ignorant of the fact that technology is nothing but an applied branch of the Western tree of knowledge. The cultural substratum and ideological centre, in its historical depth, of an aircraft such as the Mirage, the Phantom, or the MiG are found in the thought of Descartes, Spinoza, Voltaire, Hegel, Marx, and others. Because of this ideological belonging lacking a modern universal historical consciousness, we have acquired aeroplanes, yet we have not acquired aviation; we have acquired factories, yet we have not acquired industry."[2]

In the same vein, Samir Amin argues that "the search for identity is a telling indication of a society in crisis, one that has failed to confront real challenges. History demonstrates that societies that have truly succeeded in developing have indeed adapted and transformed their identity, at times without even questioning their original identity. Thus, questioning identity is a symptom of crisis, distress, and impasse."[3] From this perspective, it has become necessary to reconsider the orientation that exerts cultural particularity and enshrines fixity in the name of identity, thereby excluding the future and making the near and distant past a reference for addressing present issues. This reconsideration can be achieved only by heeding the requirements and challenges of the present.

### 3. Contemporary Arab Philosophical Discourse and the Question of Globality (Globalisation)

The Arab world faces challenges whose fronts have multiplied, and it has become necessary to examine the provocative questions posed by reality not for the sake of discussion alone, for such discussion is futile in a global context that demands action and feeds on a fierce pragmatism that has overshadowed economic, political, and cultural practice. Day after day, the world offers lessons to civilisationally defeated nations, establishing a pedagogical relation from whose lessons the Arab world has not benefited, despite their heralding of a new era that transcends the obscurantist discourse that entrenches rejection and isolation from the manifestations and challenges of reality in the name of particularity, or which approaches this reality timidly under the guise of adaptation and conciliation. Globalisation is a reality, and the debate over whether to engage in it or not is a sterile one that leaves us incapable of action, the essence of which is globality, as a necessity for transcending underdevelopment.

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[2] Abdel Razzaq Eid, *The Crisis of Enlightenment: Legitimising Civilisational Delay* (Aleppo: Center for Civilisational Development, 2nd ed.), 29.

[3] Samir Amin, *A Critique of Burhan Ghalioun's Theory on Religion and the State* (Beirut: Dar al-Tanweer, 1st ed., 1993), 477.

1443 – www.imcra.az.org, | Issue 11, Vol. 8, 2025
Between the Constraint of Particularity and the Freedom of Universality; Contemporary Arab Philosophical Discourse and the Question of Impossible Change: Al-Jābrī as a Mode
Behloul Abdelkader

There is a difference between globalisation, globality, and globability. Globalisation is a historical inevitability, whereas globality is a process grounded in will, realised by preserving selfhood and the capacity to assert the self rather than by responding to external pressures. In contrast, globalisation is a self-generated resurgence of the capacity to attain globalisation. "Globalisation does not allow free choice, nor does it allow diversity, nor does it acknowledge equivalence. It is tied to becoming, which is considered a movement of destiny and the inevitable result of things. Hence, the universality of globalisation cannot negate the particularity of globality because the methodology of globality is founded on recognising the being of the self rather than negating the other. It does not constitute an estrangement from what is ongoing and extant; rather, it engages with it through mutual influence. "[4]

Globality, therefore, is a tool for asserting opinion and will when the globally active subject makes good use of opportunities for success, invests natural and human resources, and generates economic opportunities that enable ascent to centres of power. Globality, in this sense, requires the utilisation of our own particularity and distinction from others as a creative point of departure, provided that globability exists.

Undoubtedly, every phenomenon has its negative aspects, which is why proponents of globalisation have revised their premises by advocating "civilised" or "safe globalisation," which takes into account human and cultural dimensions, as well as the interests of poorer nations. Globalisation does not contain a selfhood of its own; it is an open-ended term that must be viewed "through the logic of its openness to other orientations and through the expansion of its content with the movement of thought and the intensification of dialogue and studies across time, the directions of geography, and their interaction with history. Globalisation and the world have been linked both as concepts and as resonances throughout human history. Hence, globalisation has a three-dimensional framework: a wavering philosophical concept, an overbearing dynamic current, and a rebellious future vision."[5]

Its wavering quality stems from the elasticity of the term and the multiplicity of philosophical perspectives concerning it; its overbearing nature pertains to the transitional stage preceding the advent of the world state through the realisation of unity in all domains; its rebellious futurity lies in the revolt against prevailing conditions and their transcendence through a shift from a narrow rationality to a broader rationality that delineates the contours of a new world for a new human being. "The tragedy of contemporary Arab thought lies in its use of reason to confer legitimacy upon unreason, for it has employed the most modern methodologies and techniques of Western scientific research those which are the product of five centuries of European scientific and intellectual progress in order to search for a historical legitimacy for backwardness under the name of particularity, and to confer rationality upon the nation's civilisational delay in the name of defending its cultural and civilisational selfhood."[6]

Heritage and the concepts subsumed under it, such as authenticity, identity, and cultural particularity, constitute obstacles to future aspirations; indeed, it is a term introduced by Western thought in this context. ʿAlī Oumlīl maintains that "written heritage is not equivalent to historical national identity; rather, it is a partial imprint. The written differs

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[4] Mohsen Ahmed al-Khodari, *Invading Globalisation* (Cairo: Nile Arab Group, 1st ed., 2001), 17.

[5] Ibid., 29.

[6] Abdel Razzaq Eid, *The Crisis of Enlightenment: Legitimising Civilisational Delay*, previously cited, 20.

1444 – www.imcra.az.org, | Issue 11, Vol. 8, 2025
Between the Constraint of Particularity and the Freedom of Universality; Contemporary Arab Philosophical Discourse and the Question of Impossible Change: Al-Jābrī as a Mode
Behloul Abdelkader

from the natural tongue, and it constitutes only a small part of Arab culture, if present at all, and is scarcely present if not marginal. What confirms that heritage does not coincide with national identity is that the first to propose heritage as a concept and subject of inquiry were the thinkers of colonialist Europe, or at least the thinkers of a self-centred West. Colonialism is, in essence, a systematic process aimed at removing us from history and inserting us permanently into heritage. Deliverance from this impasse can be achieved only through a revolution that severs society simultaneously from colonial dependency and its remnants and from the structures of the old society."[7]

The revolution intended here is the recasting of the Arab mind in accordance with the givens of the present and with what modernity and modernisation in all fields require. On this basis, cultural heritage is a civilisational legacy that does not impose its identity upon globalisation but gradually and voluntarily responds to its directions. Globalisation represents an unprecedented cultural challenge, a new universal world culture whose scope particularity dissolves. This is not so much a negative phenomenon as a positive phenomenon that valorises the cultural dimension, retaining what is beneficial and discarding what is not. Moreover, there is a dispossession of multiple cultures. In that case, it is in favour of a single global culture that offers, to those who possess globability, a more elevated and open cultural identity through which the cultures of the nation and the Arab state can be transcended. National culture has long reinforced and legitimised division, fragmentation, and internal disintegration. In contrast, the state's culture suppresses political and social consciousness and does not harmonise with the nation's culture in all its dimensions. It represents a pale image incapable of providing alternative visions that elevate the individual's personality to a level of effectiveness and liberate it from passivity and emotionalism.

The selectivity and cultural filtration practiced by globalisation favour local cultures that prove their worth and embody human aspirations. Thus, globalisation does not eliminate the cultures and civilisations of others; instead, it transforms them from their narrow local domains into the expansive horizons of universality. "Globalisation advances, extends, and expands; it is not so much a negation of the other as it is an organised absorption of the other, digesting it and reshaping it. In reality, it is not the dissolution of the other or dissolution into the other, but an awareness of the other and an integration with and through the other in a new form: one world gradually converging and unifying in all things."[8]

Thus, the justifications advanced by the opposing forces for retreat and regression are flimsy, and the approach to globalisation has become historically inevitable. For "the forces of withdrawal and self-enclosure, which reject everything that globalisation offers, have indeed fallen into an impasse; their ploys and machinations have become unacceptable even to those who orbit within their sphere. It has become clear that the 'folly' of obscuring matters through injustice and darkness will not lead to rejecting globalisation or obstructing its implementation as much as it will hinder those who attempt to hinder it. Globalisation has produced fragmentation and collapse in the walls of isolation and in the prisons of freedom, compelling the emergence of all human impulses either for good or for evil and driving the forces of globalisation to create a new, effective system that believes in freedom and democracy, that upholds social responsibility, and that protects human beings from the tormentors of humankind and from anarchists, establishing

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[7] Ali Oumlil, *On Heritage and Transcendence* (Casablanca: Arab Cultural Center, 1st ed., 1990), 19.
[8] Mohsen Ahmed al-Khodari, *Invading Globalisation*, previously cited, 9.

1445 – www.imcra.az.org, | Issue 11, Vol. 8, 2025
Between the Constraint of Particularity and the Freedom of Universality; Contemporary Arab Philosophical Discourse and the Question of Impossible Change: Al-Jābrī as a Mode
Behloul Abdelkader

justice and fairness as an affirmation of civil society and of the human community."[9] If this is the case, then the culture of globalisation constitutes a safety valve and a driving force for cultural particularities that seek to transcend underdevelopment and the challenges of reality. However, how can this be realised in practice? Is there not, in this view, a call for alienation and submission to the status quo?

The notion of a global culture in which particularities dissolve, culminating in a world state characterised by justice and prosperity, is a utopian idea. Cultural plurality and diversity are human referents, and working towards unity within diversity is possible if sincere intentions are present. However, history is replete with events that confirm that sincere intentions are an illusion when the matter concerns the other. In our present age, we are living through a clash of civilisations, not a dialogue of civilisations. The cultural dimension is powerfully present therein, and thus, the defence of cultural identity is a necessity. It must stand, in terms of strength, as an equal to the idea that globalisation is a historical inevitability. As Blaise Pascal states, "everything that reaches completion through progress also knows decline and dissolution through progress."[10]

The political tensions witnessed across the Arab world, which have led to instability and the suspension of developmental programmes, trace their fundamental cause to the ideology of globalisation, which has not abolished the nation-state but has weakened its capacity to protect its own interests. How, then, can this violent clash be overcome? The most pressing challenge today lies in formulating a "philosophy of vigilance" capable of confronting digital and global transformations without losing the battle for identity, dignity, and human freedom. Contemporary Arab philosophy is called upon to redefine its role from "contemplation of the past" or "borrowing from the other" to that of a "guardian of meaning," balancing the protection of humanity from dissolution within virtual systems with a conscious and critical openness to global civilisation so that philosophical renewal becomes the only path to restoring the ability to achieve possible change.

The Moroccan thinker Muḥammad ʿĀbid al-Jābrī (1935–2010) constitutes the most prominent philosophical model around which the problem of "the constraint of particularity, the freedom of universality, and the question of impossible change" has crystallised within contemporary Arab discourse through his major project, *The Critique of Arab Reason*.

## 4. Al-Jābrī's Philosophical Discourse and the Question of Impossible Change

At the foundation of all change lies capital: natural, financial, social, intellectual, and cultural capital. The latter "constitutes the highest form of human capital, representing the sum of knowledge and the source of the human identity and particularity of a community of people. Cultural capital acquires particular importance in the case of the group of Arab countries, which can transform the positive aspects of their shared cultural legacy into a factor of revival and dignity, especially against the background of the clash of civilisations in the age of globalisation."[11] There is almost a

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[9] Ibid., 56.

[10] P. Foulquié and R. Saint-Jean, *Dictionnaire de la langue philosophique*, 580.
"*Tout ce qui se perfectionne par progrès périt aussi par progrès.*" —Blaise Pascal.

[11] Abdullah Abdel Daim et al., *Education and Enlightenment in the Development of the Arab Society*, previously cited, 113.

1446 – www.imcra.az.org, | Issue 11, Vol. 8, 2025
Between the Constraint of Particularity and the Freedom of Universality; Contemporary Arab Philosophical Discourse and the Question of Impossible Change: Al-Jābrī as a Mode
Behloul Abdelkader

unanimous consensus that multifaceted human capital, concentrated in people, is the essence of change and progress. Thus, a nation deprived of its cultural identity cannot shape its future.

In this context, al-Jābrī maintains that cultural identity is complete only when its point of reference is the totality of the homeland, the nation, and the state: "Among the self-evident truths in today's world is that the success of any country whether developing or 'on the path' to development in preserving identity and defending particularity is conditioned, more than ever before, by the depth of the modernisation process under way in that country: the conscious, cumulative, and deeply rooted engagement with the age of science and technology."[12]

In another passage, al-Jābrī argues that globalisation yields three fundamental outcomes: "First, the widening gap between the rich and the poor an ever-increasing gap that renders contemporary life in every country marked by duality and fragmentation on the economic, social, and cultural levels. Second, the widening gap between the children of the rich and the children of the poor and the emergence of a generation split into two groups, each with its own separate world, making communication within a single generation more difficult than communication between successive generations (and further entrenching the divide between social classes in the future). Third, the exclusion and effacement of the human dimension in commercial and developmental activity, and the entrenchment of the principle that 'the end justifies the means,' with profit established as the sole end and the supreme value."[13]

The self that has not discovered itself cannot realise comprehensive, balanced, and independent development. Globalisation, as an ideology, has worked and continues to work to efface the Arab self from its past and present in the name of progress and change, which, in reality, is an illusion of the cave, to borrow the Platonic expression. It entirely abolishes the concept of the future. It consolidates an intellectual inertia whose adverse effects extend to creative activities that could rescue the nation from its crisis-ridden condition in an era of defeats and breakdowns. Effacing the self from the content of its historical dimensions removes it from the sphere of humanity, as the notion of time, from the perspective of rationalist schools, is an innate notion. When a nation lives only in the present moment, it has stripped itself of its human nature and put an end to its own historical becoming.

Muḥammad ʿĀbid al-Jābrī delineated a general framework for understanding the relationship between globalisation and cultural identity, as it may be observed today in the Arab world either as a relation already operative or as one that may come to be in the future through several works, among which three stand out in particular: *the Cultural Question* (1994), *the Question of Identity* (1995), and *Issues in Contemporary Thought* (1997). The content of these works establishes ten theses[14] That function as axioms to be inferred from, rather than proven, and derive their legitimacy from the substance of the term "culture", as he conceives it. He states, "Culture is the authentic expression of the

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[12] El-Sayed Yassin et al., *The Arabs and Globalisation*, previously cited, 307.

[13] Mohammed Abed al-Jābrī, "What Role for Civil Associations in the Age of Privatisation and Globalisation?" paper presented at the Second Conference of Arab Civil Associations.

[14] See Mohammed Abed al-Jābrī, "Globalisation and Cultural Identity: Ten Theses," *Arab Future*, no. 228 (February 1998): 13, 22.

1447 – www.imcra.az.org, | Issue 11, Vol. 8, 2025
Between the Constraint of Particularity and the Freedom of Universality; Contemporary Arab Philosophical Discourse and the Question of Impossible Change: Al-Jābrī as a Mode
Behloul Abdelkader

historical particularity of a nation: of that nation's view of the universe, life, death, the human being, his tasks, his capacities, his limits, what he ought to do, and what he ought not to hope for. "[15]

This entails the following:

1.  There is no single global culture; instead, there are multiple cultures.

2.  Cultural identity consists of three levels: individual, communal, and national-collective; the relationship between these levels is determined primarily by the type of "other" they confront.

3.  Cultural identity is complete only when its point of reference is the totality of the homeland, nation, and state.

4.  Globalisation is not merely one mechanism among others in capitalist development; it is also, and above all, an ideology expressing the will to dominate the world.

5.  Globalisation is one thing, whereas *globality* is another. Globality entails openness to the world and to other cultures while retaining ideological differences. In contrast, globalisation negates the other and replaces the ideological struggle with cultural penetration.

6.  The culture of penetration is founded upon a set of illusions whose aim is "normalisation" with hegemony and the entrenchment of civilisational subordination.

7.  It is a system that works to empty the collective identity of all substance and drives it towards fragmentation and dispersal, binding people to a world of no-homeland, no-nation, and no-state, or plunging them into the furnace of civil war.

8.  Globalisation and the entrenchment of duality and fragmentation within Arab cultural identity.

9.  The renewal of any culture can take place only from within it: by rebuilding it, practising modernity within its givens and history, and seeking forms of understanding and interpretation of its trajectory that allow the linking of the present to the past in the direction of the future.

10. Our need to defend our cultural identity at its three levels is no less than our need to acquire the foundations and tools indispensable for entering the age of science and technology, foremost rationality and democracy.

On this basis, any developmental model or strategy that does not take cultural content into account will amount only to growth that violates cultural identity, prevents its development, and drives it towards rigidity and contraction, affecting all its levels: individual, communal, and national-collective. The relationship between these levels is determined primarily by the type of "other" they confront. Hence, the movement of cultural identity unfolds within three interlocking circles sharing a single centre, the *self*, whether individual, collective, or national, which confronts the other. The nature of the relationship between these levels is not fixed. Thus, "cultural identity cannot be complete, its civilisational particularity cannot emerge, nor can it become a full identity capable of aspiring to universality of giving and receiving unless its point of reference is embodied in a concrete entity in which three elements coincide: homeland, nation, and state."[16]

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[15] El-Sayed Yassin et al., *The Arabs and Globalisation*, previously cited, 298.
[16] Ibid., 298.

1448 – www.imcra.az.org, | Issue 11, Vol. 8, 2025
Between the Constraint of Particularity and the Freedom of Universality; Contemporary Arab Philosophical Discourse and the Question of Impossible Change: Al-Jābrī as a Mode
Behloul Abdelkader

The fourth thesis equates globalisation with Americanization, which assumes a *geopolitical* dimension: it does not stop at the economic sphere. However, it extends beyond it to an ideology whose substance is the will to dominate the world and to Americanise it. States unable to compete in the global market face extinction in accordance with the Darwinian principle of the survival of the fittest, or the strongest. Thus, the foundation of the ideology of globalisation is selection and predestination. The nation-state cannot escape social, cultural, economic, and political crises because this phenomenon transcends national borders and extends into invisible, virtual boundaries where global media networks participate through audiovisual imagery. Their aim is a hegemony that permeates the economy, thought, taste, and behaviour, that is, the personality of the individual and of the nation. In other words, its aim is cultural penetration. On this basis, globalisation has deepened the duality between traditional and modern authenticity and contemporaneity, both of which are old and new. In doing so, it entrenches duality and fragmentation within Arab cultural identity.

However, what is to be done in the face of these negative aspects and dangers that characterise the relationship between globalisation and Arabs at the level of cultural identity, according to al-Jābrī? The ninth and tenth theses provide the answer: they justify the legitimacy of defending Arab cultural identity at three levels, and this is achieved by renewing culture from within by rebuilding it, practising modernity within its givens and its history, and adapting its contents to meet the challenges of the age by linking the present to the past in the direction of the future. Our need to acquire the principles and tools indispensable for entering the age of science and technology, foremost rationality and democracy, remains essential.

At the theoretical level, al-Jābrī's project appears logically coherent, as all the fundamental elements required for civilisational ascent are present, with cultural identity at their centre. It is among the self-evident truths that the success of any developing country, or one on the development path, depends on preserving its identity and defending its particularity. Europe itself speaks in the language of particularity and authenticity; it speaks of a "European identity" in the face of the American onslaught, and the project of a united Europe is a powerful indicator of the complementarity between economic identity and cultural identity in the face of American globalisation.

## 5. The Epistemological Diagnosis of the Obstacles to Change in al-Jābrī

Al-Jābrī argues that the constraint of ʿirfān (mystical gnosis), the epistemic system based on intuition, unveiling, and existential correspondence, which marginalises the role of reason, and the constraint of bayān (juridical–linguistic discourse), the epistemic system grounded in the analysis of religious and linguistic texts that grants absolute authority to the text and to the ancestors, constitute fundamental impediments. "The Arab mind scarcely confronts any problem without hastening to seek its solution within earlier referential frameworks and to secure its legitimacy from the past, as although it were incapable of generating frameworks and solutions from the present and its future."[17]

According to al-Jābrī, the dominance of these two systems constitutes the "ideological particularity" that keeps Arab thought imprisoned and prevents it from acquiring the tools of change. For al-Jābrī, the optimal solution for

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[17] Mohammed Abed al-Jābrī, *The Structure of Arab Reason* (Beirut: Center for Arab Unity Studies, 1st ed., 1986), 30.

1449 – www.imcra.az.org, | Issue 11, Vol. 8, 2025
Between the Constraint of Particularity and the Freedom of Universality; Contemporary Arab Philosophical Discourse and the Question of Impossible Change: Al-Jābrī as a Mode
Behloul Abdelkader

transcending the factors of civilisational sclerosis and keeping pace with universality in all its manifestations lies in reviving *burhān* (demonstrative reason), the Averroist model. Openness to universality, in this sense, is not a call for imitation or dissolution but a call for methodological liberation, which he terms the "freedom of universality," a freedom that must emerge from within. This is the substance of the ninth thesis, whereby the demonstrative system (rationality) is reactivated because it has been excluded and marginalised in favour of *bayān* and *ʿirfān*. This reactivation entails reliance on logical inference, experience, and methodological doubt, features of the critical rationality that form the basis of Western modernity. "Engagement with universal modernity is not a luxury; it is a condition of survival and revival. We are called upon to transcend the closed structure of heritage and to adopt a critical rationality not in the sense of dissolving in the other but in the sense of mastering his epistemic tools so that we may interact with the world on equal footing and in freedom."[18]

Al-Jābrī regards the philosopher Ibn Rushd as the historical embodiment of demonstrative reason in Arab culture. His project was therefore a call to "modernise the mind from within, by restoring an Averroist mode of thinking," meaning the adoption of the scientific and rational (universal) method while maintaining a consciously modern mode of reading heritage. The solution thus lies in an epistemological rupture with the old mechanisms of domination (*bayān* and *ʿirfān*). "The *bayānī* mind has exhausted its capacities after deploying all its possibilities in the service of religious and political legitimacy, and it can no longer offer more than what it offered in past centuries. Hence, a modern revivalist project cannot be founded solely upon its methodological tools."[19]

This methodological rupture is a necessary condition for change. Without a free, critical (demonstrative) reason, any political, economic, or cultural reform remains superficial and liable to collapse. There is, therefore, a necessary link between constraints, freedom, and the question of change. Al-Jābrī's message, then, is that the crisis of Arabs is neither a crisis of identity nor a crisis of modernity but rather a crisis of the method that governs both. However, despite this epistemological, structural, and deconstructive diagnosis of the question of impossible change, impossibility continues to impose itself forcefully, for there remains a vast gulf, a deep fracture between idea and application. Philosophical consciousness, regardless of its approach or strength, is rendered meaningless in the absence of action.

## 6. The Question of Impossible Change (Philosophical Consciousness and the Absence of Action)

This section poses the fundamental question: Why does the Arab reality remain stagnant despite the richness of critical philosophical discourse? Multiple unsettled faces are possible. On one level, it reflects the lack of communication between the public and the intellectual elite: the elite writes for itself, whereas the principal agent of society itself is absent. Philosophical discourse in the Arab world is marginalised; its manifestations are faint, and the elite has failed to promote it so that it might be consumed and bear fruit. On another level, effective communication among the elites themselves is lacking. Critical rationality, with its tools, is universally preached in discourse, yet the mechanisms of

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[18] Mohammed Abed al-Jābrī, *Issues in Contemporary Thought* (Beirut: Center for Arab Unity Studies, 1st ed.), 135.

[19] Mohammed Abed al-Jābrī, *The Structure of Arab Reason* (Beirut: Center for Arab Unity Studies, 1st ed., 1986), 109.

1450 – www.imcra.az.org, | Issue 11, Vol. 8, 2025
Between the Constraint of Particularity and the Freedom of Universality; Contemporary Arab Philosophical Discourse and the Question of Impossible Change: Al-Jābrī as a Mode
Behloul Abdelkader

implementation are absent or, where they do exist, there is profound disagreement about them. Furthermore, communication between the thinking and operative elites is weak, rendering the idea a purely theoretical datum lacking practical depth.

Despite the abundance of philosophical production advocating the values of progress, diagnosing societal ailments, critiquing traditional structures, and calling for enlightenment and rationality (such as projects concerned with the critique of Arab reason and with social and political questions), stagnation continues to dominate. The problems associated with the *nahḍa* remain unresolved. Philosophical thinking has been reduced to purely theoretical, academic reflection unrelated to the construction of consciousness and incapable of "shaping reality" or transforming itself into "applied action" with real influence upon political, social, or economic structures.

In my view, the factors of impossibility may be summarised as follows:

> ➤ **The creed of loyalty and obedience:** Society remains governed mainly by a dominant culture that privileges imitation and seeks legitimacy not through critically examining ideas but through the figure of the thinker who formulated them or the jurist who transmitted them. This has generated loyalties that have fenced in the mind, leaving it captive to heritage or to the veneration of personalities.

> ➤ **The primacy of ideology:** The dominance of ideological frameworks over thinking restricts criticism and distorts truths.

> ➤ **Authoritarian structures:** The presence of political and social systems that resist any radical change that threatens their power.

> ➤ **The methodological crisis:** The failure of discourse to move beyond traditional dualities towards a creative method capable of producing knowledge that can be applied in practice.

Thus, "impossible change" lies in the gap between the *awareness* of critique and the *practice* of change. Philosophical discourse, with its excessive emphasis on the dialectic of particularity and universality, may unconsciously contribute to this stagnation by turning the preoccupation with self and other into a theoretical labyrinth that preserves the status quo rather than deconstructing it and working towards its transcendence. However, raising this problem remains a methodological necessity.

## 7. Conclusion

In concluding this analysis of contemporary philosophical discourse and the thought of Muḥammad ʿĀbid al-Jābrī positioned between the constraint of particularity and the freedom of universality and confronting the question of impossible change in contemporary Arab thought, we recognise that al-Jābrī's project is not merely a diagnosis of the ailments of heritage. It is a profound philosophical attempt to establish new conditions of possibility. Our study revealed that particularity manifested in the mechanisms of knowledge production within *bayān*, *ʿirfān*, and *burhān* is a double constraint: it is, on the one hand, the epistemic foundation that cannot be bypassed and, on the other hand, a methodological prison that prevents effective and creative engagement with universality represented by the concepts of modernity, critical rationality, and democracy.

1451 – www.imcra.az.org, | Issue 11, Vol. 8, 2025
Between the Constraint of Particularity and the Freedom of Universality; Contemporary Arab Philosophical Discourse and the Question of Impossible Change: Al-Jābrī as a Mode
Behloul Abdelkader

The question of impossible change is not, at its core, the impossibility of political or social transformation; rather, it is a methodological impossibility arising from the dominance of epistemic unconsciousness over the Arab mind. Here lies the philosophical impasse: can the mind be liberated from its own "internal structures" that restrict it through critical tools imported from the realm of universality? Al-Jābrī's project is a foundational call to rebuild the Arab philosophical self, not through imitation or superficial borrowing from the freedom of universality but through a critical contribution that emerges from within the constraint itself. Change is not impossible; it is suspended upon the condition of profound, self-critical awareness.

Thus, the question of impossible change becomes an invitation to accomplish an epistemological revolution beginning from within, opening horizons for civilisational participation in the global future and demonstrating that critically deconstructed particularity is the only bridge towards productive universality.

### Ethical Considerations

This study is a purely theoretical and analytical philosophical inquiry. It does not involve human participants, personal data, experimental procedures, or empirical fieldwork. Therefore, ethical approval was not required. The author affirms that the research was conducted in accordance with internationally recognized standards of academic integrity, intellectual honesty, and responsible scholarship.

### Conflict of Interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest regarding the research, authorship, or publication of this article.

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1452 – www.imcra.az.org, | Issue 11, Vol. 8, 2025
Between the Constraint of Particularity and the Freedom of Universality; Contemporary Arab Philosophical Discourse and the Question of Impossible Change: Al-Jābrī as a Mode
Behloul Abdelkader

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1453 – www.imcra.az.org, | Issue 11, Vol. 8, 2025
Between the Constraint of Particularity and the Freedom of Universality; Contemporary Arab Philosophical Discourse and the Question of Impossible Change: Al-Jābrī as a Mode
Behloul Abdelkader