

The great Iranian culture is being born

Unpublished interview with Professor Karim Mojtahedi

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As you mentioned, prior to the interview, we reviewed your works and consulted with your associates about where to begin the interview with Dr. Karim Mojtahedi and what topic to focus on. However, please elaborate on the reason for emphasizing this particular topic.

To provide some clarity, I would like to express that, in this interview, I prefer to discuss more about my works and books. I have dedicated my entire life to philosophical pursuits, and the culmination of these endeavors is the books that are available to you today. I wish for the perception of me in people's minds to be associated not with myself but with my works. This is not driven by a desire for commercial success but rather a genuine interest in having my books read and evaluated, revealing their strengths and weaknesses for my own understanding. This, to me, is more important than anything else.

Given your suggestion to focus more on philosophy and your books, if you permit, I propose dividing the interview into two sections. In the first part, we can briefly discuss your background and biography, and then transition to the main topic of interest, which is your preferred discussion. Please provide a concise overview of your life before going to France.

I was born in Tabriz, but I mostly grew up in Tehran from childhood, even completing my elementary education there. My family was relatively well-known; my grandfather, Mirza Javad Mojtahedi, is mentioned in history books and even in high school textbooks. He was a clergyman who played a significant role in the tobacco boycott in Azerbaijan. In a letter written by Seyed Jamal al-Din Asadabadi to Mirza Shirazi, his name is mentioned second after Mirza Shirazi.

At the age of eighteen, I completed my secondary education at Firouzabrahman and Alborz College, then went to Paris for further studies. I spent my entire university education there, from the beginning to the end. I won't claim it was easy; on the contrary, I was a typical wandering Iranian student who hadn't acquired the necessary skills to attend French classes yet chose philosophy from the outset. You are quite young, and perhaps you are unaware that after World War II, there was a prevalent atmosphere of political and cultural discussions in Tehran, with various political parties present, and numerous books were being written. Looking back, those writings lack substantial content, but they created a certain atmosphere of debate and criticism in Tehran, giving rise to individuals like me. During that period, influenced by this debate atmosphere, most young people inclined towards technical fields for their studies.

Anyone aspiring for academic advancement would pursue medicine or engineering, and if not, they would lean towards law. What led you to deviate from this trend?

I pursued my academic field based on my personal choice, despite my family's disapproval. I believed we didn't all have to conform and follow the same path, becoming engineers, doctors, or lawyers in the conventional sense of that time. I constantly questioned what significance these intellectual debates and diverse opinions held, and what the political parties

really had to say. I thought philosophy might offer suitable answers to these questions, which is why I was already an avid reader. I remember reading twelve books during a ten-day pilgrimage trip to Mashhad.

The high school environment also nudged me in this direction. Admittedly, there was an element of idealism, and I won't deny it. I thought studying philosophy would lead me to find a path distinct from others, one with greater authenticity. However, when I went to France and began studying philosophy, I realized how naive I had been. I thought philosophy would be an easy discipline, but it turned out to be the opposite. For an Iranian at that time, any field other than philosophy seemed easier because they all had established curricula to follow, whereas in philosophy, there was no plan in the first year, and one had to have an innate aptitude for the subject.

Nevertheless, I passed the first-year general exam "propedeutique" at Sorbonne University, which was not competitive but necessary for admission. At that time, I was the only Iranian who had passed this exam. Perhaps, the reason for my acceptance was that I was a methodical person, always contemplating how to study to get the highest grades. For instance, in an English written exam, I memorized words with incorrect pronunciation so that I could write them correctly in the written exam.

How were the living conditions during that time?

Those two years were quite challenging for me, especially as it was during the Mossadegh era, and we didn't receive foreign currency. Most of us were financially strapped, facing various issues, but fortunately, there were ample facilities for students at that time. It wasn't complete luxury, but there were at least basic amenities available. We would get coupons and have a low-cost meal at university restaurants, but with the same amount of money, we couldn't even afford a cup of tea outside.

Of course, in some cases, facilities were nonexistent. For example, there was no heater in my room throughout the winter. I remember in the winter, while reading a book, I would place a small part of my hand outside just to be able to hold the book. After those two difficult years, I had a better understanding. I became more familiar with the situation and knew what to do. In the first two years, I was impulsive, like someone who didn't know what career path they wanted to pursue.

To complete the philosophy bachelor's degree, we had to take written exams in psychology, social logic, ethics, history of philosophy, and philosophy of science. These were our main courses, and

none of them were taught directly. The teaching method involved a professor coming to class and, for example, discussing only Descartes regarding the history of philosophy. This was challenging for me as an Iranian who wasn't accustomed to this teaching style. The Sorbonne library was open until 10 PM. If I didn't have a heater at home, the library was a warm and comfortable alternative. We would stay in the library until 10 PM, and the necessary books were accessible. Reference books were free to use within the library, and there was no need to ask for permission. Everyone was focused on learning, and the eagerness to learn was palpable. Despite the large hall, sometimes it was challenging to find a seat. People would queue in front of the library, waiting for a spot.

In your opinion, how did this atmosphere affect the quality of education and the elevation of individuals?

This atmosphere is influential in itself. In an environment where there is eagerness to learn, the individual becomes eager as well, similar to a wolf that is seated and eating. Most students were eager for knowledge. It wasn't easy to ask someone a question because everyone was busy learning. This atmosphere had an impact on my Iranian identity. I learned the eagerness for learning from that university. Even now, with not being in good physical condition, I read as much as I can. I live my life through work and philosophical thinking.

In Europe, I had the mentality that I am Iranian and must serve Iran, considering learning as my duty. The drive to learn came from within. This sense itself created a duty towards compatriots, the homeland, and the family. Alongside these, you also find a duty towards yourself, not in a prideful sense, saying that I am superior, but acknowledging that I am inferior and must address my intellectual deficiencies.

You must tell yourself that I am learning so that I stay away from ignorance because if I remain ignorant, I have done injustice to myself. To be just, I must stay away from ignorance. This duty an individual feels towards themselves in philosophy should be a foundation for creating a personality with intellectual and spiritual independence. A philosopher must be self-reliant and have confidence in their own thinking.

During this time, who were your renowned professors?

My professors were significant figures such as Jean Wahl, Georges Gurvitch, Jean Piaget, and many others.

During this period, you had interactions with H. Henry Corbin, is that correct?

I became more acquainted with