

Ibn Khaldun as a Social Holist Philosopher

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Abstract

This article defends Ibn Khaldun as a social holist philosopher. Ibn Khaldun is an Arab philosopher regarded as a proto-social holist theorist of modern social thought. The central thesis of social holism asserts that human beings are social creatures because they depend upon one another for their biological existence and the development of human cognitive potential. Many European philosophers since the eighteenth century, including Giambattista Vico, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Johann Gottfried Herder, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, and Ferdinand Tönnies, contributed their roles to the development of social holism in the modern Western tradition. Significantly, after Aristotle and before these European social holist theorists, Ibn Khaldun developed his notion of social holism in the fourteenth century in the Islamic tradition. The key argument of Ibn Khaldun's social holism holds that cooperation is essential for human existence. He makes a distinction between the sedentary and the nomadic social groups. Ibn Khaldun claims that *Asabiyyah* is the central value of the nomadic society. 'Asabiyyah' refers to 'social cohesiveness' which binds people together. Indeed, Ibn Khaldun is an essential philosopher because he is not only a bridge between classical and modern thought in Western tradition but also between Islamic and Western traditions. Thus, I argue that Ibn Khaldun is a significant social holist philosopher.

Keywords: social holism, social atomism, *Asabiyyah*, *Gemeinschaft*, *Gesellschaft*, Western philosophy, Muslim philosophy

Introduction

Ibn Khaldun (1332-1406) is an Arab philosopher, historian, sociologist, and social scientist who occupies a significant place in intellectual history because he is a bridge between the Western classical and modern traditions on the one hand and a bridge between the Western and Islamic traditions on the other hand. Mohsin Mahdi credited Ibn Khaldun as “the father or one of the fathers of modern social science and cultural history”.¹ Is Ibn Khaldun relevant to contemporary society? In his seminal work, *Muslim Society* (1981), Ernest Gellner, a Cambridge University anthropologist and philosopher, writes, “Social factors tend only to be introduced *ad hoc* when the system runs into difficulties. If we are to try it out in the context of Muslim societies, one may as well begin with the greatest sociologist of Islam – Ibn Khaldun”.² If any society’s social system runs into difficulties, how can it be managed? I endorse Gellner’s claim that Ibn Khaldun would help understand Muslim societies. Still, I also believe his philosophy would help explain the nature of contemporary societies because of his scientific approach.

Ibn Khaldun is a social holist theorist in two senses: first, he holds a holistic mind that envisages social reality as a whole rather than its parts. Due to this holistic aspect, he is known primarily as a historiographer, sociologist, cultural theorist or social and political philosopher. Second, he posits the social nature of human beings in the sense that people depend upon one another for their existence. Ibn Khaldun’s magisterial work is *Muqaddimah* (1377), which he wrote as a prolegomenon to his grand project of history, *Kitab al-Ibar*, in Arabic. *Muqaddimah* theorises the principles of historiography, sociology, culture, ethics, politics and economics. Thus, I argue that Ibn Khaldun is a proto-social holist theorist in the classical Islamic tradition and the modern Western tradition.

If Aristotle is considered the first prominent social holist philosopher in the Western tradition, Ibn Khaldun is the first prominent social holist philosopher in the Islamic tradition. In general, Ibn Khaldun is a two-way bridge between the classical and modern Western traditions and the Western and Islamic traditions. He develops a social holist approach to explain the principles of social phenomena. Ibn Khaldun argues that cooperation is essential for human existence.³ Ibn Khaldun offers a social holist approach to governing society. The notion of *Asabiyyah* is the staple of Ibn Khaldun’s social holism. The standard view of social holism claims that human beings are interdependent for their biological existence and the development of

human cognitive potential. In contrast, social atomism claims that human beings are independent of one another, and they not only exist biologically but also independently develop their human cognitive potential. Social dependency is vital in social holism. Social holists affirm the thesis of social dependency, while social atomists deny it. Social dependency refers to the social nature of human beings in some sense. Like Ibn Khaldun's notion of *Asabiyyah*, Ferdinand Tönnies, a European social theorist, holds that *Gemeinschaft* is the foundation of a social group. In this paper, I explain what is Ibn Khaldun's standpoint of *Asabiyyah*, and how it differs from *Gemeinschaft*. Ibn Khaldun's notion of *Asabiyyah* and Tönnies' notion of *Gemeinschaft* would help understand the nature of social holism.

2. The Standard View of Social Holism in the Western Tradition

The idea of social holism is primarily associated with Aristotle, the first theorist who explained and supported the social nature of human creatures. Social and political philosophers take the notion of human sociality from Aristotle's Greek expression, *zoon politikon*. In, *Politics*, Aristotle explicated '*zoon politikon*' in a political sense. Philip Pettit, a contemporary Irish-Australian social and political philosopher, argues, "Aristotle insisted of course that the human being was a *zoon politikon*, a social animal, and this theme recurred through the long period when his influence was paramount".⁴ There is no doubt in the claim that Aristotle's standpoint of sociality influenced the human mind for a long time. Like Pettit, Karl Marx holds that, "the human being is in the most literal sense a *zoon politikon*, not merely a gregarious animal, but an animal, which can individuate itself only in the midst of society".⁵ However, Marx conceives the idea of the human as a gregarious creature who individuates in society in the economic sense. This kind of sociality, in Marx's understanding, is essential for human beings to increase economic production. Yet, in the literal sense of the expression, *zoon politikon*, it refers to 'political animal' rather than 'social animal'. This is a fact that social creatures are political creatures and the other way around. So, politics is a social phenomenon. Notably, Aristotle posited a social holist thesis in his classic work, *Nicomachean Ethics* (2004). Aristotle argues, "Surely it is also odd to make the blessed person solitary since no one would choose to have all good things and yet be by himself. For a human is a social being and his nature is to live in the company of others".⁶ This argument of Aristotle, which supports the social interdependency of human beings, is the foundation of social holism. Hence, Aristotle's argument of social holism asserts that human beings cannot live without a community of people.

If Aristotle advocates the thesis of social holism in classical Western thought, the question arises who are the supporters of the thesis in modern Western thought? In his work, *Vico and Herder* (1976), Isaiah Berlin states that there are several scholars in modern Western thought who are considered to be supporters of social holism, including Vico, Rousseau, Herder, and Hegel.⁷ I agree with Berlin's thesis. For instance, Vico's idea of common sense and Herder's idea of *volksgeist*, Rousseau's idea of the general will, and Hegel's idea of *zeitgeist* are not inconsistent with social holism. In this line of argument, Pettit holds that the Romanticist philosophers insist on the existence and the value of social connections.⁸ We can infer from Berlin's and Pettit's arguments that the thesis of social holism is true. The crux thesis of social holism is that a solitary individual is an abstract and impossible conceit. Social holist theorists argue that human beings can only recognise their humanity in a community: the community is prior to the individual.⁹

In the footsteps of Romantic theorists, a new philosophical movement known as communitarianism emerged in the second half of the twentieth century to support the idea of social holism. A group of communitarian philosophers comprises Michael Walzer, Michael Sandel, Alasdair MacIntyre, and Charles Taylor. Taylor summarises the central thesis of social holism as follows:

What has been argued in the different theories of the social nature of man is not just that men cannot physically survive alone, but much more that they only develop their characteristically human capacities in society. The claim is that living in society is a necessary condition of the development of rationality, in some sense of this property, or of becoming a moral agent in the full sense of the term, or of becoming a fully responsible, autonomous being. These variations and other similar ones represent the different forms in which a thesis about man as a social animal has been or could be couched. What they have in common is the view that outside society, or in some variants outside certain kinds of society, our distinctively human capacities could not develop. From the standpoint of this thesis, too, it is irrelevant whether an organism born from a human womb would go on living in the wilderness; what is important is this organism could not realize its specifically human potential.¹⁰

Taylor argues that social interaction is vital not only for the existence of human beings but also for the development of particular human capacities. Taylor is correct that social interaction is necessary for the truth of social

holism. In contrast to social holism, social atomism defends the view that social interaction is not necessary for the development of particular human capacities.

In case of comparison between social holism and social atomism, the argument of social holism is valid because it is consistent with human nature. The thesis of social atomism has no strong foundation. Pettit presents an anti-social atomist argument, which claims, “individuals are not entirely free-standing”.¹¹ Pettit’s claim is true because people depend upon one another in their social lives. This is the idea of social interdependency, which makes the foundation of social holism. Pettit develops three conditions on the thesis of social holism to be true: first, if social holism is consistent with the thesis of social interdependency, the enjoyment of several properties depends upon the existence of other human members, for example, one is being a sibling, average height, enjoying a particular degree of status, or power.¹² There is no doubt in the fact that solitary persons cannot enjoy such properties without the presence of other people. Hence, the existence of other people is the first condition for the thesis of social holism to be true.

The second question is about to the meaning of dependency that inquires whether the dependency is causal or non-causal relationship. ‘Causal social dependency’ refers to the view that one is actively influenced by other human persons. For attaining a large range of properties, one is causally dependent upon other human persons, for instance, the ability to speak a language, suppose English. This ability to speak English requires the existence of parents, peer groups and educators. Instead, social dependency is a non-causal relationship if and only if human persons require others for obtaining the qualities comparatively hidden.¹³ Notably, a causal dependency needs regularity while a non-causal dependency may not require any regularity.

The third question considers whether the existence of other persons is a sufficient condition for a social holist thesis to be true. Pettit holds that just existence of other people may not be a necessary condition to be a social holist thesis true, for it, social interaction is necessary. For instance, the enjoyment of a particular property, social interaction is vital because it helps human persons to develop their beliefs and ideas about one another. This particular sense of the individual in relationship with others reveals the social character of human persons.¹⁴ Yet, social interaction in different arenas develops different kinds of common minds.¹⁵ So, the presence of others is

not only a necessary condition for the thesis of social holism to be true, but social interaction is also indispensable.

In the Western tradition, Ferdinand Tönnies (1855-1936) is a German social philosopher, who has striking similarities with Ibn Khaldun. Tönnies' notion of *Gemeinschaft* and Ibn Khaldun's notion of *Asabiyyah* have a close resemblance. In his magnum opus, *Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft* (1887), translated into English entitled, *Community and Society* (1954), Tönnies makes a distinction between two kinds of social life. The first kind of association is real and organic while the second kind is imaginary and mechanical. The real and organic association is a positive type of relationship, which Tönnies calls *Gemeinschaft* (community). In this association, people hold strong unity intrinsically and extrinsically. While the second kind of association is a negative type of relationship, which he calls *Gesellschaft*.¹⁶ Tönnies holds that people have stronger, alive, lasting and genuine form of living together in *Gemeinschaft* while people have merely transitory and superficial life in *Gesellschaft*. Tönnies takes *Gemeinschaft* as a living organism while *Gesellschaft* as a mechanical aggregate and artefact.¹⁷ Other salient features of *Gemeinschaft* are that people have intimate, private, and exclusive living together. This kind of social life is, like one's family in which members live from birth to their entire lives with one another as kith and kin. In contrast, *Gesellschaft* is a public life with imaginary and mechanical relationships. In this kind of society, one finds oneself living in a strange country in which people cooperate for their self-interests.¹⁸ In addition, Tönnies' account of *Gesellschaft* has a close affinity with the contemporary capitalistic society in which people think only for their self-interests.

3. Ibn Khaldun's Social Holism in the Islamic Tradition

Ibn Khaldun maintains that the nature of human beings is social, but there are two kinds of human sociality. Considering the nature of sociality, he divides social life into two kinds: nomadic life and sedentary life. The nomadic life refers to a social group which is dynamic, mobile and small while a sedentary life refers to a social group which is stagnant, immobile and large. Sedentary people live in cities and countries that adopt the business of crafts and commerce. The sedentary people live a more comfortable life than the nomadic people.¹⁹ Ibn Khaldun holds that nomadic life has stronger social solidarity than sedentary social life.²⁰ He demonstrates that hard and hunger-stricken life in a nomadic tribe enables a strong bond of social solidarity among its people, which motivates them for the common good rather than the individual good. The survival of the

nomadic people in deserts depends upon the bond of *Asabiyyah*.²¹ The idea of *Asabiyyah* is a social capital in the Islamic tradition.

What does Ibn Khaldun mean by *Asabiyyah*? Ibn Khaldun holds that *Asabiyyah* underpins people together in a community. Ibn Khaldun states that *Asabiyyah* is a feeling of “affection for one’s relations and blood relatives, no harm ought to befall them nor any destruction come upon them”.²² *Asabiyyah* means that people of common descent have moral, social and political obligations to one another. In general, the crux idea of *Asabiyyah* upholds that people of a tribe treat one another with respect.²³ Ibn Khaldun believes that *Asabiyyah* is rooted in the religious zeal of Arab nomads. This was the cause of the rise of Muslim civilization.²⁴ Ibn Khaldun identifies the moral, political, social and economic significance of *Asabiyyah* in a tribe. I hold that *Asabiyyah* contains three moral values including equality, freedom and fraternity. If *Asabiyyah* is based on these values, it can extend from a local tribe to a global human tribe. If *Asabiyyah* is extended to the level of the human tribe, it underpins the global human community, transcending racial, cultural, ethnic, linguistic or religious identities while relying only on human identity. Ibn Khaldun’s premise that people share common dangers, common interests and common fate develop social solidarity can be demonstrated with a lot of social phenomena under the problem of shared identity in religion, culture and politics. This means that the mutual interdependence of people, including masters and slaves, and patrons and clients, develops a bond of *Asabiyyah*, which is as strong as developed among the people sharing kinship. Beyond kinship, a common religion could be a ‘powerful cement’ among people.

The central premise of Ibn Khaldun’s social holist argument is that individuals cannot live by themselves. They depend upon one another to meet their needs, such as food and security. How do association and conflict develop? Interestingly, common interests create association and mutual affection in people. The conflict of interests creates strife in people. So, common interests and conflicts of interest make friendship and hostility in people.²⁵ In addition, Ibn Khaldun holds that a scholar must comprehend the nature of politics and existing things, disparities between nations, places, and epochs related to people’s ways of life, their characters, qualities, customs, sects and schools, considering and juxtaposing their present and past conditions with the causes and rationales of similarities and differences in different states of affairs including origins of dynasties and religious groups for explaining the underlying principles of social phenomena.²⁶ Embarking on a social holist approach, Ibn Khaldun explores the notion of *Asabiyyah*

as the fundamental principle of social phenomena.

Fuad Baali argues that *Asabiyyah* is a social, psychological, physical, and political phenomenon which exhibits itself among nomadic or tribal people.²⁷ *Asabiyyah* emerges through social interaction through reciprocal testing and trying and through the activities of common occupations.²⁸ Like the emergence of *Asabiyyah*, Philip Pettit maintains that the emergence of a common mind depends upon social interaction in a social setting.²⁹ The feeling of *Asabiyyah* causes one to conform to the expectations of the other members of one's group. *Asabiyyah* has different degrees of level: it is created by blood ties in small groups, such as family or tribe.

Ibn Khaldun states that there are two foundations of *Asabiyyah*: first, blood relationships and the relationships equivalent to blood relationships. With *Asabiyyah*, people taking care of their blood relatives means that they would not be harmed or humiliated by others. If one's blood relative is humiliated by someone, one will feel shame and one tries to defend one's dear one. This urge to help one's blood relative is natural in human beings.³⁰ However, *Asabiyyah* does not develop only in kinsmen but also in those people who share common dangers, common interests, and common fate.³¹ Ibn Khaldun identified *Asabiyyah* in groups other than the members of the family and tribe. Thus, the blood relationship is not the only condition for the existence of *Asabiyyah*.³² If this is true that *Asabiyyah* exists among those people who do not have a blood relationship, it has considerable sociological and ethical value. It would help understand moral cooperation with those people who are not members of a particular group. One of the central moral problems is how strangers ought to be treated. Ibn Khaldun's standpoint of *Asabiyyah* helps us understand why people treat one another humanely.

The existence of *Asabiyyah* is stronger among nomads than sedentary people but it is wrong to confine it only to nomadic life.³³ The question arises whether the level of social solidarity exists in the same magnitude between people living in different social conditions. *Asabiyyah* is natural in human beings and it cannot be linked only to Arabs. If it is not confined only to Arabs, it has universal import. That is why, Ibn Khaldun recognises the existence of *Asabiyyah* in numerous non-Arab people, including Persians, Jews, Assyrians, Greeks, Romans, Turks, and Berbers.³⁴ A question arises whether *Asabiyyah* respects people who do not belong to their nation, society, or culture. Ibn Khaldun holds that strangers are respected through generosity. People's proper stations are recognized and respected with fairness, and fairness is justice.³⁵ Ibn Khaldun's idea of justice as fairness

developed before John Rawls's theory of justice as fairness in the last quarter of the twentieth century. *Asabiyyah* does not only promote good character but also the means of sustained relationships such as 'forgiveness of error, tolerance toward the weak, attentiveness to the complaints of applicants, fulfillment of the duties of the religious law and divine worship in all details, and avoidance of fraud, cunning, and deceit'.³⁶ These features of *Asabiyyah* are cardinal for a good society.

To sum up, Ibn Khaldun's idea of *Asabiyyah*, which is generally understood to be an idea for social solidarity, can be extended to human solidarity. If *Asabiyyah* creates social solidarity in a group at a national level, in which all people do not have personal acquaintance with one another, it can work for human solidarity at the global level. *Asabiyyah* develops a sense of mutual respect for one another because it is a natural sympathetic attitude that exists in people beyond national boundaries. In the Islamic tradition, *Asabiyyah* means brotherhood or sisterhood. It unites people together to challenge the hardships of life. For acquiring the common good, such as global peace, human development or global justice is used as a tool to resolve them.

4. Conclusion

In this article, I explicated the central characteristics of Ibn Khaldun's social holism. The thesis of social holism defends the nature of human sociality: social dependency is vital for the development of human's biological and cognitive potentials. The vital argument of Ibn Khaldun's social holism claims that cooperation is essential for human existence. Ibn Khaldun distinguishes between the sedentary and the nomadic societies; he discovers the central vital force of nomadic society exists in the nomadic society, which he calls, *Asabiyyah*. Instead, the sedentary society does not possess such a binding force. Ibn Khaldun holds that *Asabiyyah* refers to something social cohesiveness or social solidarity which binds people together. He is a significant philosopher because he is not only a bridge between classical and modern thought in Western tradition but also between Islamic and Western traditions.

Although Ibn Khaldun and Tönnies belong to different periods, there is much which holds them together. Regarding the division of society, Ibn Khaldun makes a distinction between two social groups by observing his own Arab culture of his times. He found that there are two kinds of social groups: nomadic and stagnant. The nomadic people have more social solidarity than the stagnant people. In contrast, Tönnies observed society in his times. He holds that there are two kinds of social life: country life and

city life. In country life, people develop a strong sense of solidarity for one another, which he calls, *Gemeinschaft*. In city life, people are more self-centred and they have less solidarity for one another, and he calls it *Gesellschaft*. The contemporary capitalistic societies are the forms of Tönnies' *Gesellschaft*. Ibn Khaldun's idea of *Asabiyyah* and Tönnies' idea of *Gemeinschaft* has close affinity because both undergird the social life. Interestingly, contemporary nationalistic societies contain *Asabiyyah* and *Gemeinschaft* in their foundations. To sum up, Ibn Khaldun's philosophical corpus contains the indispensable features of social holism.

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