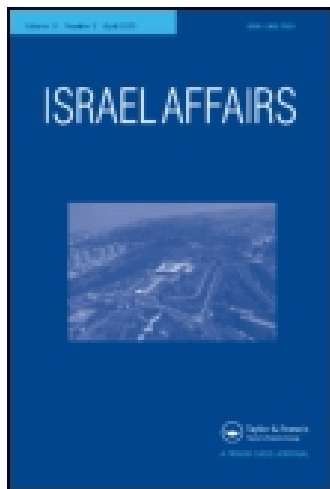


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Essentialism, Consistency and Islam: A Critique of Edward Said's *Orientalism*

IRFAN KHAWAJA

Since 9/11, and obviously for some considerable time before it, a question has arisen about the relationship between Islam and terrorism. Is it legitimate to prefix the term 'terrorism' with the adjective 'Islamic'? Is that a racist thing to do? Is it ahistorical? Contextless? Otherwise problematic? At any rate, what does the term 'Islamic' denote in such a formulation? Given the multiplicity of forms of Islam, and of terrorism, what conceivable cognitive purpose might be served by discussing the one in relation to the other?

This rather topical set of questions is of course just an instance of a more general issue. What, in general, does the adjective 'Islamic' denote when it modifies such abstract nouns as architecture, literature, culture, people, and the like? Does it denote anything in particular, or everything, hence nothing in particular? In Marshall Hodgson's terms, can an intelligible—or, more importantly, sharp—distinction be drawn between the Islamic and the merely Islamicate?¹

This more general set of questions is of course merely an instance of a yet more general issue. What in general does any doctrine's name, in adjectival form, denote when it modifies any abstract noun? Think of 'Jewish culture', 'Christian regimes', 'Africana philosophy', 'utilitarian calculations', 'Marxist tyranny', 'existentialist angst', 'Buddhist self-annihilation', 'nationalist strife', 'Zionist policies', 'racist practices', 'Machiavellian *realpolitik*'. Do the adjectives in these formulations serve any cognitive purpose that justifies linking them with the nouns with which they are coupled?

It is a working assumption of intellectual historiography that the answer is quite obviously 'yes'. This working assumption, seldom made

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explicit or explicitly defended, is called ‘essentialism about doctrines’. An essence, quite generally, is an attribute of something whose possession defines its possessor’s identity and explains all or many of the other attributes or capacities its possessor has. Essentialism about doctrines is the view that philosophical, religious or political doctrines are defined by a core set of norms that constitute their identity, and that these core norms explain the practice of adherents of the doctrine.

In the context of Islamic studies, essentialism about doctrines would entail that Islam has an essence, that this essence consists of the fundamental and defining norms common to all and only genuine versions of Islam, and that these norms explain what Muslims believe and do qua Muslims. A thing is Islamic on this view to the extent that specifically Islamic norms—the Islamic essence—figures in an explanation of why the thing exists in the way that it does. So Islamic terrorism is terrorism whose existence and nature is explained by specifically Islamic norms—in other words, that the essence of Islam plays a fundamental role in explaining why such terrorism arose *ab initio* and why it took the form it has subsequently. And so on, for art, architecture, literature and the like.

Essentialism is of course something of a taboo in academia and high intellectual culture in the English-speaking world, and if there is one person most prominently associated with anti-essentialism about Islam, it is Edward Said. The charge here is that to speak or even contemplate the possibility that Islam has an essence—much less to rely on essentialism to explain, say, terrorism—is to violate a long series of moral and methodological desiderata. It is, among other things, racist, imperialist, and bigoted; an expression of ignorance about Islam, and of the relation between theory and practice; an expression of presumption and arrogance; evidence of a problematically ‘textual’ attitude to the Orient; a substitution of donnish fantasy for hard-won experience; a piece of methodological *naïveté*; a Platonic confusion of mind and world; and, just, simply *passé*.

This claim, expressed *ad nauseum* in Said’s work, has come to enjoy the status of an axiom in postcolonial studies, and generally in academic and high intellectual culture. And it enjoys this axiomatic status across the board: one encounters it in theorists of postcolonialism, but also in centrist journalists, and not just there, but from the likes of Daniel Pipes.² How can one possibly talk about a single essence of Islam—it is asked—when what we see is irreducible variety?

One cannot, in the available space, defend so broad a thesis as essentialism, essentialism about doctrines, or even essentialism about Islam. Nor can one refute every version of anti-essentialism, either generally, about doctrines, or about Islam. Nor is there a need to. The aim of this essay is more limited: a critique of the version of anti-essentialism about Islam espoused by Edward Said. Drawing on the broad range of Said’s writings, but focusing principally on *Orientalism*, this essay argues

that Said's critique of essentialism, though widely influential, is thoroughly incoherent. The real question is not whether any part of the thesis can be salvaged—it cannot—but how it is that so utterly incoherent a thesis has managed to survive twenty-five years, achieve predominance in English-speaking intellectual culture, and come to structure a whole discipline of study.

FROM ESSENTIALISM TO ESSENTIALISM ABOUT DOCTRINES: CLARIFICATORY REMARKS

Although, as remarked earlier, this essay is not intended as a defence of essentialism, it needs a brief description of essentialism simply to clarify what counts as evidence of a commitment to essentialism about a doctrine, whether Islam or Orientalism or anything else. Thus, this essay begins with a few observations about essences, intended to clarify some of the claims made at the outset.

The philosophical literature on essentialism is a large and rigorous one that begins with the writings of classical antiquity, stretches through the medieval period, continues with the modern period, and proceeds up to and through the contemporary literature, analytic, pragmatic, and Continental. This last point is worth emphasizing in part to dispel the common falsehood that essentialism is an outdated and outmoded doctrine, and also to emphasize that given the variety of sources for essentialism, the word means different things to different philosophers. Philosophers continue to discuss essentialism as a live alternative, and one can find lively and technical discussions of the topic simply by browsing top-tier journals in the field. But precisely because philosophy generates disagreement, the word 'essentialism' means different things to different philosophers. In the sense intended here, essentialism is not a particularly deep or theoretically-fraught doctrine. It is a methodological rule drawn from the traditional Aristotelian rules of definition as stated in elementary logic textbooks. As one textbook puts it:

A definition should state the essential attributes of the concept's referents. The referents of a concept often have many attributes in common. Some are relatively superficial, some are essential. As we saw in discussing the rules of classification, the term 'essential' means fundamental: an essential attribute causes or explains the existence of other attributes ... Remember that one purpose of a definition is to condense the knowledge we have about the referents of a concept. Defining by essential attributes is the best way to achieve this purpose, because then you convey not only those particular attributes, but also the ones they underlie and explain.³

An essence, then, is an attribute of something that defines its identity and explains all or most of the attributes and/or capacities that its possessor has. Some textbook examples: atomic number is the essence of a chemical element; a constitution is the essence of a political system; rationality is the essence of man.

Notice that an essence on this view need not explain every last attribute or capacity of its possessor to be essential. Atomic number does not explain every surface feature of a chemical element; a constitution does not explain every last municipal regulation; the capacity for rationality does not explain every detail of human physiology. The point is rather that an essence explains all or most of the attributes or capacities that constitute the thing. Do away with atomic numbers and you do away with the science of chemistry; do away with functionality and you can make no sense of an artefact; do away with rationality and human action and society become utterly unintelligible.

In practical terms, allusion to essences performs a summarizing function. To grasp the summarizing function, try doing away in your own speech with such terms as 'In essence', or 'Essentially', along with every equivalent, such as 'Fundamentally', 'In general', 'As a rough generalization', 'Basically', 'To summarize', and generalizations of an essentialist type that are not necessarily flagged by those phrases. You will find that you cannot. Indeed, as an amusing parlour game, you might want to skim through the works of famous anti-essentialists and look for phrases of that kind. One can find great amusement doing this with the works of Edward Said.⁴

Essentialism about doctrines is a more complicated affair than essentialism applied to the textbook examples just alluded to, simply because doctrines are slightly more complicated in relevant respects than the chemical elements familiar to us from high school chemistry or the artefacts familiar to us from daily life. In short, essentialism about doctrines involves five claims:

1. *Definitional identity*. First, the essence of a doctrine defines the doctrine by distinguishing it from other doctrines and giving it its unique identity. In the case of doctrines intended to guide practice, the essence will consist of a set of core evaluations and norms found in all or (all significant) varieties of the doctrine. There may be differences between classical Marxism, Western Marxism and Marxist-Leninism, but the essence of Marxism is the common core that they share.
2. *Synchronic identity*. Claims about something's essence will support generalizations about the doctrine indifferently across a wide variety of doctrinal contexts at roughly the same time. There may be differences between the utilitarianism espoused by, say, Peter Singer

- and Milton Friedman, but the essence of utilitarianism names the commitment that each of them shares insofar as each is a utilitarian.
3. *Diachronic identity*. Claims about something's essence support generalizations across time. So the essence of Christianity consists of what can be said simultaneously of the Christianity of St. Matthew, St. Paul, St. Augustine, Origen, the Emperor Justinian, John Locke, Anne Hutchinson, and George W. Bush.
 4. *Explanatory power*. Claims about the essence of a doctrine explain what adherents believe or do insofar as they are following the doctrine. It is worth distinguishing here between strict adherence and nominal adherence to a doctrine. The essence of the doctrine will only explain behaviour insofar as adherents are in fact trying to follow the doctrine. It will not explain anything about the behaviour of nominal adherents who are to some extent indifferent to the doctrine. If many of a doctrine's adherents profess merely nominal adherence although not in fact caring about the doctrine, the essence of the doctrine will turn out not to explain very much about them.
 5. *Logical implication*. Finally, the essence of something supports claims about logical implications that are independent of what adherents of the doctrine may actually believe. Utilitarians may not believe that utilitarianism violates individual rights, but they may be wrong about their own doctrine. Marxists might not believe that Marxism leads to tyranny, but they too might be wrong about their own doctrine. Freudian psychotherapists may not believe that therapeutic practice presupposes some conception of free will and moral responsibility, but whether it does or does not turns not on what Freudians believe but what is actually the case. Similarly, few Muslims may espouse terrorist or anti-Semitic or misogynist views, but all the same, Islam may bear some connection to terrorism, anti-Semitism or misogyny regardless of that.⁵

CLAIM 1: SAID'S COMMITMENT TO ESSENTIALISM ABOUT ORIENTALISM

With this primer account of essentialism in hand, we are now nearly in a position to vindicate the first premise of this critique, namely, Said's commitment to essentialism about Orientalism. For present purposes, Said's definitions (or quasi-definitions) of 'Orientalism' are quoted.⁶ There is insufficient space in this essay for a detailed analysis of all of the texts that demonstrate Said's commitment to essentialism about Orientalism. Instead textual evidence that meets the criteria for essentialism about doctrines described in the preceding section is identified.

Most obviously, there are texts in which Said simply tells us, obligingly enough, that Orientalism has an essence—sometimes explicitly using the word ‘essence’, sometimes using a cognate term or series of them. On page 42, for instance, Said tells us that ‘the *essence* of Orientalism is the ineradicable distinction between Western superiority and Oriental inferiority’. On page 58, Said generalizes across several thousand years of history, portrays what he sees there as ‘*typical* encapsulations’ and one page later describes what he himself calls the ‘essence’ of the category of ‘Orientalism’. On page 69, we are offered the generalization that, for Orientalism, ‘[e]mpirical data about the Orient or about any of its parts count for very little; what matters and is decisive is what has been called in this essay the ‘Orientalist vision’, a vision by no means confined to the professional scholar, but rather *the common possession of all who have thought about the Orient in the West*’. On page 72, we are told that ‘we can generalize’ about Orientalism as its claims ‘were handed down through the Renaissance’. ‘Philosophically’, Said continues, ‘Orientalism *very generally* is a form of radical realism.’ Hence ‘*anyone* employing Orientalism’ is a realist; ‘Orientalism is *absolutely* anatomical and enumerative.’ On page 122, we read that ‘the *essential* aspects of modern Orientalist theory and praxis’ derive ultimately from ‘Christian supernaturalism’. On page 156, in describing the supposed transmission of orthodox Orientalist attitudes to putative non-Orientalists (e.g., Marx), Said tells us that the mechanism in question is ‘a very difficult and complex operation to describe’, which justifies simplifying ‘a great deal of the narrative complexity... by specifying the *kinds* of experiences that Orientalism *typically* employed... In *essence* these experiences continue the ones I described as having taken place in Sacy and Renan’ (italics added). On page 201, he announces that he regards the ‘British and French experiences of and with the Near Orient, Islam and the Arabs’ as ‘privileged *types*’. On the same page he suggests that he has presented ‘a portrait of the *typical* structures... constituting the field’ of Orientalism. On page 204, Orientalism is described as ‘*fundamentally* a political doctrine’ so that ‘[a]s a cultural apparatus Orientalism is *all* aggression’. On page 222, the ‘relation between Orientalist and Orient’ is described as ‘*essentially* hermeneutical’. On page 263 we are told that H.A.R. Gibb and Louis Massignon were among Orientalism’s ‘representative *types*’. Words italicized in the preceding quotations indicate either a direct or an indirect admission of a commitment to the definitory criterion of essentialism.

Closely related to the preceding are texts in which Said ascribes what he calls ‘an internal coherence and unity’ to Orientalism of a sort that justifies large-scale cross-contextual generalizations about the nature of Orientalism. The book begins with an explicit statement of essentialism about doctrines as a deliberately-adopted method:

It should be said at once that even with the generous number of books and authors that I examine, there is a much larger number that I simply have had to leave out. My argument, however, depends neither upon an exhaustive catalogue of texts dealing with the Orient nor upon a clearly delimited set of texts, authors, and ideas that together make up the Orientalist canon. I have depended instead upon a different methodological alternative—whose backbone in a sense is the set of historical generalizations I have so far been making in this Introduction.⁷

Because the generalizations depend on Said's thesis, and the thesis depends on the generalizations, what we have is a basic circularity at the very beginning of the text, a circularity that Said concedes without ever resolving.⁸ More to the point, however, the generalizations depend on the assumption that there is one stable object about which to generalize—another way of saying that Orientalism has an essence consisting of the ideas that constitute it, or, as Said prefers to put it, 'the internal consistency of Orientalism and its ideas about the Orient'.⁹

As many previous critics have shown, this claim of unity and coherence commits Said to generalizations of staggering scope. Said takes Orientalism to encompass what he believes to be the entire Western attitude toward the Orient, which he construes to stretch from Homer and Aeschylus on the one hand to Bernard Lewis and George W. Bush on the other. He thus freely generalizes across times, cultures, genres, political interests and outlooks, disciplines, vocations, languages, religions, and a variety of other contexts to tell us that Orientalism as a unitary phenomenon operates in one unitary way across all of them. Occasionally Said will evince discomfort at the scope of his own generalizations: '[I]t is better not to risk generalizations about so important a notion as cultural strength', he tells us, 'until a good deal of material has been analyzed.' Having analyzed a page of this material, however, the worry evaporates, and Said generalizes that 'Orientalism was a library or archive of information commonly, and some of its aspects *unanimously* held'.¹⁰

This is why Orientalism in all of its forms can be described as 'ultimately a political vision of reality whose structure promoted the difference between the familiar... and the strange'.¹¹ It is also why he can describe Orientalism as a form of 'imaginative geography' committed systematically to the falsification of reality.¹² It is why Said can claim that '[u]nderlying all the different units of Orientalist discourse... is a set of representative figures or tropes' that express extra-empirical fantasies about the Orient.¹³ It is why Said feels free to distinguish three forms of Orientalism but to generalize across all three forms, and it is also why he feels perfectly free to regard Dante, Flaubert, and Fouad Ajami as belonging to the same problematic category of thought (or dreamwork).

If Orientalism has an essence, as Said is obliged for the sake of his thesis to admit, that essence defines its identity both synchronically and diachronically. Synchronous essentialism justifies generalizations across varied contexts at a given time; diachronic essentialism justifies generalizations across times.¹⁴ Because Said is committed to both, he is committed to thinking that the differences between Dante's, Flaubert's and Ajami's genres of writing do not matter. Neither do the differences in context between them. What matters to Said is what they share in common, not what distinguishes them, because what he wants to indict is Orientalism as such, not merely any particular version of it. And so we have both the synchronic and diachronic criteria.

A fourth claim involves the explanatory criterion of essentialism, i.e., the claim that a commitment to Orientalism explains various moral and political malfeasances in the wider world apart from the donnish one inhabited by scholars and writers. In Said's case, the malfeasances in question involve colonialism and imperialism. To be sure, Said frequently soft-pedals this explanatory claim a bit, telling us reassuringly that he does not mean Orientalism to denote 'some nefarious "Western" imperialist plot to hold down the "Oriental" world', and suggesting that the explanation of imperialism is a complex one, involving factors besides Orientalism.¹⁵ He also claims to recognize Orientalist achievements, and claims not to have intended to criticize Orientalism as such.¹⁶ But where this soft-peddling is not itself incoherent, it flatly contradicts claims expressed throughout *Orientalism* and elsewhere: Said is unmistakably committed to the thesis that Orientalism not only has an essence as shown above, but that (the essence of) Orientalism explains concrete events in the history of the West's dealings with the Orient—which is itself a history chiefly of racism and imperialism.

The causal claim goes at least two ways.¹⁷ In one sense, Orientalism *led to* imperialism: 'To say simply that Orientalism was a rationalization of colonial rule is to ignore the extent to which colonial rule was justified in advance by Orientalism, rather than after the fact.' In another sense, it rationalized imperialism *after the fact*: 'During the early years of the twentieth century, men like Balfour and Cromer could say what they said, in the way that they did, because a still earlier tradition of Orientalism than the nineteenth-century one provided them with a vocabulary, imagery, rhetoric, and figures to say it.' Sometimes, Said splits the difference between these formulations: 'Once we begin to think of Orientalism as a kind of Western projection onto and will to govern over the Orient, we will encounter few surprises.' 'To say simply that modern Orientalism has been an aspect of both imperialism and colonialism is not to say anything disputable', we are bluntly told. 'Orientalism staked its existence, not upon its openness, its receptivity to the Orient, but rather on its internal, repetitious, consistency about its constitutive will to power over the

Orient.' Imperialism derived support from racism, and as for racism, it is 'correct to say that every European, in what he could say about the Orient, was consequently a racist, an imperialist, and almost totally ethnocentric'.¹⁸

Much of *Orientalism*, *The Question of Palestine*, *Covering Islam*, *Culture and Imperialism* and Said's other works attempt to flesh out these claims.¹⁹ Though Said tends to confine Orientalism's explanation of imperialism to the period subsequent to the 1798 Napoleonic invasion of Egypt, the chapter on the 'scope of Orientalism' ties modern imperialism to a consistent tendency of thought that stretches from Greek antiquity through medieval Christianity through the Renaissance and into the Enlightenment. As Said puts it, he 'draws a large circle around all dimensions of the subject, both in terms of historical time and experiences and in terms of philosophical and political themes'.²⁰ Orientalist racism and imperialism are for him consistent and unchanging political themes.

Finally, there is the logical implication criterion, to which Said is committed by virtue of the fact that his thesis entails claims about Orientalism that supersede what Orientalists themselves actually say or profess to believe. Orientalism, Said tells us, has a logic of its own, a propensity to imperialism that overrides not just the claims but the intentions of Orientalists. Thus even the most sympathetic Orientalists, like Louis Massignon, and the (to Said) most sympathetic thinkers influenced by Orientalism, like Marx, are in the grips of Orientalism's logic, whether they wanted to be or not. Said sees about their situation what they could not see about their own because he sees something about their situation that they could not have had access to. Perhaps the starkest example of this is the astonishing claim, in a discussion of H.A.R. Gibb's assessment of Louis Massignon, which Said infers from the former's obituary of the latter: 'I am of course imputing things to Gibb's obituary that are there only as traces, not as actual statements, but they are obviously important if we look now at Gibb's own career as a foil for Massignon's'.²¹ Said takes himself to 'impute things' to Gibb that are in Gibb's writing 'only as traces' because (as he tells us a page later), he has a conceptual grasp of the 'paradigm' to which Gibb belonged, and, given this grasp, can deduce what Gibb was *committed to* regardless of what he actually *said*.²²

When Said protests, then, in the 1994 Afterword to *Orientalism* that Orientalism is a 'book that to its author and in its arguments is explicitly anti-essentialist, radically sceptical about all categorical designations such as Orient and Occident',²³ he is simply flouting the words that appear and reappear on page after page of his book. Likewise when he tells us, in his 1985 essay 'Orientalism Reconsidered', that the charge of 'ahistoricity' is one 'more weighty in the assertion than ... in the proof', we are justified

in regarding this claim as a bluff.²⁴ The textual evidence is unmistakable: although it is true that Said is sceptical about the categorical distinction between Orient and Occident, that distinction is a red herring. The relevant point is that he is not at all sceptical about the legitimacy of the category 'Orientalist' or of the ahistorical and cross-contextual generalizations he makes about it as a style of thought and approach to the Orient. Nor could he be, without giving up on the dozens upon dozens of generalizations he makes about Orientalism along with the dozens of things he purports to explain by means of those generalizations—indeed, without giving up on the dozens of passages referenced in this section.

In short, if Orientalism lacks an essence, *Orientalism* lacks a thesis. To the extent that the book has a thesis, it is inescapably a thesis about the *essence* of Orientalism. If so, Said is committed to essentialism about doctrines—at least with respect to Orientalism. As we will see, this commitment wavers when it comes to his treatment of Islam.

CLAIM 2: SAID'S INDICTMENT OF ORIENTALISM FOR ESSENTIALISM ABOUT ISLAM

In a sense we need barely belabour the question of whether Said indicts Orientalism of essentialism about Islam; that, after all, is the crux of what he has to say about Orientalism and Islam. As in the previous case, it is not feasible in the present context to engage in lengthy analyses of particular swatches of text from Said's work. We can simply identify the distinct claims that make up the indictment.

The matter here is fairly straightforward. We have seen that essentialism about Islam holds that Islam has a set of core doctrines that constitute its identity and explain distinctively Islamic practices or institutions. Though Islam as a religion stretches over some fourteen centuries, involves at least two sects (Sunni and Shia), as well as some considerable variety in regional, ethnic and national versions of the religion, differences in jurisprudence, differences between Salafi and Sufi conceptions, etc., the fact remains that the essence of Islam states the conceptual common denominator that commensurates the differences and makes them variations on one Islamic theme.²⁵

This is the claim that Said repeatedly (though inconsistently)²⁶ denies. One claim is the denial of definitory identity to Islam: Several passages in *Orientalism* and elsewhere tell us that given the disagreement over the meaning of Islamic norms, and the disagreement over what constitutes an Islamic norm, there can be no authoritative way to identify a core set of norms as essential to the religion. If we accept *ijtihad* as a principle, we allow for the possibility of independent reinterpretation of texts, in which case every Muslim is an interpreter and every Muslim can in principle disagree with every other about virtually everything. According to Said, the

fact of disagreement entails the impossibility of identifying an essence; hence there is no Islamic essence.²⁷ ‘Islam’, he writes, ‘is not properly a subject at all but (at best) a series of interpretations that are so divergent in nearly every case as to make a mockery of the enterprise conceived of by the interpreter as one monolithic whole called “Islam”’.²⁸

A second claim holds that any attempt to identify an essence of Islam would ride roughshod over the synchronic variety we encounter in the Islamic world: there is, Said says (to some extent following anthropologists like Clifford Geertz), too much variety between, say, Moroccan, Egyptian, Iranian, Pakistani and Indonesian Islam to permit generalizations that cut across all of those categories.

A third claim tells us that any attempt to generalize would ride roughshod over the diachronic variety of Islamic experience. And so, Said repeatedly argues, it makes no sense to invoke facts, concepts, or texts rooted in the time of the Prophet Muhammad or the Four Righteous Caliphs or al Ghazzali or ibn Taymiyyah to explain current events. Too much water has passed under the bridge for such millennial facts to be relevant today. If we find, say, anti-Jewish sentiment in the Medinian verses of the Qur’an or in the Prophet’s conduct vis-à-vis the Jews of Khaybar, it is wrong to think that so temporally remote a phenomenon could have any bearing whatever on the anti-Semitism we may find in the contemporary Arab or Muslim world. ‘For anyone with any clarity of thought and common-sense ideas about the complexity and variety of concrete human experience’, Said writes (combining the second and third claims),

it is much more sensible to try to talk about different kinds of Islam, at different moments, for different people, in different fields, such as thirteenth-century Arab-Muslim philosophers of history, or eleventh-century Islamic-Andalusian architecture, or eighteenth-century Yemeni religious controversy, or political, economic, cultural and religious developments in one or another Islamic country, though specifying how ‘Islamic’ a country or group is requires laborious effort to begin with.²⁹

A fourth claim suggests that, given the preceding claims, there is no way to tie ‘Islam’ to any explanation of putatively Islamic behaviour—be it terrorism or censorship or anti-Semitism.³⁰ Indeed, Said often falls into the claim that the term ‘Islam’ is simply a fiction: there is no such thing as Islam *tout court*; there are many Islams, perhaps as many as there are practitioners and differences of opinion. Said thus repeatedly implies that the phrase ‘Islamic terrorism’ is non-explanatory at best and, more likely, racist. His most extreme formulations imply that although Orientalism explains imperialism, and imperialism explains Western depredations against the Orient, Islam bears no explanatory relation whatsoever to terrorist acts by Muslim believers performed in the name of Islam—even when those acts are justified in detail by *fatwas* based on Islamic scripture

and jurisprudence, ratified by Islamic jurists, have precedents in Islamic history, and are approved of by millions of Muslims.³¹

And that brings us to the fifth claim. According to Said, Islam is what ‘living, breathing’ Muslim believers make of it.³² This claim has a two-fold consequence. First, because there are 1.25 billion Muslim believers, there is no way to generalize about Islam except to generalize across 1.25 billion highly divergent beliefs and practices—a patent impossibility. Second, any attempt to ascribe to Islam claims that Muslims themselves do not accept is thereby nullified: the criterion of ‘the Islamic’ is Muslim consensus; hence, unless Muslims concede the legitimacy of such locutions as ‘Islamic terrorism’, the locutions are *ipso facto* illegitimate. It should be emphasized that the textual evidence of Said’s commitment to this point is absolutely clear and unequivocal, and despite many attempts at obfuscation and circumlocution, it has the unavoidable result of giving Muslims a veto over what counts as a logical consequence of the acceptance of Islamic norms. *Only* Muslims can determine what is authentically Islamic; no apostate can, nor can a sceptic, nor can a non-believing Orientalist. Islam is, in effect, the private property of Muslims. It is, Said tells us in a finger-wagging passage directed at Gibb, ‘a contradiction to speak of “Islam” as neither what its clerical adherents in fact say it is nor what, if they could, its followers would say about it’.³³

Adducing the preceding evidence merely belabours what ought to be an obvious point: that Said regards the preceding as an ascription to Orientalism of essentialism about Islam and an *indictment* of it for that. So having denied the preceding claims about Islam, Said tells us that Orientalism is defined by its propensity to ascribe each of them to Islam. Orientalists discuss Islam as though it had a defining normative core; they over-generalize both synchronically and diachronically, ignoring crucial context; they offer one-dimensional and over-simplified explanations of social pathologies by referring to Islam; and in carrying out each of these tasks, they habitually override or ignore the claims of Muslim believers. He has some rather abusive things to say about the Orientalists who do this. They are ‘reductive’, ‘obsessive’, ‘deterministic’, ‘hypocritical’, ‘anachronistic’, ‘out of touch with reality’, ‘simpleminded’, ‘dishonest’, ‘racist’, and ‘imperialist’.

Hence, by implication, their writings are quite valueless. Orientalism, Said asserts—not a version of it, but the enterprise as such—is a human and intellectual ‘failure’.³⁴ Pressed by a sympathetic critic (Albert Hourani) to qualify this claim a bit, Said refuses. ‘So while I sympathize with Hourani’s plea’, Said writes, ‘I have serious doubts whether the notion of Orientalism properly understood can ever, in fact, be completely detached from its rather more complicated and not always flattering circumstances.’³⁵ Notice Said’s claims here that (i) Orientalism retains its unchangingly nefarious identity across centuries of time,³⁶ and (ii) that he, Said, has epistemic

access to its essential nature in ways that override the claims of ‘living, breathing’ Orientalists—even when the Orientalist in question happens to be a distinguished specialist in the field (as Said was not), and a Lebanese anti-Zionist to boot. The lesson is unmistakable: claims about Islam *must* be qualified so as to avoid judgements about Islam as such; claims about Orientalism *must not* be.

Though Said occasionally backtracks under pressure of criticism to tell us that he was not criticizing Orientalism as such, such backtracking brazenly flouts what the text of the book actually says. ‘Nowhere’, he writes in the Afterword to the 1994 edition of *Orientalism*, ‘do I argue that Orientalism is evil, or sloppy, or uniformly the same in the work of each Orientalist.’³⁷ But that is in fact just what he argues throughout the book, especially with respect to Orientalism’s treatment of Islam. To put the point more precisely: Said argues that Orientalism qua Orientalism is a fantasy-substitute for genuine knowledge driven by neurosis, racism and the will to power, which gave rise to and rationalized racist-imperialist depredations from the Crusades until the present day. Although the essence of Orientalism so construed has a 2,500-year history which cuts across cultures, languages and genres, it is instantiated in particular Orientalists in varying degrees, ranging from the virulent (Bernard Lewis) to the venial (Louis Massignon). The concessions Said makes to Orientalism are, by his explicit standards, mere trivia as compared with the indictment he offers. It is therefore simply false to say, as an otherwise severe critic does, that Said ‘never seeks to belittle the genuine scholarly achievements, scientific discoveries and creative contributions made by Orientalists and Orientalism over the years’.³⁸ He most certainly does seek to do just that, and the texts bear it out in no uncertain terms.

It would be a separate task—and a worthwhile one—to rebut each and every claim Said makes in his indictment, but for present purposes the relevant point is simply that it *is* an indictment and that the indictment makes essential reference to the crime of espousing essentialism.

PERFORMATIVE CONTRADICTION

With the preceding in place, we can identify the performative contradiction at the heart of Said’s argument—that is, a contradiction arising from the sheer performance of asserting the thesis (like ‘I am not here’, or ‘Language does not convey thought’, or ‘I don’t know a word of English’, or ‘I don’t think anything exists’). On the one hand, Said is committed to the thesis that Orientalism has an essence. On the other hand, he indicts Orientalism of claiming that Islam has an essence. The first claim commits him to essentialism about doctrines; the latter to its rejection. The combination yields a contradiction. Because no contradiction is true, Said’s thesis is false. Putting the point equivalently but somewhat differently, what we

have here is a live and fatal dilemma. Each claim that Said makes contradicts the other, but each is as central to his thesis as the other. If he asserts both at once, he lands in a contradiction. If he gets rid of one, he has no thesis.

Note that the criticism here is that Said's thesis is self-contradictory and that the contradiction arises from his commitment to essentialism about Orientalism as a phenomenon. The primary criticism is neither the *ad hominem* claim that Said is personally a hypocrite, nor (primarily) that he is guilty of exercising double standards. The problem of having a literally self-contradictory thesis is a much deeper problem than either of these criticisms asserts.

Nor, contrary to many of Said's critics, does this essay ascribe to him any commitment to a sharp distinction between Orient and Occident.³⁹ Said is right to say that he consistently disavows such a distinction. The point is not that Said ascribes an essence to Occident and Orient, but that he *ascribes an essence to Orientalism while indicting Orientalism for ascribing an essence to the Orient*. What he is committed to is the thesis that Orientalism, considered as a unified phenomenon, explains two millennia of attitudes about the distinction between East and West, i.e., has an essence. But given what he says in his indictment of Orientalism, that claim is precisely one that Said is not entitled to make.

A defender of Said's thesis might respond to this objection with the claim that the two cases are simply different: essentialism about Orientalism is permissible, whereas essentialism about Islam is invidious. A few defensive remarks are in order.

First, the fact is, Said himself never addresses the issue, much less puts it that way. So it is unclear whether he himself would endorse the claim in question. Second, absent a rationale for saying the one thing about one doctrine and the reverse thing about the other, the preceding procedure is *ad hoc*, transparently designed to avoid the charge of inconsistency.

To the extent that a rationale ever appears in Said's work, it is entirely implicit: we might, to borrow Said's language, say that at best we find 'traces' of an argument.⁴⁰ Said sometimes takes himself to be justified in discussing Orientalism in essentialist fashion because it describes the Orient in essentialist fashion. So in ascribing an essence to Orientalism, Said implies, he is not himself committed to essentialism; he is merely describing the essentialist activities of Orientalists from the equivalent of a neutral (but non-essentialist) anthropological perspective which allows him to describe Orientalist essentialism without being committed to essentialism.

It is not clear whether Said actually holds this or would assert it, but if so the gambit fails. For one thing, Said's epistemology precludes the possibility of adopting a literally neutral anthropological perspective.⁴¹ Second, whatever perspective he thinks he is adopting, no author can avoid

avowing his thesis as true from a first-person perspective, and the fact remains that Said's thesis involves a personal commitment to the truth of essentialism about doctrines with respect to Orientalism. Subtract that claim from his thesis, and it evaporates. Finally, a mere description of essentialist activities would not add up to the indictment that Said clearly intends about Orientalism. Subtract the indictment from the thesis, and it evaporates as well. There is, in short, no 'perspectivalist' route out of Said's bind.

To go on the offensive, however, it is remarkable just how confused Said turns out to be on what would seem to be a fairly crucial issue for his thesis. He is committed, it would seem, to essentialism about doctrines. To see this, we need only look through the index of *Orientalism*, identify the abstract nouns, and check the text to see what he has to say about them. He feels free to offer large-scale generalizations in *Orientalism* about anti-Semitism, Christianity, classicism, Foucauldian discourses, empiricism, 'Europe' as an idea, imperialism, language, Marxism, philology, racism, Romanticism, scholarship, totalitarianism, utilitarianism and Zionism. The one exception to this rule appears to be Islam—which appears not to be governed by any rule.

Islam, he says, is a fiction without determinate identity. Meanwhile, he tells us, Islam has systematically been misrepresented in the West.⁴² How does one 'misrepresent' something that lacks an identity? How, for that matter, does one misrepresent something if—as Said asserts—no accurate representations are possible?⁴³

There is, Said tells us, no true or false Islam.⁴⁴ Elsewhere he blithely tells us that terrorism, anti-Semitism and censorship are incompatible with true Islam.⁴⁵ Meanwhile, we are told, Eqbal Ahmad has got Islam right in three newspaper columns, Ali Shariati has got it right in his fanciful interpretation of migration (*hijira*), but the Orientalist establishment has got it wrong after having written libraries of books on the subject.⁴⁶ So which is it—is there an essence of Islam to get right, or not?

As a matter of method, we are told that Orientalism gets Islam wrong because of its Platonic bias, i.e., describing things too abstractly. On the same page we are told that Orientalism gets Islam wrong because of its empiricist biases, i.e., describing things too concretely.⁴⁷ This comes from an author who himself admits to facing both problems in his own book, and resolves the problem with the cheerful admission of having fallen into *both* errors!

Yet even though it includes an ample selection of writers, this book is still far from a complete history or *general account* of Orientalism. Of this failing I am very conscious. All I have done is to describe parts of that fabric at certain moments, and merely to suggest the existence of

a larger whole, detailed, interesting, dotted with fascinating figures, texts, and events.⁴⁸

So which is the larger failing—Platonism or empiricism?

Islam, Said says, explains nothing. Meanwhile, we are told, utilitarianism explains British imperialism in India;⁴⁹ Zionism explains the Hebron Massacre of 1994;⁵⁰ the orthodox Christianity of St. John of Damascus (d. 749) explains the Lebanese civil war of the late 1970s;⁵¹ medieval Christian supernaturalism (and anti-Semitism) explains Orientalism, which in turn explains modern imperialism⁵²—which ultimately explains contemporary US foreign policy.⁵³ On one page we read the claim that humanism is a department of Orientalism which has retarded human progress; the Preface and Afterword of the same book tell us, a few years later, that humanism is a left-oppositional stance against imperialism.⁵⁴ So which is it—do doctrinal essences explain practice or not?

If Said thinks that Islam is different from other abstract nouns, he needs to tell us why. But he says just the reverse: he tells us that Islam should be treated as Judaism and Christianity are treated, and presumably as other like abstractions are to be treated.⁵⁵ And yet, as we have seen, he often treats abstract nouns in an essentialist fashion. So it should follow that Islam can be treated the same way. And yet that is precisely what he takes to be the cardinal sin.

There is one encompassing explanation for this (far from exhaustive) list of incoherences. When we realize that Said is the first to concede the conscious inconsistency of his own book—‘I designed the book to be theoretically inconsistent’⁵⁶—we see that further criticism would be superfluous: he has conceded everything that his least sympathetic critic would want to show. As Aristotle put the point 2,500 years ago, once your interlocutor violates the most basic laws of logic, ‘it is absurd to reason with one who will not reason about anything . . . For if he means nothing, such a man will not be capable of reasoning, either with himself or with another.’⁵⁷

HOW DID IT GET OFF THE GROUND? A DIAGNOSIS

Thus Edward Said—described by Richard Poirier as ‘the most consequential literary, cultural and geopolitical critic of our time’⁵⁸—is convicted of a contradiction as fatal to his most famous thesis as it is stunningly elementary and palpably obvious. One might wonder whether that is not, all by itself, a *reductio ad absurdum* of the argument. How could Said’s argument be liable to such a critique? How could so brazenly self-contradictory a thesis achieve such prominence and survive so long? The answers will be examined in order of increasing importance.

The first is that we tend to forget what Said himself is the first to remind us, which is that the book almost did not get off the ground. It was rejected by several publishers before it was picked up by Vintage.⁵⁹ Maybe those editors got something right.

A second reason is one that was nicely made by a famous Orientalist: 'Said *had* a good point', he said, 'but didn't *make* a good point.' It is an astute claim. Bear in mind that what is criticized in this essay is the literal thesis of Said's book—the point he made. One suspects that many readers have read *Orientalism* not for what it says but what they think a book of its type ought to have said. And such readers are probably right that some criticisms of Orientalism as a style of thought were in order.

That brings us to a third point. Said has over the decades had many critics, and this essay has relied on some of them, especially the philosopher Sadiq al Azm, whose criticisms of Said have been borrowed and radicalized in this essay. But even reading all of Said's critics, in many ways, Said's success is explicable by the default of his critics. As Martin Kramer has pointed out, to a certain degree the Orientalist guild simply caved in to Said's thesis without going very far to contest it.⁶⁰ And many of the criticisms made are themselves quite defective. For one thing, some of the most critical authors indulge in misplaced charity that ultimately undercuts their arguments. This is true of al Azm; it is also true of the anthropologist James Clifford and the literary theorist Aijaz Ahmad, whose critiques of Said are thought to be very bracing.⁶¹ Further, many critics focus on issues that are too derivative to have very much impact on the crux of Said's thesis. Left-leaning critics tend to pursue quibbles about the proper interpretation of Marx or Foucault, or to pursue side-issues about Said's treatment of class or gender.⁶² Right-leaning critics tend to engage in narrow polemical point-scoring about this or that mistake or peccadillo in the text but leave the deeper epistemological issues untouched.⁶³ Finally, some criticisms of Said have simply been *ad hominem* (or otherwise fallacious) attacks on him that quixotically attempt to replicate his own dismal polemical style. Such attacks have simply bolstered his status as a martyr without doing a thing to rebut his arguments.

There is, finally, Said's own expository camouflage. Despite his frequent boasts about writing clear and jargon-free prose, Said is in fact a genuine master of the art of expository evasion. He is, at times, brazenly dogmatic about his claims; at others, oddly sceptical about the same claims. He will say one thing on one page, contradict it on the next, and then qualify the contradiction in such a way as to suggest that it cannot be there because the qualification shows that he is aware of its existence. His prose conveys a crude and barely-concealed sense of pomposity, sarcasm, rhetorical bombast, appeals to authority, *ad hominem* argumentation, and (often embarrassingly superficial) learning calculated to intimidate those susceptible to intimidation. The sheer number of logical fallacies that

Said commits on a given page of text are enough to arrest any reader unprepared to distinguish mortal sins from venial ones, and to stick to a discussion of the former. His treatment of the topic of logical consistency from *Orientalism* is a case study in this respect: from accusing Orientalism of inconsistency in *Orientalism*, he responds to the charge of inconsistency in 'Orientalism Reconsidered' by questioning the virtues and meaning of consistency; and from there ends up avowing cheerfully in a 1987 interview that he designed his own book to be theoretically inconsistent right from the start.⁶⁴ To be consistently inconsistent about consistency is a feat in itself.

That explains the *reception* of Said's thesis. But what explains the *thesis*? How could anyone have produced something so numbingly preposterous? What, then, is the ultimate diagnosis of why Said has ended up with the contradictory thesis he has offered us?

A first reason is pure political opportunism. Said tells us explicitly that *Orientalism* was a 'partisan' work, that objectivity is impossible, and that all objectivity is in fact a mask for one's (perceived) personal and political interests. Nor does he regard himself as an exception to the rule. He does not pretend to be objective. He regards himself as a partisan unconstrained by any conception of objectivity. It is worth taking him at his word. We would expect a book unconstrained by objectivity to be unconstrained by the application of politically-neutral epistemic principles—like consistency. And that is what we end up with. Indeed, by Said's explicit admission, that is what we *began* with.⁶⁵

A second reason is more specifically theoretical. The issue of essentialism in philosophy is itself part of a larger debate about the status of abstract general terms—the-so-called 'problem of universals'. The debate is typically described as involving two sides, the realists and the nominalists. It is clear from *Orientalism* that Said lacked even a rudimentary grasp of the state of this debate circa 1978 or ever after; without exception, every claim that he makes about it comes wholesale from some other theorist, few of them philosophers, and few of them any better equipped to discuss the issue than Said.⁶⁶

In at least one case, that of Claude Levi-Strauss, Said's use of the theorist is a case of outrageous philosophical incompetence. On pages 53–54 of *Orientalism*, Said invokes chapters 1–7 of Levi-Strauss's book *The Savage Mind* to support his own commitment to an extreme version of philosophical nominalism.⁶⁷ In fact, Levi-Strauss's book offers not a shred of support for the claims that Said makes on the cited pages. In another case, that of Foucault, the support that Said claims to draw turns out to be explicitly (and avowedly) self-contradictory. Foucault's writings, he tells us, constitute 'Nietzsche's legacy operating at a deep level in the work of a major twentieth-century thinker. All that is specific and special is preferable to what is general and universal.' Four pages later,

Said writes: ‘The most striking of [Foucault’s] blind spots was... his insouciance about the discrepancies between his basically limited French evidence and his ostensibly universal conclusions.’⁶⁸ The first passage tells us that Foucault’s work eschews universalism. The second tells us that Foucault’s conclusions affirm universalism. Elsewhere, Said tells us that he relies for philosophical support throughout *Orientalism* on Foucault’s ‘notion of a discourse’.⁶⁹

In Said’s version of the debate about universals, ‘realism’ is the view that abstract general terms (e.g., ‘Islam’) refer to extra-mental realities in a supernatural dimension; ‘nominalism’ is the view that abstract general terms refer to nothing more than arbitrary conventions governed by structures of power. In setting up the issue in this comically reductive way, Said reasons that because there cannot be extra-mental entities in a supernatural dimension, realism and essentialism must be false, and all classificatory schemes are totally arbitrary. This leads him to a predicament in which, as a nominalist, he finds himself asserting that all non-trivial generalizations are ‘arbitrary’, but as someone who cannot concede the arbitrariness of his own generalizations, he asserts generalizations and classifications he needs but cannot sustain. The result is a philosophical disaster area.

CONCLUSIONS

What is the upshot of all this for the present—for postcolonial theory, for our understanding of Islam, for the future? On page 19 of *Orientalism*, Said writes:

There is nothing mysterious or natural about authority. It is formed, irradiated, disseminated; it is instrumental; it is persuasive; it has status, it establishes canons of taste and value; it is virtually indistinguishable from certain ideas it dignifies as true and from traditions, perceptions and judgments it forms, transmits, reproduces. Above all, authority can, indeed must be analyzed.

Indeed. In *Orientalism* Said catalogued what he took to be Orientalism’s ‘methodological failures’, including its ‘paper-thin intellectual apparatus’, its sweeping generalizations, its ignorance of matters of theory, its intellectual sloppiness, its presumption, and, most deliciously, its supposed failure to be bound by the fundamental laws of logic—the principles of identity and non-contradiction.⁷⁰ How ironic that precisely *these* charges should turn out to be true of Said’s *magnum opus*: a self-contradictory thesis buttressed by little more than the mere appearance of intellectual substance, swaddled in coils of obfuscation, all intended to divert attention from the fact that, when subject to analysis, the book’s thesis crashes and burns.

This essay ends, however, in agreement with Said. He is right. There is nothing mysterious or inevitable about authority. It comes to be by a process of volition, and it can, by the same process, be extinguished. One can make no predictions about how the future will judge Edward Said's claims to authority; one can, however, suggest how it should.

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NOTES

1. Marshall G.S. Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam: Conscience and History in a World Civilization, Vol. 1: The Classical Age of Islam*, Chicago and London, 1974, pp. 57–60.
2. See Irfan Khawaja, 'Should We Read the Koran to Understand Muslim Terrorism? A Response to Daniel Pipes', available at www.hnn.us/articles/3902.html.
3. David Kelley, *The Art of Reasoning*, 3rd ed., New York and London, 1998, p. 40, italics in original. In the sense described in the text, 'essentialism' has been a staple of introductory logic textbooks for at least a century, if not longer. For an earlier and more rigorous discussion, see H.W.B. Joseph, *An Introduction to Logic*, Oxford, 1906, chapters 4–5. For standard contemporary treatments, see Irving M. Copi and Keith Burgess-Jackson, *Informal Logic*, 2nd ed., New York, 1992, pp. 175–176, and Patrick Hurley, *A Concise Introduction to Logic*, 8th ed., Belmont, CA, 2003, p. 105. In the acknowledgements of *The World, The Text and the Critic*, Cambridge, MA, 1983, Said records his debt to 'Arthur Szathmary, professor of Philosophy at Princeton University, who taught me the essentials of critical thinking' (p. v). The 'essentials' taught at Princeton seem not to have included the elementary rules of definition.
A separate question arises about the metaphysical and epistemological basis of claims about essences. This is indeed a difficult issue, but we no more need a full theory of essences to apply an elementary rule of definition than we need a full theory of numbers to balance our check books. On the deep issue, of course, philosophers differ widely about the nature of essences, as they do about everything else. The view presented in this essay follows that of Ayn Rand, as defended in her *Introduction to Objectivist Epistemology*, expanded 2nd ed., Harry Binswanger and Leonard Peikoff (eds.), New York, 1990, chapter 5, and elaborated by Leonard Peikoff, *Objectivism: The Philosophy of Ayn Rand*, New York: Dutton, 1991, pp. 96–105 and Allan Gotthelf, *On Ayn Rand*, Belmont, CA, 2000, chapter 7.
For related but distinct approaches from the Aristotelian tradition, see Douglas B. Rasmussen, 'Quine and Aristotelian Essentialism', *New Scholasticism*, Vol. 58 (1984), pp. 316–335; Martha Nussbaum, 'Human Functioning and Social Justice: In Defense of Aristotelian Essentialism', *Political Theory*, Vol. 20, No. 2 (1992), pp. 202–246; and Nussbaum, 'Aristotle on Human Nature and the Foundations of Ethics', in J.E.J Altham and Ross Harrison (eds.), *World, Mind and Ethics: Essays on the Ethical Philosophy of Bernard Williams*, Cambridge and New York, 1995, pp. 86–131. For a historical discussion, see Charlotte Witt, 'Aristotelian Essentialism Revisited', *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, Vol. 27, No. 2 (1989), pp. 285–298.
4. Edward W. Said, *Orientalism, 25th Anniversary Edition*, New York: 1979 [2003], pp. 42, 58, 72, 113, 122, 124, 156, 161, 185, 201, 204, 216, 222, 242, 261, 263, 267, 284, 307; *Covering Islam*, New York, 1997, pp. 28, 53, 106, 150, 152; *Culture and Imperialism*, New York, 1994, pp. xi, xii, xxii, 13, 58, 59, 102, 113, 128, 150, 236; Gauri Viswanathan (ed.), *Power, Politics and Culture*, New York, 2002, pp. 9, 180, 201, 221, 340–341, 361, 386, 448. The list is far from exhaustive. Said makes no attempt whatsoever to reconcile his thunderous

- denunciations of essentialism with his ubiquitous reliance throughout his work on claims of essentiality. Instead, he excoriates Orientalists for their supposed lack of methodological self-consciousness for doing precisely what he himself repeatedly does (e.g., *Orientalism*, p. 261).
5. For essentialist treatments of Islam from a variety of perspectives, see the major works of H.A.R. Gibb, Albert Hourani, Philip Hitti, Ismail Faruqi, Fazlur Rahman, and David Waines. See also Mohammad Khalifa's neglected but interesting book, *The Sublime Qur'an and Orientalism*, London and New York, 1983—a believing Muslim's essentialist response to (what the author takes to be) Orientalist misinterpretations of the Qur'an. Throughout his writing, Said lavishes extensive praise on the work of Albert Hourani (*Orientalism*, pp. 274, 275, 276, 330, 335, 336, 340, 347, 348) and Louis Massignon (*Orientalism*, pp. 262–273). And yet it remains an unresolved (indeed unacknowledged) mystery why Hourani and Massignon are any less essentialist in their commitments than, say, Gibb, who comes in for extensive criticism (*Orientalism*, pp. 278–283). A particularly absurd series of inconsistencies arises when Said raises the possibility that Massignon, in offering a view of Islam unacceptable to its adherents, might well have misrepresented the religion (*Orientalism*, p. 272). He concludes on the same page that no misrepresentation was involved—by denying the very possibility of accurate representation! Oblivious to the fact that the latter denial destroys the very possibility of objective communication (and with it the book's thesis), Said proceeds on the same page to the claim that Islam has systematically been 'misrepresented' by the West. The evidence for this latter (obviously self-contradictory) claim comes in part from his analysis of Gibb, whom Said convicts of misrepresenting Islam. The misrepresentation, according to Said, consists in Gibb's offering an interpretation of Islam unacceptable to the religion's adherents (*Orientalism*, p. 283)—the very thing Said had *excused* in Massignon. The preceding combination of claims would be comical if expressed in a paper by a confused undergraduate; they are less so in a book described by one reviewer as 'bound to usher in a new epoch in the world's attitude to Oriental studies and Oriental scholarship' (Nissim Rejwans in *The Jerusalem Post*, quoted on the back cover of the first edition).
 6. In the interests of space, a long section has been cut out of an original draft of the essay discussing the deep methodological problems with Said's attempts to define Orientalism—problems whose discussion would require a separate paper and happen to be subsidiary to the main theme of the present essay.
 7. Said, *Orientalism*, p. 4.
 8. Said, *Orientalism*, pp. 15–16. Said notes that he discusses issues of circularity in his book *Beginnings: Intention and Method*, but (*pace* Abdirahman Hussein's *Edward Said: Criticism and Society*, London and New York, 2002, pp. 224–232) nothing in that book resolves the circularity at issue.
 9. Said, *Orientalism*, p. 5.
 10. Said, *Orientalism*, pp. 40–41.
 11. Said, *Orientalism*, p. 43.
 12. Said, *Orientalism*, pp. 49–73. Said occasionally attempts various rhetorical retreats from the claim of systematic falsification, but there is no avoiding it. 'Imaginative geography', as he puts it, 'Orientalizes' the Orient, so that the Orientalized Orient becomes its basic object of study (*Orientalism*, p. 67). But the Orientalized Orient does not correspond to reality. There is for Said no 'Orient' or 'Islam' for it to focus on in the first place (*Orientalism*, p. 50). Orientalism thus freely constructs an Orientalized reality by analogy with a 'daydream' (*Orientalism*, pp. 52–55). This daydream either 'infuses or overrides' reality (*Orientalism*, p. 55) and leads directly to a culture-wide refinement of 'ignorance' (*Orientalism*, pp. 62, 75). In every case where Said qualifies his claims about falsification he does so to suggest that the commitment to falsification was understandable, not to deny that it was a falsification. 'It is perfectly natural for the human mind to resist the assault on it of untreated strangeness; therefore cultures have always been inclined to impose complete transformations on other cultures', *Orientalism*, p. 67. It is worth noting that this latter claim is a (vaguely Kantian) generalization about conceptualization that commits Said to essentialism about the mind.
 13. *Orientalism*, p. 71.
 14. See Said, *Orientalism*, pp. 4, 5, 9, 16, 21–24, 40, 41, 42, 43, 45–56, 50, 52, 53–55, 58, 59, 70–71, 72, 73, 74, 87, 88, 96, 98, 99, 100, 122, 154–155, 156–157, 200, 202, 204, 205, 206, 208, 221, 230–231, 260, 262, 297, 323, 336.
 15. *Orientalism*, pp. 12, 60, 95–96; *Covering Islam*, p. 26; *Culture and Imperialism*, pp. 51–52.

16. *Orientalism*, p. 96; Afterword to 2003 edition of *Orientalism*, pp. 345, 341; Viswanathan, *Power, Politics and Culture*, p. 151.
17. Occasionally, Said—in a characteristic attempt to have things all ways at once—will assert that he does not intend the relation between Orientalism and imperialism to be understood as causal. But besides contradicting the causal claims he clearly does make, such protestations are simply incoherent. If a morally significant relation obtains between Orientalism and imperialism, and the relation *explains* the connection between the two things, what else could the relation be but causal? In a particularly ludicrous formulation, Said asserts that although Orientalism ‘fortified’ imperialism, he would not assert a causal relation between it and imperialism (Viswanathan, *Power, Politics and Culture*, p. 243; cf. *Culture and Imperialism*, p. 81). It is left to the reader’s imagination to figure out how x can ‘fortify’ y without standing in a causal relation to it. The scandalous imprecision of Said’s account of the causal relation between Orientalism and imperialism is one of the most glaring (and least commented-on) deficiencies of the book. For a cursory criticism, see Aijaz Ahmad, ‘Orientalism and After’, *In Theory: Classes, Nations, Literatures*, London and New York, 1992, pp. 181–182.
18. The quotations in this paragraph come, in order, from *Orientalism*, pp. 39, 41, 95, 123, 222, 204.
19. See *Orientalism*, pp. 11, 14, 39, 40, 41, 86–87, 95–96, 108–110, 123, 201–225, 253; Afterword to 2003 edition of *Orientalism*, pp. 343, 348; *The World, the Text, and the Critic*, p. 264; *Covering Islam*, pp. lvii–lviii, 26, 30, 163; Edward Said, *The Question of Palestine*, New York, 1980, pp. 146–147; Edward W. Said, *The Politics of Dispossession: The Struggle for Palestinian Self-Determination 1969–1994*, New York, 1995, p. 329; *Culture and Imperialism*, pp. 41, 48, 51–52, 108–110; Viswanathan, *Power, Politics and Culture*, pp. 26, 151, 169, 237–238.
20. Said, *Orientalism*, p. 25.
21. Said, *Orientalism*, p. 274.
22. Hence Bernard Lewis’s justified complaint that Said reinterprets ‘the passages he cites to an extent out of all reasonable accord with their authors’ manifest intentions’ (*The Question of Orientalism*, in *Islam and the West*, New York, 1993, p. 112). Among the most egregious examples in *Orientalism* are Said’s interpretations of Dante, Edward Lane, William Robertson Smith, H.A.R. Gibb, and Bernard Lewis. The silliest of these is undoubtedly the interpretation of Dante’s *Inferno*, which suffers from the fatal inability of being unable to reconcile Dante’s supposed Orientalism with his partiality for Ibn Sina, Ibn Rushd, and Saladin—whom Dante puts morally on a par with Hector, Aeneas, Abraham, Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle (Said, *Orientalism*, p. 69). If Dante’s treatment of these Muslims is evidence of Orientalism, is it not equally evidence of Occidentalism? For a cogent discussion of this issue, see Aijaz Ahmad, ‘Orientalism and After’, *In Theory*, pp. 187–190.
23. Said, Afterword to the 1994 edition of *Orientalism*, p. 331.
24. Edward Said, ‘Orientalism Reconsidered’, *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays*, Cambridge, MA, 2002, p. 199. Said writes, ‘I would not want it to be thought that this [essay] is an attempt to answer critics’ (p. 198). Though the essay does in fact try to answer critics (thereby contradicting Said’s stated intentions), it is for the most part a self-congratulatory advertisement for the book that highhandedly ignores or dismisses its critics as unworthy of a response.
25. See note 5.
26. Said concedes in two places that Islam does indeed have a defining essence. On pp. 57–59 of *Covering Islam*, he isolates what he calls ‘the bedrock identity of Islamic faith’. Likewise, in ‘Impossible Histories’ (*Harper’s*, July 2002, pp. 69–70) Said describes Islam in essential terms ‘[a]s a religious idea’, protesting very quickly that this idea leaves one with a merely introductory and ‘primitive’ understanding of the nature of Islam. Two fatal problems arise here. The first is that these claims are flatly inconsistent with the bulk of Said’s claims about Islam. The preceding two passages concede that Islam has an essence. But as has been argued in this essay, a large number of passages assert that it lacks one. Said nowhere resolves the inconsistency. At times, Said seems to suggest that although Islam has a core set of defining doctrines, this core bears no determinate relation to the many kinds of Islam we find in history and across various cultural contexts today (e.g., Said, ‘Impossible Histories’, p. 70). But Said offers nothing in the way of an argument for this claim. Nor does he deal with the

- possibility that every genuine version of Islam bears some relation to the core doctrines within a determinate *range* of plausible possibilities. Nor, finally, does it occur to Said, despite his ritual invocation of the first-person perspective of the Muslim believer (Said, 'Impossible Histories', p. 74), that his approach to Islam is incompatible with precisely that perspective. Serious Muslim believers profess faith in Islam qua Islam, not in *species* of Islam subdivided by secular criteria (e.g., 'eighteenth century Yemeni Islam', to use Said's example). No student of Islam, secular or religious, can afford to ignore this obvious fact. Said does.
27. Said, *Orientalism*, pp. 96–102, 105, 208, 236–240, 246–254, 272–273, 276, 280, 283, 296–297, 301–302, 305, 322; Said, *Covering Islam*, pp. 9–11, 57–62, 85, 148; Viswanathan, *Power, Politics and Culture*, p. 238; Said, 'Impossible Histories', p. 70; Tony Judt, Introduction to Edward W. Said, 'Collective Passion', in *From Oslo to Iraq and the Road Map*, New York, 2004, p. 110.
 28. Said, 'Impossible Histories', p. 70.
 29. Said, 'Impossible Histories', p. 70.
 30. Said, *Orientalism*, pp. 96–102, 234, 237–240, 246–254, 256, 301; Said, *Covering Islam*, pp. xxxi, lv, 62, 85, 148; Said, *Politics of Dispossession*, pp. 307–308.
 31. See 'Impossible Histories', and 'Adrift in Similarity', in Said, *From Oslo to Iraq and the Road Map*, pp. 119–124.
 32. E.g., Said, *Orientalism*, pp. 272–273, 283; Said, *Covering Islam*, pp. 44–45, 168; Viswanathan, *Power, Politics and Culture*, p. 238; Said, 'Impossible Histories', p. 74.
 33. Said, *Orientalism*, p. 283. Cf. note 5 above for further discussion of some relevant issues here.
 34. Said, *Orientalism*, p. 328.
 35. Said, Afterword to the 1994 edition of *Orientalism*, pp. 340–341.
 36. Said, *Orientalism*, pp. 307, 323.
 37. Said, Afterword, *Orientalism*, 1994 edition, p. 341.
 38. Sadiq al Azm, 'Orientalism and Orientalism in Reverse', in Jon Rothschild (ed.), *Khamsin: Forbidden Agendas—Intolerance and Defiance in the Middle East*, Beirut, 1984, p. 350. Al Azm cites p. 96 of *Orientalism* as evidence, but misconstrues Said's point. Although Said concedes Orientalism 'a great many' achievements on that page, he tells us on the same page that regardless of these achievements, we 'must be very clear' that Orientalism systematically falsified ('override') the Orient and abetted imperialism. Said's point then is that Orientalism's supposed achievements furnished the very materials by which it *falsified* the Orient. All things considered, that would make Orientalism a failure, which is precisely the word Said repeatedly uses for it (e.g., Said, *Orientalism*, pp. 322, 328).
 39. For a clear example of the mistake, see Emmanuel Sivan, 'Edward Said and His Arab Reviewers', in *Interpretations of Islam: Past and Present*, Princeton, NJ, 1985. The mistake also arises in a somewhat milder form in Al Azm's 'Orientalism and Orientalism in Reverse', e.g., p. 351 and in Aijaz Ahmad's 'Orientalism and After', *In Theory*, p. 183. It is worth noting that Al Azm's famous thesis of 'Orientalism in Reverse' (pp. 371–376), though similar to the criticism of Said expressed in this essay, is also different from it. Al Azm uses that phrase to denote the Islamist exploitation of Said's thesis in defence of Islam, whereas the thesis of this essay concerns the logic of Said's thesis, not its use or misuse by others. Remarkably, Said offers no sustained response to Al Azm's thesis anywhere in his writings. For a brief discussion of 'Orientalism in Reverse', see Viswanathan, *Power, Politics and Culture*, pp. 184, 219–222. Aijaz Ahmad makes a criticism similar to Sadiq al Azm's in 'Orientalism and After', but unfortunately formulates it by way of an interpretive point about Said's use of Foucault, which considerably understates the essential problem, e.g., pp. 166–169.
 40. Said, *Orientalism*, pp. 49–73.
 41. Said, *Orientalism*, pp. 25–28.
 42. Said, *Orientalism*, p. 272; Said, 'Impossible Histories', p. 69.
 43. Said, *Orientalism*, pp. 202–205, 272; Said, *Covering Islam*, pp. 44–47, citing C. Wright Mills.
 44. Said, *Orientalism*, p. 317; Said, *Covering Islam*, pp. lviii, 44; Said, 'Impossible Histories', p. 70.
 45. On terrorism, see Said, *Covering Islam*, p. xxxii; Said, 'The Essential Terrorist', in Edward W. Said and Christopher Hitchens (eds.), *Blaming the Victims: Spurious Scholarship and the Palestinian Question*, London and New York, 1988, p. 156; Said, *The Politics of*

- Dispossession*, p. 345; Viswanathan, *Power, Politics and Culture*, pp. 295, 239. On anti-Semitism, see Said, *Politics of Dispossession*, chapter 32. On censorship, see Viswanathan, *Power, Politics and Culture*, p. 383.
46. On Eqbal Ahmad, see Said, 'Adrift in Similarity', *From Oslo to the Iraq War*, pp. 122–124, citing Ahmad's columns in the Pakistani newspaper *Dawn*, January–March 1999. On Shariati, see Said, *Covering Islam*, pp. 67–68. Elsewhere, Said asserts that Osama Bin Laden has misinterpreted Islam—a claim he asserts without analyzing a single word of Bin Laden's writings, Said, 'A Vision to Lift the Spirit', p. 129; and Said, 'Suicidal Ignorance', p. 133, both in Said, *From Oslo to the Iraq War*.
 47. Said, *Orientalism*, pp. 302–305. Said is discussing P.M. Holt, Anne K.S. Lambton, and Bernard Lewis (eds.), *The Cambridge History of Islam*, 2 vols., Cambridge, 1970.
 48. Said, *Orientalism*, pp. 8, 24. Italics added.
 49. Said, *Orientalism*, pp. 214–215. In Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, Said invokes J.S. Mill's *Principles of Political Economy* to the same end, pp. 59, 90, 91.
 50. 'Further Reflections on the Hebron Massacre', *Peace and Its Discontents*, New York, 1996, pp. 54–55.
 51. Said, *The Question of Palestine*, pp. 146–147.
 52. On Christianity, see Said, *Orientalism*, pp. 67, 70–73, 115, 120. On anti-Semitism, Said, *Orientalism*, pp. 27–28, 286, 307.
 53. Said, *Orientalism*, pp. 322–324.
 54. Compare Said, *Orientalism*, p. 254, with the Afterword to the 1994 edition, p. 336, the Preface to the 2003 edition, pp. xxii–xxx, and Viswanathan, *Power, Politics, and Culture*, p. 174.
 55. Said, 'Impossible Histories', p. 70.
 56. Viswanathan, *Power, Politics and Culture*, p. 80.
 57. Aristotle, *Metaphysics* IV.4, 1006a12–24.
 58. Viswanathan, *Power, Politics and Culture*, back cover.
 59. Said, *Orientalism*, Afterword to the 1994 edition, p. 339; Richard Falk, 'Imperial Vibrations, 9/11, and the Ordeal of the Middle East', *Journal of Palestine Studies*, Vol. 34, No. 3 (2005), p. 72.
 60. Martin Kramer, 'Edward Said's Splash', in *Ivory Towers on Sand: The Failure of Middle East Studies in America*, Washington, DC, 2001, chapter 2.
 61. James Clifford, 'On Orientalism', in *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature and Art*, Cambridge, MA, and London, 1988, chapter 11.
 62. Dennis Porter, 'Orientalism and Its Problems', in *The Politics of Theory*, Colchester, UK, 1983, pp. 179–183, and Valerie Kennedy, *Edward Said: A Critical Introduction*, Malden, MA, 2000. A good deal of left writing consists of pure adulation for Said, e.g., Abdul Jan Mohammed, 'Worldliness-Without-World, Homelessness-as-Home: Toward a Definition of the Secular Border Intellectual', in Michael Sprinker (ed.), *Edward Said: A Critical Reader*, Oxford, UK and Cambridge, MA, 1992; Abdirahman A. Hussein, *Edward Said: Criticism and Society*, New York, 2002; Rashid Khalidi, 'Edward W. Said and the American Public Sphere: Speaking Truth to Power', *Boundary 2*, Vol. 25, No. 2 (1998), pp. 161–177. And some left-leaning theorists have used Said's work as the occasion for promulgating sheer unintelligible nonsense; for a spectacularly silly example see Homi Bhaba, *The Location of Culture*, New York and London, 1997, pp. 71–74.
 63. Lewis, 'The Question of Orientalism'; Sivan, 'Edward Said and His Arab Reviewers'. Joshua Teitelbaum and Meir Litvak make some good points in 'Students, Teachers, and Edward Said: Taking Stock of Orientalism', *Middle East Review of International Affairs*, Vol. 10, No. 1 (2006), pp. 23–43, but offer too many concessions to Said and formulate their critique too broadly.
 64. Said, *Orientalism*, p. 236; Said, 'Orientalism Reconsidered', p. 199; Said, *Reflections on Exile*; Viswanathan, *Power, Politics and Culture*, p. 80.
 65. Said's views on objectivity and truth are simply a mess. Occasionally, he will assert that objectivity is impossible; occasionally, he asserts the reverse and allows for approximations to truth. However, no intelligible position emerges from the claims he makes on the subject. For relevant passages, see Said, *Orientalism*, pp. 9–28, 55, 87, 104, 113–123, 201–210, 259–260; Said, *Covering Islam*, pp. lvii, lviii, 45–47, 135–136, 139–140.

66. See *Orientalism*, pp. 54–56, 96–97, 119–120, 208, 237–240, 246–254, 297, 300; Said, *Covering Islam*, pp. 45–47. Said relies here on work by Claude Levi-Strauss, Anwar Abdel-Malek, Michel Foucault, Talal Asad, Abdullah Laroui, and C. Wright Mills. None of Said's references deals even in a cursory way with the material cited in note 3 of the present study.
67. Claude Levi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind*, Chicago, 1962. At best, a charitable reading would permit one to say that pp. 159–160 of Levi-Strauss's book are broadly relevant to Said's claims.
68. Said, 'Michael Foucault, 1927–1984', in *Reflections on Exile*, pp. 192, 199.
69. Said, *Orientalism*, p. 3. For all the tortured verbiage written on this subject, Foucault's essentialism should be obvious to any moderately intelligent reader simply by inspection of the titles of his books, e.g., *The History of Sexuality*, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, *Discipline and Punish*, New York, 1979; *The Birth of the Prison*, etc. Suffice it to say that the texts amply bear this out. For a very obvious example, see *Discipline and Punish*, pp. 264–270.
70. Said, *Orientalism*, pp. 322, 236.