CONTENTS

Acknowledgments ∙ ix
Note on Transliteration and Translation ∙ xiii

INTRODUCTION
Psychoanalysis and Islam ∙ 1

A Copernican Revolution ∙ Psychoanalysis and the Religious Subject ∙ The Mystic Fable ∙ Psychoanalysis and Islam: A Tale of Mutual Understanding? ∙ Decolonizing the Self ∙ Structure, Method, and Argument

PART I
THE UNCONSCIOUS AND THE MODERN SUBJECT

CHAPTER 1
Psychoanalysis and the Psyche ∙ 21

Translating the Unconscious ∙ The Integrative Subject ∙ Unity and the Philosophical Self ∙ The Epistemology of Psychoanalysis and the Analytic Structure ∙ Insight and Hermeneutics ∙ The Socius: Self and Other ∙ Conclusion

CHAPTER 2
The Self and the Soul ∙ 42

Divine Breath ∙ The Topography of the Self ∙ A Phenomenology of Mysticism ∙ Self-Struggle (Jihad al-Nafs) ∙ Noetic Knowledge and das Ding ∙ Conclusion

PART II
SPACES OF INTERIORITY

CHAPTER 3
The Psychosexual Subject ∙ 63

Languages of Desire ∙ The Sexual Drive ∙ The Spiritual Physick ∙ The Psychology of (the Female) Gender ∙ Same-Sex Desire ∙ Technologies of the Self ∙ Conclusion
CHAPTER 4  Psychoanalysis before the Law  83

Psychoanalysis, Crime, and Culpability - The Criminal at Midcentury - Psychoanalysis before the Law - Anti-Oedipus - The Political Unconscious - Psychopathy - Conclusion

Epilogue  110

Notes · 117
Glossary · 165
References · 169
Index · 191
Psychoanalysis and Islam

In truth, we find treatises on the soul in Arabic works that evoke the Freudian division among the parts of the personality: id, ego, and superego.

—Moustapha Safouan

In 1945 psychologist Yusuf Murad introduced the Arabic term al-la-shuʿur, a term borrowed from the medieval Sufi philosopher Ibn ʿArabi and redolent with mystical overtones, as “the unconscious” in the newly founded Egyptian Majallat ʿIlm al-Nafs (Journal of Psychology). Only two years prior, in 1943, Murad had published Shifaʿ al-Nafs (Healing the Psyche) as part of the popular Iqraʾ (Read) series, a text that introduced its audience to the basic theories and concepts of psychology and its schools of thought. In 1946, lawyer Muhammad Fathi Bey published a full-length treatise titled The Problem of Psychoanalysis in Egypt. Responding to allegations that Freudianism had little to teach us about crime, he argued that, quite the contrary, psychoanalysis and criminology were entirely analogous disciplines. A decade later, in 1958, the Egyptian Lacanian analyst Moustapha Safouan translated Sigmund Freud’s Interpretation of Dreams into Arabic for an eager audience.

The Arabic Freud explores how Freud traveled in postwar Egypt, invoking Freudianism not as a pure form, “the source of an unchanging truth that was the model, mold and dress code to be imposed on all our experience,” but rather as a multivalent tradition and metonym for broader Arabic debates surrounding the status of the unconscious in psychic life. An understanding of the body of work developed on psychoanalysis in Egypt and of the intersections between Islamic thought and psychoanalysis enables us to reconsider that quintessential question of modernity, the question of the self, in a non-European context. Indeed, the story of the elaboration of modern languages of the self in twentieth-century Egypt moves us away from models of selfhood...
as either modern or traditional, Western or non-Western, autonomous or heteronomous, and unsettles the assumption of an alleged incommensurability between psychoanalysis and Islam.

Significantly, the new science of the self that emerged drew both from Freudianism and other psychoanalytic traditions, as well as from key classical Islamic thinkers, such as Avicenna (d. 1037), Abu Hamid al-Ghazali (d. 1111), Fakhr al-Din al-Razi (d. 1209), and most extensively, Ibn ʿArabi (d. 1240). This contemporaneity of classical Islamic texts, coexisting and intermingling with psychoanalytic models, allows us to trace the epistemological resonances of discursive traditions as they come into contact. Translating and blending key concepts from psychoanalysis with classical Islamic concepts, Egyptian thinkers explored the resonances between psychoanalytic and pre-psychoanalytic traditions in order to produce a theory of the self that was at once in concert with and heterogeneous to European analytic thought. According to novelist and playwright Tawfiq al-Hakim the impulse to blend traditions went as far back as Abu Nasr al-Farabi's neoclassical contemplation of Plato's Republic, one in which Greek ideas were poured into the mold of Islamic philosophy and Arabic thought and the intermarriage of literatures, epistemologies, and ontologies transpired.

Tracing the lineaments of the unconscious, The Arabic Freud maps out the topography of modern selfhood and its ethical and epistemological contours in postwar Egypt. What does it mean, I ask, to think through psychoanalysis and Islam together, not as a “problem” but as a creative encounter of ethical engagement? Rather than view Islamic discourses as hermetically sealed, or traffic in dichotomous juxtapositions between East and West, this book focuses on the points of intersection, articulation, and commensurability between Islamic discourses and modern social scientific thought, and between religious and secular ethics. The hybridization of psychoanalytic thought with pre-psychoanalytic Islamic discursive formations illustrates that The Arabic Freud emerged not as something developed in Europe only to be diffused at its point of application elsewhere, but rather as something elaborated, like psychoanalysis itself, across the space of human difference.

A Copernican Revolution

Notions of the unconscious had seeped into Arabic writings in Egypt since at least as far back as the 1920s and through a myriad of sources, including for example Pierre Janet, Sigmund Freud, Carl Jung, and Alfred Adler. Salama Musa, an avowed Fabian and public intellectual, published multiple books, beginning in the late 1920s, that touched on Freudian and psychoanalytic themes for a lay audience. Musa had referred to the unconscious by the somewhat awkward compound phrase al-ʿaql al-batin (the inner mind), which he had to define extensively for his audience, in a 1928 text. Yet the imprint of
Freudian psychology was becoming increasingly visible in the 1930s and 1940s in the focus on unconscious drives, as synopses and translations of Freud began to appear. For example, a 1938 article in *al-Hilal* noted that a generational shift had taken place and that Egyptian youth were avidly reading Freud and were familiar with his ideas on psychoanalysis, the unconscious, the interpretation of dreams, and the sexual drive. A 1941 article in *al-Thaqafa* by intellectual and writer ʿAli Adham discussed Freud’s attitude toward war, translating and summarizing portions of “Thoughts for the Times of War and Death” and *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, while outlining the sexual or life drive and explicating the increased significance of the death drive for Freud in the aftermath of the Great War. By the mid-1940s a burgeoning lay literature on psychology was so well developed that scholars felt compelled to critique the unscientific literature “drowning the marketplace”—a testament to the increased salience of psychology to popular public discourse. And by 1951 Kamal al-Din ʿAbd al-Hamid Nyal, a secondary school philosophy teacher, proposed prenuptial psychological exams in order to prevent unhappy marriages due to unresolved Oedipus complexes.

Indeed, no knowledge of Freud could be complete without an understanding of the Oedipus complex, which Arabic readers would have been familiar with through the two adaptations of Sophocles’s *Oedipus Rex* that appeared in 1949 by playwrights Tawfiq al-Hakim and Ali Ahmad Bakathir, as well as the first scholarly Arabic translation in 1939 by Egyptian belle lettrist Taha Husayn. Egyptian dramatist al-Hakim’s version is noteworthy for its innovative interpretation that places the central conflict of the play not between man and fate, but rather between fact and (hidden) truth, a decidedly Freudian reading. But it was above all in Naguib Mahfouz’s masterful 1948 literary rendition that the Oedipus complex was brought to life for its Arabic readers. In *al-Sarab* (The Mirage) the highly introverted protagonist Kamil Ruʾba Laz immerses himself in a daily dreamscape to escape a stifling reality and a pathological attachment to his mother, characterized by “an unwholesome affection which had exceeded its proper limits … a kind of affection that destroys.”

Understanding of Freud abounded in literary criticism as well. In 1947, the renowned Islamist thinker and writer Sayyid Qutb discussed the heuristic value of a psychological and specifically a psychoanalytic approach to literary criticism—itself defined as the attempt to understand literature as “the expression of a sensory experience in an inspired image.” Qutb demonstrated a psychoanalytical approach through a detailed consideration of Freud’s study of Leonardo da Vinci. Qutb’s familiarity with Freud was gleaned directly from the pages of *Majallat ʿIlm al-Nafs*, as evidenced by his reference to the unconscious as *al-la-shuʿur*, as well as his use of the term *al-jinsiyya almithliyya* to refer to homosexuality, both terms of art put forth by the journal. In 1953, two psychoanalytically oriented studies of the ʿAbbasid poet
Abu Nuwas, widely known for his homoerotic poetry, were published in Egypt. Both studies, one by literary critic Muhammad al-Nuwayhi and the other by poet and writer ‘Abbas Mahmud al-‘Aqqad, were greatly concerned with Abu Nuwas’s psychosexual makeup. In 1954, outside of Egypt, Iraqi sociologist ‘Ali al-Wardi wrote on the importance of Freud and “unconscious drives rooted in psychological and social conditions.” The ardent interest in Freud was the purview of academics and novelists, prevalent in lay and scholarly literature alike, as well as an object of interest to both secular and religious thinkers. Freud, it would seem, was nothing short of ubiquitous in postwar Egypt and the Arab world.

**Psychoanalysis and the Religious Subject**

In his *Sources of the Self*, philosopher Charles Taylor discusses the shift that occurred in the moral topography of modern selfhood in the early modern West. In particular, he locates the emergence of a space of moral interiority characterized by a language of inwardness, and separated from the divine, with the thought of Descartes. Post-Cartesian thought, he argues, located the sources of the self within humans, rather than in relation to a path toward the divine. Revisiting the Western European archive of selfhood, Jerrold Seigel departs from Taylor’s account, which, he argues, overemphasizes the punctual and disengaged nature of selfhood as a “rejection of moral sources exterior to human existence (the original sin of modernity in Taylor’s story).” Rather than speak of modern selfhood in the singular, Seigel’s more capacious conception allows for variation and vicissitude, to include those, for instance, who were animated by a “desire to preserve a connection with the very premodern conceptions of a transcendent universe able to guarantee the harmony between self and world whose decline Taylor laments.” Moreover, Seigel departs from views that “regard the notion of an individual and subjectively grounded selfhood as peculiarly Western and modern.”

This more nuanced and expansive understanding of the history of modern selfhood helps us unsettle assumptions regarding the singularity of Western selfhood, as well as the secular nature of modern selfhood, assumptions that have been usefully undone by a growing body of literature on the globalization of the unconscious that has placed European and non-European formations within a single analytic lens. Ranjana Khanna has introduced the notion of “worlding” psychoanalysis, arguing that “understanding psychoanalysis ethnographically involves analyzing its use, both by Europeans and by the colonized,” thereby “provincializing a language that presented itself as universal.” Shruti Kapila has investigated “Freud and his Indian friends,” demonstrating how psychoanalytic knowledge was challenged and reappropriated in the context of colonial India, particularly with respect to religion, which was placed within a normative rather than pathological domain. Similarly, Chris-
tiane Hartnack has detailed Girindrasekhar Bose and the Indian Psychoanalytic Society’s integration of classical Hindu texts and popular cultural traditions into their psychoanalytic theory, while Mariano Ben Plotkin has traced the emergence of a psychoanalytic culture in Argentina and its institutional dissemination throughout the twentieth century, and Rubén Gallo has excavated the “terra incognita that is Freud’s Mexico.”29 Such reformulations of the global modern subject have refused to see the emphasis on the divine, for example, within non-European models of selfhood as atavistic remnants to be worn away by modernity and secularization. They have thus belied the implicit, albeit unsayable of European psychoanalysis, “the impossible achievement of selfhood for the colonized, who remain primitive and concealed.”30

Despite this, the assumption that modern selfhood, and by extension psychoanalysis, are normatively secular, remains a tenacious one. Many scholars have assumed “the non-religious, radically atheistic, anti-metaphysical foundations of psychoanalysis,” based on Freud’s readings of monotheism in Moses and Monotheism and his statements in “Obsessive Actions and Religious Practices,” The Future of an Illusion, Civilization and Its Discontents, and elsewhere in his writings.31 Admittedly, there were early analysts who believed that religion “was an expression of the infantile in mental life,” and that religious ideas were “illusory wish fulfillments.” Religious practices were compared to obsessional neuroses, religious experience to infantile regression and desire for union, or a misinterpretation of sexual feelings and even to catatonia and schizophrenia. However, there were analysts who tried to bridge the gap between analysis and religion, such as Eric Fromm and Karen Horney.32 Bruno Bettelheim, for example, argued that in the original German, Freud’s language was full of references to the soul, going so far as to refer to analysts as “a profession of secular ministers of the soul.”33

To be sure, Freud himself has been subject to a wide variety of interpretations, ranging from those who see him as singularly atheistic to those who argue for his positive affirmation of Judaism.34 In a most controversial interpretation, psychoanalysis has even been seen as a secularized version of Jewish mysticism.35 At the center of these analyses often lay Sigmund Freud himself who, many have claimed, demonstrated an ambivalence toward religion in general, and Judaism in particular. Edward Said’s Freud and the Non-European addresses the question of Freud’s complex and troubled relationship to his Jewish identity primarily through the prism of its implications for political and national identity. Said deftly reads Moses and Monotheism, and its assertion that Moses was an Egyptian, as indicative of an antinomian thinking and an “opening out of Jewish identity towards its non-Jewish background.”36 Said sees the strength of this Freudian insight regarding the non-unitary nature of identity as “attending to it as a troubling, disabling, destabilizing, secular wound—the essence of the cosmopolitan, from which there can be no recovery,” once again connecting the cosmopolitanism of psychoanalysis

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PSYCHOANALYSIS AND ISLAM [5]
to its secularity. Other scholars have focused less on Freud as a historical personage or on Moses and Monotheism as indexical of Jewish identity, and more on psychoanalysis as a heteroglossic tradition that exceeds “the scope of Freud’s explicit postulates and arguments,” thereby revealing “an other Freud,” or what is “in Freud more than Freud.” Such an attentiveness to the productive tensions and ambivalences in Freud’s work have enabled the staging of a dialogue between psychoanalysis and theology. In a reevaluation of the Freudian tradition, Eric Santner takes seriously the therapeutic elements of monotheism, while elaborating the psychotheological contours of everyday life (revelation as enabling accountability and openness to the Other), to borrow his turn of phrase.

Moving away from the literality of determining “what Freud really meant” has led to an emphasis on understanding the relationship between psychoanalysis and religion through the prism of ethical being, being for the Other, and the “love of man and the decrease of suffering” shared by religion and psychoanalysis alike. Thinkers have turned to bearers of the Freudian tradition, most notably Jacques Lacan, to argue for what James DiCenso terms “a reciprocal impingement of religiously derived concepts and issues upon psychoanalytic theory.” As Lacan noted, the subject of religious experience was for Freud, “literally a dead letter…. Yet … that letter was nevertheless definitely articulated.” Lacan systematically addressed the question of “the monotheistic foundations of Western subjectivity as a set of discursive ruptures” through which the modern subject was forged. The emphasis on Lacan has enabled a rethinking of the relationship between psychoanalysis and “religious and ethical selfhood.” In short, Lacan’s method “is to bring psychoanalysis into proximity with both philosophy and religion,” while acknowledging that “religion can give expression to the ethical potentiality for being of the subject.”

The Mystic Fable

Within the analytic tradition, mysticism, as a subset of religious belief and practice, has retained a peculiar importance, and for some, an exalted status. Freud himself, according to Ernest Jones, “regretted having ignored ‘the rarer and more profound type of religious emotion as experienced by mystics and saints,’” having focused instead on the religious belief of the common man. As Marion Milner points out, Freud discussed mysticism in precious few references. In the introduction to Civilization and Its Discontents Freud discussed a letter from Romain Rolland in which his friend described an affective or psychic state termed “oceanic feeling”:

It is a feeling which he would like to call a sensation of “eternity,” a feeling as of something limitless, unbounded—as it were, “oceanic.” This
feeling, he adds, is a purely subjective fact, not an article of faith; it brings with it no assurance of personal immortality. Freud ultimately concluded that oceanic feeling was a form of primary narcissism, a residual effect of the ego-feeling of “limitlessness and of a bond with the universe.” Oceanic feeling represented a sort of primitive survival in the domain of mental life—an early phase of ego-feeling. According to Ranjana Khanna, Freud’s conception was part of a larger progressivist and civilizational discourse “seen not as evolution but as a history in which those whom he understood to be savages really did await treatment.”

In discussing oceanic consciousness, Freud noted that the affect caused him “no small difficulty.” “I cannot,” he continued, “discover this ‘oceanic’ feeling in myself. It is not easy to deal scientifically with feelings.” William Parsons has shown that Freud’s thirteen-year correspondence with Romain Rolland was beset with ambivalences and that his view of mysticism was far more nuanced than received accounts would have us believe. So much so that the Freud-Rolland debate foreshadowed philosophical arguments found in contemporary debates about mysticism, setting forth the possibility of a “new dialogical position that grants legitimacy to mystical modes of knowing.” In sum, we find “an ambivalent Freud who . . . oscillated between an ill-informed, dismissive reductionism . . . and a more open appreciation of mystics as ‘intuitive psychologists’ whose ecstatic and artistic utterances, properly interpreted, might lead us to new forms of psychological knowledge.”

Beyond the appreciation of such new forms of knowledge, thinking alongside mysticism has arguably deepened the analytic tradition and enabled a reconsideration of the ethics of the human subject. Lacanian psychoanalysis, oftentimes through its engagement with mysticism, places ethics at the core of man’s relationship to the good, as an unconscious dialectical relationship between the subject and the law mediated through enjoyment (jouissance). As Marc De Kesel argues, Lacan breaks with Aristotelian ethics in terms of content (as for example, in the cultivation of virtuous habits), but retains the central form of ethical judgment in the subject’s mediation between the pleasure principle and the reality principle. And yet within Lacan’s framework the good is not imagined as the moral universe of general values (neither “the moral ‘ought’ of the superego,” nor the Kantian categorical imperative), but rather a positive orientation toward what lies beyond the formal law, “an antimoralistic ethics.” Classical ethics is consequently decentered while its core form is retained.

Lacan devoted particular attention to mysticism, conceived in the style of courtly love, as exemplifying an erotics centered on the love of the “good old God.” For Lacan “religion in all its forms” consisted in avoiding a constitutive emptiness (a vacuole) at the heart of the human subject that he terms, following Freud, das Ding, conceived as a radical evil, a death drive, around
which man must keep his distance and yet ethically orient himself.\textsuperscript{59} The entire process of sublimation, to which Lacan devotes much attention, relates to this confrontation between man and “the deathliness of his drive.”\textsuperscript{60} Religion, like art, sublimates \textit{das Ding}, encircling it in order to conceive it; it is “a gap always in abeyance (a béance) of religious men and mystics.”\textsuperscript{61} For Lacan “all mysticisms, all that Kant disdainfully calls the \textit{Religionsschwärmeien}, religious enthusiasms…. What is all this except a way to rediscovering the relation to \textit{das Ding} somewhere beyond the law?”\textsuperscript{62}

In this book, I explore Islamic mysticism, or Sufism, as a particularly fruitful point of entry for thinking about the relationship between Islam and psychoanalysis in terms of the theorization of the relations among ethics, eros, and the unconscious. Like Michel de Certeau, I find that mystical religious literature often shared an epistemological alignment with psychoanalysis. Pursuing the functional analogy between psychoanalysis and mysticism, de Certeau analogizes these two discursive formations as inaugurating the question of the subject, conceiving the body as itself a symbolic language, establishing a dialectic between the hidden and the shown, and asking what remains of the spoken word, all the while authorizing “a critical analysis by establishing a space (be it ‘mystical’ or ‘unconscious’) posited as different but not distant from the configuration organized by those founding principles of the historical system.”\textsuperscript{63}

It is perhaps, then, not accidental that Lacan had referenced the Muslim Andalusian mystic and philosopher Ibn ʿArabi on a number of occasions, going so far as to note his own alignment with Ibn ʿArabi’s position on symbolic knowledge over the rationalism of Averroës.\textsuperscript{64} Nor, too, is it incidental to find that Moustapha Safouan, a preeminent member of Lacan’s inner circle in Paris, had originally trained with Ibn ʿArabi scholar and translator Abu al-ʿAla’ al-Afifi, whose doctoral thesis elaborated on the medieval mystic’s conception of psychology.

\textit{Psychoanalysis and Islam: A Tale of Mutual Understanding?}

The first Arabic translators of Freud rendered “the unconscious” as \textit{al-la-shuʿur}, a notion deeply resonant within the Islamic mystical tradition and evocative of the work of Ibn ʿArabi.\textsuperscript{65} Contemporary scholars have revisited this link between psychoanalysis and Islam by focusing on Ibn ʿArabi’s rendition of the Qur’anic story of Abraham, in which Abraham dreams that he is sacrificing his son and believes it to be a divine commandment. According to Ibn ʿArabi:

God said to Abraham while he was speaking to him: “In truth, O Abraham, you believed in a vision,” which is not to say that Abraham, be-
believing he had to sacrifice his son, was faithful to the divine inspiration; because he has taken the vision literally, while every dream demands a transposition or interpretation.66

As Jean-Michel Hirt notes, the Abrahamic trial confronts us with “whether to believe or to interpret one’s dream,” in which the “error is to give in to the manifest meaning of the dream, to reduce it to action, instead of hearing its latent signification.”67

Tunisian analyst Fethi Benslama elaborates further: Ibn ʿArabi interprets the dream not as the desire to sacrifice the son, but rather as “the desire to kill the child in the father.”68 Abraham is “‘not-conscious’ (bi lā ʿchūʿūr) of the true object of the desire for sacrifice,” nor of the divine interpretation of the dream, of which he “was not conscious (la yachʿ ur).”69 Ibn ʿArabi continues, “Because God is never unconscious (bi lā Chʿ ur) of anything, while the subject is necessarily unconscious of such a thing in relation with such other.”70 Man is therefore not conscious of the multiplicity of things (for example, in Abraham’s dream) and their transmutation into multiple forms, Benslama continues, “forms to which man does not have full access since there is an unconscious.”71

As Benslama states, “Ibn Arabi’s unconscious is not the Freudian unconscious, even if it often comes close to it. It is the condition of the spiritual veiling and unveiling of the multiple forms of man.”72 While it may ultimately be true that Ibn ʿArabi’s unconscious differs from the Freudian unconscious, it was epistemologically resonant with it, much in the same way that Ibn ʿArabi’s notion of the imaginal world (hadrat al-khayal) resonated with Lacan’s Imaginary, albeit conceptualized as a theophany, as I elaborate in chapter 2.73

Fethi Benslama’s reading of Ibn ʿArabi takes place in the context of an “exploration of the texts and symbolic constructions of the Islamic religion in relation to the hypotheses of psychoanalysis.”74 In particular, he seeks to readdress Abdelkebir Khatibi’s claim that “Islam is an empty place in the theory of psychoanalysis.”75 His parsing of the Abrahamic story of sacrifice is an attempt to situate the “primal fictions of Islam and the workings of its symbolic systems” in terms of the Freudian role of the father in the establishment of the monotheistic religions.76 Yet in focusing on the “repressed elements of Islam’s founding narrative,” Benslama’s writings have been motivated, in part, by a concern for political Islamism as a return of the repressed.77 Islamist movements, he notes, are “haunted by the question of origins,” the heart of a “tormented present.”78

Benslama is not alone in his use of psychoanalytic concepts and tools in order to understand the means and motives of Islamic religious phenomena. There is, in fact, a large psychoanalytic literature that seeks to understand contemporary Islamism as well as an alleged Arab and Islamic hostility to psychoanalysis.79 In striving to explore the psychic reasons for an assumed Islamic resistance to psychoanalysis, such thinkers have proffered explanations of an
Arab culture “dominated by the figure of the persecuting Master outside its ranks and the paternal Master within them.”80 Even when such explanations purport to be historical, they fail to take into account the specific history through which “Islam” and “psychoanalysis” became iconic symbols representing allegedly distinct civilizations and political positions. Such debates reduce theoretical models to political signifiers largely evacuated of meaning (a Western self signified by psychoanalysis and an Eastern self signified by Islam). Joseph Massad has criticized this body of literature on psychoanalysis and Islam by arguing that it represents an “uninterrogated conjunction of a reified psychoanalysis and a reified Islam,” with the psychoanalytic insights of Benslama functioning as mere “invocations of liberalism.”81 The attempt to stage an interlude between psychoanalysis and Islam reproduces “the avatars of colonial thought with regard to the matter of the psychic being.”82 Indeed, as Alberto Toscano eloquently states, the “idea of transforming psychoanalysis into a secular clinic aimed at diagnosing the phanstasmatic impasses that prevent ‘Arabs’ or ‘Muslims’ from becoming the properly pathological subjects of modernity (rather than fanatics stuck between crumbling tradition and fear of ‘Westoxification’) leaves itself open to the accusation that psychoanalysis might constitute yet another stage in that cunning of Christianity which has often taken the name of ‘secularism.’”83 Such is an implicit danger of Gohar Homayounpour’s spirited defense of Doing Psychoanalysis in Tehran, where she rebuts claims of an Islamic resistance to psychoanalysis, but only by virtually effacing Islam’s presence in the Islamic Republic of Iran, with the exception of a few offhand references.84

The Arabic Freud actively refutes the secular civilizing mission of certain strands of psychoanalysis by bringing psychoanalysis and Islam into dialogue with each other and yet at the same time it does not take Islamic scripture, theology, and tradition as an ahistorical object of psychoanalytic inquiry. As such, I do not use psychoanalysis as a theory through which to understand the origins of Islam as a religion, or its allegedly attendant civilization, for example, by exploring the role of the father in the Qur’ān (by analyzing the dramatic import of the story of Abraham, Sarah, and Hagar and so forth).85 Rather, I explore specific intellectuals who theorized the self by drawing on both Islamic and psychoanalytic idioms, and reconstruct historical interactions, such as an interlude between Sufism and psychoanalysis in mid-twentieth-century Egypt, in which thinkers read classical Sufi philosophers such as Ibn ‘Arabi, alongside, in concurrence with, and in distinction to Freud.

I thus join a body of work that takes seriously the relationship between psychoanalysis and Islam as mutually transformative, without succumbing to a secular liberal universalism or cultural imperialism. Stefania Pandolfo has referenced the relationship between Islam and psychoanalysis as representing the possibility of an opening, of “cultivating an ethical attitude in which
one risks one’s concepts, and oneself, in the opening to other traditions—welcoming, in the process, the transmutations of psychoanalytic knowledge.” Sigi Jöttkandt and Joan Copjec have likewise argued for the need to stage an “encounter between Islam and psychoanalysis in their mutual opening to the field of the impossible.” What is crucial to note here is that to instantiate the dialogue between psychoanalysis and Islam is to admit “to a modern subject whose freedom and finitude, responsibility and praxis are articulated in relation to God, on a transcendental axis where the soul/self must be trained and equipped, in this world, to become the addressee of divine discourse; and who simultaneously . . . is ethically active in relation to others in a community.” Allowing the encounter between Islam and psychoanalysis to exert pressure on psychoanalytic thought may therefore be productive and generative of new forms of psychoanalytic knowledge. The idea, of course, is not to collapse the distinction between the two traditions, but rather to allow each to view the other as an aperture within which a certain form of lucidity becomes possible.

In contrast, then, to the so-called tale of mutual ignorance between Islam and psychoanalysis asserted by Benslama and others, I trace a tale of historical interactions, hybridizations, and interconnected webs of knowledge production between the Arab world and Europe. A series of interactions, I might add, in which there was as an ethical engagement between psychoanalysis and religion, and in which the two terms were not assumed to be a priori distinct. The result, I hope, will be part of the project of understanding psychoanalysis ethnographically, not simply by provincializing psychoanalysis’s European provenance, but rather by demonstrating the non-Western traditions and individuals who contributed to psychoanalysis as a body of knowledge that was always already hybridized with the discourse of the other. The coproduction of psychoanalytic knowledge across Arab and European knowledge formations definitively demonstrates the outmoded nature of historical models that presuppose originals and bad copies of the modern subject—herself so constitutively defined by the presence of the unconscious.

Decolonizing the Self

No discussion of psychoanalysis and Islam can avoid the question of colonialism and the relationship between Islam and the West. Gayatri Spivak has gone so far as to suggest that “institutional psychoanalysis can be a latter-day support of . . . epistemic violence,” while Jacques Derrida has noted “the psychoanalytic colonization of a non-American rest-of-the-world.” Referencing colonial Algeria, he suggests that “it was altogether exceptional and untypical for psychoanalysts to raise the question of their own practice in its political, ethno-psychoanalytical and socio-institutional dimensions.”

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And yet, as Ranjana Khanna has detailed, psychoanalysis has been widely used by theorists of decolonization ranging from Aimé Césaire to Frantz Fanon, remarking that it was not possible to “think of selfhood entirely independently of psychoanalysis.” In fact, she continues, the political stakes of decolonization “demanded that subjectivity come to the fore in consolidating a theory and practice of political commitment.” Nevertheless the presence of non-Western analysts raised the pressing question of “Who can legitimately lay claim to psychoanalytic knowledge?” Kalpana Seshadri-Crooks examines “the manner in which psychoanalysis . . . has served to exclude the non-Western analyst from theory or has demanded a reinscription of his/her subjectivity in consonance with Freudian (cultural) ideology.” Far from advocating a rejection of psychoanalysis, Seshadri-Crooks proposes it as a tool with which to understand “the historical ruptures and the epistemic violence engendered by colonialism, with regard to the (re-)inscription of subjectivity as such.” Indeed, countless texts of postcolonial critical theory and history have attended to the historicization of such epistemic ruptures and realignments of subjectivity.

At the same time, conventional narratives of Arab intellectual history focus on colonialism as a formative rupture that split twentieth-century thought (and subjects) into liberal secular and religious trends. Moroccan historian Abdallah Laroui and Egyptian political theorist Anouar Abdel-Malek, for instance, expound the twentieth-century Arab intellectual as the product of the struggle for the reconquest of identity in the face of a constitutive self-alienation created by the colonial encounter. For Laroui and others, the intelligentsia’s response to colonialism and European hegemony led to two dominant trends, traditionalist Islamic thought and modernist thought—the former characterized by a repetitive recitation of the past or an alienation through time, and the latter by an eclecticism characteristic of ideological backwardness, or an alienation through space.

My concern here, however, is of a decidedly different nature. Rather than assume the rigidity, mimesis, or univocity of “traditional” and “modern” thought, I explore the ways in which writings on the self drew from both psychoanalysis and the Islamic discursive tradition, understood as convivial bodies of knowledge subject to continuous reinterpretation. Further, in thinking about the routes of psychoanalysis in postwar Egypt, I attend to what endures of precolonial ontologies and epistemologies, to the continuities rather than ruptures, and to the trace rather than the cut. If as Pandolfo says, “psychoanalysis . . . developed at the margins of European modernity, from the debris of minor or obliterated traditions, and in the form of a counter-move,” then so too did postwar Arab writings on the self. What intellectual exchanges, conceptual translations, and encounters between traditions took place between Islam and psychoanalysis?
In fact, theoretical literature on the anthropology of Islam, such as Katherine Pratt Ewing’s insightful ethnography of Sufism in contemporary Lahore, or Amira Mittermaier’s anthropology of the imagination in Egypt, have eschewed simplistic interpretations of postcolonial Muslim personhood as caught between the fetters of tradition and modernity. Most pertinently, Javed Majeed has compellingly argued that the Sufi poet Muhammad Iqbal might be seen as a possible landmark “in which Islamism and Western critical theory can be considered, not as oppositional discourses, but together, with overlapping concerns, as critiques of and responses to colonial modernity.” Similarly, Naveeda Khan explores Iqbal’s engagement with philosopher Henri Bergson in order to demonstrate his recasting of Islam as an “open religion with possible futures as yet uninstantiated.”

Referencing psychologist Yusuf Murad, leading Egyptian literary critic Mahmud Amin al-ʿAlim referred to him as the consummate “philosopher of integration.” Rather than the “tale of mutual ignorance” that some have claimed to exist, for example, between Islamic and Western theories, debates in the formative postwar period in the Middle East did not view eclectic blendings, in Frederick Cooper’s phrasing, as “personally destabilizing, as intellectually contradictory, or as threatening to [one’s] sense of cultural integrity: in between [was] as much a place to be at home as any other.” For example, in postwar Egypt, an entire generation of scholars and their students began to teach the social sciences in Arabic at Egypt’s national university, establishing an Arabic language lexicon for fields such as sociology and psychology within a university that had heretofore been dominated by French and British influence. Scholars created synthetic visions that combined Durkheimian sociology with Ibn Khaldun’s theory of civilizations, or the dialectical dynamism of psychoanalysis with the mystical philosophy of Ibn ʿArabi, all the while uncovering epistemological resonances between modern European and Arab discursive traditions and demonstrating the contemporaneity of classical Arabic and Islamic texts. Whether scholars were translating Bergson and Fanon, reading Freud, or rethinking Qur’anic ethics, European philosophy was simply not to be dismissed.

And yet even as they were in dialogue with various strands of European thought—existentialism, socialism, and Marxism, to name but a few—postwar intellectuals often agitated for complete political and cultural decolonization. As Yoav Di-Capua has detailed, the postwar period was dominated by a concern for the creation of a “new Arab man”—sovereign, authentic, and free—and on the elaboration of a postcolonial ontology centered on being rather than essence. The 1940s and 1950s constituted the beginnings of a “working through” of the constitutive self-alienation of the colonial era (and hence the focus on the nafs or psyche) and a negotiation of the oftentimes divergent agendas of intellectuals and the state. The drive toward national liberation
and social justice led to an ambivalent relationship to the postcolonial state, viewed at once as the avatar of national independence and an apparatus of political repression.

In particular, psychoanalysis could not be completely divorced from the attempts to professionalize psychology in the postwar period while putting its views and findings at the service of medicine, criminology, and state social engineering in the hope of creating the postcolonial “new man.” At times, psychoanalysis was harnessed to postwar concerns centered on youth and sexual deviance, or on crime and psychopathy, for instance. This was particularly the case given the fact that psychoanalysis itself had made only negligible inroads into clinical practice. Inevitably, such attempts led to tensions between philosophical and ethical orientations and pragmatic political concerns that emerged when intellectual objectives became tethered to postcolonial political programs.

Homo psychoanalyticus was thus not characterized by “the neutralization of ethics and of the political realm” and a dissociation of the “psychoanalytical sphere from the sphere of the citizen or moral subject in his or her public or private life.” Rather, psychoanalysis presented the possibility of enjoyment in the use of the other as an instrument or object, while at the same time offering a means of undermining that sovereign pleasure, precisely by critically analyzing one’s own psychic implication in it. Simply put, psychoanalysis oscillated between ethical ideals centered on the opacity of the human subject (her resistance to intelligibility and understanding) and the belief in the transparency of humans and the possibility of their instrumentalization. Such divergent views marked the difference between the prospect of a psychoanalysis that would be “at the service of those who suffer, and not an instrument of power or mastery over them.”

More specifically, the trajectory of psychoanalysis in Egypt indicates a tension between a notion of the human subject as conceptually opaque, as only incompletely knowable to itself or others due to the existence of the unconscious, and as operationally transparent as the erstwhile object of postcolonial projects of social reform and amelioration. This tension, one internal to psychoanalysis, has often been discussed in terms of the divide between certain strands of Freudian or Lacanian psychoanalysis that posit a “radically unknowable, radically incalculable” subject and those of American ego psychologists that aim for the adaptation of the human subject to his environment. This latter tradition has been criticized for its amenability to projects of human engineering that render the human subject whole, transparent, and calculable, in effect leading to a psychologized subject who becomes the object of Foucaultian biopower.

Among those who drew on psychoanalysis, we observe that the key term of reference was never the ego, but rather always the polysemic Arabic term nafs (soul, spirit, psyche, self), a concept implying a spiritual core, alongside the presence of the unconscious (al-la-shu’ur) as a place where God could be
manifested. Such domains far exceeded the operations of the ego while simultaneously grounded in the praxis of ethics. It would be reductive, then, to think that intellectual and ethical concerns could simply be mapped onto political agendas, and questions beyond postcolonialism and nationalism deeply engaged thinkers concerned with the science of selfhood and the soul. I therefore eschew an analysis that would view psychoanalysis as merely yet another technology of the late colonial state or of postcolonial nationalism, or as epiphenomenal to larger political developments in the Arab world. Psychoanalysis found outlets in theoretical and philosophical debates where thinkers elaborated on the conceptual history of the unconscious and of desire, while attuned to the ethical contours of the subject. At the same time, the exigencies of postcolonial politics often rendered psychological theories in the service of disciplinary projects and prescriptive visions of the postcolonial subject. *The Arabic Freud* traces the movement of these two components of psychoanalytic thought, outlining how these two strands—the philosophical and the pragmatic—intersected and diverged in various ways within the history of analytic thought within twentieth-century Egypt.

**Structure, Method, and Argument**

By exploring the formation of modern discourses of subjectivity in fields as diverse as psychology, Islamic philosophy, and the law, this book demonstrates that psychoanalysis was a tradition with deep and varied roots in the Egyptian postwar setting, not only among psychologists and mental health professionals, but also among Islamic thinkers and legal practitioners. At the same time this is not a reception history; it does not in any way seek to exhaustively assemble together all those who wrote about or approached Freud’s ideas in Egypt, nor does it catalog Arabic translations, commentaries, and exegeses of Freud. Rather, I both stage and historically reconstruct a philosophical encounter between psychoanalysis and Islam, one in which Arab intellectuals emerge as producers of philosophy and theory rather than merely as objects of study or the simple products of their political context.\textsuperscript{113} As Edward Baring notes, we should be wary of “a mode of history that reduces philosophical texts to their contextual moment. One should not see biographical, political, or cultural background as an ‘origin’ for philosophical ideas.”\textsuperscript{114}

We will encounter Arabophone writings on the self by a variety of scholars virtually unknown to a Western audience, all of whom were in conversation with a range of figures of psychoanalysis, such as Sigmund Freud, Karen Horney, Henri Wallon, and Ian Suttie. Such a dialogue was enabled by a long-standing engagement with the classical Arabic tradition of scholarship on the soul or *nafs*, one that included key luminaries of Islamic thought, al-Ghazali and Ibn ‘Arabi, as well as lesser-known thinkers, such as Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah al-Sakandari.
I mobilize both sets of writings, those on psychoanalysis and those of classical and contemporary Islamic thought, as theoretical frameworks and objects of philosophical analysis, shuttling back and forth, much as my own historical actors, between frameworks. At the same time, my analytical orientation is not confined to those of the scholars that I study, and I draw freely from the psychoanalytic tradition, drawing on scholars such as Jacques Lacan who were at times at odds with the theoretical formulations of my historical actors. I do so with the intent of emphasizing certain affinities, while highlighting key differences between these traditions, rather than a dogmatic fidelity to a particular psychoanalytic orientation.

Part I, “The Unconscious and the Modern Subject,” explores postwar intellectuals’ engagement with psychoanalytic theory in philosophical and ethical debates on the nature of the soul, the self, and the psyche. Part II, “Spaces of Interiority,” explores the more pragmatic concerns that emerged with the professionalization of psychology, particularly within the psychology of sexuality and youth and criminal psychology. Traversing literatures minor and major, ranging from scholarly texts on psychoanalysis to lay literature on self-healing, the following chapters address many of the key questions of psychoanalysis and its intersection with multiple traditions, Islamic and otherwise, by exploring, in turn, the modern subject of consciousness, ethics, sexuality, and the law within mid-twentieth-century Egypt.

Chapter 1, “Psychoanalysis and the Psyche,” considers Freudian itineraries in postwar Egypt through an exploration of the work of Yusuf Murad, the founder of a school of thought within the psychological sciences, and the journal he coedited from 1945 to 1953, Majallat ʿIlm al-Nafs. By training a generation of scholars, Murad left a wide-ranging legacy on psychology, philosophy, and the wider academic fields of the humanities and the social sciences. Melding key concepts from psychoanalysis with classical Islamic concepts, Murad elaborated a psychological theory of the subject as an integrative agent, embodying a complex synthesis of unity and multiplicity. Theorizing the temporality of the subject, the epistemology of psychoanalysis and the analytic structure, and the socius, Murad both drew upon and departed from European psychoanalytic thought, while often insisting on the epistemological and ethical heterogeneity of different theories of the self.

Chapter 2, “The Self and the Soul,” reconstructs a historical interlude between Sufism and psychoanalytic psychology in postwar Egypt. How might we think through the relationship between psychoanalysis and the Islamic tradition, while respecting the “ontological stakes” of the latter, namely, the belief in divine transcendence and divine discourse? I address this question through a detailed exploration of the writings of Abu al-Wafa al-Ghunaymi al-Taftazani and his mentor Muhammad Mustafa Hilmi, both prominent Egyptian intellectuals who expounded Sufi ideas for a broader reading public, beginning in the 1940s. Situating these figures within the larger intellectual
and religious context of mid-twentieth-century Egypt, I explore the elective affinities between Sufism and certain strands of psychoanalysis in terms of a dialogical relationship between the self and the Other, as mediated by the unconscious.

Chapter 3, “The Psychosexual Subject,” traces the intersection of psychoanalysis and the invention of the psychosexual subject in postwar Egypt. Following a set of discussions on Freudian theory and sexuality in Majallat ʿIlm al-Nafs, as well as a series of popular and didactic books, I explore newly emerging languages of desire and ethics and their relationship to gender and sexuality. In sharp contrast to the alleged incommensurability between psychoanalysis and Islam, postwar psychoanalysis was able to breathe new life into an earlier premodern classical literature centered on desire and the appetites and on the ethical cultivation of the child. The invention of the psychosexual subject, in other words, did not necessarily entail a simple shift of pleasure and desire away from the theological pastoral toward secular science and medicine as some scholars have asserted.

Between June 1947 and February 1949, a series of articles in Majallat ʿIlm al-Nafs debated the heuristic value of Freud’s ideas, particularly surrounding the Oedipus complex, for an understanding of criminality. Chapter 4, “Psychoanalysis before the Law,” traces this debate spawned by professor of criminal psychology Muhammad Fathi, while paying particular attention to the social role of the criminal at midcentury. I argue that the convergences or divergences found between psychoanalysis and the law were in part related to disputes regarding the causal nature of crime. Further complicating these debates was the juridical status of psychoanalysis itself as it struggled to assert its autonomy as a field of therapeutic practice within the Egyptian legal system. At the center of all of these arguments lay the criminal, himself increasingly enmeshed within new legal and forensic practices, as well as multiple legal regimes over the course of the twentieth century.

In the epilogue, I return to the central question of this book—what does it mean, now, to think through psychoanalysis and Islam together as a creative encounter of ethical engagement? Addressing recent scholarly interventions, such as those of Julia Kristeva, that operate within larger civilizing mission narratives that couple psychoanalysis with the secularization of Judeo-Christian legacies, I question the notion of psychoanalysis as the purview of any singular civilization. What might it mean to rethink the secular ends of analysis and open ourselves up to an ethical encounter with the Other?
INDEX

ʿAbbasiyya Mental Hospital, 95, 104, 105, 106
ʿAbd al-Hamid Nayal, Kamal al-Din, 3
ʿAbd al-Qadir, Husayn, 114
ʿAbd al-Raziq, Mustafa, 45, 136n24, 142n25
Abdel-Malek, Anouar, 12, 124n99
Abdel Nasser, Gamal, 45, 72. See also Nasserism; Free Officers
ʿAbduh, Muhammad, 136n25
Abelove, Henry, 152n113
Abou-El-Haj, Rifaaʿat, 53
Abraham (Qurʾan), 8–9, 122n67, 122n71
Abu Ghurra, Ibrahim, 46
Abu Nuwas, 3–4, 118n21
Academy of Language (Egypt), 23
ʿadab (social comportment), 96, 97, 158n86
Adam (Qurʾan), 42
Adler, Alfred, 2, 78
adolescence, 67, 68, 78, 79–81; affect and, 79; ethics and, 79–81; female experience of, 73, 76–77; introspection and, 79–80, 81; male experience of, 72, 73, 77, 80–81; recapitulation of childhood pleasures in, 67, 68, 79; sexuality and, 78, 80–81; studies of, 79–80, 153n117, 153n118, 153n120
affect: adolescence and, 79; inner affect, emotions (shuʿur batini), 54; oceanic feeling and, 6–7; perception through, 57; sahwa (Islamic revival) and, 140n78; Sufism and, 46, 49, 50–51, 57
Al-Aqqad, ʿAbbas Mahmud, 4, 118n21
al-Afifi, Abu al-Alaʾa, 8, 44, 112, 136n22
al-Aqqad, ʿAbbas Mahmud, 4, 118n21
Arabi, Oussama, 94, 95
Arabic language: Academy of Language (Egypt) and, 23; demotic versus modern standard in, 113, 162n24; political theory and, 113; psychological terminology and classical Islamic concepts in, 21, 33; psychological terminology in, 3, 23; psychological terminology on sexuality in, 63, 65–66, 147n13
Aristotle, 47, 69, 149n56; âme sensible, 139n52; entelechy and, 70; eudaimonia and, 69, 149n46; psychoanalysis and, 7, 149n46; Secretum Secretorum (Kitab Sirr al-Asrar) and, 34; virtue ethics and, 7, 70, 71, 149n46
Asad, Talal, 81, 117n6
Askesis, 52
analogy, 30
analytic situation, 30–33; criminal examination and, 86; integration through, 33; inter-subjectivity in, 30, 32; language and, 31, 32; lying and, 32; resistance and, 32, 86; shaykh-murid (master-disciple) relationship and, 43, 48, 52–54; triadic nature of, 30
annihilation (fanaʾ). See fanaʾ (annihilation)
anthropology of Islam, 13
anticolonialism, 13–14, 15, 39–41, 102; anti-Sufism and, 45; gender and, 156–157n53; political assassinations and, 102–3. See also decolonization; nationalism
anti-Semitism, 120n36
après coup (nachträglichkeit), 26, 129n37
ʿaql (reason). See reason (ʿaql)
ʿaql al-batin (unconscious, inner mind). See unconscious
ʿaql naqdi (critical reasoning). See critical reasoning (ʿaql naqdi)
al-Aqqad, ʿAbbas Mahmud, 4, 118n21
Arabi, Oussama, 94, 95
Arabic language: Academy of Language (Egypt) and, 23; demotic versus modern standard in, 113, 162n24; political theory and, 113; psychological terminology and classical Islamic concepts in, 21, 33; psychological terminology in, 3, 23; psychological terminology on sexuality in, 63, 65–66, 147n13
Aristotle, 47, 69, 149n56; âme sensible, 139n52; entelechy and, 70; eudaimonia and, 69, 149n46; psychoanalysis and, 7, 149n46; Secretum Secretorum (Kitab Sirr al-Asrar) and, 34; virtue ethics and, 7, 70, 71, 149n46
Asad, Talal, 81, 117n6
Askesis, 52
biopower, 14

body: discipline and governing of, 55, 70, 146n172; drives and, 65; gendered body, 64; integrative psychology and, 24, 94; nafs (self/soul) and, 24, 42, 47–48, 54, 94, 114, 128n16, 139n55; prison house of the body, 47–48, 146n172; self-knowledge and, 59

Bose, Girindrasekhar, 5

bourgeois subject, 24, 64, 81–82, 118n21

breath, 42, 134–35nn1–3. See also Nafas Rahmani

Breuer, Josef, 30

Brooks, John L., 29

Buqtur, Zakariyya Ibrahim, 37–38, 133n110

Burrow, Trigant, 97

Cairo Station (Bab al-Hadid) (film), 83

case studies: family structure in, 161n145; love and sexuality in, 75–76, 152n101; methodology of, 99–100, 104; Oedipus complex in, 87–88, 152n101; political assassination in, 106–8; psychopathy in, 104–8, 161n146

castration complex, 67, 71, 73, 74

categorical imperative, Kantian, 7

catharsis, 54, 69, 149n52

certeau, Michel de, 8, 122n63

Cézanne, Aimé, 12

Chahine, Youssef, 83, 154n2

Chakrabarty, Dipesh, 81

childhood, 98; confessional narratives of, 77, 79, 81, 133n119; criminality and, 106, 158n87; egocentricity and, 36–37, 79; gender and sexuality and, 66–68, 71–76, 76–79; homosexuality and, 67–68, 73, 76–79; influence on adult relationships, 77, 152n105; mental illness originating in, 71, 97; mirror stage and, 36–37, 39, 133n108; tarbiya (upbringing) and, 63, 68–71, 71–75, 82

Chittick, William, 129n47, 134n3, 136n19

Chraibi, Driss, 25, 124n102

Christmann, Andreas, 46, 137n30

citizenship, 14, 39, 72, 81

civilizational discourses: Islam and, 10, 13, 111–12; psychoanalysis and, 7, 17, 82, 111–12

civilizing mission, 10, 17, 111
Index [193]

Cleckley, Hervey, 104, 105
Colla, Elliott, 86
collective psychology, 102, 159n124
collective unconscious, 103, 159n124, 160n135
colonialism: criminality and, 107; Egyptian context of, 88–89, 102–4, 124n99; Islamism and, 13; law and, 88–89, 108, 156n48; psychoanalysis and, 5, 10, 11–15, 119n27, 121n52, 128n23; psychology of, 103; self and personhood and, 13, 89, 135n13; subjectivity and, 12, 25; violence and, 12, 103
commitment. See engagement (iltizam)
community of/in the other, 24, 27, 36–38
Comte, Auguste, 30
connaissance adéquate (adequate knowledge), 57
conscience, 59, 88, 93, 96, 139n62, 146n174
Cooper, Frederick, 13
Cojec, Joan, 11, 151n85
coproduction of knowledge, 2, 11, 13, 23, 24, 38
Corbin, Henry: “Apophatic Theology as an Antidote to Nihilism,” 163n36; fana’ (annihilation) and, 52; Ibn ‘Arabi and, 136n19, 143n136; Lacan and, 44, 136n19, 136n20; self-world connection and, 115; Sufi knowledge and, 56; syzygic unity and, 51
cosmopolitanism, 5, 119n27
Cousin, Victor, 24, 29, 38
criminology: Egyptian, 85, 154n6; modern state and, 90, 94, 154n3; Murad on, 100; National Institute for Criminology, 85, 101, 109; psychoanalysis and, 1, 83, 84–88, 94, 98, 154n3, 158n84; social welfare and, 101, 109
critical reasoning (‘aql naqdi), 136n24
al-dafi’ al-hayawi (vital life force), 65, 97.
See also libido
darshan, 57
das Ding, 7–8, 58, 122n59, 143n136, 145n170; Freud and Lacan on, 122n59, 122n61
Dean, Carolyn, 64, 128n25
decolonization: intellectual project of, 12–13, 22, 40, 124n100; psychoanalysis and, 12, 39, 40, 125n109; self and, 25.
See also anticolonialism
deduction, 30, 56
Derrida, Jacques, 11, 69, 129n37
Descartes, René, 4, 37–57
Despine, Prosper, 100
detective fiction, 86, 91, 156n53
Deutsch, Helene, 97
deviance, 64, 72, 73, 75, 147n13, 152n111
dhat (self, subject; Essence of God), 28, 37, 51, 67
dhawq (intimate taste): aesthetics and, 145n168; askesis and, 52; al-Ghazali on, 145n162, 145n168; Ibn ‘Arabi on, 57–58, 144n146; intuition versus, 145n163; knowledge and, 53, 56, 57, 58, 144n146; al-Taftazani on, 57, 58, 145n163
dhikr (remembrance of God), 53, 142n117
dialectics, 7, 21, 30–31, 37, 51, 98, 130n48
Di-Capua, Yoav, 13, 40
DiCenso, James, 6
discernment (tamyiz), 70
discipline (riyada, ta’dib), 52, 63, 70, 80
discursive formations: psychoanalysis and classical Islamic tradition, 2, 12, 13, 22–24, 114; psychoanalysis and mysticism, 8
discursive traditions, 2, 12, 24, 43, 66, 117n6, 135n12
dreams: Abraham’s dream, 8–9; interpretation of, 9, 31, 43, 44, 87; opening inner eye through, 145n162; unconscious and, 31
drives, 3, 65, 67; death drive, 3, 7–8, 27, 55, 129n43; instinct versus, 67; interpersonal theory of, 69; self-preservation drive, 31; sexual drive, 31, 67, 82; sublimation and, 142n123; translation as al-daфиʿ al-gharizi or al-nil al-gharizi, 65
duration, 26, 35
durcharbeiten (working through), 32
Durkheim, Émile, 13, 29
al-Durubi, Sami, 22, 26, 128n24
eclectic spiritualism, 29
education: psychological education, 73, 77, 93; tarbiya (upbringing), 68–71, 72–73, 75, 82, 96
egerrddiya (middle-class professionals), 86, 87
ego, 114, 128n25; al-ana (I, ego) in Sufism, 48, 52, 142n105; ego as other, 33; id and, 98; integration through, 128n25; Lacanian psychoanalysis on, 128n25, 142n105; Lust-Ich (pleasure ego), 152n103; nafs (self/soul) and, 14–15, 24–25, 128n25, 163n33; socius and, 36–37, 67; sovereign, 113; super-ego and, 75, 96; translation of, 23, 128n16
ego psychology, 14, 24, 151n89
ego-centric theories of self, 27, 36–37
ego-feeling, 7
Egypt, history of: 1952 revolution, 39, 45, 72; anticolonial nationalism in, 102–4; colonialism in, 88, 89, 102–4, 124n99; interwar period, 90; Mehmed ʿAli period, 93, 95, 151n34; Ottoman era, 89, 90, 93; postcoloniality, 24; postwar period, 13–14, 64, 83
Egyptian state: Academy of Language, 23; criminality and, 100, 101, 109; legal system of, 86, 88–91, 93–94; Mehmed ʿAli period and centralization of, 93, 95, 151n34; mental institutions and, 95; Military, use of psychology in, 39; National Institute for Criminology, 85, 101, 109; postcolonial state, 13–14, 39; state feminism and, 72
Ellis, Havelock, 77
El-Rouayheb, Khaled, 68
engagement (iltizam), 12, 40
Epicureanism, 68–70
etic violence, 11, 12
esoteric hermeneutics, 56, 144n148
esoteric knowledge, 56, 142n110
esoteric program (al-manhaj al-batini), 54
ethical cultivation, 7, 48, 52–55, 64, 82, 96
ethical attunement, 52–53, 70, 80, 82, 149n56. See also attunement
ethics: divine discourse and, 11, 162n20; ethical autonomy, 59–60, 81–82, 146n174; existentialism and, 40; al-Ghazali on, 70–71, 149n59; jouissance and, 7, 59; Lacanian psychoanalysis and, 7, 163n33; Murad’s conception of, 68–71; nafs (self/soul) as ground of, 15; psychoanalysis and, 14, 39, 59, 69, 114–15; psychoanalysis and Islam and, 2, 10–11, 59–60, 110–11; psychoanalysis and religion and, 5–6; Sufism and, 43, 52–55, 59–60, 146n174; tarbiya (upbringing) and, 68–71, 82, 96; virtue ethics, 7, 70–71, 82, 149n46, 149n54, 149n56
eudaimonia, 69, 149n46
evil, 55
Ewing, Katherine Pratt, 13, 53
exchange of virtues (tabdil al-akhlaq), 49
existential psychology, 30
existentialism: absence (al-ghiyab) and, 133n110; Arabic translation of, 34; decolonization and, 13, 22, 40; selfhood and, 96
exoteric knowledge (ʿilm al-zahir), 56, 142n110, 144n143, 144n150
experimental psychology, 22, 28–29, 30, 130n50
estimacy, 55
Fahmy, Khaled, 89, 93, 151n34
family: adolescent as unit of analysis versus, 79; adult sexuality and, 76; gender roles in, 73, 74, 99; mental illness and, 71, 94–95, 98; Middle East context of, 152n96; nuclear family, 161n45
fanaʾ (annihilation), 50, 51–52, 80, 137n25, 140n84, 142n106
Fanon, Frantz: Arabic translation of, 22, 128n24; Black Skin, White Masks, 103; criminality and, 107; selfhood
INDEX [195]

and, 12, 25, 135n13; violence and, 103–4, 160n134

fantasy, 55, 67, 69, 76, 114

al-Farabi, Abu Nasr, 2

father: attachment to, 76; Oedipus complex and, 73, 78, 88, 158n87, 158n90, 159n122, 159n123; psychoanalysis and, 9, 122n61; religion and, 9, 123n84

Fathi, Muhammad: career of, 85, 154n6; criminology and, 1, 84–88, 96, 100, 101, 154n6; critiques of, 94, 95–98, 101–2; influences upon, 154n10; legalization of psychoanalysis and, 91–95, 108; The Problem of Psychoanalysis in Egypt, 1, 84, 91

femininity, 71–76, 153n15; castration complex and, 71, 73; Egyptian state feminism and, 72, 147n8; Horney on, 72–73; masculine sex/gender, 73; morality discourses and, 156n53; normative ideal of, 75, 78, 153n15; psychology of, 72–73

Ferenczi, Sándor, 53, 148n39

fiqh (Islamic jurisprudence), 34, 93–94, 156n43. See also shariʿa

firasa (insight): definition of, 34, 132n81; divine insight and, 34; einsicht (insight) and, 35; Ibn Arabi and, 34–35, 132n87; Murad and, 33; mystical firasa (al-firasa al-dhawqiyya), 34; physiognomy and, 33–34; qiyafa and, 132n81

forensic medicine, 84, 89, 93; autopsy in Ottoman period, 89, 93, 157n70; colonialism and, 155n33

Foucault, Michel, 64, 149n50

Free Officers, 39, 45–46

French psychology and psychoanalysis: Egyptian psychology and, 28–29, 36–38, 79; Gestalttheorie, 29, 130n50; split subject in, 24–25, 128n25

Freud, Anna, 127n10, 158n90

Freud, Sigmund: aggression and, 27, 31; Arabic translations of, 1, 8, 23, 112, 117n3, 127n10, 136n22; atheism and, 5, 120n34; Beyond the Pleasure Principle, 3; castration complex and, 71, 74; Civilization and its Discontents, 6–7, 27; colonialism and, 11–12, 128n23; criminality and, 83, 85–86, 88, 95–96, 158n84; critiques of, 27, 74, 101, 160n135; das Ding and, 122n59, 122n61; death drive and, 27; drives and, 3, 27, 31, 65–67, 142n123; ethics and, 59; female sexuality and, 72–74; Future of an Illusion, 27; gender and sexual difference and, 71, 72–74, 152n113; group psychology and, 160n135; homosexuality and, 77–78, 152n113; infantile narcissism and, 27; infantile sexuality and, 67; integration and, 128n25; Interpretation of Dreams, 1, 31, 112, 136n22; Judaism and, 5, 44, 120n36, 135n16; literature and, 3–4, 67, 118n17; love and, 152n103; metapsychology of, 31, 66, 68, 128n25, 145n169, 149n46; Moses and Monotheism, 5–6, 120n36; mysticism and, 6–7, 44, 135n16; oceanic feeling and, 6–7, 142n119; Oedipus complex and, 3, 67, 71, 95–101; pleasure and, 74, 142n123; pleasure principle and, 33, 68, 69; popular knowledge of, 2–3, 67, 81, 117n11; race and, 121n52; religion and, 5–6, 51, 120n39, 121n52; repression and, 54; scientific concepts and, 127n13; sexual drive and, 67; social pessimism of, 27; soul and, 5; sublimation and, 59, 60, 142n123; temporality and, 26; Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality, 148n20; tripartite division of the self and, 114; unconscious and, 21, 46

Freudianism: materialist framework of, 31; multivalent tradition of, 1, 6, 7, 14, 24, 44, 69; popular knowledge of, 2–3, 67, 78, 81, 117n11; sexual difference debates in, 74

Fromm, Eric, 5

futuwwa, 90–91

Gallo, Rubén, 5, 96, 158n84

gaze, 37–38, 133n14

gender in the Middle East, 66, 150n69, 152n96, 153n16

gender roles, 71, 73, 99

gender and sexual difference, 71–76, 77, 81–82, 99, 151n71; jins (sex/genus), 66, 73
genitality, 147n13
Gestalttheorie, 28–29, 30, 35, 130n50; 
einsicht (insight) and, 35; idealism 
and holism of, 28, 29, 130n54; Murad 
and, 28, 29, 35; Sufism and, 35
ghariza (instinct). See instinct (ghariza)
al-Ghazali, Abu Hamid Muhammad, 2; 
batin (inner) and zahir (outer) and, 
144n147; childhood and, 66, 70; Deliv-
erance from Error, 145n162; dhawq 
(intimate taste) and, 145n162, 
145n168; ethics and, 70–71, 149n59; 
firasa (physiognomy) and, 34; inner 
eye and, 145n162; instinct (ghariza) 
and, 63, 65–66, 148n16; kashf 
(unveiling) and, 57; light and, 139n49; 
middle way and, 65–66; nafs 
(self/soul) and, 
47, 114, 137n35, 138n41, 163n33; On 
Disciplining the Soul, 63; 
Revival of 
the Religious Sciences (Ihya Ulum al-Din), 52, 63, 70, 114, 138n43; secret 
(sirr) and, 140n63; 
sirat (straight path) and, 71, 78–79; studies of, 
135n12; Sufi experience of, 50, 80; 
tarbiya (upbringing) and, 82; ta’

dib (discipline) and, 70
al-ghiyab (absence). See absence 
(al-ghiyab)
Glueck, Bernard, 97
gnosis. See ma’rifa (gnosis)

God: Dhat (Essence of), 28, 51, 56, 57; 
dhikr (remembrance of), 53, 142n117; 
heart (qalb) and, 57; Ibn ‘Arabi on, 28; 
Lacan and “good old God,” 7, 44; love 
of, 7, 44, 51–52, 56, 76; ma’rifa (knowledge of), 48–49, 51, 56, 59, 141n96, 
141n99; mystical experience of, 52, 
56–58; Nafas Rahmani (Divine 
Breath) and, 42, 134–35n1–3; Names 
of, 28; One/Manyness of, 28, 55, 
130n48, 141n33; paternalism and, 
123n84; seventy thousand veils of, 58, 
146n172; Symbolic (Lacan) and, 
145n169; theophany and, 141n103; 
Unity of, 28, 55, 136n19
Goldstein, Jan, 24
group psychology, 102, 114, 160n35
Guercic, Suzanne, 26, 35
Guevara, Ernesto “Che,” 40
Guillaume, Paul, 28–29

habituation (ta’wid), 70
hadith, 51, 58
Haj, Samira, 117n6
al-Hakim, Tawfiq, 2, 3, 67, 86
hal (state, Sufi). See states, Sufi (ahwal)
Hartnack, Christiane, 4–5
heart (qalb), 46, 48, 49, 145n159; body 
versus, 47–48; dhikr (remembrance of 
God) and, 53; esoteric knowledge and, 
56; firasa (insight) and, 34; al-Ghazali 
on, 137n35; Ibn ‘Arabi on, 52; knowl-
dge and, 56, 57, 139n61; ma’rifa 
gnosis) and, 48; mirror of Divine in, 
52, 57; nafs (self/soul) and ruh (spirit) 
merged in, 48; secret (sirr) and, 
139n62, 140n63
Hegel, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich, 26, 37, 
40, 129n37, 133n109, 143n126, 143n134
Hegelian murder, 40, 143n126
heritage (turath). See turath (heritage) 
hermeneutics: esoteric hermeneutics, 56, 
144n148; integrative psychology and, 
39, 45, 86; law and, 86–87, 108; Sufism 
and, 50, 56, 144n148
Herzog, Dagmar, 125n109
heteronormative ideal: companionate 
marriage and, 76; Freud’s lack of, 
152n113; impossibility of, 76, 78; na-
tionalism and, 72, 76; Oedipus com-
plex and, 67, 78; tarbiya (upbringing) 
and, 67, 73, 78
heterosexuality: child development and, 
67, 73, 78; heteronormative ideal, 67, 
73, 76, 78, 152n113; translation as 
al-jinsiyya al-ghayriyya, 147n13
Hilmi, Muhammad Mustafa, 45, 46; 
doctoral studies of, 137n33; Sufi self-
discipline and, 50, 52; Sufism and 
psychology for, 54
Hirt, Jean-Michel, 9
hiss (sensate data). See sensate data (hiss)
Hodgson, Marshall, 53
holism, 26, 28–29, 86
Homayounpour, Gohar, 10
homosexuality: Abu Nuwas and, 3–4; 
Arabic translation of, 3, 147n13, 
152n111; child development and, 
67–68, 73, 76–79; psychoanalytic 
theorization of, 77–78; same-sex 
romantic attachment and, 68, 76–79;
INDEX [197]

translation as al-jinsīyya al-mithliyya, 3, 77; translation as al-shudhūd al-jinsi (sexual deviance), 152n111; Western category of, 150n69, 152n111

Horney, Karen: feminine psychology and, 72–73, 74, 151n72, 151n77, 153n115; infantile experience and, 152n105; religion and, 5; social optimism and, 27

Husayn, Taha, 3, 67

hysteria, 73, 150n64

Ibn al-Farid, 137n33

Ibn Rushd. See Averroës

Ibn Sabʿin, 43, 46, 145n156

Ibn Sina. See Avicenna

Ibn ʿArabi, 2, 13, 46; Abraham’s dream and, 8–9, 122n67, 122n71; alchemy and, 140n76; Arabic psychological terminology and, 21; Averroës and, 136n20; batin (inner) and zahir (outer) for, 144n143; branches of knowledge and, 144n146; dhawq (intimate taste) and, 57–58, 144n146; Divine Governance of the Human Kingdom, 28; esoteric knowledge and, 56; fanaʾ (annihilation) and baqaʾ (subsistence) and, 142n106; firasa (insight) and, 34–35, 132n87; heart (qalb) and, 52; imaginal world (hadrat al-khayal) and, 142n106; irsah (insight) and, 34–35, 132n87; heart (qalb) and, 52; imaginal world (hadrat al-khayal) and, 9; kashf (unveiling) and, 142n106; Lacan on, 8, 44, 136n20; al-la-shuʿur (unconscious) and, 1, 8, 9, 21, 122n65; love and, 51; Meccan Revelations, 58; multiplicity of religions and, 130n49; Murad’s reading of, 1, 28, 34–35, 38; nafs (self/soul) and, 42, 47, 138n46, 139n53, 141n96, 141n99; Oneness of Essence and, 129n47; Real, 58, 143n136; secret (sirr) and, 48; self-knowledge and, 51, 141n96, 141n99; stations (maqamat) and, 140n86; taʾwil (esoteric hermeneutics) and, 144n148; unity (waḥda) and, 28, 33, 38, 130n48

Ibn Khaldun, 13

id, 47, 98, 114, 163n33

idealism, 26, 28, 29

identification, 32, 69, 87, 148n31

ʿilm al-nafs. See psychology

imaginational world (hadrat al-khayal) (Ibn ʿArabi), 9

Imaginary (Lacan), 9, 112, 143n136

infantile narcissism, 27

infantile sexuality, 66–68, 71, 95, 101, 148n31. See also Oedipus complex

instinct, 67, 148n16; adab (social comportment) and, 96, 97; al-dafiʿ al-hayawi (life force, libido) and, 65, 97; drive versus, 67; primeval inheritance of, 87; sexual instinct, 66–67, 73, 80, 81; social instinct, 27, 73; Sufism and, 49, 54, 59, 80, 140n75; translation as ghariza, 63, 65–66, 148n16

integration: absence of (disintegration), 71, 84, 100, 104, 105, 107; analysis and, 33; ego and, 128n25; Freudian idea of, 128n25; social integration, 25–27, 36

integrative psychology, 21, 24; analytic process in, 33; bio-psycho-social integration and, 25, 26, 100, 104–5; case studies and, 104; criminality and, 84, 100, 101, 104–5, 108; Gestalttheorie and, 29; hermeneutical approach of, 39, 45, 86; language and, 105; post-coloniality and, 13, 22, 24; sexuality and, 76; social integration and, 26–27; subject in, 24–27. See also Murad, Yusuf

interiority: adolescence and, 79, 81; childhood and, 70, 153n119; modernity and, 4, 60, 81–82; Bergson and, 35, 132n103; research methods and, 79; Sufism and, 48, 70

intersubjectivity, 30, 32, 67, 110, 113

intimate enemy, 55

introspection: psychology and, 30–32, 69, 79; self-knowledge and, 30, 48; Sufism and, 48, 54, 80, 145n158

intuition: Bergson and, 35, 36; intuitive sciences, 50, 54, 56, 139n61, 145n163; knowledge and, 30, 35, 49, 56–58, 139n61, 143n140; al-Taftazani on, 45, 49, 56–58, 139n61, 145n163; translation of, 145n163

Iqbal, Muhammad, 13

Iran: criminal science in, 154n3; gender and sexuality in, 76, 150n69, 153n116; Iranian revolution, 112, 162n15; psychoanalysis in, 10, 119n29

al-Iskandari, Ibn ʿAta’ Allah. See al-Sakandari, Ibn ʿAta’ Allah
Islam: anthropology of, 13; discursive tradition of, 12, 117n6; ontological stakes of, 16, 43; orthodox Islam, 43, 45, 46; psychoanalysis and, 1–2, 8–11, 12, 17, 110–15, 135n6; sahwa (Islamic revival), 140n78; state and, 113; unity and, 55, 143n134. See also Sufism

Islamic jurisprudence. See fiqh (Islamic jurisprudence)

Islamism, 9, 13, 111, 123n78, 162n13, 162n14

Istithmus (barzakh). See barzakh (isthmus)

istinbat (analogical reasoning). See ana-logical reasoning (istinbat)

Jacob, Wilson, 72, 90–91

Jambet, Christian, 43, 55

James, William, 121n53, 143n140

Janet, Pierre, 28, 29, 37, 38, 131n58, 133n108

Jay, Martin, 38

Jewish mysticism, 5, 44, 135n16, 136n18

jihad al-nafs (self-struggle), 52–55, 80

al-Jili, ʿAbd al-Karim, 51

jins (sex/genus), 66, 73

Jirjis, Sabri: clinical work of, 104–5, 160n137; Freud critiqued by, 157n72; integrative psychology and, 84, 94, 104–5; psychopathy and, 104–8

Jirjis, Shukri, 91–93

Jones, Ernest, 6, 74, 94

Jöttkandt, Sigi, 11

jouissance: ethical role of, 7, 59; love of God and, 44, 51, 52, 141n94; sexuality and, 80–81

Jung, Carl, 96, 97, 103, 158n85, 159n124, 160n135

Kakar, Sudhir, 53, 57, 141n89

Kant, Immanuel, 7, 8, 59, 146n174

Karadağ, Sadi, 4

Kapila, Shruti, 4

Kashf (unveiling), 56, 58, 142n106, 145n163

Kesel, Marc De, 7

Khan, Naveeda, 13

Khanna, Ranjana, 4, 7, 12, 39, 128n23

Khatibi, Abdelkebir, 9

Kholoussy, Hanan, 72

al-Khuli, Amin, 145n168

Kinsey, Alfred, 77

Klein, Melanie, 96

know thyself (Delphic injunction), 69, 71, 132n103

knowledge: affects and, 57; co-production of, 2, 11, 13, 22–24, 38, 114; deduction versus intuition in, 30, 56; empirical knowledge, 50, 57, 139n61; esoteric knowledge, 56, 142n110; esoteric versus exoteric knowledge, 56; God's knowledge, 28, 113, 130n48; hadith on, 51, 58; Ibn ʿArabi on, 8, 44, 58–59, 144n146; intuition and, 35, 49, 50, 57, 58, 132n81, 139n61, 143n140; maʿrifā (gnosis), 48, 49, 53, 55–58, 59, 60, 141n96, 141n99; mysticism and, 7, 8; self-knowledge, 30, 31–32, 48, 52, 59, 69–70, 141n96, 141n99

Koffka, Kurt, 35

Kojève, Alexandre, 133n109

Koyré, Alexandre, 34, 133n109

Kozma, Liat, 64

Kristeva, Julia, 110–11, 113–14, 161n3, 162n10

Lacan, Jacques: analytic situation and, 30; Corbin and, 44, 136n19, 136n20; das Ding and, 7–8, 58, 122n59, 122n61, 143n136, 145n170; ego and, 142n105, 152n103; ethics and, 7–8, 59, 163n35; Ethics of Psychoanalysis, 122n59, 136n20; intimacy and, 55; Freudianism and, 1, 21; “good old God” and, 7, 44; Hegelian murder, 134n126; Ibn ʿArabi and, 8, 9, 44, 122n73, 136n20; Imaginary and, 9, 112, 143n36; Islam and, 112; jouissance and, 44, 51, 52, 59, 81, 141n94; language and, 63; law and, 7–8, 59, 112; love and, 152n103; love of God and, 7, 44, 51; Lust-Ich (pleasure ego) and, 152n103; lying and truth and, 32; madness and, 154n4; mirror stage, 36, 79; mysticism and, 7–8, 44, 81, 135n14, 136n19, 141n94, 143n136; pastoral and, 129n40; quilting point (point de capiton) and, 24, 128n1; Real and, 58, 143n136; register theory, 143n136; religion and, 6, 7–8, 112, 121n44, 122n59, 143n136; sexual difference and, 151n85, 151n93; soul and, 49;
subject and, 14, 24–25, 128n25; sublimation and, 8, 122n61; Symbolic and, 112, 143n136, 145n169; unitary thinking and, 143n136

laduni (noetic). See noetic (laduni)

Lalande, André, 23, 127n14, 139n54

language, 25, 30–31, 37, 105, 113. See also Arabic language

Laplanche, Jean, 65, 67, 148n31

Laroui, Abdallah, 12, 124n100

al-la-shuʿur (unconscious). See unconscious

latent content: dream interpretation and, 9, 122n71; mysticism and, 8, 43, 44; Sufism and, 48, 52, 56, 59. See also batin; manifest content

law: criminal culpability and, 156n47; criminal psychology and, 83, 101; Egyptian history of, 84, 86, 88–95; forensic medicine and, 84, 89, 93–94; Lacan and, 7, 8, 59, 112; legal personhood and, 88–90, 155n34; medicine and, 85, 157n61; mental illness and, 94, 95, 107, 157n76; psychoanalysis compared with, 85–87, 158n84; public opinion and, 91

Le Bon, Gustave, 160n135

Lear, Jonathan, 69, 128n25, 129n43, 149n46, 149n54, 152n100

legal personhood, 88–90, 155n34

libido, 67, 96, 97, 147n13, 152n103

literary criticism, 3–4, 145n68

literature: decolonization and, 22, 40; law and, 86, 90, 158n83; Oedipus complex in, 3, 67, 118n17; psychoanalytic approach to, 3–4; religion and, 145n168

Lombroso, Cesare, 83, 100, 159n109

Lopez, Shaun, 91, 156n53

love, 74–76; ethics and, 76; Freudian versus Lacanian accounts of, 152n103; gaze and, 38; ishq (passionate love of God), 56, 146n172; Islamic discourses of, 51, 141n92; love of God, 7, 44, 51, 56, 76; Murad on, 27, 74–76, 152n100, 152n103; narcissism and, 75; nationalism and, 107; Oedipus complex and, 67–68, 73, 75, 76, 78; primordial love (Suttie), 27, 74–75; romantic love, 75; social life and, 27; Sufi state (hal) or station (maqam) of, 50–51; Sufism and psychoanalysis on, 44

lover-Beloved relation, 38, 51, 59, 76, 143n136

MacCabe, Colin, 113

madness, 84, 94–95, 108, 154n4, 157n76

Mahfouz, Naguib, 3, 67

Mahir, Ahmad, 102

Mahmud, Abd al-Halim, 54, 142n125

Majallat Iṭm al-Nafs (Journal of Psychology), 1, 23, 38; criminality in, 84, 85, 95, 96, 100; dictionary of psychological terms in, 23, 65; existentialism in, 40; experimental psychology in, 130n50; homosexuality in, 77–78; influence of, 3, 23; letters to the editor in, 77; medicine versus psychoanalysis in, 94; mental health services in, 108; philosophical writings in, 30; self and other in, 36–38; sexuality in, 63, 64, 77; Sufism in, 45; Wallon in, 36–37, 130n50, 133n106

Majallat al-Riyada al-Badaniyya (Journal of Physical Culture), 95

Majallat al-Sīḥa al-Nafsiyya (Journal of Mental Health), 127n10

al-Majallat al-Tibbiyya al-Misryya (Egyptian Journal of Medicine), 92

Majeed, Javed, 13

Malinowski, Bronislaw, 96–97

al-manḥaj al-batini (esoteric program).

See esoteric program (al-manḥaj al-batini)

manifest content: dream interpretation and, 9, 122n71; mysticism and, 8, 43, 44; Sufism and, 48, 56, 59. See also latent content; zahir

maqamat (stations, Sufi). See stations, Sufi (maqamat)

Marcel, Gabriel, 36, 133n110

maʿrifā (gnosis), 49, 55–58; dhawq (intimate tasting) and, 53; esoteric hermeneutics and, 56; heart (qalb) and, 48; intuition and, 57; self-knowledge and, 59, 141n96, 141n99; self-struggle and, 55; Sufi goal of, 55, 56, 59, 60

maʿrifat al-nafs (self-knowledge). See self-knowledge
marriage, 3, 73, 75, 76, 77, 78, 82, 150n68
Marxism, 13, 40
Mary (Qur’an), 42
masculinity, 64, 147n8; male sexuality, 72, 76, 77, 78; masculine civilization, 72, 151n72; masculinity complex, 72–73, 75
Massad, Joseph, 10, 66, 111–12
Massignon, Louis, 46
master-disciple relationship. See shaykh-murid (master-disciple) relationship
materialism, 31, 35
Maucade, Julien, 55
medicine: forensic medicine, 84, 89, 93–94, 150n33, 157n70; law and, 85, 157n61; medieval Arab medical texts, 33; psychiatric medicine (al-tibb al-ʿaqili), 94; psychoanalysis versus, 85, 86, 91–95; sexuality and biomedicine, 64, 71–72
memory, 25, 32, 103, 105
mental institutions, 95, 105, 106, 108, 158n77, 161n55
metapsychology, 31, 66, 68, 128n25, 145n169, 149n46
al-Miliji, ʿAbd al-Minʿam, 79–81
Mihner, Marion, 6
Mirage (al-Sarab) (novel), 3, 67
mirror stage, 36, 79, 133n105
al-Misri (newspaper), 85, 95, 158n81
Mitchell, Juliet, 74
Mittermaier, Amira, 13
modern subject: bourgeois subject, 24, 81–82, 118n21; colonization and, 135n13, 155n34; ethical autonomy and, 81, 146n175; Europe and, 4–5, 88; interiority and, 81–82; legal identity and, 88–89, 150n34; Middle East and, 117n5; plural forms of, 4, 11; secularism and, 4–6, 110–15, 146n174. See also subject
monotheism, 5–6, 9, 111, 121n44
Moosa, Ebrahim, 135n12, 162n20
Moreno, Jacob, 114
Moses, 120n34
mother: attachment to, 74–75, 76, 78, 87, 88, 96, 99; mothering instinct, 73; Oedipus complex and, 3, 67, 73, 75, 78, 96; Orestes complex and, 99
Mura, Andrea, 123n78
Murad, Yusuf: adolescence and, 70, 79, 81; Arabic psychological terminology and, 3, 21, 23, 33, 65, 127n15, 147n12; art and, 69; bio-psycho-social integration and, 25, 26, 100; clinical psychology and, 32, 68, 76; criminality and, 100–101; doctoral studies of, 22, 28, 33, 126n8; ethics and, 68–71; Freud critiqued by, 27, 74, 151n90; Freudian texts reviewed by, 131n66; gender and sexual difference, 71–76, 81, 82, 151n71; Gestalttheorie and, 28, 29, 35, 38; al-Ghazali and, 70; hystera and, 150n64; Ibn ʿArabi and, 1, 28, 34–35, 38, 129n45; infantile sexuality and, 66–68; influence of, 21–23, 39, 84, 104; integrative psychology and, 13, 21, 22, 24, 27, 33, 39; integrative subject and, 24–27; Janet and, 131n58; love and, 27, 74–76, 152n100, 152n103; nafs (self/soul) and, 21, 24–25, 38, 39, 114, 128n16, 128n25; neo-psychoanalytic theory and, 22, 74, 78, 82, 151n77; obituaries of, 126n5, 126n6, 129n30; Oedipus complex and, 67; personality and, 26, 69–70, 71; philosophical orientation of, 29; publications of, 126n7; Ricoeur and, 32, 131n76; sexuality and, 66–68, 73, 76–79, 81, 82; Shah al-Nafs (Healing the Psyche), 1, 69; Sikulajigjat al-Jins (The Psychology of Sex-Gender), 71, 72, 76; societies founded by, 23, 30; socio-political optimism of, 27, 39; socius and, 25, 39, 67, 133n108; soul in Islam and, 139n52; spirituality of, 28; students of, 21, 22; synthetic account of psychoanalysis and, 21, 30–33; tarbiya (upbringing) and, 68–71, 72, 73, 75, 82; textbook by, 22; unity (wahda) and, 21, 24, 25, 27–29, 33, 38, 129n36, 131n58; virtue ethics and, 70, 71, 82
Musa, Salama, 2
Muslim Brotherhood, 45–46, 103, 112, 137n28
mysticism: experience of, 121n53, 142n119, 143n140; intuition and, 35; Islamic mysticism (see Sufism); Jewish and Islamic, 136n18; Jewish tradition of, 5, 44, 135n16; jouissance and, 44, 52,
INDEX [ 201 ]

141n94; Kant on, 8; Lacanian psychoanalysis on, 44, 52, 141n94, 143n136; oceanic feeling and, 6–7, 142n119; psychoanalysis and, 6–8, 44, 58, 122n63, 135n14; psychology of, 48; stages of, 141n89

nachträglichkeit (après coup). See après coup (nachträglichkeit)

Nafas Rahmani (Divine Breath), 42, 134–35n1–3

nafs (self/soul): afterlife and, 140n76; Aristotelian âme sensitive and, 139n52; bahr al-nafs (ocean of the soul), 49; barzakh (isthmus) and, 47; body and, 24, 42, 47–48, 94, 114, 128n16, 139n55; classical Arabic tradition of, 14–15, 24–25, 47–48, 114, 137n35, 138n41; definitions of, 14–15, 47–48, 128n16, 138n39, 138n46, 139n52; divine discourse and, 162n20; ego versus, 14–15, 24–25, 52, 128n25, 163n33; ethics and, 14–15, 48, 59; etymology of, 24–25, 42; al-Ghazali on, 47, 137n35, 138n41; God and, 51; heart (qalb) and, 46, 47–48, 139n55; ilm al-nafs (psychology) and, 42, 58–60; integrative psychology and, 24–25, 38; intuition and, 30; jihad al-nafs (self-struggle) and, 52–55, 80; latent content of, 48; Murad on, 21, 24–25, 38, 39, 114, 128n16, 128n25; Nafas Rahmani (Divine Breath) and, 42, 134–35n1–3; nationalism and, 107; postcoloniality and, 13; Qur'anic tripartite division of, 47–48, 139n53, 163n33; al-Razi and, 114; rukh (spirit) and, 46, 48, 134n2, 137n35, 138n39; self-knowledge and, 48, 51, 141n96, 141n99; Sufi conception of, 46–49, 80, 138n42, 138n46, 139n51, 140n75; tadhkhib al-nafs (self-attunement), 52, 60, 70, 80, 149n56; unconscious and, 48, 54. See also self nahda (cultural modernist movement), 86, 108

al-Nahhas, Mustafa, 102, 103

Najmabadi, Afsaneh, 66, 76, 147n13, 153n16

Napoleonic code, 89, 90

narcissism, 67, 75, 98, 107; primary narcissism, 7, 67, 75; infantile narcissism, 27

Nashed, Rafah, 110–11, 114

Nasserism, 39, 72, 101. See also Abdel Nasser, Gamal

National Institute for Criminology, 85, 101, 109

nationalism: anticolonial nationalism, 13–14, 15, 39–41, 102, 156n53; emotion and, 107, 161n149; reformist nationalism, 104

neo-Freudianism, 151n89

Neo-Platonism, 2, 47

neo-psychoanalytic theory, 151n89; gender and sexual difference and, 64–65, 74, 82; love and, 74; religion and, 5; sexuality and, 78

nervous system, 25, 105

neurosis, 68, 87, 98, 153n98

Nicholson, Reynold A., 46

Nietzsche, Friedrich, 88, 153n28

nihilism, 163n36

al-niyaba (Parquet). See Parquet (al-niyaba)

noetic (laduni), 55–58, 59, 143n140

norms: criminality and normativity, 89, 96, 104, 107, 156n47; gender norms, 64–65, 67, 71–75, 153n115; heteronormative ideal, 67, 72, 73, 76, 78, 152n113; social norms, 96

al-Nuwayhi, Muhammad, 4

object relations theory, 66, 96, 151n89

oceanic feeling, 6–7, 142n119

Oedipus complex: criminality and, 87–88, 91, 95–101, 108; critiques of, 95–101, 102, 158n87, 158n90, 159n122, 160n135; female experience of, 73, 75; gender and sexual difference and, 67, 71, 148n31; homosexuality and, 67, 78; Klein and, 96; literature and, 3, 67, 118n17; Murad's analysis of, 67–68; popular knowledge of, 3, 67, 78; super-ego and, 96, 158n87

Oedipus Rex (Sophocles play), 3, 67

Orestes complex, 99

Orientalism, 46, 112

other: being for the Other, 6, 37; community of/in the other, 24, 27, 36–38;
other (continued)

encounter with, 6, 11, 114–15; gaze
and, 37–38; internal other, 37; Other
(God), 48; Other (Lacan), 6, 33, 114–15,
145n170; self and, 11, 27, 36–38, 44, 67,
148n27; self-knowledge through, 30;
sexuality and, 67, 76; socius and, 25,
36–37, 67; unconscious and, 31–32;
use of the, 14

Pandolfo, Stefania, 10–11, 12, 25, 42, 55,
112, 163n35

Parquet (al-niyaba), 90

Parsons, William, 7

patriarchy, 99

Paz, Octavio, 57

pedagogy. See education

personality: criminal personality, 97; dis-
tegration of, 71, 104, 107; Murad on,
26, 66, 69–70, 71; temporality of, 26

Peters, Rudolph, 89, 155n35, 156n40

phenomenology, 30, 32

physical culture movement, 72

physiognomy, 33–34

Piaget, Jean, 36

Piéron, Henri, 28

Plato, 2, 152n103. See also Neo-Platonism

pleasure, 14, 68–71, 74, 80–81, 82, 100,
142n123; Lust-Ich (pleasure ego),
152n103; al-nafd al-ammarra bi-l-suʾ
(commanding self) and, 47, 54; al-
Razi on, 68–69, 148n41, 148n42; trans-
formation in discourses of, 64, 82;
Vorlust, 67

pleasure principle, 7, 32–33, 68, 69, 70, 82

Plotkin, Mariano Ben, 5

point de capiton (quilting point). See
quilting point (point de capiton)

police, 85, 90

police assassinations, 84, 96, 101–3, 106,
109

political psychology, 160n135

popular knowledge of psychology, 2–3, 4,
81, 108, 117n11; criminality and, 83;
Iqraʾ (Read) series, 1, 71; literature
and, 3, 67, 81; al-Misri (newspaper)
and, 85, 95, 158n81; Oedipus complex
and, 3, 67, 78; radio talk shows and,
81, 127n10

positivism, 30, 31, 86, 144n152

postcoloniality: imagined community of,
27, 39–40; integrative psychology and,
13, 22, 24; "new Arab man" and, 13, 14,
22; ontology of, 13; sexuality and, 72;
subject and, 15, 24, 25

precolonial, endurance of, 12, 91

primary narcissism, 68, 97

projection, 32–33, 51, 59, 76, 78

prophecy, 145n162

Prophet Muhammad, 58, 113

prostitution, 72, 150n68

psychiatric medicine (al-tibb al-aqli), 94

psychoanalysis: across traditions, 2, 4–5,
11, 25, 114, 119n29; colonialism and,
5, 10, 11–15, 119n27, 121n52, 128n23;
co-production of knowledge about, 2,
11, 13, 22–24, 114; criminology and, 1,
83, 84–88, 94, 98, 154n13, 158n84;
Epicureanism and, 69; ethics and, 7, 14,
39, 59, 69, 114–15, 163n35; global sub-
ject of, 4–5, 119n27, 124n90; herme-
neutic approach of, 86; institutional-
ization of, 92; Islam and, 1–2, 8–11, 12,
17, 110–15, 135n6; Islamism and, 9, 111,
162n13, 162n14; legal evidence and,
96, 98, 108; legal regulation of, 91–95,
108; medicine versus, 85, 86, 91–95;
minor tradition of, 12; Murad’s syn-
thetic account of, 21, 30–33; mysticism
and, 6–8, 44, 58, 122n63, 135n14; ob-
ject relations theory, 66, 96, 151n89;
public knowledge of (see popular
knowledge of psychology); postcolo-
niality and, 13, 14–15, 22, 24; relational
psychoanalysis, 66; religion and, 6, 11,
42–44, 110–15, 121n44, 143n136, 161n3,
162n10; secularism and, 5–6, 10, 17,
110–15, 123n83, 135n6, 161n3; social
role of, 93, 110; Sufism and, 42–44,
53–55, 58, 80–81, 111; virtue ethics
and, 7, 149n46; “worlding psycho-
analysis” (Khanna), 4

psychology: academic philosophy and, 29;
applied psychology, 39, 100, 134n119,
160n135; Arabic terminology of, 3, 23;
Egyptian academy and, 22–23, 126n9;
Egyptian institutes of, 126n9; experi-
mental psychology, 22, 28–29, 30,
130n50; French and Egyptian, con-
nexions between, 28–29, 36–38, 79;
group psychology, 102, 114, 160n135; *ʿilm al-nafs* (science of self/soul) and, 42, 58–60; political psychology, 160n135; popular knowledge of (see popular knowledge of psychology); social psychology, 100, 102

psychopathy: case studies in, 104–8, 161n146; criminality and, 97, 107, 158n87; integrative psychology on, 104, 105, 107

psychosexual complexes, 76, 83, 97, 106. See also castration complex; Oedipus complex

psychosexual subject, 64, 68–71, 76–79, 81, 82, 101

psychosis, 48, 107, 137n31, 159n98

public sphere, 45, 72, 81

qalb (heart). See heart (*qalb*)

qanun al-ʿiʿada (law of recapitulation). See recapitulation, law of (*qanun al-ʿiʿada*)

qiyafa. See firasa (insight)

quilting point (*point de capiton*), 24, 27, 128n18

Qurʾan: Abraham in, 8–9, 122n67, 122n71; Breath and, 42, 134n1; Classical Arabic of, 162n24; esoteric interpretation of, 56, 144n143, 144n148; insight in, 33; *nafakha* (to blow) and, 134n2; *nafs* (self/soul) and, 47–48, 55, 134n1, 134n2, 139n53, 163n33

al-Qushayri, Abuʾl Qasim, 34, 47, 50, 140n63, 140n84

Qutb, Sayyid, 3, 118n20

race, 121n52

Rank, Otto, 96

rationalism, 8, 44, 49, 56–57, 86–87, 145n162

al-Rawi, Mahmud: criminality and, 84, 95–101, 158n87; Jungianism of, 97; political psychology and, 101–4, 160n135

al-Razi, Abu Bakr Muhammad bin Zakariyya: homosexuality and, 152n112; pleasure and, 68–69, 148n41, 148n42; *Spiritual Physick (al-Tibb al-Ruhani)*, 21, 68–69, 71, 114, 148n41

al-Razi, Fakhr al-Din, 2, 33

Real (Lacan), 58, 143n136

reality principle, 7, 32–33, 68, 69, 70, 82

reason (*ʿaql*): critical reasoning (*ʿaql naqdi*), 136n24; inadequacy of, 56–57; knowledge acquired through (*ʿilm al-ʿaql*), 144n146; modernism and, 86–87, 155n19; Sufism and, 139n61. See also rationalism

recapitulation, law of (*qanun al-ʿiʿada*), 67, 68, 79

register theory (Lacan), 55, 143n136. See also Imaginary; Real; Symbolic

Reid, Donald, 103

Reinhard, Kenneth, 44

relational psychoanalysis, 66

religion: Freud on, 5–6, 51, 120n39, 121n52; Lacanian psychoanalysis and, 6, 7–8, 112, 121n44, 122n59, 143n136; pathologization of, 5, 9, 10, 111, 123n78, 162n10, 162n13, 162n14; psychoanalysis and, 6, 11, 42–44, 110–15, 121n44, 143n136, 161n3; state authority and, 163n25; true and false religion, 120n34; unity of religious traditions, 28, 49

remembrance of God (*dhikr*). See *dhikr* (remembrance of God)

repetition, 26, 32, 33, 70

repression, 78; criminality and, 83, 87; Freud and, 54, 66; Sufi self-discipline and, 54, 60, 80

res cogitans, 37, 57

resistance (psychoanalysis), 32, 86

revolution, 102, 104, 160n135; 1952 revolution (Egypt), 39, 45, 72; Iranian revolution, 112, 162n15

Ribot, Théodule-Armand, 28, 29

Ricoeur, Paul, 32, 131n76

Rida, Rashid, 137n25

Rolland, Romain, 6–7

ruh (spirit), 46, 48, 134n2, 137n35, 138n39

Safouan, Moustapha: archaic state and, 113, 163n25; Islamism and, 112; scholarly career of, 8, 44, 128n20, 136n22; *Speech or Death?*, 110, 112, 162n15; transcendental and, 162n19; translations by, 1, 136n22; *Why Are the Arabs not Free?*, 112–13, 162n24, 163n25

Said, Edward, 5–6
al-Sakandari (al-Iskandari), Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah, 43, 46, 138n48, 139n49; dhikr (remembrance of God) and, 53, 142n117; exoteric knowledge and, 144n144; Ibn ‘Arabi and, 138n48; nafs (self/soul) and, 47, 139n51; psychological thought compared with, 48
Salvatore, Armando, 89
Santer, Eric, 6
al-Sarab (The Mirage) (novel), 3, 67
Sarton, George, 33
Sartre, Jean-Paul, 36, 37–38, 40, 128n23
science: human sciences, 13, 22, 29, 45 (see also psychology); intuitive sciences, 50, 54, 56, 57, 58, 139n61, 145n163; medieval Arab sciences, 33, 34, 114; science of Tastings (ʿulum al-adhwaq), 58; state and, 39
scripture, 10, 44
secret (sirr), 38, 46, 47–48, 49, 53, 140n63, 146n172; Ibn ‘Arabi on, 48; knowledge of (ʿilm al-asrar), 144n146; mysticism and secrecy, 140n64; psychoanalysis and secrecy, 85–86, 112; secret of the secret, 48, 51
Secretum Secretorum (Kitab Sirr al-Asrar), 34
secularism, 4–6, 10, 110–15, 123n83, 135n6, 146n174, 161n3
Seigel, Jerrold, 4
self: classical Islamic texts and, 2, 114; components of (Sufism), 48; discipline of, 52, 60, 70, 80; divine discourse and, 112, 162n19, 162n20; egocentric ideas of, 27, 36–37; ethical attunement of, 52, 60, 70, 80, 149n56; interiority and, 81–82; Middle East and, 117n5; other and, 11, 27, 30, 31–32, 36–38, 44, 67, 148n27; secularism and, 5; self-knowledge, 30, 31–32, 48, 52, 59, 69–70, 141n96, 141n99; social theories of, 36–38; Sufism and, 43, 46–49, 55; techniques of, 53, 69, 79, 149n50; technologies of, 79, 149n50; transformation of, 49, 53, 138n42, 140n75, 146n172, 149n50; tripartite divisions of, 1, 114, 139n52, 163n33; Western and non-Western selfhood, 1–2, 4–6, 24. See also nafs (self/soul)
self-knowledge, 48, 52, 59, 69–70, 141n96, 141n99; analytic situation and, 32; hadith on, 51; introspection and, 30, 31–32, 48, 69–70; other and, 30
Selim, Samah, 88, 90, 134n26
Sells, Michael, 51, 122n63, 141n92, 142n105
sensate data (hiss), 56, 57, 65, 70
Seshadri-Crooks, Kalpana, 12
sexual and gender difference. See gender and sexual difference
sexual instinct, 66–67, 73, 80, 81
sexual latency, 67–68
sexuality: Arabic psychological terminology of, 63, 65–66, 147n13; deviance, 64, 72, 73, 75, 147n13, 152n111; drive versus instinct and, 67; enlargement of the sexual, 67, 68; excess and, 81; female sexuality, 71–76; Foucault and, 64; infantile sexuality, 66–68, 71, 95, 101, 148n31; inter-subjective origins of, 67; jouissance and, 80–81; Ottoman era sexuality, 64, 68, 146n14; regulation of, 72, 150n68; tarbiya (upbringing) and, 64, 73, 82; virtue ethics and, 71, 81, 82. See also heterosexuality; homosexuality
al-Shafi’i, 34
al-Shamma, Salih, 22
shari’a, 56, 89, 93; criminal law in Egypt and, 89, 90, 93, 108, 155n34, 155n35, 156n40; evidentiary standards of, 89; siyasa (state law) and, 89, 93–94, 156n40, 156n43. See also fiqh
al-Sharuni, Yusuf, 22
shaykh-murid (master-disciple) relationship, 48, 52–55, 80, 137n25, 146n172; analyst-analysand relationship and, 43, 48, 53–54; unconscious and, 54, 80
shuhud (witnessing). See witnessing (shuhud)
Simmel, Georg, 151n72
sirat (straight path), 71, 78–79
sirr (secret). See secret (sirr)
Sirriyeh, Elizabeth, 137n25
siyasa (state law), 89, 93–94, 156n40, 156n43
social comportment (adab). See adab
(social comportment)
social psychology, 100, 102
social welfare, 134n120; crime and, 100,
101, 109; integrative psychology and,
14, 39, 100, 101; women and, 72
socialist realism, 40
socius, 25, 36–37, 39, 67, 133n108
Sophocles, 3, 67, 118n15
soul. See nafs (self/soul)
Spinoza, Baruch, 57
spirit (ruh). See ruh (spirit)
Spivak, Gayatri, 11
split subject, 24, 25, 128n25
St. Augustine, 50, 80
Stalinism, 40
state: archaic state, 113, 163n25; Islamism
and, 162n14; Islamic state, 113; post-
colonial state, 13–14, 39, 40, 109
state feminism, 72
states, Sufi (ahwal), 50–52, 53, 56, 57,
140n86, 144n146
stations, Sufi (maqamat), 50–52, 140n86
Stekel, Wilhelm, 154n10, 154n14
straight path (sirat). See sirat (straight
path)
subject: autonomy and heteronomy of,
1–2, 43, 44, 55, 59–60, 81–82; auton-
omy of, 59–60, 81–82, 89, 91, 146n175;
das Ding and, 7–8, 58, 143n136,
145n170; individual, 36–38, 112,
118n21, 146n175, 155n34; transparency
of, 14, 39, 109; unity of, 55; unknow-
ability of, 14, 81. See also modern
subject
sublimation, 8, 54, 59, 60, 80, 122n61,
142n123
subsistence (baqa’). See baqa’
(subsistence)
Sufism, 8; askesis as pole of, 52; dhawq
(intimate taste) as pole of, 52; dis-
solution of sense of self and, 51–52;
economy of vision in, 38, 133n14;
encounter with the Other in, 59; esot-
eric program of, 54; esoteric versus
exoteric knowledge in, 56; ethics and,
43, 52–55, 59–60, 146n174; Free Offi-
cers and, 45–46; healing through, 52,
53, 54; introspection and, 48, 54, 80,
145n158; lover-Beloved relation in,
38, 51, 59, 76; opposition to, 45, 81,
136n25; Orientalism and, 46; ortho-
dox Islamic mysticism and, 46; popu-
lar writings on, 43, 46; psychoanalysis
and, 42–44, 53–55, 58, 80–81, 111; psy-
chological diagnoses of, 48, 50, 53, 80,
137n31, 139n54; selfhood in, 43, 46–49,
55; self-transformation in, 49, 53,
138n42, 140n75, 146n172; social scien-
tific studies of, 13, 45, 89–57, 136n25;
spiritual regimen of, 52, 56; tariqa (path)
and, 52, 53, 60; unconscious and, 59. See
also individual names
superego, 7, 96, 114, 158n87; Arab translation
of, 23, 163n33; criminality and, 99;
ego and, 75; nafs (self/soul) and,
163n33; Oedipus complex and,
158n87; tarbiya (upbringing) and,
70; translation of, 128n16
Suttie, Ian, 27, 74–75, 129n42, 148n27,
151n94
Suwayf, Mustafa Isma’il, 22; Bergson and,
26, 36; criminality and, 84, 98–100,
159n98, 159n109; critiques of, 133n104;
social role of psychology and, 108
Symbolic (Lacan), 55, 58, 112, 143n136,
145n169
symbolism, 143n142, 144n149
syzygic unity, 51, 59
tabdi al-akhlâq (exchange of virtues). See
exchange of virtues (tabdi al-akhlâq)
taboo, 112, 158n87
tadib (discipline). See discipline (ta’did)
tadrib (training). See training (tadrib)
Taha, Farag ʿAbd al-Qadir, 22
al-Taftazani, Abu al-Wafa al-Ghunaymi:
dhikr (remembrance of God) and, 53;
fanaʾ (annihilation) and, 50, 51–52,
140n84; al-Ghazali and, 52, 59.
137n35; heart (qalb) and, 46, 46, 48,
57; Hilmi and, 45, 46; Ibn Sabʿ in and,
43, 145n156; intuition and, 35, 49,
56–57, 139n61, 145n156, 145n163; jihad
al-nafs (self-struggle) and, 52–55, 80;
knowledge and, 56–58; love and, 51;
modernism of, 59–60; mysticism and,
46, 49, 50; nafs (self/soul) and, 46–49;
al-Taftazani, Abu al-Wafa al-Ghunaymi

(continued)

orthodoxy and, 45, 46; political context of, 45–46; psychological terminology used by, 53–54, 80, 145n158; publications of, 135n11; al-Qushayri and, 140n84; repression and, 54; al-Sakandari and, 43, 46, 47–48; scholarly career of, 43, 135n11; secret (sirr) and, 48–49; states (ahwal) and stations (maqamat) and, 50–52; Sufism and psychology for, 43, 45, 48, 49, 52, 54, 137n30
tahdhib (attunement). See attunement
tamyiz (discernment). See discernment (tamyiz)
tarbiya (upbringing), 63, 68–71, 71–75, 82; sexual and gender difference and, 72–73, 75, 82
tariqa (path), 52, 53, 60
tasting (dhawq). See dhawq (intimate tasting)
taʿwid (habitation). See habituation (taʿwid)
Taylor, Charles, 4
temporality, 25, 26, 104, 129n35, 129n37, 141n103
theophany, 9, 51, 57, 141n103
Toscano, Alberto, 10, 123n83, 143n136
tradition. See discursive traditions
training (tadrib), 68, 70, 138n42
transcendental, the, 112, 113, 162n19
transference, 32, 53
translation, 21, 23, 25, 111, 127n15
turath (heritage), 163n31

unconscious: Bergson and, 35; collective unconscious, 103, 159n124, 160n135; criminality and, 84, 87, 101, 155n26; Freud on, 21, 31, 46, 66; God and, 9, 14–15; globalization of, 4, 119n27; Ibn ʿArabi on, 8–9, 21; inter-subjective discourse and, 30; lying and, 32; mysticism and, 8, 56, 57, 58; other’s role in, 30, 31–32, 33; psychosexual complexes and, 71–76, 77, 78, 79; Sartre’s critique of, 128n23; subject and, 11, 146n175; Sufism and, 44, 46, 48, 54, 59; translation as al-aql al-batin, 2, 126n3; translation as al-la-shuʿur, 1, 3, 8, 21, 48, 122n65, 126n3; translations of, 122n65, 126n3
unity (wahda): God’s unity (tawhid), 28, 130n48, 136n19; Ibn ʿArabi on, 28, 33, 38, 130n48, 136n19; Islam and, 55; multiplicity and, 9, 25, 28, 38, 129n36, 143n133; Murad on, 21, 24, 25, 27–29, 33, 38, 129n36, 131n58; syzygic unity, 51, 59
unveiling (kashf). See kashf (unveiling) upbringing (tarbiya). See tarbiya (upbringing)
ʿUways, Sayyid, 85
violence, 11, 12, 99, 103–4, 160n134
virtue ethics, 7, 70–71, 82, 149n46, 149n54, 149n56
Vorlust, 67
Waḥd Party, 102, 103
Wahba, Murad, 22, 26, 35, 132n103
wahda (unity). See unity (wahda)
Wallon, Henri, 28, 36–37, 67, 79, 133n105; Arabic translation of, 36; ego formation and, 36–37; Majallat ʿIlm al-Naf’s publication of, 36, 133n106; mirror stage and, 36–37, 79
al-Wardi, Ali, 4
Wertham, Frederic, 98, 99
West, Ranyard, 27
witnessing (shuhud), 50, 53, 56, 57
working through (durcharbeiten). See durcharbeiten (working through)

Yahalom, Jonathan, 69
Zaghlul, Saʿd, 102, 106
zahir (exoteric), 56, 144n144; batin al-zawahir (interiority of external signs), 35; īlm al-batin (esoteric knowledge) versus, 56, 142n110, 144n143, 144n150; īlm al-zahir (esoteric knowledge), 56
Ze’evi, Dror, 64, 146n4
Ziywar, Mustafa, 23, 77, 81, 127n10, 152n101

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