

# Homo Discens

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*Man könnte auch sagen: einer denkt, wenn er in bestimmter Weise lernt.*

—Wittgenstein

When speaking of “religions,” one is likely to refer quite matter-of-factly to the “teachings” of Zoroaster or to those of the Buddha. And rightly so, for much of the (translated) vocabulary of what we persist in calling “religions” is ostensibly pedagogical (though the Greek etymology of that term might, of course, give us pause). Consider, for instance, the significance of *doctrine* and of *discipline* (to invoke Latin terms) or the diverse figures of *learning* and—but where shall it be found?—*wisdom* (to turn to the Germanic). With these and others, occasions might have abounded to learn something about, well, learning. I write this out of a sense of wonder. For when, not a moment before 1758, and blissfully ignorant of the fact that Yuval Noah Harari would in 2011 make a killing with the “brand” (you know, like Peugeot),<sup>1</sup> Linnaeus came up with the phrase *homo sapiens*, he did juxtapose the notorious Greek saying—in Latin—right next to it: “Nosce Te Ipsum,” wrote Linnaeus, presumably to signify that a few steps might remain before claiming for ourselves, with regard to wisdom, knowledge, or indeed learning, “mission accomplished.” As Talal Asad puts it with impeccably restrained style, there have been, in the past, circumstances that “indicated that the learning process was incomplete—or more drastically, that it had failed.”<sup>2</sup>

Such coordinates—incompleteness, failure—might well govern “the learning process,” the “practical process of learning” to which Asad has devoted much attention here and elsewhere (“a ‘natural’ life that is born, that learns, succeeds and fails”<sup>3</sup>). It might nonetheless seem awkward of me to float a poorly refreshed moniker for the human here, or worse, to propose a definition for anthropology

according to Talal Asad. Asad, after all, begins by expressing highly justified reservations with regard to definitions (“the assumption that definitions are essential for understanding the meaning of utterances is challenged by Wittgenstein” (431n1), and by himself too). Yet it is remarkable that the closest thing to a definition can nevertheless be found in Asad’s assertion that the anthropologist’s task consists in “learning to live another form of life and to speak another kind of language.”<sup>4</sup> Asad is of course renowned for his critique of “the pseudoscientific notion of ‘field-work,’”<sup>5</sup> for his “general opinion” that “the rich historical tradition of anthropology is unduly narrowed if it is *defined* simply in terms of field work.”<sup>6</sup> More recently, though, fieldwork has returned in his work, and very much as an unscientific post-script,<sup>7</sup> under the figure of experience: “a unique and perhaps inadequately appreciated way of understanding,” Asad writes of the experience of learning, of “living another form of life in order to learn about it.”<sup>8</sup>

The anthropologist’s task is, of course, the task of the translator. And what Asad writes, at that point in his notorious treatment of Ernst Gellner, is in fact that “the anthropologist’s translation is not merely a matter of matching sentences in the abstract, but of *learning to live another form of life* and to speak another kind of language.”<sup>9</sup> Anthropology—or translation—is a matter of learning, “something one learns in the course of living.”<sup>10</sup> Asad’s contribution to translation is well known (has it been learned though?), and he himself has elaborated on it at some length. So I will restrict myself to noting that he exerts his acute attention toward it here again. He does so with regard to German or to the Arabic of the Qur’ān, with regard to “the translation of concepts” or to “the grammar of concepts” as “discursive tradition,” something that he glosses—and this is what I wish to underscore—as “the open-ended passing on of behavior and styles of argument in which language and life across generations are intertwined” (415). Translation, tradition, learning. What else has Asad written about? If Nietzsche’s question—one of his questions—was “Have I been understood?,” one might propose that Asad joins Wittgenstein with the following: am I capable of learning?<sup>11</sup> How have I learned that? And: have I—have we—succeeded in learning anything?<sup>12</sup> And just like Wittgenstein, Asad would be manifesting much more than the rare virtue of humility he typically embodies when answering, as he often does: “I am not so certain . . .”<sup>13</sup>

From the outset of his fascinating essay, and already in the abstract he wrote for it, Asad tells us that he seeks to reframe the familiar pairing of belief and practice “in terms of the mutually interconnected processes of being and learning” (403). Under this broad heading, and mindful of the precision of his language (he does not speak of *teaching*), we might recognize that he positions himself not only as “having learned from reading” Wittgenstein (and Alasdair MacIntyre too, “from whose writings I have learned much over the years”) and from Wittgenstein’s sense of “the limitation of language in understanding the world” (404), but

also with regard to the kind of learning one does as a result of “the dissolution of language into everyday behavior” (404). The ability of a musician, say, tells us of a general ability, “the ability to do a specific thing that one has learned to do” (404). Learning is embodiment, and embodiment is learning—this was Marcel Mauss’s lesson, of course, and before him, that of many a “religious” tradition—but this is not sufficient, for, as Asad further says, “at the center of the human soul is the ability to learn to use language” (404). Which brings Asad back to anthropology, a word one will have to read in its older sense, which goes well beyond the limits of the specialized discipline, since “participant-observation is not merely the distinctive method of a particular academic discipline but *the essence of all learning*” (404; emphasis added). Asad reminds us of the endeavor in which anthropologists, then, are engaged, their “attempts at understanding unfamiliar forms of life by means of participant-observation: learning to do what others do by attending to what is said and what is not said because it is taken for granted—in short trying to *live* like other human beings” (404).<sup>14</sup>

It might be unnecessary at a moment like this to underscore, as Asad does, that learning is always incomplete (or inhibited, when citizens are denied “the leisure and connections to learn the conventions of critical interrogation in public”<sup>15</sup>). To understand the reasons for this finitude or limitation of learning might nonetheless be significant. Asad learns about learning, and its incompleteness, from Wittgenstein. Just as cities grow and change, so “words change in accordance with different purposes” (406). And “like any living city, *language is never complete*” (406). Which is why learning a language, “getting to know grammar is learning the *intelligibility* of words—of discourses in worldly situations. It is to engage with the world in and through language even as a child learns to engage with it and live in it” (407). It is, however, not only the child who learns, and learns incompletely. It is also the adult whose “incomplete learning of language” must constantly contend with “her emplacement in the tradition that tells her not simply *that* she is doing something wrong or right but *what* it is she is doing” (407). Thus, one “acquires not only the skill to use language but also the ‘self’ that she develops and modifies through life” (407). The self is the (incomplete) result of a learning process.

To say that we are learning animals, to affirm that even our “selves” are the result of an always incomplete learning process, is also to recognize that “the self cannot make itself.” In a striking formulation that might jar with a certain Foucauldian orthodoxy, Asad explains that it is being, “preexisting *being* and not the individual self that makes the self” (407). Surely, power has a hand in it, and Asad acknowledges it, together with authority. Children do learn from authority, parental and otherwise, from repetition and recitation—“as I did when I was a child,” he tells us in a footnote (432n18). One learns from models, too, and may even become one. Thus scientists, “those who have mastered the practices of the rel-

evant scientific project, those who know what model is to be followed, acquire the authority to speak for it” (409). One will continue learning, in fact, intentionally or not, and “through ordinary language,” will contend with multiple appeals, “the appeal to the banalities of ordinary life,” for instance, “shared by the one persuading and the one to be persuaded” (410).

Asad provides us with a vocabulary, a vocabulary he has long been using but is also revealed here for its significance as a language of learning. From “formation” to “mastery,” from “persuasion” to “cultivation,” “conversation” and “polemic,” Asad has been describing many “a living discursive tradition [that] aims at mutual interrogation and continuous learning” (411), dialogues and exchanges, yes, and ideas and concepts, but also “practices extended, taught, and grasped” (412)—or not. Learning has everything to do with “persuadability,” an ability as well as, indeed, a “capacity for, or vulnerability to, being converted to another opinion—or to another form of life at a particular moment” (412). There is a time for learning, “times of learning,”<sup>16</sup> and one might do well to consider, to understand, “the difference between the temporal constraints in political persuasion and the time available to persuasion in an intimate, personal context” (412). Learning does not happen willingly, or always willingly. It may occur *un-willingly*, in fact, unwittingly and even unconsciously (Freud is never far from Wittgenstein’s mind or from Asad’s). “Which is perhaps why it is easy for political strategists to manipulate the unconscious predispositions of those they call (somewhat contemptuously) ‘persuadables’” (413).

Another Asadian word for learning is, of course, “tradition,” and most explicitly “discursive tradition,” which Asad describes here, I have quoted earlier, as “the open-ended passing on of behavior and styles of argument in which language and life across generations are intertwined” (415). The Qur’ān too, in Asad’s most explicit turn to date toward what he calls his own tradition,<sup>17</sup> is to be understood as an opportunity to learn, as a learning process, “utterances enacting the change and development of human character” (420). In Asad’s interpretation of Ibn Taymiyya, for instance, “learning to practice a particular form of life is prior to the offering of definitions or redefinitions; one can understand and enact what is required in one’s form of life perfectly well without resorting to definitions” (421). Learning is to be understood as an inclination, the formation of a capacity to learn, the endeavor “to awaken the ensouled body into practicing a form of life in submission” to God (422). Tradition—the Islamic tradition—is a discipline. It is a learning. Therefore here, too, “the disciplinary modality of the language, the *repeated* exercise of a virtue, heightens and shapes not simply the worshipper’s *body* but her *ability* to sense and act as a faithful Muslim before God in the world” (423).

And then there are those who do not learn, “those who refuse to hear.” Strikingly enough, this refusal is still learning (*not* learning as learning), as “human

beings cannot escape the molding effect of repetitive wickedness” (423). Just as “learning and practicing the Islamic tradition—including how to think, to feel, to talk, and to behave—are necessary for acquiring and strengthening ‘*imān*’ (424), so one learns and practices other traditions, learns to think, feel, talk, and behave, with different effects and results. “A world of incredible viciousness” (431), for one. We learn more than we know, in other words. Fortunately, or unfortunately, no one who aspires to an ideal (*if one aspires to an ideal, when learning*) can ever “completely succeed in embodying” that ideal (425). Yet, there is learning, there is “learning to recognize and negotiate the world in and through the multiple possibilities and demands of ordinary language” (427). Even a language that, like the one we have now learned all too well, which “we have inherited,” is, it must be admitted, “so inadequate for our worldly experience” (431).

Is learning a religious practice? Should we translate religion as “learning”? “Religious practice,” Asad challenges us—*teaches* us—after Wittgenstein, “is not *fundamentally* different from behavior in ordinary life—because it *is* part of ordinary life” (427). Then again, there is learning, and there is *learning*.

Allow me to conclude with an excerpt from the same Judaic tradition, which, Asad rightly says, “shares many concepts and attitudes with Islam” (436n53)—the two traditions, in their distinctiveness, have of course learned much from each other over the centuries. Famously invested in learning, in a sense I think proximate to what Asad articulates, the tradition succinctly lists, describes, and prescribes—in one of its most canonical recitations, the *Shema*<sup>c</sup>—the opportunities for “ensoulment,” for developing an inclination: the abundance of occasions to learn something about learning.

Hear O Israel! The Lord is our God, the Lord is One. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. These instructions with which I charge you this day shall be engraved upon your heart. Repeat them to your children. Recite them when you stay at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you get up. Bind them as a sign on your hand and let them serve as a symbol on your forehead; inscribe them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates. (Deuteronomy 6:4–9, trans. Jewish Publication Society, modified)

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## Notes

1. Harari, *Sapiens*, 31–36.
2. Asad, *Genealogies*, 64.
3. Asad, *Secular Translations*, 144.
4. Asad, *Genealogies*, 180.
5. Asad, *Formations*, 17.
6. Asad, “Ethnographic Representation,” 79; emphasis added.
7. “People sometimes say they cannot make any judgement about this or that because they have not studied philosophy. This is irritating nonsense, because the pretence is that philosophy is some sort of science. People speak of it almost as they might speak of medicine” (Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, 29e).
8. Asad, *Secular Translations*, 9.
9. Asad, *Genealogies*, 180.
10. Asad, *Genealogies*, 180.
11. “When he was old Charlemagne tried to learn to write, but without success: and similarly someone may fail when he tries to acquire a manner of thinking. He never becomes fluent in it” (Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, 75e).
12. “In philosophy it is not enough to learn in every case what is to be said about a subject, but also how one must speak about it. We are always having to begin by learning the method of tackling it” (Wittgenstein, *Remarks*, 23). Or, with reference to Charlemagne again, “But Charlemagne certainly understood the principle of writing and still couldn’t learn to write. Someone can thus also understand the description of a technique yet not be able to learn it. But there are two cases of not-being-able-to-learn. In the one case we merely fail to acquire a certain competence, in the other we lack comprehension” (59).
13. “Certainty comes from learning,” Asad comments on Wittgenstein, 434n42.
14. “In this tradition,” Asad writes elsewhere, referring to Ghazālī’s, “it is not merely what one learns to *say* in disembodied words but how one learns to *live* in and through language and silence that expresses the central point of an encompassing vision” (*Secular Translations*, 74).
15. Asad, *Secular Translations*, 45.
16. Asad, *Secular Translations*, 149.
17. “I am dealing here essentially with *my* tradition,” Asad writes, making clear, once again, that his is a *learning* endeavor, in which he is “trying not only to report on something to those who might be interested in it, but also to *explore and understand for myself* what aspects of the Islamic tradition might mean” (emphasis added).

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