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Harald Jacob Viersen

THE TIME OF TURĀTH

AUTHENTICITY AND TEMPORALITY IN CONTEMPORARY ARAB THOUGHT

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PHILOSOPHIE IN DER NAHÖSTLICHEN MODERNE

Harald Viersen

The Time of Turāth

Philosophie in der nahöstlichen Moderne
Philosophy in the Modern Middle East

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A note on transliteration and translation

Arabic words and names have been transliterated using the International Journal of Middle East Studies (IJMES) transliteration system. The Arabic definite article *alif-lam* (*al-)* is only capitalized when it is at the beginning of a sentence or a footnote. The *shadda* is expressed by doubling the letter in question. This is also the case when the IJMES transliteration system prescribes using two letters to transliterate a single letter in Arabic – for example, a doubled *shīn* (ش) is written as "shsh." Diacritical marks have been applied throughout, except in the case of established English transliterations of personal names, for example, Gamal Abd al-Nasser.

Case endings as well as the *fatḥa* at the end of the plural suffix have been omitted, except for passages of poetic verse. In conforming to common pronunciation, the "t" ending of the *tā marbūṭa* has been kept when it is the first part of an *iḍāfa* construction. The "an" ending of the *tanwīn* in the indefinite accusative (*manṣūb*) – such as in the *ḥāl*-case – has also been kept to reflect the common pronunciation in Arabic. Equally, in other cases where regular pronunciation dictates the addition of the end vowel, it has been added – for example, *naḥnu* instead of *naḥn.*

When works in languages other than Arabic use an alternative transliteration of the author's name, this alternative has been maintained – for example, ʿAbd al-Rahman Taha is listed as Abderrahman, Abderrahmane, and Abdel Rahman. Unless the meaning of an expression is easily grasped by a speaker of English, the expression has been translated. When it is not clear from which language a quotation was translated, this will be clarified in the text.

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Introduction

This was supposed to be a book about ethics. It was supposed to be a book describing contemporary ethical discourse in the Arab world, and it was supposed to link particular writings on ethics by Arab intellectuals to their general conceptions of Arab-Islamic culture. As happens with many research projects, things turned out differently. From a focus on ethics, the project morphed into an examination of the concept of authenticity, before taking yet another turn towards the daunting topic of time conceptions in contemporary Arab thought. An aspect of each of these incarnations has made its way into the final version of this book, and in order to understand its setup and some of the theoretical choices that have been made along the way, it will be helpful to explain them and highlight the sediments that they have left behind.

When, back in 2014, I proposed to write a PhD on contemporary Arab thought, my knowledge of this field (and of Arabic) was still rather sketchy.[1] I knew about

1 The term "contemporary Arab thought" is frequently used in English introductions to this topic – for example, Elizabeth Suzanne Kassab, *Contemporary Arab Thought: Cultural Critique in Comparative Perspective* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), Ibrahim M. Abu-Rabi', *Contemporary Arab Thought: Studies in Post-1967 Arab Intellectual History* (London/Sterling, VA: Pluto Press, 2004), and Issa Boullata, *Trends and Issues in Contemporary Arab Thought* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990). To clarify, I will use this general description to refer to critical reflection and debates about fundamental issues of politics, society, religion, knowledge, and ethics that have been engaged in by Arab intellectuals and which have been carried on largely in Arabic since more or less the 1960s. I intentionally refrain from giving a definite description of what thought is in general, or whether one should distinguish between thought and philosophy or whether that ought to exclude ideologies or religious standpoints. Ideas about how thought, ideology, or religion are each defined are themselves hard to disentangle – for example, a liberal definition of religion will differ from a Marxist one, just as a humanist notion of philosophy may be hard to square with that of a Thomist. Moreover, such a definition is not necessary if we define thought not by looking at its content, but at its creators, that is, the intellectuals and the problems that they are discussing among themselves. Hence, the extent of our topic will be defined by looking at what authors who worked partly or wholly in Arab academia and those outside of these circles, like artists, journalists and politicians, wrote about and discussed. For a discussion of how philosophy, ideology, and religion are defined in the Arab context, see: Kata Moser, *Akademische Philosophie in der arabischen Welt: Inhalte—Insititutionen—Periodika*, Philosophie in der nahöstlichen Moderne (Berlin: Klaus Schwarz Verlag, 2018), 31–37 and 53–57.

The geographical or cultural definition of Arabic is rather straightforward. We will be looking at discussions conducted for the most part in Arabic. Sources in other languages, mainly English and French, may be included, insofar as they latch on to debates that are conducted in the Arab world in the Arabic language. As for the temporal cut-off point, a more precise starting date commonly found in discussions of "contemporary Arab thought" would be June of 1967, because the Six Day War (known in Arabic as the "June War") is seen as having left a deep imprint on intellectuals

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some of the main figures whose work had been translated, and I understood the main arguments through the introductions written by Issa Boullata, Ibrahim Abu-Rabi' and, more recently, Elizabeth Kassab. The kernel idea which got me started on this path was a quotation found in the introduction to Muḥammad ʿĀbid al-Jābirī's magisterial four-volume work *Naqd al-ʿAql al-ʿArabī*, or *Critique of Arab Reason.* In the first volume, he writes:

> If the concept of reason (*ʿaql*) in Greek culture and modern and contemporary European culture is bound up with the 'understanding of causes', namely with cognition, as we previously demonstrated, the meaning of the term 'reason' in the Arabic language, and consequently in Arab thought, is related mainly to conduct (*sulūk*) and ethics (*akhlāq*).[2]

Al-Jābirī differentiates between Western and Arab reason by attributing to Arab reason an ethical orientation. While Western reason concerns itself with finding out what is the case, Arab reason points to what ought to be the case or, more concretely, what one ought to do. Leaving aside whether his assessment is correct, such essentialist differentiation between forms of reason leads to an interesting follow-up. If Arab intellectuals like al-Jābirī ascribe to Arab reason a nature that is essentially ethical, then this in all likelihood will affect the way in which they write about ethics.[3] This would become the premise of my inquiry in its earliest stages. I would ask how this self-ascription of an ethical nature or reason had come about, and how it affects discourse on ethics in the Arab world.

Although this hypothesis still seems sound, working it out in practice proved rather complicated. While it was easy to find publications that discussed ethics as

working in the final decades of the twentieth century. To my mind, the importance of this event tends to be overstated, for reasons discussed at the end of the Chapter 1. However, I do recognize that there is a qualitative difference in Arab intellectual discourse since the 1960s, in particular with regard to the study of the Arab heritage (*turāth*). For a discussion of the term "contemporary" (*muʿāsir*) applied to Arab thought and why one might opt for 1967 as a starting date, see: Moser, 44–46 and 77.

2 Muḥammad ʿĀbid al-Jābirī, *Naqd al-ʿAql al-ʿArabī*, vol. 1, *Takwīn al-ʿAql al-ʿArabī* (Beirut: Markaz Dirāsāt al-Waḥda al-ʿArabiyya, 2011), 29–30. I use my own translation of the original here. For the same passage in the English translation of this book, see Mohammed Abed al-Jabri, *The Formation of Arab Reason: Text, Tradition and the Construction of Modernity in the Arab World*, trans. The Centre for Arab Unity Studies (London: I.B. Tauris, 2011), 25.

3 The ascription of an ethical nature to Arab culture is a recurring phenomenon, as will be discussed in the chapters on Zakī Najīb Maḥmūd and ʿAbd al-Raḥmān Ṭāhā. The third of the interlocutors in the second part of this book, the Syrian poet Adonis, puts less emphasis on the ethical nature of the "Arab mind," although he does regard the dominant worldview in the Arab-Islamic tradition as doctrinal in nature, and views ethics as a means of justifying and supporting doctrine.

something valuable and an essential aspect of the Arab-Islamic heritage, it was much harder to find works by Arab intellectuals writing in the past few decades who fleshed out a theory of ethics or an idea about what is good and just. Al-Jābirī's work is a case in point. The final volume of his *Critique* project is ostensibly about ethics, as it is titled *al-ʿAql al-ʿArabī al-Akhlāqī* (*Arab Ethical Reason*).[4] Yet its foremost concern is not what Arab ethics is, but rather where its roots lie. It describes Arab ethics as a mixed bag of Persian, Greek, and Sufi influences that have tainted the original Arab ethic of *murūʾa* (chivalry) and the Islamic ethic of *maṣlaḥa* (the common good). In other words, the book is more concerned with the historical authenticity of the Arab-Islamic heritage, than with any argument about what is good or just. This approach to ethics is worthwhile from a historical perspective, and precisely this historical angle is understandable given the tenor of intellectual debates in the Arab world at the time. The main topic of these debates is that of the Arab-Islamic heritage (*turāth*), and how to balance allegiance to the cultural authenticity contained in this heritage against a need for modernization according to a predominantly Western model.[5] Al-Jābirī's historical treatment of

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4 Muḥammad ʿĀbid al-Jābirī, *al-ʿAql al-Akhlāqī al-ʿArabī* (Beirut: Markaz Dirāsāt al-Waḥda al-ʿArabiyya, 2001).

5 The term *turāth* is left untranslated to reflect its very peculiar semantic field. When translated, it is usually rendered as "heritage," although as Angela Giordani notes, its meaning also comes very close to what in modern European languages is termed "the classical" – Angela Giordani, "Making Falsafa in Modern Egypt: Towards a History of Islamic Philosophy in the Twentieth Century" (PhD diss., Columbia University, 2021). This comparison is illuminating, because just as is the case with the classical serving as an example and historical mooring for European cultures, *turāth* is regarded as what lives on from the past in the present, or as Joseph Massad calls it, "a time traveller" – see Joseph A. Massad, *Desiring Arabs* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2007), 17. At the same time, we should not neglect the fact that, unlike "the classical," the concept of *turāth* acquired its current meanings in a colonial and postcolonial context. As Yasmeen Daifallah points out, the concept "aids in distinguishing Arab culture from, and relating it to, its European counterpart to assert both its autonomy and its concordance with the perceived foundations of European Ascendance" – see Yasmeen Daifallah, "The Idea of an Arab–Islamic Heritage," in *The Oxford Handbook of Comparative Political Theory*, ed. Leigh K. Jenko, Murad Idris, and Megan C. Thomas (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 220. This helps explain the social and political significance of this concept in contemporary Arab societies.

From a linguistic perspective, the common translation as "heritage" makes sense, since it bears a lexical relationship to the triliteral root W-R-TH (و – ر – ث), meaning "to inherit." Since the 1960s and 1970s however, this specific derivation has gained currency in a more specific meaning, namely that of "tradition," in particular the Arab-Islamic intellectual and cultural tradition – see Daifallah, "The Idea of an Arab–Islamic Heritage," 217. Daifallah explains that other terms were used to refer to the common Arab-Islamic heritage before. In the nineteenth century, "Islam" was often used, while at the turn of the century concepts like "civilization" (*ḥaḍāra*) and "Islamic civilization" became more popular markers of the shared heritage. The term "culture" (*thaqāfa*) be-

ethics in terms of an origins story fits this narrative perfectly, even if it does not itself present any clear view of what an Arab ethics ought to look like.[6]

The problem of defining a corpus of writings by contemporary Arab thinkers that one might reasonably consider "ethics" appeared to be widespread. The more I looked for books or discussions about ethics (*akhlāq*), the more I realized how few contemporary Arab authors in fact wrote about it, and how even fewer used the term in anything but a very general sense. Islamist authors and popular imams refer to ethics frequently as a coverall term for a return to Islamic piety but without theorizing it,[7] while politicians use it to justify greater government control over public discourse, such as when the Egyptian president ʿAbd al-Fattāḥ al-Sīsī began his crusade against the decline of morals in his country at the hands of Islamists.[8]

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came fashionable in the early twentieth century, in particular among more secular literati, like Ṭāhā Ḥusayn (1889 – 1973) and ʿAbbās al-ʿAqqād (1889 – 1964). The religious terms prevalent in earlier times perhaps reflect the connection of the question of *turāth* to that of religion, and the question whether the adoption of modern science and technology was in conflict with the older religious tradition and forms of knowledge, or whether the two could be harmonized or, at the very least, immunized from each other, allowing each their own field – for a deeper analysis of this question around 1900 and in more recent times see Anke von Kügelgen, "Konflikt, Harmonie oder Autonomie? Das Verhältnis von Wissenschaft, Philosophie und Religion," in *Wissenschaft, Philosophie und Religion: Religionskritische Positionen um 1900*, ed. Anke von Kügelgen, Philosophie in der nahöstlichen Moderne (Berlin: Klaus Schwarz Verlag, 2017), 30 – 120. Another relevant publication in this regard is Mary Elston's analysis of the term *turāth* among religious scholars in Egypt. This is especially important for balancing out the emphasis on secular discussions of *turāth* in existing scholarship see – Mary Elston, "Becoming Turāth: The Islamic Tradition in the Modern Period," *Die Welt des Islams* 63, no. 4 (December 29, 2022): 441 – 73, https://doi.org/10.1163/15700607-20220026.

6 For a more detailed analysis of the book's lack of substantive debate on ethics, see Harald Viersen, "The Ethical Dialectic in al-Jabri's 'Critique of Arab Reason,'" in *Islam, State, and Modernity: Mohammed Abed al-Jabri and the Future of the Arab World*, ed. Francesca M. Corrao, Zaid Eyadat, and Mohammed Hashas (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 249 – 70.

7 Exemplary of this is Yūsuf al-Qaraḍāwī's recent book "The Ethics of Islam" (*Akhlāq al-Islām*), in which he presents ethics as the core message of Islam in the introduction. While he does buttress this claim with references to Qur'an and Hadith, he "does not conceptualize or theorize" the concept of ethics – see Yūsuf al-Qaraḍāwī, *Akhlāq al-Islām* (Beirut: Dār al-Mashriq, 2017); Mohammed Hashas and Mutaz al-Khatib, eds., *Islamic Ethics and the Trusteeship Paradigm: Taha Abderrahmane's Philosophy in Comparative Perspectives*, Studies in Islamic Ethics (Leiden: Brill, 2020), 12.

8 Jannis Grimm, "Sisi's Moralism," *Sada* (blog), December 19, 2014, https://carnegieendowment.org/sada/57574. Al-Sīsī, by invoking the discourse of ethics, may be understood as following an older tradition that links the decline of ethics to a decline in national progress. This trend reaches back to the nineteenth century, when the idea that the dominance of Western powers over Arab and Islamic lands was due to ethics and a renewal of moral uprightness was needed to reinvigorate the nation. This is already evident in the middle of the nineteenth century, for instance

Meanwhile, more secularly oriented intellectuals like al-Jābirī and also Mohammed Arkoun discussed ethics in the framework of the authenticity–modernity problematic, by examining "the relationship between ethics, tradition and modernity."[9]

Faced with this problem, the project required a new angle. One option would have been to push the more philosophical perspective to one side, and commit to a historical investigation into the roots of the common self-description of Arab-Islamic society as "ethical" and how it relates to more orientalist (and occidentalist) binaries opposing a materialist West to a spiritual East. This conceptual-historical project still appears worthwhile to me, but it is not the road that I took. Instead, I opted to find a way of teasing out the "ethical" from what Arab intellectuals did write about, namely the problematic of authenticity and modernity in relation to *turāth*. The conjecture that one might find ethical overtones in this debate was not without grounds. After all, the modern concept of authenticity in particular is an ethical ideal. To be authentic in this day and age is a virtue. Moreover, this ideal of authenticity is multifarious. There are different ways in which it is interpreted, and each of these conceptions carries with it different moral, aesthetic, and even political implications.[10] The Arabic adjective *aṣīl* (authentic) appeared to

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in Rifāʿa Rāfiʿ al-Ṭahtāwī's writings on education in which the corruption of morals (*fasād al-akhlāq*) is presented as a primary cause for the undermining of national civilization (*tamaddun*) and progress (*taqaddum*), as well as in the flourishing ethics literature of the early twentieth century exemplified by the work of Aḥmad Amīn, whose *Book of Ethics* continues to be published today – see Rifāʿa Rāfiʿ al-Ṭahtāwī, "al-Murshid al-Amīn li-l-Banāt wa-l-Banīn," in *al-Aʿmāl al-Kāmila li-Rifāʿa Rāfiʿ al-Ṭahtāwī*, vol. 2 (Cairo: Maktabat al-Usra, 2011), 317, and Aḥmad Amīn, *Kitāb al-Akhlāq*, 3rd ed. (Cairo: Maṭbaʿat Dār al-Kutub al-Miṣriyya, 1925). Perhaps the most famous expression of this sentiment is found in Shakīb Arslān's *Why Did The Muslims Fall Behind? And Why Did The Others Progress?* in which the author laments the demise of morals in the Islamic world and explains British dominance at the time as a result of their "high national ethics and principles" – see Shakīb Arslān, *Li-mādhā Ta'akhkhar al-Muslimūn? Wa-li-mādhā Taqaddam Ghayruhum?* (Cairo/Beirut: Dār al-Kitāb al-Miṣri/al-Lubnānī, 2012), 26. A similar link between morals and national progress is evident in the famous line of Aḥmad Shawqī (1870–1932): "Peoples are sustained by ethics… For when ethics perish, the people perish with it" (*Innamā al-umam al-akhlāq mā baqiyat/Fa-inna hum dhahabat akhlāquhum dhahabū*) – see Aḥmad Shawqī, *Ṣaḥwat wa-Istadrakatnī Shīmatī al-Adab*, Poem, accessed June 26, 2021, https://www.aldiwan.net/poem7890.html.

9 Muhammad al Haddad, "Mohammed Arkoun and the Question of Ethics in Contemporary Arab Thought," *Al-Tafahom* 11 (2015): 145. An exception to this rule may be ʿAbd al-Raḥmān Ṭāhā. His work is very much concerned with ethics, focusing more on the ethical side of how to form a virtuous self than on the doctrinal side, which he sees as essentially contained in Islamic law.

10 For an analysis of authenticity as an ethic of modernity, see Charles Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991), Alessandro Ferrara, *Reflective Authenticity: Rethinking The Project of Modernity* (London: Routledge, 1998), and Thomas Claviez, Britta Sweers, and Kornelia Imesch, eds., *Critique of Authenticity* (Wilmington, NC: Vernon Press, 2020).

carry a similar range of meanings, and by understanding how the term is used by different authors (whose works are filled with discussions of authenticity) one might therefore unlock an indirect way of discussing contemporary Arab ethics.

This new perspective proved fruitful, but it also presented a couple of problems. The first, which will be discussed more in a moment, was one of positionality. By adopting the lens of "authenticity," did one not impose a Western understanding of this concept on debates in the Arab world? The second problem is of a different kind, and has to do with a peculiar aspect of the meaning of authenticity. This concept carries many different meanings and connotations. One of the most important distinctions, however, is the seeming contradiction between the old and the new, between being true to a heritage and creating something that has no heritage, between tradition and originality. Like originality, authenticity may be attributed to an artist who has done something unprecedented as well as to one who works within a strictly regimented fashion that has a long heritage. It can be used to describe a creative impetus as well as its opposite. Obviously, such paradoxical concepts offer a rich ground for articulating an ethical template as rich as the contemporary ideal of authenticity. Yet they are also harder to analyze systematically.

One aspect that appeared more and more crucial in dealing with this concept, and promised to provide some stable ground for a discussion of authenticity, was another philosophical concept: Time. Different conceptions of what authenticity means (and how it relates to a counter-concept with a similar temporal charge like "modernity") are bound to different ways of thinking about time. To take a very basic example, a temporal orientation towards the future is likely to go along with a greater esteem for modernity and less regard for authenticity in its historical sense – though certainly not in the sense of originality and creativity! The upshot is that if we want to understand how Arab authors use terms such as authenticity and modernity, we need to understand something about their conceptions of time.

Moreover, like conceptions of authenticity, ideas about time carry a distinct ethical weight. In the modern age, authenticity refers to more than merely something that is original. It has over the past two centuries become a pivotal moral ideal. It prescribes certain ways of life for the individual and the community. It is an ideal that has been interpreted in many different ways, leading to a variety of virtues that are justified with reference to authenticity, such as creativity, individuality, communal purpose, respect for tradition, moral essentialism, or a humanist universalism. Likewise, conceptions of time are fundamental to our ethical outlook. Time serves as a frame of reference for how we see our past commitments and our future hopes and dreams, both in the individual sense of the story that *I* tell about my life and what I want to do with the rest of it, and in the communal

sense of how *we* view ourselves in relation to our history, to our tradition, to our culture, and how we compare to others. Different conceptions of time frame these issues differently. Depending on how it is articulated, a belief in progress may shape our expectations for a future that is always better, and it may foster a disregard for the past. It can cause hope in times of crisis, but also confusion when things do not pan out well. A rupture in our sense of history (both individual and collective) can help envision a radically new future.

These moral aspects of time, moreover, are in conversation with authenticity. The sense of a temporal rupture, whether in the life story of an individual or in the collective story of a society, may become part of articulating an authentic sense of self in terms of something that has no precedence. Meanwhile, a belief in accumulative progress may help preserve the idea of authenticity as something that lies in the past and that forms the essence of the subject of progress. In sum, it is not just that authenticity and time are both ethically significant, but that they also shape each other's meaning and ethical import. This is particularly evident in the way that the modern ideal of subjective and self-expressive authenticity came about. The impetus for this turn towards the individual was a sense among a group of European intellectuals associated with early Romanticism that, for all the blessings that enlightened modern society had bestowed upon humanity, it had also taken something away. Its materialist, rationalist abstractions had begun to corrupt the individual person and undermine not just older values but the source of these values *tout court*, as a firm belief in human progress was accompanied by a disregard for past tradition. In very crude terms, the turn to authenticity may be seen as a reaction to this loss – something that will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 3. It can be seen as an attempt to reground value in the authentic individual (or group of individuals) in opposition to what was perceived by Romantics as a naïve belief in progress through reason. In this way, authenticity's claim to an alternative conception of the authentic individual person as a wellspring of value became connected to the rejection of a progressive notion of time.

This may still appear very sketchy, but there is an important takeaway. Even where we are focussing on authenticity and time in Arab thought, in the end these topics give us a way of talking about ethics. This is not ethics in the manifest sense of a doctrine about what one ought to do, but ethics in the more basic sense of which views people articulate about man's basic nature and his relation to others. These rudimentary ethical orientations may form a foundation for more clearly expressible doctrines and notions of virtue. Hence, even though the end result of this project may appear far removed from its original intention, the initial impetus to write about Arab ethics has remained at its core. It is in this link to the foundations of ethical comportment that I believe we may find how different narratives of seemingly stuffy and over-intellectualized debates on heritage, authenticity, and

modernity are intricately linked to more quotidian ways in which people perceive themselves and their relation to others.

What this approach offers, then, is a new way of reading Arab thought and its ethical implications by reinterpreting some of its basic concepts – authenticity, modernity, *turāth* – through different conceptions of time found among Arab authors of the previous fifty-odd years. This endeavor, I must add, carries a critical impetus. Not only is the authenticity–modernity binary a prominent feature of Arab intellectual and political life of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, but it is also read somewhat one-dimensionally as an opposition between a backward-looking traditionalism versus a forward-looking modernizing trend – more will be said on this in Chapter 1. A study that proposes to look into different conceptions of time, authenticity, and modernity that form the foundation for the prevalent understanding of Arab thought will likely relativize the importance of this paradigm. This is a critical undertaking not just because it questions received knowledge, but because it tries to get at patterns in Arab thought that may not have been fully acknowledged by the philosophers, authors, professors, and other intellectuals who built what we refer to as Arab thought. In other words, it may to some extent question *their interpretation of their own work.*

This leads me back to the point about positionality mentioned earlier. After all, it might be argued that this kind of study goes beyond the bounds of what is proper for an academic working at a Western university to engage in. As much as interest in non-European trends of thought is appreciated in a world that continues to look primarily to cultural and philosophical trends in the West, it is not generally accepted that one enters into a debate with other traditions. The borders in these cases are not always easy to draw, of course, but there is a general consensus that the proper role of Western researchers is akin to that of a social anthropologist who describes what goes on in different areas of the world to further our understanding of them, not to become part of these discussions. Showing such deference to global philosophical trends is not just a worthwhile ideal, but a necessary means of redressing epistemic injustices that grow out of an ingrained Eurocentric perspective that tends to drown out other voices.

Although I understand this position, I do not abide by it. This book is written not just as a description, but as an intervention in Arab thought. The justification for this is threefold. First, I believe that it is impossible to be objective in the sense that one gives a mere description of an intellectual tradition that at the same time alleges to be an accurate one. This is not just because description requires interpretation and interpretation is impossible to do without bringing to the table one's own pre-judgements. I have a certain sympathy towards such more hermeneutically or phenomenologically influenced arguments, but I am thinking here of a different argument that I have made elsewhere in more detail. The core point of this ar-

gument is that an idea, a discourse, or an intellectual tradition always derives some of its force from its internal coherence.[11] This coherence does not have to be of a strictly logical kind, nor does it only have to be discursive – traditions have always been related to bodily practices – but for something to be an idea or a set of interlocking ideas, there must be some structure holding them together. Some kind of unity must be there to make a thing thinkable. The task of someone describing ideas, that is, the intellectual historian, is to explain this coherence and to be honest about where it seems to be lacking.[12] The latter, however, is precisely what is typically expected of intellectuals who are engaged in a debate. They try to show the superiority of one view over another by pointing out how one system coheres better than another. What this leads us to conclude, however, is that there is no way for intellectual historians to remain entirely outside the boundaries of any debate that they describe. Their job as an outsider is in large part similar to that of the insider, namely to explain what people have said and to assess how this coheres with what they and others have said elsewhere.

The second justification for this position is of a different kind. It hinges on our understanding of respect, in particular the respect due to different traditions of thought. To show respect is a cardinal reason for adopting a descriptive rather than an argumentative stance regarding discourses or traditions of thought of which we do not consider ourselves an active member. Much like in everyday life, we respect each other by not imposing, by listening instead of speaking first. Given the power disparities involved in most debates, this is not only a worthwhile ideal but a prerequisite for any serious dialogue. Worthwhile as this conception of respectful intercultural dialogue is, it also misses something crucial about what it means to respect someone's intellectual standpoint. Ideas are not mere de-

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11 Harald Viersen, "Critique as Reception: Can There Be an Objective Study of Contemporary Arab Thought?," *Denkanstöße—Reflections* (blog), January 16, 2023, https://philosophy-in-the-modern-islamic-world.net/critique-as-reception-can-there-be-an-objective-study-of-contemporary-arab-thought/.

12 To emphasize, I am not saying that ideas or constellations of ideas are always in fact entirely coherent. One of the traps of writing intellectual history is precisely to ascribe coherence where it is not, or what Quentin Skinner terms the "mythology of coherence" – see Quentin Skinner, *Visions of Politics I: Regarding Method* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 67. What I am saying is that a measure of coherence is needed for something to be recognized as an idea or constellation of ideas at all. Purely as an aside, this requirement of unity is one with a distinguished philosophical pedigree, reaching back through Kant's notion of transcendental unity of apperception to classical philosophy, like Plotinus's fundamental claim that "All beings are beings due to unity" and that "if you take away the unity which they are said to be, then they are not those things" – see Plotinus, *Plotinus: The Enneads*, ed. Lloyd P. Gerson, trans. George Boys-Stones et al. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 882.

scriptions. They are descriptions that lay a claim to being true. To justify this claim they are abetted by a whole range of discursive tools: arguments, descriptions, narratives, metaphors, rhetoric, etc. One way of respecting these claims would be to take note of them, to collect them and observe them at a respectful distance. While this preserves one kind of respect, it also hampers another. It keeps us from showing the kind of respect and, importantly, the kind of *recognition* that accompanies critical engagement. If ideas lay claim to truth, then merely describing them without engaging in critical discussion neglects their essence – a claim grounded in arguments, susceptible to challenge.

Challenging both the central questions that are asked and the answers that are given to these questions can be a mark of taking a discourse seriously. In this view, cross-cultural understanding of traditions of thought is not simply a measure of factual knowledge about who said what when, but a consequence of dialectical engagement. Western academia has seen a recent upsurge in interest in non-Western philosophies and traditions of thought that was long overdue. If this results in a generation of academics more knowledgeable about Arab, Chinese, Indian, Meso-American, or African thought, the world will be richer for it. Yet, understanding these traditions as an outsider does not require that one assent to how insiders experience them. Respect can be shown by concurring with someone, but it can also be shown by taking them seriously through reasoned critique. Engagement is (or at least can be) a sign of respect, and if the trend to broaden the horizons of the Western philosophical canon is to result in true universal dialogue, then respectful critical engagement must be part of it. However, this kind of engagement is impossible without compromising the insider–outsider perspective.[13]

It should be added that this kind of approach implies both a risk and an opportunity for the researcher. Recognition through engagement can only really succeed if both parties are open to being corrected if they allow themselves to be convinced by others. This takes a certain amount of courage and self-reflection. It is not an easy road, and this perhaps points to another reason why researchers pre-

13 Interestingly, an argument that tends in a similar direction was proposed by Brian Barry, even though its author phrases it as an argument *against* "the demand of equal recognition of all cultures." Noting that "cultures have propositional content," Barry concludes that "it is an inevitable aspect of any culture that it will include ideas to the effect that some beliefs are true and some false, and that some things are right and others wrong." The practice of assigning value to beliefs, however, ceases to have a point, "unless discriminations are made" – Brian M. Barry, *Culture and Equality: An Egalitarian Critique of Multiculturalism* (Cambridge: Polity, 2000), 270. This last point is in line with the previous discussion which led up to the conclusion that it is impossible to not take a position in a debate, because part of understanding a debate is to be aware of its weaknesses and discriminate accordingly. What my take stresses is that it is precisely such serious engagement with the other's arguments that is prerequisite for recognizing them.

fer to describe discourses and traditions from the outside. Not only does this promise to preserve the integrity of the object of study, but it also removes the risk for researchers of having to give up certain beliefs or points of view of their own.

When it comes to current traditions of thought, there is an additional third justification for entering into a critical dialogue. If we take the two concepts that make up the central dichotomy in Arab thought, authenticity and modernity, it is obvious that they are not alien concepts particular to a supposedly self-contained Arab-Islamic tradition. These are modern ideals, central to debates the world over. The “modern” is not simply a signifier for a certain period, but a value, embedded in a modern temporal imaginary, that is invoked to justify actions and make demands on people. The “authentic’” is a quintessentially modern ideal that, rather ambiguously, is used to buttress both the claims of collectives to the sources of their shared belonging – for example, language, land, customs, artifacts, etc. – and the claims of the unique individual to realizing her “true self.” We could of course study modern Arab debates about authenticity and modernity without taking this into account, but what would this be worth? If our aim is to understand the world around us, which is a globalized modernity in which “cultural differences were constructed under new conditions” that gave rise to “new political languages, new social groupings, new modes of producing and consuming, new desires and fears, new disciplines of time and space,”[14] then to study Arab thought in abstraction leaves out an essential part of the story. Hence to study traditions of thought in the modern world, in particular when it comes to such pivotal modern concepts, requires a hybrid approach that allows space for critical dialogue in a shared effort to understand our interconnected positions in the modern world.

This book offers a stab in this direction. It does not pretend to be the only correct way of understanding Arab thought, nor does it argue that this is how Arab thinkers themselves would view their own arguments or the larger discussion in which they take part. Instead, it proposes *a* way of understanding Arab thought in the hope that we can learn more about contemporary Arab thought by bringing different readings together. It tries to give as fair and complete a description of the positions of different Arab intellectuals as possible, but it does not simply abide by the way that they might have viewed their own work. Insofar as their first-person perspective goes, this is not done out of lack of respect for what they wrote, but out of a concern for showing that the debates that they helped shape contain more than mere variations on a worn-out mantra of “authenticity and modernity.”

14 Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore: JHU Press, 1993), 230.

The core of this book is made up of three analyses of Arab thinkers who wrote on *turāth* in the last few decades: The Egyptian philosopher Zakī Najīb Maḥmūd, the Syrian poet Adonis, and the Moroccan philosopher and logician ʿAbd al-Raḥmān Ṭāhā. The choice of these particular authors was dictated by their prominence in these debates, the contrastive positions that they occupy, and the relative lack of work available on these authors in English.[15] Before we get to these authors, however, we require some groundwork. In Chapter 1 we will get acquainted with what I term the "standard narrative" of Arab thought. This common perspective describes modern Arab thought as revolving around the aforementioned binary of authenticity–modernity, with modernists championing the need to rid Arab societies of the shackles of tradition and their opponents calling for the defence of the authentic roots of Arab-Islamic *turāth.* We will see how this binary is articulated by various authors and how it looks to the so-called Arab Renaissance or *nahḍa*, the nineteenth and twentieth century era of modernization in the Arab world, as the root of these modern debates. Chapter 2 marks the beginning of our counter-narrative. It starts with some general remarks and observations about the role that the traumatic defeat of the Arab armies at the hands of Israel in 1967 played in grounding the standard narrative, and then goes on to ask how temporal demarcations such as these and related spatial demarcations that consider the topic of *turāth* as one specific to Arab debates inflect this debate, masking its connections to global intellectual trends. To this spatio-temporal contestation of the standard narrative is then added a conceptual one, when we consider the contrast between an entrenched interpretation of the meaning of authenticity (*aṣāla*) and the different interpretations that have been suggested by intellectuals. In Chapter 3, we build on this recognition of the ambiguity inherent in the concept of authenticity, by connecting it to its binary companion: Modernity. After a brief discussion of the concept of modernity and why it can most fruitfully be perceived as a *project*, we will look at how the linear-progressive conception of time often associated with modernity helps explain the binary features of the standard narrative of Arab thought according to which authenticity is the opposite of modernity. At the same time, several authors have stressed the modern origins of the ideal of authenticity, a concept that not only refers to an original past, but also to sheer individual creativity, to the idea of a true beginning that has no past. This ambiguity in the meaning of authenticity culminates in the unstable, Romantic orientation towards both an ide-

15 I should qualify here that quite a lot has been written about Adonis in English, and several of his books and poems have been translated. However, largely absent from the secondary literature is his theory of *turāth* that was developed in his dissertation. As for Ṭāhā, while in the past few years more and more articles and a monograph by Wael Hallaq have been written, at the time when I began doing my research, material on him other than in Arabic was exceedingly scarce.

alized, uncorrupted past before the Enlightenment and the eulogizing of the individual future-oriented avant-garde artist. Its binary tendencies are premised on the linear temporal imaginary, which opposes the authentic past to the modern present. What this suggests is that an analysis of the temporality inherent in this conceptual opposition offers a framework for looking at the *turāth* discourse. Put differently, if we are looking for contestations of the narrative, then we may start by looking for authors who contest the temporal structure that supports it.

This will be our goal in the second part of this book, in which we discuss our three interlocutors. In each case, we will look at their background, philosophical and other influences, and present a general introduction to their philosophical position within the *turāth* debate and an analysis of their conceptions of time in relation to the authenticity-modernity dichotomy. In Chapter 4, we meet Zakī Najīb Maḥmūd. This productive author, widely known in the Arab world for his accessible philosophical newspaper articles, is presented here as a representative of the standard narrative. We trace his development from a logical-positivist enamored with the ideal of Western progress, to his realization that modern progress should be balanced with a dedication to ethical and aesthetic values that are stored in one's cultural heritage. This binary division with which other common binaries are bound up – for example, material–spiritual, West–East, secular–religious – is seen to rely ultimately on a linear temporal imaginary moved by an ideal of progress. Chapter 5 presents the first of two figures that contrast with Maḥmūd's formulation of the standard narrative. While Adonis is better known for his poetry, he has also made considerable contributions to the debate on *turāth.* Given his overt secular orientation and his insistence on the need for renewal in Arab poetry and its culture more generally, it is not hard to see why he is often classed as a proponent of the modern side of the authenticity–modernity dichotomy. Contrary to this standard reading, we will get to know him through his theoretical work in his dissertation "The Static and the Dynamic" (*al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil*) and other works as someone who, in his commitment to dynamic renewal, tries to go beyond this stale dichotomy.[16] Using a differentiation between a linear "horizontal time" and a non-linear "vertical time," Adonis allows us to reinterpret the meaning of authenticity and modernity in such a way that they refer to the same thing, namely the ideal of dynamism. A similar move is observed in Chapter 6, where we discuss the pious, mystically oriented philosopher ʿAbd al-Raḥmān Ṭāhā. Although at first glance these two Arab intellectuals appear to be miles apart, a different picture appears when we look more closely at the conceptions of time

16 Adūnīs, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥth fī al-Ibdāʿ wa-l-Ittibāʿ ʿind al-ʿArab (Vol. 1–4)* (Cairo: al-Hayʾa al-ʿĀma li-Quṣūr al-Thaqāfa, 2016).

put forward by Ṭāhā in relation to the *turāth* debate. Like Adonis, he proposes a conception of time that runs counter to the linear-progressive story. Using a similar move, he formulates an understanding of modernity as a creative spirit that is rooted in an authentic use of the primary sources of an intellectual, practical, and spiritual tradition like Islam. Different as this religious register may sound from Adonis's, it shares the aim of redefining what the *turāth* debate is about, or perhaps what it *can* be about. Their shared effort to redefine the conceptual parameters of Arab thought is one example of how different narratives are possible and how, once we articulate them, new and interesting ways of understanding the structure of Arab thought come into view.

Part I

1 Contemporary Arab thought and the specter of the *nahḍa*

In 1971, a conference was held in Cairo bearing the title "al-Aṣāla wa-l-Tajdīd fī-l-Thaqāfa al-ʿArabiyya al-Muʿāṣira" (Authenticity and Renewal in Contemporary Arab Culture). The conference aimed to uncover "the remaining sources in the Arab culture through which the Arab feels that he belongs to a nation (*umma*) with a distinguished spirit and general character." In addition, the conference would shed light on how these roots (*uṣūl*) of Arab culture relate to modern culture, and to what extent Arab culture can productively interact with modern culture. The goal, we are made to understand, was to strike a balance between those who believe that authenticity (*aṣāla*) consists in sticking rigidly to one's own cultural sources, and those who take renewal to mean "the dismissal of the roots (*uṣūl*) of Arab culture and the embrace of everything that is new, whatever its nature."[1]

Looking at the title and the summary of its aims, this conference fits squarely with the "standard narrative" of contemporary Arab thought referred to in the Introduction. In this chapter, we will explore this narrative and how it has come up in Western and Arab literature. Although our focus is on debates in the Arab world that have taken place in the last fifty years, the roots of this narrative go back to the age of rapid modernization during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries known as the *nahḍa*, or Arab Renaissance. The encounter during this period between old and new, between tradition and modernity, between East and West, was a precursor to the problem of how to understand, reinterpret, or balance the relationship between Arab cultural authenticity and Western modernity, which would become the pivotal question of the late twentieth century. We will return to the conference in more detail in the next chapter, but before we do so, it is necessary to present the standard narrative and its backstory, starting with the *nahḍa* period and how it is perceived as the origin of later debates about *turāth.*

1 al-ʿAzīz al-Sayyid, "Muʾtamar al-Aṣāla wa-l-Tajdid fī-l-Thaqāfa al-ʿArabiyya al-Muʿāsira" (Cairo, 1971), i.

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1.1 The *nahḍa* backstory

What I refer to as the standard narrative is founded on a binary between the authentic and the modern. It is not, it should be added, a perspective to which every treatment of Arab thought ascribes. Some even actively try to undermine it. This reassessment has been particularly pronounced in the study of the early modern period referred to as the *nahḍa.* Very generally, the term *nahḍa* stands for the "project of Arab cultural and political modernity from the early nineteenth to the early twentieth century."[2] Because more recent debates both reflect on and, in some ways, continue the debates of the *nahḍa* period, we will briefly dive into the meaning of this period and how literature on the *nahḍa* has developed in recent years.

While scholars find it easy to agree with such a general definition, they differ on the specifics of:

– when this modernization started;
– how important different material and ideological aspects of modernization are, and how they relate to each other;
– who was involved in shaping it – Intellectuals? Politicians? Workers? Religious scholars? Muslims as well as Christians? Women as well as men?;
– where it took place – In Egypt and Syria? The Arab world? The Ottoman Empire? The entire world?; and
– what the precise role of Western cultural, scientific, and political power in this process was – as a catalyst? An adversary? As only a marginal factor?

Shared by all who study the *nahḍa* is a sense that this period of modernization represents a tremendous shift in Arab societies. As new modes of law, administration, and production were accompanied by new values, fashions, and modes of social organization, this period laid the groundwork for the nation-states that now collectively rule the Arab world. This also explains the continued interest in the *nahḍa* among Arab intellectuals and scholars of the Arab world more broadly. Since it is during this period that the foundations for the modern Arab nation-state were

2 Tarek El-Ariss, "Introduction," in *The Arab Renaissance: A Bilingual Anthology of the Nahda* (New York: The Modern Language Association of America, 2018), xv. The Arabic meaning of this term is far from definite. While the literal meaning of *nahḍa* refers to a rising up or being again brought to life, Hannah Scott Deuchar has shown in a careful analysis of the term that this meaning took a long time to coagulate. Moreover, it has not always been exclusively used to denote an *Arab* Renaissance, but has also been applied in reference to a rising of the colonized East, or even of any society or group, past or present – see Hannah Scott Deuchar, "'Nahḍa': Mapping a Keyword in Cultural Discourse," *Alif: Journal of Comparative Poetics* 37 (2017): 50–84.

laid, the *nahḍa* functions as a historical point of reference for explaining the dysfunction of many of these institutions in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

Although this is primarily a study of contemporary Arab thought, it is important to hold the idea of the *nahḍa* in the back of our minds, because it looms large in debates among Arab intellectuals in recent decades. An issue that is associated in particular with the *nahḍa* and which continues to move contemporary thinkers is the issue of progress. The *nahḍa* is portrayed as a project that aimed to reform Arab societies in such a way that they would be able to catch up with the rapid pace of innovation in the West. This connection is made explicit, for example, by the well-known Moroccan thinker Muḥammad ʿĀbid al-Jābirī who argues that the "problematic of authenticity and contemporaneity" (*ishkāliyyat al-aṣāla wa-l-muʿāsara*), which we have already seen is the central problematic of Arab thought since the 1970s, is rooted in what he calls the "Renaissance question" (*al-suʾāl al-nahḍawī*), namely: "Why did we (we Arabs, we Muslims, we the East) fall behind and why did others (Christian Europe, the West) develop? Therefore, how do we awaken? How do we catch up and join this modern civilization?"[3] Al-Jābirī is only one of many who emphasize the link between the ideals and problematics of the *nahḍa* and the later philosophical discourse in the Arab world. In a sense, contemporary Arab thought may be read as a meditation on the *nahḍa*, a post-mortem that will uncover the mistakes and false turns that kept its ideals from being realized. As such, the *nahḍa* has also become an essential part of the standard narrative of contemporary Arab thought.[4]

One of the aspects of *nahḍa* thought that have informed later generations of historians and philosophers who have tried to cope with its legacy is a particular way of viewing the arc of Arab history, one that has been dubbed by Stephen Shee-

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3 Muḥammad ʿĀbid al-Jābirī, *Ishkāliyyāt al-Fikr al-ʿArabī al-Muʿāsir* (Beirut: Markaz Dirāsāt al-Waḥda al-ʿArabiyya, 1989), 20; Mohammed 'Abed al-Jābri, "The Problematic of Authenticity and Contemporaneity in Modern and Contemporary Arab Thought," trans. Farid Abdel-Nour, *Contemporary Arab Affairs* 4, no. 2 (2011): 176 – 77 (translated from Arabic). The question was posed in these terms by Shakīb Arslān in his essay bearing the corresponding title: "Why Did the Muslims Fall Behind? And Why Did The Others Progress?" – Shakīb Arslān, *Li-mādhā Taʾakhkhar al-Muslīmūn? Wa-Li-mādhā Taqaddam Ghayruhum?* (Cairo/Beirut: Dār al-Kitāb al-Miṣri/al-Lubnānī, 2012).

4 For more elaborate studies of the connection between the *nahḍa* and the problematic of authenticity and modernity in contemporary Arab thought, one may turn to: ʿAbd al-Ilāh Balqazīz, *al-ʿArab wa-l-Hadātha: Dirāsa fī Maqālāt al-Ḥadāthiyyīn* (Beirut: Markaz Dirāsāt al-Waḥda al-ʿArabiyya, 2007) (in particlar the first three volumes), Ḥusayn al-ʿAwdāt, *al-Nahḍa wa-l-Hadātha: Bayn al-Irtibāk wa-l-Ikhfāq* (Beirut: Dār al-Sāqī, 2011), Muḥammad ʿĀbid al-Jābirī, *al-Mashrūʿ al-Nahḍawī al-ʿArabī: Murājaʿa Naqdiyya* (Beirut: Markaz Dirāsāt al-Waḥda al-ʿArabiyya, 1996), and Elizabeth Suzanne Kassab, *Contemporary Arab Thought: Cultural Critique in Comparative Perspective* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), chap. 1.

hi the "*inḥiṭāṭ* (decadence) paradigm."[5] This paradigm presented Islamic and particularly Arab civilization as having achieved a Golden Age in the Abbasid Caliphate (750–1258). Following this highpoint of civilization, Arab societies got caught in a negative spiral of stagnation, decadence, and decline that became particularly pronounced under Ottoman rule.[6] Its momentum, according to this perspective, was only broken with the arrival of Napoleon's invasion of Egypt in 1798 and with the arrival of Western missionaries in the century following it. This frame for telling the story of the *nahḍa* obviously ties in with the last of the questions mentioned above, namely, the role of the West. According to this view, it was through contacts with the advanced West that the process of social, scientific, cultural, bureaucratic, political, economic, and military modernization that would reawaken the Arab or the Islamic spirit of its Golden Age in the early centuries of the Islamic calendar was kickstarted. Its narrative emplotment, not entirely coincidentally, mirrors the Western story of a classical era followed by an age of decline and the rebirth that was the Italian Renaissance. Similarly, the liberal reformist Arab historiography of the late nineteenth century that first coherently articulated this view of history presented Arab history as evolving through a so-called classical era of the Abbasid Caliphate, a gradual decline mirroring the European Middle Ages, and an Arab Renaissance starting in the nineteenth century.[7]

In recent scholarship, this narrative has received a considerable amount of flak.[8] On the one hand, researchers critical of the lofty aims of the *nahḍa* have por-

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5 Stephen Sheehi, "Towards a Critical Theory of *al-Nahḍah:* Epistemology, Ideology and Capital," *Journal of Arabic Literature* 43, no. 2/3 (2012): 270.

6 Ottoman rule grew and waned in different parts of the Arab world over the course of centuries, and may have been rule only in name in some of the further flung regions of the Maghrib. Generally speaking, in the Mashriq, Ottoman rule in Egypt began in 1517 with its conquest at the hands of Sultan Selim I, and effectively ended with the French invasion of 1798, even though under the rule of Muḥammad ʿAlī and his descendants it officially remained part of the Ottoman empire. Ottoman rule in the Levant began when the Ottomans arrived in 1516, and ended with their giving up this territory after the First World War. For an overview of the rise of Ottoman rule in the Arab world, its demise in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and the "special case" of Egypt, see: Bruce Alan Masters, *The Arabs of the Ottoman Empire, 1516–1918: A Social and Cultural History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), chaps. 1 and 7.

7 Yoav Di-Capua details the origins of this mode of historiography in Egypt in: Yoav Di-Capua, *Gatekeepers of the Arab Past: Historians and History Writing in Twentieth-Century Egypt* (Berkeley/Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 2009), chap. 1.

8 For a more detailed critical discussion of the "*inḥiṭāṭ* paradigm" see Gabriel Piterberg, "Tropes of Stagnation and Awaking in Nationalist Historical Consciousness: The Egyptian Case," in *Rethinking Nationalism in the Arab Middle East*, ed. Israel Gershoni and James Jankowski (New York: Columbia University Press, n.d.), 42–61, Manfred Sing, "The Decline of Islam and the Rise of Inḥiṭāṭ: The Discrete Charm of Language Games about Decadence in the 19th and 20th Centuries," in

trayed its unfolding as a tragic usurpation and erasure of traditional society through the institutions of the nation-state.[9] The project of the *nahḍa*, according to this view, was compromised from the start due to the overwhelming force of Western power exerted on the colonial world, both directly through occupation and indirectly through pressures of diplomacy and the market. On the other hand, researchers have challenged the exclusive one-way street image of Arab intellectuals paying homage to European modernity by diligently implementing it in their own societies. They have shown how dynamics of social and economic change were global in kind, while emphasizing that reform was negotiated between a variety of social groups, both in and outside Arab societies, and not just intellectuals and local elites.[10]

This reassessment of the role of Europe in "bringing" modernity to Arab lands links up with a critical reflection on the temporal strictures that have guided previous research on the *nahḍa* and its place in Arab-Islamic historiography generally. Whereas for a long time it was standard practice to assume 1798, the year of the Napoleonic expedition to Egypt, as the starting date for the "modern" era in Arab history, recently scholars have put the centrality of this juncture in perspective. The effect of this historiographical reorientation obviously leads to a devaluation of the role of the West as the harbinger of modernity. While it does not negate European influence, to locate the rise of "Arab modernity" inside the Arab world, or even to simply highlight the intellectual achievements of Islamic scholars in the centuries before the nineteenth century, does limit the overwhelming agency at-

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Inḥiṭāṭ – The Decline Paradigm: Its Influence and Persistence in the Writing of Arab Cultural History, ed. Syrinx von Hees, vol. 2, *Arabische Literatur Und Rhetorik – Elfhundert Bis Achtzehnhundert* (Würzburg: Ergon, 2017), 11–70, and Jeffrey Sacks, "Futures of Literature: Inhitat, Adab, Naqd," *Diacritics* 37, no. 4 (2007): 32–43, 45–55.

9 The work of Timothy Mitchell has been groundbreaking in this regard – see Timothy Mitchell, *Colonising Egypt* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1991). It should be noted, however, that this tragic sentiment was also present among earlier generations of Islamist intellectuals following in the footsteps of Rashīd Riḍā (1865–1935).

10 For a comprehensive list of such scholarship, see Sheehi, "Towards a Critical Theory of *al-Nahḍah:* Epistemology, Ideology and Capital," 1–2 n. 1. Recent additions to this list could include: Tarek El-Ariss, *Trials of Arab Modernity: Literary Affects and the New Political* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013); Peter Hill, *Utopia and Civilisation in the Arab Nahda* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020); Samah Selim, *Popular Fiction, Translation and the Nahda in Egypt* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019); Kathryn A. Schwartz, "The Political Economy of Private Printing in Cairo as Told from A Commissioning Deal Turned Sour, 1871," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 49, no. 1 (2017): 25–45; and Maurizio Isabella and Konstantina Zanou, eds., *Mediterranean Diasporas: Politics and Ideas in the Long 19th Century* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016).

tributed to the West in earlier research.[11] This relativizing of Europe's importance may be foregrounded – as in Ahmed Dallal's *Islam without Europe* – or it may be an effect of a historian's drive to highlight a previously neglected part of Arab-Islamic intellectual history – as in Khaled el-Rouayheb's *Islamic Intellectual History in the Seventeenth Century.* Regardless, what these authors share is an understandable dissatisfaction with the older paradigm of decline, which they see as too Eurocentric and caught up in justifications for European domination in the name of progress and the Arab nationalists' dismissal of several centuries of Ottoman rule on ideological grounds.[12]

Another way in which the historiography of the *nahḍa* has been critically assessed is by deconstructing what one might call the temporal direction and flow used to tell the story of the *nahḍa.* We will discuss this further later on, but the idea is that the paradigm of decadence (*inḥiṭāṭ*) that has marked Arab historiography since the nineteenth century is indebted to a progressive-linear temporal imagination, which reads history, in very broad strokes, as a story of development and human progress from which Arab society has been diverted. It is against the backdrop of this idea that civilizational progress is in some way necessary, that the period of decline has been portrayed as an aberration that Arabs should address – whether that necessity be articulated in terms of a moral imperative, an impera-

11 Albert Hourani's sensitive and clear exposition of Arab intellectual history *Arabic Thought in a Liberal Age: 1798–1939* is the seminal work in English that popularized the older paradigm (as is obvious from the title). Another work, one of great importance to the development of the humanities generally, that builds on this "orientalist" historiographical paradigm is of course Edward Said's *Orientalism*, in which the author traces a change in the relationship between orientalism and imperial power to the Napoleonic expedition – see Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978), 79–87, and Albert Hourani, *Arabic Thought in a Liberal Age: 1798–1939* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962).

12 See Ahmad Dallal, *Islam without Europe: Traditions of Reform in Eighteenth-Century Islamic Thought* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2018), and Khaled El-Rouayheb, *Islamic Intellectual History in the Seventeenth Century: Scholarly Currents in the Ottoman Empire and the Maghreb* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015). What is interesting about this process of reorientation is how it demonstrates the inherent link between dates, events, and subjects. A change in the historiographical order draws out certain aspects of history and makes them salient at the expense of others. The narrative of Western dominance is not merely a historical fact due to material factors like military and economic power – although it is that too. Rather, such a story is abetted by a particular view of history that prioritizes Western intervention over indigenous dynamics in the Arab world. To what extent one or the other historiographical ordering is justified or not is a different question. What is important to note here is simply the *effect* that temporal ordering has, not just on the structure of the historical narrative, but on the very subject of history itself. As will be argued in the next chapter, a similar process is at work in the temporalization of contemporary Arab thought and its fixation on the June War of 1967 and its aftermath.

tive for national survival, or even an absolute law of human nature is another matter. It is also partly against this background that we may understand the growing interest in the Arab-Islamic intellectual heritage that started in the nineteenth century.[13] As Yoav Di-Capua has shown in his study of Arab nineteenth-century historiography, the burgeoning liberal Arab intelligentsia began to conceptualize history, not as a mere collection of past events, but as a series of causally related events that describe a movement that projects into the future. By plotting this movement and showing how eras of rise and decline correlate with human effort and ingenuity, historians could unlock the idea that the Arab future was not a mere extension or repetition of the past, but a realm of possibility for Arab progress.[14] Recent scholarship has emphasized this aspect as foundational to the *nahḍa* and to the literary, social, and political imaginary associated with it, as well as the contestations of this progressive imaginary.[15]

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13 Of course, many factors were in play in creating a surge in interest in the classical literature in Arabic among the reading public in the nineteenth century. One can think here of the introduction of technological advances in printing that made it lucrative to provide editions for a general public, a growing middle-class with the education and means to buy and read books, easier transportation and communication making it easier to find and compile complete editions of works deemed lost, new methods of critical editing, and a genuine desire to break out of a stranglehold of relatively few texts that had dominated teaching of the Arab-Islamic traditions in the centuries preceding the nineteenth century. This last point is slightly contentious in light of the recent uncovering of works of creative scholarship in the centuries that, under the *inḥiṭāṭ* paradigm, were deemed of little scholarly interest – see the previous footnote. Notwithstanding, I am sympathetic to Ahmed El Shamsy's warning that taking a more nuanced view of this so-called "post-classical" era in Arab-Islamic intellectual history, ought not lead one to the other extreme of holding this era up as a time of unbridled creative genius. We should not dismiss out of hand the critique that nineteenth-century Arab reformers voiced against their predecessors, simply because it reminds us of "orientalist propaganda" – Ahmed El Shamsy, *Rediscovering the Islamic Classics: How Editors and Print Culture Transformed an Intellectual Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020), 239.

14 Di-Capua, *Gatekeepers of the Arab Past: Historians and History Writing in Twentieth-Century Egypt*, 61.

15 Examples of studies, apart from Di-Capua's, that discuss the *nahḍa* discourse on progress are: Sheehi, "*Towards a Critical Theory of al-Nahḍah: Epistemology, Ideology and Capital*"; Stephen Sheehi, *Foundations of Modern Arab Identity* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2004); Vanessa Ogle, *The Global Transformation of Time: 1870–1950* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015); On Barak, *On Time: Technology and Temporality in Modern Egypt* (Berkeley/Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 2013); Omnia El Shakry, *The Great Laboratory: Subjects of Knowledge in Colonial and Postcolonial Egypt* (Redwood City, CA: Stanford University Press, 2007); Sing, "*The Decline of Islam and the Rise of Inḥiṭāṭ: The Discrete Charm of Language Games about Decadence in the 19th and 20th Centuries*"; Marwa Elshakry, *Reading Darwin in Arabic, 1860–1950* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2013); and Hill, *Utopia and Civilisation in the Arab Nahda.*

The recent surge in critical scholarship on the *nahḍa* has not yet been matched by a similar reassessment of contemporary Arab thought, either in light of the changing conception of the *nahḍa*, or in its own right. This is not to say that there has not been any effort to present alternative ways of reading contemporary Arab thought.[16] However, these efforts have not yet been able to successfully challenge the established view of contemporary debates in the Arab world. Also, these studies have mostly been written from a historiographical point of view, rather than from a philosophical one. They have challenged the consensus by adding historical research that complicates the standard narrative. This is important work and more of it remains to be done. This study offers a slightly different approach. Although it too involves discussions of writers, their texts, and their historical contexts, it also enters into what one might deem a "philosophical mode of inquiry" by attempting an analysis of concepts. Looking closely at the meaning of concepts like authenticity, modernity, or progress and at the conception of time that underlies it, I will present not so much a view of how Arab intellectuals have been read, nor simply of how they may have understood their own work. Instead, we will look for new ways in which these authors *might* be read, by focusing on how a particular conception of progressive-linear time that is rooted in the *nahḍa* project of

16 In addition to an edited volume that presents new and critical research into the intellectual history of the *nahḍa*, Jens Hanssen and Max Weiss have published a follow-up that take a much needed, diverse and critical look at more recent developments in Arab thought – see Jens Hanssen and Max Weiss, eds., *Arabic Thought Beyond the Liberal Age: Towards an Intellectual History of the Nahda* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), and Jens Hanssen and Max Weiss, eds., *Arabic Thought against the Authoritarian Age: Towards an Intellectual History of the Present* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018). Other interesting additions that broaden the scope of modern and contemporary Arab thought and try to embed it in global discourses are: Anke von Kügelgen, "Konflikt, Harmonie oder Autonomie? Das Verhältnis von Wissenschaft, Philosophie und Religion," in *Wissenschaft, Philosophie und Religion: Religionskritische Positionen um 1900,* ed. Anke von Kügelgen, Philosophie in der nahöstlichen Moderne (Berlin: Klaus Schwarz Verlag, 2017) 30–120; Robert D. Lee, *Overcoming Tradition and Modernity: The Search for Islamic Authenticity* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1997); Geert Hendrich, *Islam und Aufklärung: Der Modernediskurs in der arabischen Philosophie* (Darmstadt: WBG (Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft), 2004); Carool Kersten, *Cosmopolitans and Heretics: New Muslim Intellectuals and the Study of Islam* (New York: Columbia/Hurst, 2011); and Carool Kersten, *Contemporary Thought in the Muslim World: Trends, Themes and Issues* (London/New York: Routledge, 2019). Another strand of new research into contemporary Arab thought that presents an alternative point of view are the recent studies of the Arab Left: Sune Haugbolle, "The New Arab Left and 1967," *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 44, no. 4 (2017): 497–512; Michaelle Browers, "Beginnings, Continuities and Revivals: An Inventory of the New Arab Left and an Ongoing Arab Left Tradition," *Middle East Critique*, January 22, 2021, 1–15; Fadi Bardawil, *Revolution and Disenchantment: Arab Marxism and the Binds of Emancipation* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2020); and Sune Haugbolle and Manfred Sing, "New Approaches to Arab Left Histories," *The Arab Studies Journal* 24, no. 1 (2016): 90–97.

wholesale societal reform underlies the way in which these authors tend to be understood. Building on this analysis, we will see how, by drawing on alternative conceptions of time, we may approach their work differently. Before we discuss what such an alternative framework for studying Arab thought from a temporal perspective might look like, however, we will need to acquaint ourselves with the way in which the story of contemporary Arab thought continues to be told from the perspective of the standard narrative.

1.2 1967 and the standard narrative

Generally speaking, Arab intellectuals and those who write about modern Arab intellectual history have adopted 1967 as the starting point of its "contemporary" (*muʿāsir*) phase. This particular cut-off date is prompted by the seismic social, political, and economic shifts in the region following the war known in the West as the Six-Day War and referred to in the Arab world as the June War, "The Setback" (*al-Naksa*), or "The Defeat" (*al-Hazīma*). As many first-hand accounts testify, Arab intellectuals experienced this defeat as a great tragedy, as the end of an era.[17] The Syrian Marxist intellectual Yāsīn al-Ḥāfiẓ mentions feeling "something like a quake mixed with shame."[18] The defeat ignited a sense of urgency and political engagement in the Syrian philosopher Ṣādiq Jalāl al-ʿAẓm, who, with his long and fiery essay *al-Naqd al-Dhātī baʿd al-Hazīma* (*Self-Criticism after Defeat*), became a harbinger of a fiercely critical strand in Arab thought. A similar sentiment could also be heard among more conservative commentators, like the Egyptian Muḥammad Jalāl Kishk, who called the defeat of 1967 more oppressive (*afdaḥ*) than any other in living memory and took it as a call to "defeat the intellectual invasion"

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17 Friederike Pannewick notes that, in addition to the authenticity–modernity dichotomy, the other "Leitmotiv" of the period after 1967 was the "crisis of intellectuals" – see Friederike Pannewick, *Das Wagnis Tradition: arabische Wege der Theatralität* (Wiesbaden: Reichert, 2000), 63. Intellectuals were, as a consequence, drawn into debates about the redefinition of Arab identity, a redefinition mostly through contrasting the self with the "Other" in a move that she characterizes as a "Culture of defense." Interestingly, she adds that outside of Europe, movements for redefinition of the self sprang up during this time. This is a point to which we will return later.

18 Quoted in: Fadi Bardawil, "The Inward Turn and Its Vicissitudes: Culture, Society, and Politics in Post-1967 Arab Leftist Critiques," in *Local Politics and Contemporary Transformations in the Arab World. Governance Beyond the Center, ed. Malika Bouziane, Cilja Harders, and Anja Hoffmann* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 93.

(*nahzim al-ghazw al-fikrī*) that caused it.[19] The watershed moment of 1967 was also captured in art: in Saʿd Allāh Wannūs's ground-breaking play *Haflat Samar min ajl Khamsat Huzayrān* (*An Evening of Entertainment for the Fifth of June*), in Yūsūf Shahīn's movie *ʿAwdat al-Ibn al-Ḍāl* (*The Return of the Prodigal Son*) , in the poems of Maḥmūd Darwīsh, Aḥmad Fuʾād Nigm, and most famously in the work of Nizār Qabbānī, whose *Hawāmish ʿala Daftar al-Naksa* (*Marginal Notes on the Book of Defeat*) marked a political turn in his poetry.[20]

The feeling of defeat is reflected in the few works available in the common languages of Western academia that offer us an overview of Arab thought in the final decades of the twentieth century. The war, in the words of Issa Boullata, proved to be the "acid test of Arab modernization."[21] It was a "turning point,"[22] a "caesura (*Zäsur*),"[23] a "seismic event"[24] that shattered the hopes of a young generation of Arab intellectuals who had been invigorated by the efforts of Egyptian president Gamal Abdel Nasser to seek an Arab national culture free from its colonial past and Western influence. It laid bare the weakness of the Arab states despite almost a century of modernization efforts. It was "interpreted as a symptom of a defective appropriation of *nahḍa* principles."[25] In contrast to the promised cultural efflorescence of the *nahḍa*, the defeat of 1967 was seen as a major setback

19 Muḥammad Jalāl Kishk, *al-Naksa wa-l-Ghazw al-Fikrī* (Cairo, 1969), 12. The term "intellectual invasion" (*al-ghazw al-fikrī*) would become a staple of discourse that, following 1967, would try to link the defeat and deteriorating state of Arab and Islamic societies to Western intellectual oppression.
20 Nizār Qabbānī, *al-Aʿmāl al-Siyāsiyya al-Kāmila li-Nizār Qabbānī*, vol. 6, *Hawāmish ʿala al-Hawāmish*, 2nd ed., (Beirut: Manshūrāt Nizār Qabbānī, 1991), 471–97; Saʿd Allah Wannūs, *Ḥaflat Samr min ajl Khamsat Ḥuzayrān* (Dār al-Adāb, 1968); Yūsuf Shahīn (Youssef Chahine), *ʿAwdat al-Ibn al-Ḍāl* [Return of the Prodigal Son], directed by Yūsuf Shahīn (Misr International Films, 1976), film, 2 hrs. 4 mins. https://mubi.com/en/nl/films/the-return-of-the-prodigal-son. A less commented on aspect of the turn that the Arab-Israeli conflict took in 1967 is the effect it had on Arab intellectuals living and working outside the Arab world. The dismissive portrayal of the Arab as backward and the pro-Israeli bias in Western societies are recalled as important moments in the development of pivotal figures in critical theory, like Edward Said and Talal Asad – Talal Asad and David Scott, "Appendix: The Trouble of Thinking: An Interview with Talal Asad," in *Powers of the Secular Modern: Talal Asad and His Interlocutors*, ed. David Scott and Charles Hirschkind (Redwood City, CA: Stanford University Press, 2006), 253, and Edward Said, *Out of Place: A Memoir* (New York: Vintage Books, 1999), 289. One scholar who has recently raised this point is Fadi Bardawil – see Bardawil, *Revolution and Disenchantment: Arab Marxism and the Binds of Emancipation*, 85.
21 Boullata, *Trends and Issues in Contemporary Arab Thought*, 1.
22 Kassab, *Contemporary Arab Thought: Cultural Critique in Comparative Perspective*, 2.
23 Hendrich, *Islam und Aufklärung: Der Modernediskurs in der arabischen Philosophie*, 155.
24 Abu-Rabi', *Contemporary Arab Thought: Studies in Post-1967 Arab Intellectual History*, x.
25 Zeina Halabi, *The Unmaking of The Arab Intellectual* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018), 38.

(*naksa*) that capped a hopeful (if slightly naive) age of renaissance or presented by those more pessimistically inclined as an outright defeat (*hazīma*).[26]

In explaining why this defeat was important for the development of Arab thought, two important consequences of this defeat are pointed to. First, it destroyed the aura of success and inevitability that had, until then, surrounded socialist and nationalist ideologies. The fact that a tiny country (with Western backing) had been able to resist Arab numerical superiority and destroy their armies in less than a week impressed upon Arabs the fact that their societies were lagging behind. This pointed to a more structural failure of the *nahḍa* project. The Syrian philosopher Ṣādiq Jalāl al-ʿAẓm pithily expressed this sentiment, chastising his generation for falling "victim to the erroneous idea that history had already decided all the issues raised by the *Nahda* in favor of progress, genuine modernization, modern science, secularism, socialism, and national liberation."[27] These foundations of modern society had been introduced, but they had not been allowed to take root. In the eyes of people like al-ʿAẓm, something was preventing their implementation, something deep, embedded in the essential fabric of Arab culture. What could this be? This question motivated a number of intellectuals to engage in a program of soul-searching. Emblematic of this "radicalization of critique"[28] was al-ʿAẓm's book *Self-Criticism After Defeat.*[29] Published in 1969, it addresses the anti-modern characteristics of the Arab self: its subservience to authority, its lack of a work ethic and of a sense of responsibility, its lack of initiative and creativity. Before the *nahḍa* and the Enlightenment values for which it stands could truly be implemented, Arab society would need to purge itself of these structural errors in its mindset.

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26 It should be noted that both terms, *naksa* and *hazīma*, carry distinctly military connotations. The disagreement over whether to refer to the Six-Day War as either a setback (*naksa*) or a defeat (*hazīma*) can be traced back to the war's immediate aftermath. Nasser, in his famous resignation speech (*bayān al-tanaḥī*) on 9 June 1967 introduced the term *naksa* as a common term to refer to the events of June of that year. What is less well known is that Nasser was initially against using this term, as he did not want to use a euphemism for what was clearly a great defeat – "an alleviation of what has happened" (*takhfīf min illī ḥaṣal*). It was his speech writer and chief ideologue of the Nasserist, Pan-Arab project, Muḥammad Ḥasanayn Haykal, who convinced him to prefer the term *naksa* over *hazīma* – see ʿImād ʿAbd al-Laṭīf, "'Bayān al-Tanaḥī' wa-Dhākirat al-Hazīma: Madkhal Balāghī li-Taḥlīl al-Khitāb al-Siyāsī," *Alif* 30 (2010): 151 – 54.

27 Sadik al-Azm and Ghada Talhami (interviewer), "An Interview with Sadik al-Azm," *Arab Studies Quarterly* 19, no. 3 (1997): 114 – 15.

28 Kassab, *Contemporary Arab Thought: Cultural Critique in Comparative Perspective*, 2.

29 An English translation of the original Arabic is available: Sadik al-Azm, *Self-Criticism After the Defeat*, trans. George Stergios (London: Saqi, 2012).

A second and related consequence of the 1967 defeat was the rising tide of the Islamic Awakening (*al-Ṣaḥwa al-Islāmiyya*), a pious movement that, through a renewal of religious vigor, aimed to trigger a new dawn for the Arab world after having slumbered during centuries of Ottoman rule and later European colonization. As many have pointed out, the dethroning of the Arab nationalist ideology that had held sway in the Arab world since the 1950s opened up space for religious political groups that had expanded in the shadow of Nasserism.[30] Abetted by the growing economic clout of the oil-producing Gulf monarchies, which were anxious to stave off the threat of nationalist-socialist revolutionary ideology, Islamism was allowed to flourish in the open. The defeat of 1967 left the Islamists the obvious alternative.

This development added urgency to the task of the secular intellectual. Not only did the rise of Islamism strengthen their conviction that Arab society, for all its superficial modernizations, remained stuck in a backward mindset, but it also put them on the defensive in an ideological battle for the future of Arab society. As they saw it, the Islamist camp wanted to undo the entire *nahḍa* project and thrust Arab society back to the pre-modern age. Again, al-ʿAẓm is a representative spokesman for this view when he says that "today we find ourselves defending the accomplishments of *al-Nahda* against Salafi and other obscurantist attacks."[31]

In the established view of contemporary Arab thought, these combined consequences of the *hazīma*/*naksa* explain the turn that Arab intellectual discourse took in the wake of 1967. During the 1970s and 1980s, there is a growing interest in the study of the Arab-Islamic heritage, or *turāth*, an interest, moreover, that is marked by the use of sophisticated theoretical frameworks. To be sure, the question of what the proper place and role of the shared past or tradition ought to be was already debated in the nineteenth century. In this sense the problem of *turāth* can be said to have its roots in the *nahḍa* itself. However, given the changed circumstances of the late twentieth century, it is fair to say that the discussions on Arab-Islamic heritage took a different turn, or to use a term coined by David Scott and used productively by Jens Hanssen and Max Weiss in their analysis of this period, the ques-

30 Few studies present 1967 as the sole reason for the rise of Islamism in the 1970s, but it is a common theme in studies of the Islamic Awakening – for example, Yvonne Haddad, "Islamists and the 'Problem of Israel': The 1967 Awakening," *Middle East Journal* 46, no. 2 (1992): 267, Asher Susser, "Fifty Years since the Six-Day War: How the Middle East Has Changed," *The RUSI Journal* 162, no. 3 (2017): 41, and Dimitrios Machairas, "The Strategic and Political Consequences of the June 1967 War," *Cogent Social Sciences* 3, no. 1 (2017): 5. To be clear, the point here is not to disprove all claims about there being a link between the Six-Day War and the rise of Islamism. Rather, it is to set the stage for how this aspect of the historical narrative influenced our understanding of Arab thought.

31 al-Aẓm, "An Interview with Sadik al-Azm," 115.

tion of *turāth* is framed within a different "problem-space."[32] The optimism of earlier generations of reformers – the liberal and nationalist currents described by Albert Hourani as well as the socialist regimes of the Bandung era – had given way to a mood of depression and a sense of crisis. The question of *turāth* turned into a kind of autopsy of Arab culture while at the same time "the intellectual problem-space of "Islam and modernity?" or "Islam versus modernity?" that had been suppressed – though by no means entirely absent – since the Nahda was re-

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32 Scott defines the problem-space as follows:

> A problem-space, in other words, is an ensemble of questions and answers around which a horizon of identifiable stakes (conceptual as well as ideological-political stakes) hangs. That is to say, what defines this discursive context are not only the particular problems that get posed as problems as such (the problem of "race," say), but the particular questions that seem worth asking and the kinds of answers that seem worth having. Notice, then, that a problem-space is very much a context of dispute, a context of rival views, a context, if you like, of knowledge and power. But from within the terms of any given problem-space what is in dispute, what the argument is effectively about, is not itself being argued over. Notice also that a problem-space necessarily has a temporal dimension or, rather, is a fundamentally temporal concept. Problem-spaces alter historically because problems are not timeless and do not have everlasting shapes. In new historical conditions old questions may lose their salience, their bite, and so lead the range of old answers that once attached to them to appear lifeless, quaint, not so much wrong as irrelevant. (David Scott, *Conscripts of Modernity: The Tragedy of Colonial Enlightenment* [Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004], 4)

Some aspects of this definition should perhaps be highlighted to show why, following Hanssen and Weiss, the concept of a "problem-space" can help us to understand the development of Arab thought. Were we to focus merely on the topic, or the problem (of *turāth*) in general, it might be hard to see much development in Arab thought, which has continued since the nineteenth century to revolve around questions of tradition and modernity, of East and West, of religion and secularism, in various guises. The problem-space allows for a more fine-grained analysis, because it focuses not on the general problem, but on the ways in which various participants in a debate articulate particular questions with regard to this problem. It also allows us to connect changes in the way in which they thus approach the problem with changes in society and the context in which they live, showing how some questions become more salient as others become outdated. Thus, a defeat or victory in war, an economic collapse or a boom, a natural disaster, technological or intellectual developments, all may affect in different ways how people position themselves vis-à-vis a particular topic, even while the general problem ostensibly remains the same. This ultimately allows us to countenance the "problem-space" of *turāth* as both similar to what came before (in terms of the topic), and different (in terms of what is done with this topic, that is, how it is problematized and which questions are asked).

vived."[33] It is within this context that we see writers like al-ʿAẓm, but also Abdallah Laroui, Muḥammad ʿĀbid al-Jābirī, Adonis, Zakī Najīb Maḥmūd, Ḥasan Ḥanafī, Naṣr Ḥāmid Abū Zayd and many others trying to get to the root of what had gone wrong with the *nahḍa* project. After all, if modernization was held back by a structurally anti-modern mindset prevalent among Arabs, then the only way to analyze and eventually overcome this deficiency would be to analyze its sources – that is, the intellectual sources that made up *turāth* and had shaped the shared Arab-Islamic consciousness.[34]

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33 Hanssen and Weiss, *Arabic Thought against the Authoritarian Age*, 14. Here it should be mentioned that 1967 did not signal the birth of self-critique among Arab intellectuals. Critical reflection on the achievements of the *nahḍa* had already been current, particularly in the 1950s following "al-Nakba," or "The Catastrophe," which was the term used to refer to the creation of the State of Israel and the displacement of a large part of the Palestinian people during the 1948 Palestine War. An interesting example of this critique is found in the works of Qusṭanṭīn Zurayq. His emphasis on achieving an abstract ideal of reason through a critical reading of history in important ways prefigures the kind of discourse on *turāth* that would become ubiquitous from the 1970s onwards. What this earlier period arguably lacks however, is the clear sense of defeat and loss of hope that results in a much more fierce and deeper style of critique following the war of 1967. For more on Zurayq, see: Qusṭanṭīn Zurayq and Ibrahim M. Oweiss, eds., *Arab Civilization: Challenges and Responses: Studies in Honor of Constantine K. Zurayk* (Albany, N.Y: State University of New York Press, 1988); Elizabeth Suzanne Kassab, "An Arab Neo-Kantian Philosophy of Culture: Constantine Zurayk on Culture, Reason, and Ethics," *Philosophy East and West* 49, no. 4 (1999): 494–512; and Kassab, *Contemporary Arab Thought: Cultural Critique in Comparative Perspective*, 65–74.

34 To give a sense of how *turāth* was defined among this more recent generation of intellectuals we may look to some of these principal voices in the *turāth* discourse. A common way to speak about *turāth* is to stick closely to the lexical meaning of *turāth* as relating to whatever is inherited from the past. This leaves open the question, however, which part of what is inherited counts as "heritage." Adonis, for example, takes a rather circumscribed view of *turāth*, equating it with only the earliest sources of the Arab-Islamic tradition pre-Islamic poetry, the Qur'an and the *hadith* – see Adūnīs, *Hā-Anta, Ayyuhā al-Waqt: Sīra Shiʿriyya-Thaqāfiyya* (Beirut: Dār al-Ādāb, 1993), 57. By contrast, Ḥasan Ḥanafī's conception of *turāth* is much broader, encompassing not only all the written texts of the Arab-Islamic tradition, but also the experience of *turāth* in light of current events – see Ḥasan Ḥanafī, *al-Turāth wa-l-Tajdīd* (Cairo: al-Markaz al-ʿArabī li-l-Baḥth wa-l-Nashr 1980), 13–15. This more dynamic conception is also displayed in al-Jābirī's conception of *turāth*. He maintains that the term "heritage" (or at least the French cognates "héritage" or "patrimoine") does not cover the meaning of *turāth* as it is used today. This is because the term has developed to refer, not just to what is inherited from the past, but to that which is shared by all Arabs, namely "faith and sharia, language and literature, reason and mindset, longing and ambitions. In other words, it is at the same time: The epistemic, the ideological and their rational foundations and their sentimental inner life in Arab-Islamic culture" – see Muḥammad ʿĀbid al-Jābirī, *al-Turāth wa-l-Ḥadātha* (Beirut: Markaz Dirāsāt al-Waḥda al-ʿArabiyya, 1991), 23–24. For an even more extensively argued division of the various aspects and meanings of *turāth*, see Fahmī Jadʿān, *Naẓariyyāt al-Turāth wa-Dirāsāt ʿArabiyya wa-Islāmiyya Ukhrā* (Amman: Dar al-Shurūq, 1985). Jadʿān discerns three dimensions in

At the same time, according to the standard narrative, *turāth* also began to take center stage due to the principal role that it played in Islamist ideology. One of the attractions of this ideological trend was its clear-cut view of identity. It presented Islam as a holistic vision for the private and the public life of its practitioners and promoted itself as the guardian of this authentic way of life. By appealing to a collectivist sense of authenticity it gave many a sense of belonging, self-respect, and dignity. Armando Salvatore describes the link between *turāth,* authenticity (*aṣāla*), and the *ṣaḥwa* straightforwardly, arguing that "the feeling of *naksa* [...] generated a search for *aṣāla* "authenticity" whose most visible political-intellectual outcome has been the discourse of *al-ṣaḥwa al-islāmiyya.*"[35] Since Islamist ideology is premised on the retrieval of an authentic Islamic heritage as the sole route to future greatness, it displayed a keen interest in *turāth.* More precisely, Islamists presented themselves as guardians of this *turāth* and its defenders against would-be modernizers whose aim it is to replace *turāth* with secular Western ideas. The Islamist attempt to monopolize *turāth* made its study of vital importance to the more secular-minded intellectuals. They now needed to study their heritage, not only to analyze why their societies refused to become modern, but also to undermine the Islamist narrative and thwart its appropriation of *turāth.*

This, in broad strokes, is what I will refer to as the standard narrative. Summarizing it briefly, it consists of the following aspects:

- Contemporary Arab thought began as a reaction to the defeat of 1967.
- The main problematic revolved around how to balance authenticity (sticking to one's cultural roots) versus modernity (the need to progress and adopt modern, Western ideas, science, and institutions).
- The main topic for this debate was *turāth*, or Arab-Islamic cultural and intellectual heritage.

The standard narrative will feature heavily in this study. Indeed, our reading of Zakī Najīb Maḥmūd, the first of our three Arab interlocutors, will serve largely as an illustration of how it functions.[36] The goal, however, is not to entrench its

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the discourse of *turāth* – p. 14: A religious dimension, a nationalist dimension, and a humanist one. The first two clothe *turāth* in a simple garb of sanctity, either by identifying it with Islam or with the accomplishments of Arab history, while the humanistic dimension sees *turāth* as the Arab contribution to the universal project of human civilization.

35 Armando Salvatore, "The Rational Authentication of Turāth in Contemporary Arab Thought: Muḥammad al-Jābirī and Ḥasan Ḥanafī," *The Muslim World* 85, no. 3–4 (1995): 194.

36 Admittedly, Maḥmūd started to develop his ideas about *turāth* before 1967, so on this point he is not a "perfect" illustration of the standard narrative. As will be discussed in more detail further on, this can be explained by the fact that the structure of the post-1967 *turāth* discourse was al-

use, but to challenge it and look for alternatives. The narrative presents a clear and helpful way of categorizing Arab thought. But such clarity and neatness often come at a price. This narrative is liable to paper over divisions and differences between thinkers that do not fit easily in a binary paradigm of authenticity and modernity. Putting it more strongly, the dominant perspective on Arab thought has made it difficult for Arab thinkers to articulate and communicate ideas that do not square with this neat categorization. More than being a perspective among others, the standard narrative has become *paradigmatic*; it structures the way people speak about Arab thought and about modern Arab culture more generally. Our goal will be to understand what underlies this paradigm; what are its epistemological underpinnings. We will then use this understanding to explore different ways of appreciating Arab thought, both as a local product of the Arab context and as a tradition embedded in a global modern intellectual discourse.

1.3 The standard narrative in the literature on Arab thought

In the next chapter, we will look in more detail at the extent to which the standard narrative dominates contemporary Arab thought, and contrast its ubiquity with a few critical voices who gesture at alternative paths. Before we get there, however, we need to be more acquainted with the structure of the narrative, its basic dialectic that pits traditionalism against modernity. We will focus for the moment on Western commentaries of the *turāth* debate, but it should be borne in mind that this narrative is just as current in Arab intellectual circles. Western surveyors of Arab thought have on the whole based their descriptions on a prevalent understanding of contemporary Arab thought among Arab intellectuals themselves.

A typical illustration of this narrative is found in Issa Boullata's seminal book on contemporary Arab thought. In it he distinguishes three intellectual orientations: cultural revolutionaries, gradual reformers, and religious purists. The first aim to "transform Arab society and inculcate new ideas and values in it."[37] The second group consists of "Arab intellectuals who consider traditional Arab culture to be viable in modern times if only it is interpreted and understood better, and if certain of its elements are developed in the light of modern needs and the experience of modern nations."[38] Lastly, the third group consists "of Arab intellectuals

ready in place before the defeat. Rather than having caused a shift in Arab thought, the Six-Day War may be more correctly understood as a convenient watershed moment and starting point in formulating the standard narrative.

37 Boullata, *Trends and Issues in Contemporary Arab Thought*, 3.

38 Boullata, *Trends and Issues in Contemporary Arab Thought*, 3–4.

who are committed to the religious aspect of Arab culture."[39] These thinkers focus their attention on the "Islamic elements in Arab culture … advocate the elimination from Arab society of all external cultural influences, mainly Western ones, and they call for a return to the original pristine essence of Islam."[40] In short, Boullata describes the problematic of authenticity and modernity in terms of an axis with authenticity on one side and modernity on the other. Arab intellectuals are distinguished according to where they position themselves on this axis.

A more recent and very comprehensive survey of contemporary Arab thought, written by Elizabeth Kassab, portrays the main oppositions among Arab intellectuals along similar lines. She too views the Arab intellectual as stuck between the pressure to "defend and restore a positive sense of self" on the one hand and "to catch up with the West economically, politically, socially, and culturally" on the other. Confronted with this impossible choice and facing the pressure of a society eager for change, she argues that many postcolonial intellectuals felt the need to offer fast-and-easy solutions, thereby foregoing the "autonomous intellectual agency … necessary for a sense of self."[41] Kassab's overt aim is to point to the exceptions to this rule, to describe the Arab intellectuals who did not give in to a "deep yearning for a holistic vision that could offer an indigenous, non-alienating worldview," but rather engaged in a "radicalization of critique" and whose ideas have unfortunately been overshadowed by the radical writings characteristic of "the search for totalizing doctrines, especially religious doctrines."[42]

Although not quite presented in the same terms, the structure of Kassab's perspective on contemporary Arab thought is by and large in line with Boullata's. She describes a problematic of finding the just mean between authenticity and modernity, here described in terms of an opposition between defending "a sense of self" and "catching up," which leads one camp to go for "totalizing doctrines" and another to opt for "radicalization of critique." The first of these clearly follows the authenticity–modernity paradigm. The second does as well, but in more covert terms. This is seen more clearly if we look at whom she refers to as proposing these "totalizing doctrines." Although this label does not mention religion *per se*, Kassab does clarify that she is talking about "especially religious doctrines" or "especially Islamist ones." In effect, most of the descriptions of the Arab intellectuals that Kassab categorizes as "critical" focus on how they try to undercut the claims

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39 Boullata, *Trends and Issues in Contemporary Arab Thought*, 4.

40 Had he written his book twenty years later, Boullata would probably have relied on the general reading public's current familiarity with the terms "Salafism" and "Islamism" to clarify which group of thinkers he has in mind here.

41 Kassab, *Contemporary Arab Thought: Cultural Critique in Comparative Perspective*, 8.

42 Kassab, *Contemporary Arab Thought: Cultural Critique in Comparative Perspective*, 2.

of Islamists. Mention of totalitarian doctrines of the non-religious kind is almost absent. What this leaves us with is, essentially, a familiar dyadic division between a religiously minded movement of those seeking authenticity and a more secular strand of thinkers who try to undermine their claims through (philosophical) critique – the ideal of rational critique, of course, is standardly related to secularism as well as to the rise of the West in post-Enlightenment European thought.[43]

This overlap between discourse on authenticity and religion is strengthened by the original definition of contemporary Arab thought. The year 1967 is taken as a turning point because it signifies the end of the nationalist era and heralds the Islamic Awakening of the 1970s and 1980s. The interest in heritage is explained as a reflection of this development, as both Islamists and those wanting to argue against them turn to the study of *turāth.* This particular way of justifying the taking of 1967 as a starting point of a new era in Arab thought therefore automatically forefronts religious–secular opposition. We see this tendency reflected in a number of studies. One early example is Fouad Ajami's book *The Arab Predicament: Arab Political Thought and Practice Since 1967.* The author follows Boullata in describing Arab thought in terms of two poles representing authenticity and modernity. Ajami, however, explicitly equates the one side with religion and the other with secularism. He further distinguishes between two branches on each side of this divide, one radical and the other conservative. Thus, on the side of modernity he puts a group of secular intellectuals with a "radical sensibility"[44] together with dejected secularists, resigned to the fact that any attempt at modernization of Arab society is doomed to failure, due to the weight of tradition.[45] On the side of authenticity we find an equally radical group of religious fanatics, as well as a group of conservative fundamentalists who advocate a cautious interpretation of heritage so as to keep the social order in place.[46] Another instance of this overtly religious version of the standard narrative is Armando Salvatore's discussion of the *turāth* debate. Salvatore describes *turāth* discourse as a central aspect of the "Islamic Awakening." The view of *aṣāla* that he attributes to Islamists he describes as highly essentialist and reified.[47] Against this he posits a group of critical thinkers, among

43 For a deeper and critical analysis of the link between secularism and critique, see Talal Asad et. al., *Is Critique Secular?* (Berkeley, CA: The Townsend Center for the Humanities, 2009).

44 Fouad Ajami, *The Arab Predicament: Arab Political Thought and Practice Since 1967* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 32.

45 Ajami, *The Arab Predicament: Arab Political Thought and Practice Since 1967,* 48–59.

46 Ajami, *The Arab Predicament: Arab Political Thought and Practice Since 1967,* 74–87.

47 Salvatore, "The Rational Authentication of Turāth in Contemporary Arab Thought: Muḥammad al-Jābirī and Ḥasan Ḥanafī," 194.

them Muḥammad ʿĀbid al-Jābirī and Ḥasan Ḥanafī, who counter this appropriation of *turāth* by de-reifying and de-essentializing it, opening Islam up for adaption to the modern way of life. Nelly Lahoud, in her book on political thought in Islam, uses a comparable distinction between Islamists, apologists, and intellectuals.[48] She concurs with Salvatore that the "intellectuals," notwithstanding their many differences, are united in wanting to undermine the "rigid understanding of the *turāth*" propounded by the opposing groups, especially the firebrand Islamists.[49]

The aforementioned perspectives on Arab thought share a certain progressive liberal outlook. Their view is that of Arab society gripped by a struggle between secular-liberal reformers and religious reactionaries. The picture is a familiar one of liberal modernity fending of the attempts of the undemocratic, unenlightened forces who want to roll back modernity. This opposition is further strengthened by overlaying it with the division between critique and submissive conformity to tradition – a common trope of secular discourse since the Enlightenment. A somewhat different take on contemporary Arab thought is formulated by those who subscribe to a more leftist orientation, or at least by those who also discuss the Arab Left or Arab Marxists as a separate faction. One early example is Hani Faris, whose short introduction to the *turāth* debate is one of the first published in English. He distinguishes not only between the Salafiyya, whom he refers to as "Muslim modernists,"[50] and Arab liberals, but also the Arab Left. All three,

48 Lahoud in turn admits having taken over this categorization from Ghassan Finianos. See: Nelly Lahoud, *Political Thought in Islam* (London/New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 2005), 2.

49 Lahoud, *Political Thought in Islam*, 33.

50 This identification of "Salafism" with "modernism" may appear incongruous, given that the current popular image of a Salafi is that of a Muslim fundamentalist, who tries to stick as close as possible to the customs, ideas, and values that he associates with the first generations of Muslims – the pious predecessors (*al-salaf al-ṣāliḥ*) from whom the Salafi movement derives its name. It should be noted, however, that the earliest stirrings of the Salafi movement have been associated not so much with this now ubiquitous understanding of Salafism, but rather with the reform (*iṣlāḥ*) movement of the late nineteenth century whose early proponents were Jamāl al-Dīn al-Afghānī (1839–1897), Muḥammad ʿAbduh (1849–1905), and, one generation later, Rashīd Riḍā (1865–1935). Rather than present Salafism as a return to the ways of the very first generations of Muslims, these reformers had a more catholic conception of what the term "predecessors" (*salaf*) ought to refer to, with ʿAbduh, for example, taking it to refer to the great thinkers of the Islamic intellectual tradition up until Ibn Taymiyya (1263–1328). The current image of Salafism as a movement of extremely pious and traditionalist followers of the Ḥanbalī *madhhab*, only took off two generations later, with students of Rashīd Riḍa, such as Muḥammad Bahjat al-Biṭār (1894–1976) and Muḥammad Ḥāmid al-Fīqī (1892–1959) – see Henri Lauzière, *The Making of Salafism: Islamic Reform in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), chap. 2. To what extent these two strands are linked, and whether it is therefore justified to apply the Salafi label to each, has recently been the subject of a debate between Henri Lauzière and

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Frank Griffel. This academic squabble was ignited by Griffel's critical appraisal of an article by Lauzière in which Salafism is considered from the perspective of conceptual history – see Henri Lauzière, "The Construction of Salafiyya: Reconsidering Salafism from the Perspective of Conceptual History," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 42, no. 3 (2010): 369–89, and Frank Griffel, "What Do We Mean By 'Salafī'? Connecting Muḥammad ʿAbduh with Egypt's Nūr Party in Islam's Contemporary Intellectual History," *Die Welt des Islams* 55, no. 2 (1015): 186–220. According to Griffel, Lauzière was mistaken in only applying the term "Salafi" to the later incarnation of Salafism, whose members self-identified with it. He sees a significant connection between the latter and the reform movement through their common roots in the *lā-madhhabiyya* ('non-schoolists'), which was a movement tracing its origins to Muḥammad ash-Shawkānī (d. 1834), a Yemeni scholar who proposed a break with the practice of following the opinions of a particular school of law (*madhhab*) in adjudicating cases – a practice known as *taqlīd* – as well as critiquing the establishment consensus of Ashʿarite theology and the dominant role of Sufism in the Islamic tradition at the time. The *lā-madhhabiyya* later combined with the Wahhabi ideology as well as a growing appreciation for the Hanbali school, in particular following the rediscovery of the writings of Ibn Taymiyya in the late nineteenth century. While Griffel admits that al-Afghānī or ʿAbduh were not as radical in rejecting *madhhab* jurisprudence as some others, he argues that their shared intellectual pedigree is obvious and they should therefore, as he summarized in a later rejoinder, "be counted within the broader Salafi movement of the 19th and 20th centuries" – see Frank Griffel, "Rejoinder: What Is the Task of the Intellectual (Contemporary) Historian? – A Response to Henri Lauzière's 'Reply'," *Die Welt des Islams* 56, no. 2 (2016): 250. Lauzière, in his reply to Griffel, has rejected this categorization, arguing that, as he had shown in the earlier article to which Griffel had written his reply, the term *salafiyya* was never "used as an abstract noun (*maṣdar ṣināʿī*) meaning "Salafism" prior to the 1920s" – Henri Lauzière, "Rejoinder: What We Mean Versus What They Meant by 'Salafi': A Reply to Frank Griffel," *Die Welt des Islams* 56, no. 1 (2016): 90. At root, then, this debate is not simply about Salafism, but about a more general question of historiographical practice. The question at stake is who has the ultimate authority in categorizing a group of people under a particular label – that is, the people in question or the historian studying their relations – and what provides sufficient grounds for doing so. For Lauzière, self-identification is paramount, whereas for Griffel, this is a task for the historian, who may judge certain thinkers, artists, politicians, activists etc. to belong together on the basis of intellectual genealogical relations that they themselves do not necessarily recognize. Lauzière is dismissive of Griffel's argument by genealogy, seeing it as "unnecessarily confusing" and a reflection of the academic's preconceptions, rather than of historical fact. Griffel, meanwhile, has faulted Lauzière for not properly understanding the task of the intellectual historian, which is to come up with terms that help one analyze changes, continuities, and evolution in the history of ideas. As he argues, if we were to adopt Lauzière's way of defining terms only through the self-identification with the term by those whom it intends to describe, then a whole host of useful historical categories may well be assigned to the dustbin – including, but not limited to, the pre-Socratics, socialists, Neo-Platonists, and early Enlightenment thinkers. While I am personally sympathetic to Griffel's argument as being more sensible from a historiographical standpoint, one can also see why Lauzière would push back against this view, since it hardly influences the practice of Salafism as it manifests currently and is thus of little value to researchers interested merely in the contemporary study of Salafism. The way to challenge this more pragmatic

he argues, have come to the realization that the crisis in the Arab world is the result of a clash between Western modernity and authentic Arab values, and they agree that the only way to reconcile the two is by understanding one's heritage.[51] A more substantial Marxist perspective on contemporary Arab thought is offered by Ibrahim Abu-Rabi' in his sizeable monograph *Contemporary Arab thought: Studies in Post-1967 Arab Intellectual History.* As is clear from the title, Abu-Rabi' follows custom in taking 1967 as his starting point. His inflammatory exposition of contemporary Arab thought, however, adds some revolutionary spice to Boullata's more subdued, liberal narrative. Abu Rabi' explicitly problematizes and politicizes the status of Western modernity. He views the causes of the turn to authenticity in economic terms, emphasizing the "gradual proliferation in the Arab world of the capitalist mode of production" that caused the "derailment of traditional Muslim thought."[52] Inauthenticity is caused by this derailment, not because it necessitated reform, but because it led to Arab dependence on the West. Abu Rabi' explicitly opposes authenticity, not to modernity, but to dependence.[53]

This particular way of framing authenticity has repercussions for his depiction of contemporary Arab thought. In response to the derailment, Abu Rabi' explains, there arose four ideological currents: Salafist, nationalist, liberal, and Marxist/Leninist.[54] These can in turn be divided into "two main paradigms contending for authority in the Arab world."[55] The first is represented by the liberal ideology of capitalism and globalization, which he reads as "Americanization," whereas the second is represented by "Arab and Muslim values." Though the latter is practically synonymous with Salafist ideology, this is not necessarily the case. It is only due to the fact that the other two possible authentically Arab ideologies, Marxism and nationalism, failed to provide an adequate alternative to liberalism that Salafism rose to prominence. "Arab Marxism did not develop a unique Arab philosophical or intellectual expression"[56] necessary to develop popular consciousness "along Marxist/socialist lines,"[57] whereas nationalism has been defeated by the combined forces of American-Israeli recolonization, lack of social, economic, and political de-

approach would be to show not just how the conceptual lineages run, but also how intellectual genealogy, wittingly or unwittingly, influences current Salafi thought and practice.

51 Hany Faris, "Heritage and Ideologies in Contemporary Arab Thought," *Journal of Asian and African Studies* 21, no. 1–2 (1986): 100.

52 Abu-Rabi', *Contemporary Arab Thought: Studies in Post-1967 Arab Intellectual History*, 7.

53 Abu-Rabi', *Contemporary Arab Thought: Studies in Post-1967 Arab Intellectual History*, 13.

54 Abu-Rabi', *Contemporary Arab Thought: Studies in Post-1967 Arab Intellectual History*, 64–65.

55 Abu-Rabi', *Contemporary Arab Thought: Studies in Post-1967 Arab Intellectual History*, 79.

56 Abu-Rabi', *Contemporary Arab Thought: Studies in Post-1967 Arab Intellectual History*, 82.

57 Abu-Rabi', *Contemporary Arab Thought: Studies in Post-1967 Arab Intellectual History*, 84.

velopment, and Egypt's bowing out of its role as the natural leader of the nationalist movement."[58]

In Abu-Rabi''s analysis thus arises a twofold division between the liberal on one side and the Salafist, socialist, and nationalist currents on the other. Liberalism is the only ideology that does not advocate radical change and instead adheres to a democratic system of gradual transition. It is inauthentic, according to Abu-Rabi', not so much because it tries to implement modern reforms, but because it is dependent on the West. The other trends, meanwhile, are each revolutionary in their own particular way. They strive for independence, that is, for their respective mode of being authentic in being independent. Needless to say, Abu-Rabi' favors the Marxist revolutionary cause over the other two as the most truly progressive and liberating.[59]

What is interesting about this Marxist depiction of contemporary Arab thought is that, even though it paints the *turāth* debate with a different brush, Abu-Rabi's perception of it does not differ structurally from those of a more liberal bent. Instead of emphasizing the opposition between progress and backwardness or religiosity and secularism, Abu-Rabi' brings out the East–West binary that the liberal ideal of secular progress merely implies. While this makes for an interesting alternative perspective on contemporary Arab thought, it does not break with the kind of binary thinking that has dominated this discourse. It merely highlights one aspect of the binary division at the expense of another.

Finally, a recent addition to the discussion of Arab thought in Western academia is Ahmad Agbaria's *The Politics of Authenticity.* Although Agbaria follows precedent in taking 1967 as the turning point in Arab thought towards *turāth*, he also describes the subsequent search for authenticity as resulting from a broader phenomenon of disillusionment among intellectuals with the project of decolonization.[60] The need for authenticity is seen by him as a reaction to the revolutionary agenda of the 1950s and 1960s that called for a "radical rupture with earlier styles of being and a complete break with past traditions."[61] This reaction, according to Agbaria, gave rise to a new type of Arab intellectual that he refers to as the

58 Abu-Rabi', *Contemporary Arab Thought: Studies in Post-1967 Arab Intellectual History,* 78–79.
59 A recent (and less intricate) defense of an imagined Marxist position vis-à-vis the current state of Arab thought can be found in: Jaafar Aksikas, *Arab Modernities: Islamism, Nationalism, and Liberalism in the Post-Colonial Arab World* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2009).
60 An earlier important event in this regard is the 1965 coup that put Ahmad Ben Bella in power, thereby shattering the dreams of the Arab Left for a free socialist state in the Maghrib – see Ahmad Agbaria, *The Politics of Arab Authenticity: Challenges to Postcolonial Thought* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2022), 7.
61 Agbaria, 14.

"connected critic." In contrast to the social critic, the connected critic does not borrow from Western frameworks, but looks to his own heritage for inspiration in taking on contemporary problems. Agbaria paints the post-1960 intellectual scene in the Arab world as a confrontation between these two types of critic, personified in his study by the aforementioned Muḥammad ʿĀbid al-Jābirī and the Syrian thinker Jūrj Ṭarābīshī. Interestingly, while not changing or undermining the main division of Arab thought, Agbaria's analysis shifts the demarcation between what is usually considered the modernist party of reform and the traditionalists. Al-Jābirī is often portrayed as a progressive, liberal leftist taking a stand against the traditionalist appropriation of *turāth.* This uncompromising conservative position, which maintains authenticity by rejecting all (foreign inspired) innovation, is left out of the discussion, leaving Agbaria to focus solely on two figures, both of whom espouse radical reform. Between these two figures, the only difference appears to be that al-Jābirī aims to articulate his reform program without relying on Western frames of thought. Instead, he claims to uncover the authentic rationalist tradition of the western part of the Arab world, or Maghrib, which has long been marginalized by the more assertive intellectual voices of the eastern part, or Mashriq.[62]

It should be noted that the schema used by authors writing in the languages of Western academia to conceptualize contemporary Arab thought is obviously inspired by Arabic sources.[63] An influential articulation of this perspective on Arab thought is found in several articles and books by one of our main interlocutors Zakī Najīb Maḥmūd, and as we will see, it forms the backbone of reflections on *turāth*, which he describes in terms of a struggle between the forces of authenticity and modernity – see Chapter 4 of this book. But Maḥmūd is certainly not the only Arab intellectual to frame the discourse in this way. A different set of terms is used by Ḥasan Ḥanafī to distinguish between those who hold that *turāth* is self-sufficient (*al-iktifāʾ al-dhātī li-l-turāth*), and their opponents who argue for the self-sufficiency of the new (*al-iktifāʾ al-dhātī li-l-jadīd*) and the harmonization (*tawfīq*) of *turāth* and the new.[64] A similar division is used by Ṭayyib Ṭīzīnī, who identifies the Salafi, the contemporary, and the fabricated (*al-nazʿa al-talfīqiyya*) trends as cen-

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62 Agbaria, chap. 4.

63 Mohammed Ourya, in his French survey of Arab thought, admits this rather frankly, attributing his tripartite division of Arab thinkers to Fuʾād Zakariyyā – see M. Ourya, *La pensée arabe actuelle* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2016), 14–16. It should be noted that Zakariyyā introduces this distinction with some reservation, saying that he does not want to get caught in the ongoing struggle (*al-maʿraka al-dāʾira*) over *turāth* – see Fuʾād Zakariyyā, *al-Ṣaḥwa al-Islāmiyya fī Mīzān al-ʿAql*, 2nd ed. (Dār al-Fikr al-Muʿāsir, 1987), 39.

64 Ḥanafī, *al-Turāth wa-l-Tajdīd*, 27–34.

tral to the modern discourse of authenticity and modernity.[65] Focusing on the situation in Egypt, Naṣr Ḥāmid Abū Zayd also notes a division between Islamists like Muḥammad ʿAmmāra, Fahmī Huwaydī, and Muḥammad al-Ghazālī, secularists like Fuʾād Zakariyyā and Sayyid Yāsīn, and those who steer the middle course, like ʿAbd al-Munʿim Saʿīd.[66] In addition, there are views of the *turāth* debate that take into account the Marxist position. One finds this in Muḥammad ʿĀbid al-Jābirī's *Naḥnu wa-l-Turāth: Qirāʾāt fī Turāthinā al-Falsafī* (*We and the Heritage: Readings in Our Philosophical Heritage:* henceforth *We and the Heritage*), for example, where he distinguishes between a Salafi, and Orientalist, and a revolutionary reading of *turāth.*[67] The distinction has continued to be applied well into the twenty-first century. Thus, we find yet another slightly different conception of this division in the work of ʿAbd al-Ilāh Balqazīz, when he announces that the study of *turāth* ought to start from the epistemological division of the venerating (*tabjīliyya*), the disdainful (*iḥtiqāriyya*), and the utilitarian (*istithmāriyya*) trends. Whereas the first and the second refer to the traditionalists and the modernizers, respectively, the third are presented as agnostic with regard to the intrinsic worth of *turāth*, using it merely to advance their own ideological projects, whatever they may be.[68] In mentioning these authors, I do not want to suggest that they all support these divisions and the way in which *turāth* is debated. Certainly, as we will see, some of them are critical of the way this discourse is ordered and debates about *turāth* are conducted. The point is, however, that this is the background against which they work, and that it therefore provides the standards by which their own contributions are judged. Even someone like al-Jābirī, who is explicit in his desire to overcome the divisions over *turāth*, finds it hard to escape being categorized alongside the liberal, modernist, pro-Western crowd.[69]

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65 Ṭayyib Tīzīnī, "Ishkāliyyat al-Aṣāla wa-l-Muʿāsara fī al-Waṭan al-ʿArabī," in *al-Turāth wa-Taḥaddiyāt al-ʿAṣr fī al-Waṭan al-ʿArabī: al-Aṣāla wa-l-Muʿāsara* (Beirut: Markaz Dirāsāt al-Waḥda al-ʿArabiyya, 1985), 90.

66 Naṣr Ḥāmid Abū Zayd (Aboe Zaid), *Vernieuwing in het islamitisch denken*, trans. Fred Leemhuis and Rob Leemhuis (Amsterdam: Bulaaq, No Date), 146 (translated into Dutch from Arabic).

67 Muḥammad ʿĀbid al-Jābirī, *Naḥnu wa-l-Turāth: Qirāʾāt Muʿāsira fī Turāthinā al-Falsafī* (Beirut/Casablanca: al-Markaz al-Thaqāfī al-ʿArabī, 1993), 12–16.

68 ʿAbd al-Ilāh Balqazīz, *Naqd al-Turāth*, vol. 3, al-ʿArab wa-l-Hadātha (Beirut: Markaz Dirāsāt al-Waḥda al-ʿArabiyya, 2014), 53–54.

69 As Wael Hallaq puts it: "To say that these scholars, like Jābirī and many like him, are struggling (consciously or unconsciously) to accommodate Islam within liberalism is to state the most obvious" – see Wael Hallaq, *Reforming Modernity: Ethics and the New Human in the Philosophy of Abdurrahman Taha* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019), 75. This assessment would seem to undercut Agbaria's reading of al-Jābirī as a "connected critic" who articulates a modern framework for Arab-Islamic thought on authentic (that is, non-Western) foundations. For a discussion

In conclusion, what we face at the start of our inquiry into Arab thought is an established paradigm, a standard narrative that depicts the core dynamics of intellectual debate in the Arab world in a few strokes. This story is easily digested, and is repeated in descriptions of intellectual discourse in introductions to the modern Middle East or Islam.

In the Arab world, it is also rehearsed and commented on for a broader public in news articles and TV debates.[70] Its pervasiveness in public political discourse is underlined by the founding of a political party in Morocco in 2008 that adopted "The Party of Authenticity and Modernity" (*Ḥizb al-Aṣāla wa-l-Muʿāsara*) as its formal title.[71] Moreover, the religious–secular binary that is closely linked to the dichotomy between authenticity and modernity is a well-known trope in political commentary on the state of Arab societies, and is a dichotomy that is often invoked by political actors to shore up their base.[72]

What explains the dominance of this narrative is a complicated question. There is certainly an interesting story to be told about the institutional, political, and social dynamics that favor it. That, however, is not our aim in this study. Our aim is not to explain, but to explore. Our aim is to imagine different ways of understanding Arab thought. And in order to do this, we need to destabilize and dislodge an overly rigid conception of Arab thought. In Chapter 2, we will start shaping this counternarrative with some general observations about the *turāth* debate and how it is framed using particular conceptions of authenticity, time, and space. We will briefly look at the role played by the traumatic experience

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of this particular point in light of Agbaria's portrayal of al-Jābirī, see Harald Viersen, "Critique as Reception: Can There Be an Objective Study of Contemporary Arab Thought?," *Denkanstöße – Reflections* (blog), January 16, 2023, https://philosophy-in-the-modern-islamic-world.net/critique-as-reception-can-there-be-an-objective-study-of-contemporary-arab-thought/.

70 A recent example of the continuing relevance of the *turāth* discussion is the widely discussed spat between the president of Cairo University, Muḥammad al-Khusht, and the president of al-Azhar University, Aḥmad al-Ṭayyib, where the former took up the mantle of the secular camp of modernity by attacking al-Azhar's overly strict adherence to *turāth* – see Gamal Essam El-Din, "Long-Held Positions of Islamic Heritage Come to the Fore," al-Ahram Online, February 6, 2020, http://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/50/1201/362931/AlAhram-Weekly/Egypt/Longheld-positions-of-Islamic-heritage-come-to-the.aspx.

71 Ferdinand Eibl, "The Party of Authenticity and Modernity (PAM): Trajectory of a Political Deus Ex Machina," *The Journal of North African Studies* 17, no. 1 (2012): 45 – 66.

72 For interesting contestations of this perspective in light of the Arab uprisings of the early 2010s, see Charles Hirschkind, "Beyond Secular and Religious: An Intellectual Genealogy of Tahrir Square," *American Ethnologist* 39, no. 1 (2012): 49 – 53, and Hussein Ali Agrama, "Reflections on Secularism, Democracy, and Politics in Egypt," *American Ethnologist* 39, no. 1 (February 2012): 26 – 31. Whether these commentaries have stood the test of time is a matter for debate, but if anything they affirm the dominance of visions of Arab societies as divided between religious and secular.

of the June War of 1967 and the role it plays in grounding the standard narrative. Following this, we will see how the story of contemporary Arab thought may be told differently from both a local and global perspective. Having demonstrated how time and space play a role in conceptualizing Arab thought, we shift to the conceptual plane and explore the contestation of the meaning of authenticity (*aṣāla*) by Arab intellectuals. Contrary to common perception, this concept does not necessarily refer to a shared communal origin, but can equally refer to the ideal of original, unique creativity often associated with (Western) modernity. In Chapter 3, we will explore this ambiguity in the term authenticity some more by looking at how the ideal of authenticity is an inherent aspect of modernity. The creative instability in the dichotomy-cum-equivalence of authenticity and modernity will provide the foundation for the analyses of our three interlocutors – Zakī Najīb Maḥmūd, Adonis, and ʿAbd al-Raḥmān Ṭāhā – in Chapters 4, 5, and 6.

2 Evaluating the standard narrative

Central to the standard narrative of contemporary Arab thought is the binary of authenticity and modernity. As we will see, one of the main things holding back alternative conceptions of Arab thought is the assumption, common among Western pundits as well as Arab authors, that the meanings of these terms are well known and beyond dispute; that authenticity always relates to a set of cultural markers that originate in the past, and that modernity refers to Western science and forms of social organization that do away with authentic traditions. To disabuse us of this stable, unambiguous interpretation of the authenticity–modernity binary, in this chapter we will start chipping away at it in several ways. First, we will look at how the standard narrative is often linked temporally to the modern Arab "turning point par excellence": 1967.[1] As is case with the standard narrative generally, it would be foolish to neglect this crucial event in recent Middle Eastern history outright. The defeat has had a lasting impact on many of the engaged intellectuals who experienced it living in the Arab world, but also outside of it – for example, Edward Said and Talal Asad. When we use this date to make sense of what has occurred in Arab intellectual history, however, we should remain aware of the consequences of carving up history in this particular way. Intellectual history is always linked to changes in society. Hence we justify seeing certain trends, defining problematics, and radical breaks in the development of any intellectual discourse by referencing what happened in the broader historical context. The justifications for taking 1967 as a cut-off point are obvious. The Arab defeat in the June War marked the end of an era of optimistic reform. It signaled the coming out of the Islamist movements. Understandably, the authenticity–modernity problematic that arose during the following two decades was read against this background, namely as the result of changing fortunes within Arab society. The defeat against Israel was conceptualized by Arab intellectuals in terms of an *Arab* trauma and as a consequence the discourse of authenticity and modernity that followed in its wake was largely understood as being particular to the Arab world, not as a problematic that affected the world at large.[2]

1 Bardawil, *Revolution and Disenchantment: Arab Marxism and the Binds of Emancipation*, 82.
2 It was of course not the first such trauma. As mentioned earlier, the defeat of the Arab armies and the founding of Israel in 1948 also gave rise to critical appraisals of the state of the Arab world during the 1950s. These were not, however, marked by a similarly overwhelming sense of defeat. These criticisms were articulated within a different problem space, one marked by an anti-colonial struggle, whose Third-Worldist hopes and principles were embodied in the declaration of the Bandung conference of 1955. As David Scott argues, this problem space began to alter in the 1960s as the Bandung project was undermined, leading to a new set of vocabularies, attitudes and, above

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What has been the effect of this focus? While there is some logic in forefronting the experience of 1967, if we focus on it completely, it may blind us to different ways of telling the story of Arab thought that are more open to connections between what happened in Arab circles and outside the Arab context. Focusing on events particular to the Arab world provincializes their history. In certain cases, this zooming in on the local context can be beneficial, if only to counter universalizing tendencies of much of academic theory. However, it can lead to a distorted view if it excludes the global setting in which this history unfolds; if it makes unintelligible any reference to general trends in the formation of a modern subjectivity that form the backdrop for the specific problem space of late twentieth-century Arab thought. The trick is to balance the universal and the local, to acknowledge how modernity is, in a way, a story of how ideas, institutions, and practices were instituted on a global scale, but that this "universalistic thought was always and already modified by particular histories."[3] One way of exploring these connections, of *de*-provincializing Arab thought, is to look critically at the origins of the problematic of authenticity and modernity and the ubiquitous invocations of *turāth* that accompanied it.

2.1 Challenging the local perspective: What is so special about 1967?

Looking at 1967, one indication that we should indeed be cautious about reading the Six-Day War as *the* pivotal moment in Arab intellectual history is the fact that topics like *turāth*, authenticity, and religion already took center stage and were already being discussed in the kind of critical fashion associated with post-1967 *turāth* debates before the *hazīma* had occurred. A prime example is Abdallah Laroui's *L'idéologie arabe contemporaine.* This book outlines many of the problems that came to be associated with Arab thought during the final decades of the twentieth century, and the question of cultural authenticity is there, front and center, in the first chapter. It was written between 1961 and 1964 and came out in May 1967,

all, a new set of questions that were salient for the intelligentsia in the postcolonial world – see David Scott, *Refashioning Futures: Criticism after Postcoloniality* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 11. It is in light of this change in problem space that we can understand why seemingly similar criticisms of Arab societies and Arab thought were different in kind. Whereas previously the mood was one of defiance, the post-1967 moment may be described as one of crisis or tragedy.

3 Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), xiv.

that is, one month before the outbreak of the Six-Day War.[4] Moreover, it is notable that Laroui conceived of this work during a stay in Egypt right at the time when the writings of Sayyid Quṭb, who was executed in 1966, started to foment fundamentalist strains of Islamism. Regardless whether the image of Quṭb as a staunch traditionalist is truthful, this stereotype of him and of the movement that he helped shape was on the minds of progressives like Laroui and other Arab intellectuals when they turned their pens against the Islamic Revival.[5] Hence, from their perspective, the roots of this conflict lay in the intellectual scene of the 1960s, not in the effect that the *hazīma* might have had on the Arab psyche.

Similarly, Carool Kersten has argued that the Egyptian intellectual Ḥasan Ḥanafī can be read as a harbinger of the later *turāth* discourse, as the latter's "theoretical and methodological framework for the philosophical study of religion" was developed in the 1960s. Ḥanafī's agenda thus defies "the assumption of an immediate causal link between the fallout of the war and the return of religion in Arab intellectualism."[6] Corroborating this trend, if we focus for a moment on a couple of thinkers who will feature centrally in our narrative, we see that the ideas that would captivate intellectuals in the 1970s were fermenting at least one decade earlier in the works of both of Zakī Najīb Maḥmūd and Adonis. Maḥmūd mentions shifting from his earlier logical positivist phase to the study of *turāth*, before the supposedly crucial events of June 1967. Indeed, we see a hint of his later obsession with *turāth* in his book *al-Sharq al-Fannān (The Artistic East)* from 1960.[7] Adonis, meanwhile, in the introduction to his dissertation *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil* (*The Static and the Dynamic*) admits that the main ideas for this work stem from the time when he compiled the first edition of an overview of Arab poetry.[8] This was in the late 1950s. In all, these are some indications that the foundations for the subsequent discussions about heritage and cultural authentic-

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4 Nancy Gallagher, "Interview – the Life and Times of Abdallah Laroui, a Moroccan Intellectual," *The Journal of North African Studies* 3, no. 1 (1998): 137.

5 Although Laroui's direct target in *L'ideologie arabe contemporaine* is the Moroccan intellectual ʿAllāl al-Fāsī, he admits in an interview that this book was inspired by two Egyptian experiences: first, his reading of Egyptian publications on the question of society between 1930 and 1950, and second, his own experience of the cultural deterioration (*taqahqur*) in Egypt in 1961. In particular, he mentions that his book was written as a response to Sayyid Quṭb's (*al-ʿAdāla al-Ijtimāʿiyya fī al-Islām*)—ʿAbd Allah al-ʿArwī, "al-Taḥdīth wa-l-Dimūqrāṭiyya," *al-Ādāb* 43, no. 1–2 (1995): 20.

6 Kersten, *Cosmopolitans and Heretics: New Muslim Intellectuals and the Study of Islam*, 152.

7 He himself confirms having started his project of *turāth* analysis in 1960 – Zakī Najīb Maḥmūd, *ʿArabī bayn Thaqāfatayn* (Cairo: Dar al-Shurūq, 1990), 390–91.

8 The introduction to the first volume of Adonis's "Anthology of Arab Poetry" (1964) in fact lays out the structure of the argument that he will pursue in his dissertation in the 1970s – Adūnīs, ed., *Dīwān al-Shiʿr al-ʿArabī*, 5th ed., vol. 1 (Beirut: Dār al-Sāqī, 2010), 15–92.

ity that would come to dominate intellectual circles in the final decades of the twentieth century, were already in place.

These first signs of the *turāth* debate could be accommodated if we attribute the occurrence of binary tropes of tradition–modernity, religion–science, backwardness–progress, etc. to the dominance of modernization theory in the 1950s. This origin is proposed, for example, by Reinhard Schulze.[9] But we can even push the clock back further, pointing out that the *nahḍa* is primarily associated with the drive to ensure the progress (*taqaddum*) of Arab society, a bid to undo centuries of what was presented by *nahḍawī* intellectuals as centuries of decay (*inḥiṭāṭ*) – as discussed in Chapter 1. As part of this progressive impulse, we find among this group a renewed, or rather, a new kind of interest in history. One important part of the *nahḍa* project was to articulate a new, coherent historical consciousness that could accommodate modern progressive and nationalist historiography. This involved the formulation of new conceptions of time, progress, and identity, which led to a historiographical realignment that was decisive for the modern understanding of Arab-Islamic intellectual history. Modern printing technology, the emergence of publishing houses and new methods of editing, together with a need to articulate an authentic Islamic intellectual tradition resulted in fierce debates over what the pre-modern Islamic intellectual tradition consists

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9 Reinhard Schulze, "Is There an Islamic Modernity?," in *The Islamic World and the West: An Introduction to Political Cultures and International Relations*, ed. Kai Hafez, trans. Mary Ann Kenny (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 22. More recently, Fadi Bardawil has made the more nuanced suggestion that, while modernization theory has indeed been effective in creating this binary mode of discussing Arab culture, this should not distract us from actors that have tried to move beyond this rigid system – see Bardawil, *Revolution and Disenchantment: Arab Marxism and the Binds of Emancipation*, 5. Whether the division between tradition and modernity as an abstract relationship maps onto how society is in fact organized, as sociologists and economists who espoused modernization have been to prone do, is a different matter. As Baber Johansen has argued with regard to the ideological use of the concept of tradition in postcolonial Morocco, the situation in Moroccan society cannot be captured in any such generalized distinctions, but has to be described as a continuing process of negotiation between a capitalist and a non-capitalist sector in which the dualist relationship between tradition and modernity "is reproduced and sharpened" – see Baber Johansen, "Tradition und Moderne in der Dualismus-Theorie," *Zeitschrift für Kulturaustausch* 25, no. 4 (1975): 27. Incidentally, this materialist approach to the question of *turāth*, which looks not at how *turāth*, modernity, or authenticity are discussed by Arab intellectuals but whether applying these terms makes sense from a socio-economic point of view, may offer a different avenue for critique. This is not further pursued in the current study, which focuses on the discussions themselves and the perceptions by Arab intellectuals of what ails Arab societies, not whether their views are a proper reflection of the true relations of political and economic power in these societies.

in.[10] Concomitantly, at around the same time, in the 1930s and 1940s, we see an intellectual face-off between a discourse of authenticity and one of modernity.[11]

This analysis is shared by, among others, ʿAzīz al-ʿAẓma, Fuʾād Zakariyyā, and Joseph Massad, all of whom point to an even earlier period in the late nineteenth century as the starting point for the interest in *turāth* and the problematic of authenticity and modernity.[12] As mentioned earlier, Muḥammad ʿĀbid al-Jābirī even calls the question of authenticity and modernity "the renaissance question" (*al-suʾāl al-nahḍawī*).[13] Looking at philosophy in particular, we see a drive towards establishing an authentic Islamic philosophical tradition in the writings of the influential philosophy professor and follower of Muḥammad ʿAbduh, Muṣṭafā ʿAbd al-Rāziq. ʿAbd al-Rāziq was set on demonstrating the "originality and authenticity of Islamic philosophy" as a way of proving the "compatibility of the Islamic theory of life with modern thought,"[14] and an important part of this project was to build an Islamic philosophical canon. Muṣṭafā ʿAbd al-Rāziq was an influential figure, a beacon for the next generation of philosophers who continued his project in different ways, including such luminaries as ʿAbd al-Raḥmān Badawī and ʿĀlī Sāmī al-Nashshār.[15]

The combination of a drive for progress and a search for authentic roots is key to many analyses of the *nahḍa.* These concepts map onto what Peter Hill has recently termed the two metanarratives of the *nahḍa* that continue to be used by Arab and non-Arab scholars alike to make sense of the *nahḍa.*[16] The first of these metanarratives is a heroic story of the triumph of reason and progress over backwardness, a story in which the Arab nations struggle to get with the times to secure the well-being of their people. This is the story of the *nahḍa* that

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10 Ahmad Khan, "Islamic Tradition in an Age of Print: Editing, Printing and Publishing the Classical Heritage," in *Reclaiming Islamic Tradition: Modern Interpretations of the Classical Heritage*, ed. Elisabeth Kendall and Ahmad Khan (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016), 54.

11 Roel Meijer, "The Quest for Modernity: Secular Liberal and Left-Wing Political Thought in Egypt 1945–1958" (Amsterdam: University of Amsterdam, 1995), 24–25.

12 ʿAzīz al-ʿAẓma, *al-Aṣāla aw Siyāsat al-Hurūb min al-Wāqiʿ* (London/Beirut: Dar aL-Sāqī, 1992), chap. 2; Massad, *Desiring Arabs*, 16–29; Zakariyyā, *al-Ṣaḥwa al-Islāmiyya fī Mīzān al-ʿAql*, 85–86.

13 al-Jābri, "The Problematic of Authenticity and Contemporaneity in Modern and Contemporary Arab Thought," 176.

14 Ibrahim M. Abu-Rabi', "Al-Azhar and Islamic Rationalism in Modern Egypt: The Philosophical Contributions of Muṣṭafā ʿAbd ar-Rāziq and ʿAbd al-Ḥalīm Maḥmūd," *Islamic Studies* 27, no. 2 (1988): 130.

15 Angela Giordani shares the view that it was specifically the group of philosophers following in the footsteps of Muṣṭafa ʿAbd al-Rāziq who did much to develop the modern notion of *turāth* – see Giordani, "Making Falsafa in Modern Egypt: Towards a History of Islamic Philosophy in the Twentieth Century," 125.

16 Hill, *Utopia and Civilisation in the Arab Nahda*, 3–7.

arose among the liberal Arab intelligentsia. The second narrative is a tragic one. It tells of an Arab world that has been deceived into adopting Western innovations that have not brought it wealth and well-being, as was promised, but instead destroyed the traditional social fabric that held Arab societies together for centuries. Both narratives have their stock representatives – Muḥammad ʿAbduh, Jūrjī Zaydān, and Aḥmad Amīn on the side of heroism and Rashīd Riḍā, Sayyid Quṭb and Muḥammad Jalāl Kishk as their tragically inclined opponents. These narratives continue to be espoused until this day. In academia, Christopher de Bellaigue's *The Islamic Enlightenment* represents the heroic narrative in what Hill calls its "unreconstructed form,"[17] whereas Timothy Mitchell's *Colonising Egypt* and some of the work by Talal Asad can be seen as contemporary representatives of the tragic sensibility.[18]

It should be mentioned that, as was the case with the *inḥiṭāṭ* paradigm, both these narratives have received a fair amount of criticism as scholarly interest in the *nahḍa* has increased.[19] Yet, as Hill rightly notes, the two metanarratives remain relevant, if only because they continue to be used in the Arab world by historians who require a neat paradigm to make sense of modern Arab history and, in the post-2011 phase of revolution and counterrevolution, "as Arab states continue to trumpet the heroic narrative of *tanwīr* [enlightenment] in combat with its unenlightened enemies; while the tragic counter-narrative of 'intellectual invasion' by

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17 Hill, *Utopia and Civilisation in the Arab Nahda*, 6. Hill also mentions Tarek El-Ariss's *Trials of Arab Modernity* and Ussama Makdisi's *Artillery of Heaven* as examples of this trend: see Ussama Samir Makdisi, *Artillery of Heaven: American Missionaries and the Failed Conversion of the Middle East* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2008), El-Ariss, *Trials of Arab Modernity: Literary Affects and the New Political*, and Christopher de Bellaigue, *The Islamic Enlightenment: The Struggle Between Faith and Reason, 1798 to Modern Times* (New York: Liveright, 2017).

18 Mitchell, *Colonising Egypt*; Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Redwood City, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003) in particular ch. 7.

19 It deserves emphasis that this opposition between a heroic and a tragic paradigm is not *the same* as the *inḥiṭāṭ* paradigm. The former is a division over future expectations, whereas the latter is a historical frame for describing the pre-modern Arab world. Yet, the two are also connected. The *inḥiṭāṭ* paradigm of a decadent pre-modern situation was formulated and used by the heroically minded liberal reformers to paint a future of progress built on the reforms initiated by the Egyptian ruler Muḥammad ʿAlī (1769–1849), while the sense of loss underlying the tragic sensibility informed a rejection of this legacy. These two positions are clearly related to the *inḥiṭāṭ* paradigm in a discussion between Jurjī Zaydān and Muḥammad ʿAbduh in the journals *al-Ḥilāl* and al-*Manār* sparked by the centennial of Muḥammad ʿAlī's accession to power. For a description of this debate, see Di-Capua, *Gatekeepers of the Arab Past: Historians and History Writing in Twentieth-Century Egypt*, 31–35.

the West remains Islamist orthodoxy."[20] As his analysis of the argument shows, however, these narratives did not arise after 1967, but rather echoed earlier divisions in Arab thought, albeit in a new geopolitical, social, and intellectual context.

It is not only the case that these metanarratives echoed through the debates on *turāth* after 1967. *Turāth* itself was also on the radar before that time; *nahḍawī* intellectuals were already reassessing (and in a certain sense reinventing[21]) their shared heritage, and took a great interest in Arab-Islamic historiography. They were also aware of the tensions that might arise between the advent of the modern and the traditional worldview that suffuses *turāth*. The efforts of these scholars in fact honed in on this tension as they formulated ways of adopting new ideas and inventions without giving up too much of their identity as Arabs and as Muslims. It is not the case, moreover, that these earlier generations only focused on the material adoption of modernity, ignoring the need to change to a modern mindset. They were not under any illusion that adopting modern science and technology would be possible without serious repercussions for the mentality of the citizens of the nascent Arab nation-states. Late nineteenth-century journals were teeming with discussions on modern manners, ethics, and social organization. English manuals of ethics were incredibly popular, at least among the liberal, literate segment of the population, and Arabic versions of them were seen as a necessary part of the modern curriculum in university and later also in secondary schools.[22] In the 1950s, the

20 Hill, *Utopia and Civilisation in the Arab Nahda*, 9. The concept of enlightenment in contemporary debates in the Arab world and its politicization by less-than-"enlightened" regimes is discussed at length in a recent book by Elizabeth Kassab: *Enlightenment on the Eve of Revolution: The Egyptian and Syrian Debates* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019). An interesting source that she refers to is the article by Mona Abaza titled "The Trafficking with Tanwir (Enlightenment)"; see Mona Abaza, "The Trafficking with Tanwir (Enlightenment)," *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 30, no. 1 (2010): 12–46.

21 For an insightful look at the reinvention of the Islamic classics during the *nahḍa*, see: El Shamsy, *Rediscovering the Islamic Classics: How Editors and Print Culture Transformed an Intellectual Tradition.*

22 For example, Aḥmad Amīn's *Kitāb al-Akhlāq* (*The Book of Ethics*), which is largely based on Victorian manuals of ethics and education, began as an instruction manual for judges. It was later used in an abridged version in Egypt's secondary education system, which had a tradition of using ethics manuals either translated directly from English or based on Victorian sources – as is clear from records at the Egyptian Ministry of Education, a book entitled *Uṣūl al-Akhlāq* (*The Sources of Ethics*) and likely attributed to the Scottish theologian James Denney (1856–1917) was assigned as reading for students in secondary education in 1925, and has a lot in common with Amīn's book. The general impact of Victorian ideals of character is discussed in, for example, Mitchell, *Colonising Egypt*, 108–11. It is important to remind ourselves, however, that even as European modes of ethics and education were introduced, they were also "refashioned, renegotiated, and rendered intelligible in non-European contexts." Omnia El Shakry, "Schooled Mothers and

doyen of Arabic letters, Ṭāhā Ḥusayn, in reaction to the discourse on tradition and renewal that was already being articulated at the time, discussed the necessity of engaging in the slow development of a new self in order to truly renew society.[23] Marxist thinkers like Anwar ʿAbd al-Malik envisioned "the purification [*takhlīṣ*] of the Egyptian thought and spirit [*wijdān*] from all imperialist influences" so as to create a "new personality" by reviving the "national heritage" (*al-turāth al-qawmī*).[24]

Given this historical record of continuous discussions of *turāth* and different iterations of the problematic of progress and decay, Enlightenment and Counter-Enlightenment, authenticity and modernity, what are we to make of the claim that 1967 marks the beginning of Arab thought's "contemporary" phase? If something changed in the period following the June War, it certainly was not due to new elements being introduced into Arab intellectual discourse. The basics were already there. Even the critique of the decadence and fleeing from the problems of the everyday is not something to which the pre-1967 Arab community was entirely oblivious, as evidenced by Naguib Mahfouz's novel *Tharthara fawq al-Nīl* (*Adrift on the Nile*) – published in 1966 – or the poem "al-Ẓill wa-l-Salīb" ("The Shade and the Cross") by Ṣalāḥ ʿAbd al-Ṣabūr.[25] If anything did change in the late 1960s, it must be seen as a change in degree, not in kind. The 1967 defeat confirmed a trend, a loss of confidence in the heroic narrative of progress and Enlightenment. Simultaneously, the tragic sensibility gained momentum. A renewed sense of loss of identity set in without the gain of political and economic independence to make up for it. In this new landscape, the topic of *turāth* itself becomes problematic. It is no longer assumed that with the adoption of certain institutions, inventions, and customs Arab societies will be able to become like Europe, only with a different cultural orientation. Aided, perhaps, by a culturalist theoretical turn in Marxist thought in the early 1960s, intellectuals now start to think of the Arab mind as being structurally incapable of coming to terms with modernity.[26] The

Structured Play: Child Rearing in Turn-of-the-Century Egypt," in *Remaking Women: Feminism and Modernity in the Middle East*, ed. Lila Abu-Lughod (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), 158.

23 Ṭāhā Ḥusayn, *Taqlīd wa-Tajdīd* (Cairo: al-Hayʾa al-Miṣriyya al-ʿĀmma li-l-Kitāb, 2013), 23.

24 Meijer, "The Quest for Modernity: Secular Liberal and Left-Wing Political Thought in Egypt 1945–1958," 245.

25 Ṣalāḥ ʿAbd al-Ṣabūr, *Aqūlu lakum …* (al-Maktab al-Tijārī li-l-Ṭibāʿa wa-l-Tawzīʿ wa-l-Nahsr, 1961); Najīb Maḥfūz (Naguib Mahfouz), *Tharthara fawq al-Nīl* (Cairo: Dār Misr li-l-Ṭibāʿa, 1966).

26 The importance of Marxist theoreticians, in particular someone like Althusser, for this generation of thinkers has been remarked upon by Bardawil, *Revolution and Disenchantment: Arab Marxism and the Binds of Emancipation*, 125, Manfred Sing, "Arab Self-Criticism after 1967 Revisited: The Normative Turn in Marxist Thought and Its Heuristic Fallacies," *Arab Studies Journal* 15, no. 2 (2017): 152, and Harald Viersen, "The Ethical Dialectic in al-Jabri's 'Critique of Arab Reason',"

problem is no longer simply that of combining old and new. Before that can happen, the old must first be purged of its anti-modern tendencies that determine the Arab mind. Gone is the still somewhat carefree optimism of liberal and socialist reformers who thought that with a little tweaking here and there the postcolonial world could pull itself up out of the morass of colonial backwardness and dependence, without thereby harming its cultural heritage. As part of this endeavor to purge the shared Arab consciousness, there is a proliferation of interest in research methods (*manāhij al-baḥth*) that may be used to unlock the depths of Arab thinking, through methodologically sound analysis of the traditional heritage.[27] Thinkers like Muḥammad ʿĀbid al-Jābirī and Ḥasan Ḥanafī use frameworks provided by Althusser and the phenomenological tradition, respectively, to formulate elaborate research projects to reread *turāth* in an effort to de-essentialize it and make it compatible with the modern age. They, in effect, try to bring the two sides of authenticity and modernity together, by giving *turāth* a positive spin, portraying it as potentially progressive or at least not as equivalent to passive imitation (*taqlīd*). No matter how one judges the success of these complicated endeavors, *turāth* is now at the heart of the problem. On the one hand it is debated in more theoretically sophisticated terms, yet on the other hand a basic binary structure of this discourse appears to prevail.

This dominance, evident in the growing number of books published and conferences organized around the theme of "authenticity and modernity," means that the role of the intellectual changes as their room for maneuver is restricted. Given the dominance of this problematic and this particular way of understanding authenticity as almost synonymous with *turāth*, it has become incumbent on every Arab intellectual to take a stance on this issue. Whereas before, notwithstanding the various constraints on expression in an increasingly authoritarian climate, in-

in *Islam, State, and Modernity: Mohammed Abed al-Jabri and the Future of the Arab World*, ed. Francesca M. Corrao, Zaid Eyadat, and Mohammed Hashas (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 253–55.

27 It should be noted that, like the interest in *turāth*, the focus on methodology was also pioneered by Muṣṭafa ʿAbd al-Rāziq and his students. We see this for instance with his previously mentioned student ʿAlī Sāmī al-Nashshār, who already in his master's thesis displays a great interest in research methods. This thesis, which was published under the title "Islamic Thinkers' Methods of Investigation and Muslims' Critique of Aristotelian Logic" (*Manāhij al-Baḥth ʿind Mufakkirī al-Islām wa-Naqd al-Muslimīn li-l-Manṭiq al-Arisṭoṭālīsī*) would, as Angela Giordani writes, "become the foundation for all of his later work" – see Giordani, "Making Falsafa in Modern Egypt: Towards a History of Islamic Philosophy in the Twentieth Century," 214. It may well have been al-Nashshār's lectures at Muhammad V University in Rabat during the 1970s that inspired Moroccan intellectuals like Muḥammad ʿĀbid al-Jābirī and ʿAbd al-Raḥmān Ṭāhā to focus to such a high degree on methodology, specifically in the study of *turāth.*

tellectuals could still propound national, Marxist, or existentialist ideals free from reference to the historical paradigm of *turāth*, starting in the 1970s, these theories have been increasingly channeled through readings of *turāth.* Concomitantly, the meaning of the central terms of the *turāth* debate, authenticity and contemporaneity, has become set. During the 1970s, it was still possible for a literary critic like Shukrī ʿAyyād to offer different understandings of authenticity. When we get to the 1980s, the idea that authenticity is a broad and intricate concept, that it can include non-temporal references to personal creativity and originality and that, barring a few exceptions, it is not a virtual equivalent of *turāth,* is drowned out. By that time, the reigning consensus had narrowed the meaning of authenticity to that of modernity's eternal diachronic adversary. This basic paradigm for Arab thought would remain in place during the final decades of the twentieth century and at least up to the Arab Spring. Moreover, it has affected popular discourse in important ways, as evidenced by the many newspaper articles and televised discussions in which the problem of *turāth* is translated to a broader public.

2.2 Contemporary Arab thought from a global perspective

What changed in or around the late 1960s was not that *turāth* was introduced as a new topic, but that it became a *dominant* interest for a generation of intellectuals. In the 1970s and 1980s, *turāth* and the question of authenticity became the name of the game, for intellectuals working in academia, but also in bureaucratic institutions that saw it as their task to build a cultural identity, and for artists who felt called upon to navigate questions of authenticity and modernity in their work.[28] To what extent this had to do with the defeat of 1967 is not clear. Seen

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28 Examples of *turāth* reception in the arts are found in Arab theatre, music, literature, and popular culture – see Pannewick, *Das Wagnis Tradition: arabische Wege der Theatralität;* Dina Amin, "Arab Theatre Between Tradition and Modernity," in *The Modernist World*, ed. Stephen Ross and Allana C. Lindgren (London/New York: Routledge, 2017), 481–87; Jonathan Holt Shannon, *Among the Jasmine Trees: Music, Modernity, and the Aesthetics of Authenticity in Contemporary Syria* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2006); Wael Abu-'Uksa, "Liberal Renewal of the Turath: Constructing the Egyptian Past in Sayyid al-Qimni's Works," in *Arab Liberal Thought After 1967: Old Dilemmas, New Perceptions*, ed. Meir Hatina and Christoph Schumann (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015); and Tarik Sabry, *Cultural Encounters in the Arab World: On Media, the Modern and the Everyday* (London: I.B.Tauris, 2010). The institutional interest in *turāth* with the aim of creating a firm national identity has already been commented on in Western academia some time ago – see Dieter Bellman, "The Reception of the Cultural Heritage as a Factor of the Process of Civilization and Its Reflection in Arab Cultural Development Concepts," in *Arab Heritage and Traditions: Burden or Challenge*, ed. Günther Barthel and Gerhard Hoffmann, vol. 22, Asia, Africa, Latin Amer-

as a prelude to the 1973 oil crisis and the growing financial and political clout of Islamist organizations and their ideologues, it may well be part of an explanation. These are surely interesting historical questions that affect how we look at intellectual history of the period. For now, what interests us more than the historical explanation is the common perception of 1967 as a marker for a new era in Arab philosophy. Among Arabs, the defeat was felt as a defeat of the Arab nation. Since the effect was felt locally, the subsequent use of this date as a starting point for a new era in the intellectual history of the Arab world had a local bias. The particular focus on *Arab-Islamic* heritage that developed in its wake, and which was explained in the context of the ascent of Islamist politics, did more to strengthen the perception that the excessive interest in the question of authenticity (and modernity) was an Arab affair. It reinforced the insider's perspective on contemporary Arab thought. Discussions of *turāth* in these years hardly referenced broader, global intellectual trends, largely isolating Arab thought. Arab thought became a way of dealing with an Arab trauma through analyzing the Arabic textual tradition. Even if certain ways of understanding Arab thought were gleaned from Western theories, the result was a discourse that was self-consciously parochial.

It is sound historiographical policy to take the insider's view seriously. Only by listening to what is said locally can we avoid riding roughshod over the peculiarities of local intellectual history. At the same time, this does not imply that we ought not be critical of the testimony of these informers. Even if Arab thought was articulated locally and the self-perception of it as a local affair plays a big part in the way philosophical debate is conducted, this should not blind us from seeing similarities between the development of intellectual discourse in the Arab world and other regions. Focusing on the question of authenticity, the obvious candidate for such comparisons would be postcolonial thought in other parts of the world. Here, the possibilities for comparison are legion. The ubiquity of authenticity discourse throughout Africa and Asia in particular following the Second

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ica: Special Issue (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1989), 128 – 37; and Dieter Sturm, "Heritage and National Consciousness in the Arab Countries," in *Arab Heritage and Traditions: Burden or Challenge*, ed. Günther Barthel and Gerhard Hoffmann, vol. 22, Asia, Africa, Latin America: Special Issue (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1989), 113 – 19. More recently, there has been particular interest in institutional involvement in questions of heritage among relatively "young" states of the Gulf – see Karen Exell and Trinidad Rico, eds., *Cultural Heritage in the Arabian Peninsula: Debates, Discourses and Practices* (London: Routledge, 2014). Interestingly, these developments in the creation of an authentic national identity link up with other strands of current authenticity discourse, in particular the importance of authenticity in branding and presenting an authentic experience to foreign visitors – see Kornelia Imesch, "Authenticity as Branding Tool: Generic Architecture versus Critical Regionalism in the United Arab Emirates and in Qatar," in *Critique of Authenticity*, ed. Thomas Claviez, Britta Sweers, and Kornelia Imesch (Wilmington, NC: Vernon Press, 2020), 251 – 63.

World War is striking. It is easy to understand why the concerns of intellectuals in these diverse countries would overlap. Following a period of direct or indirect colonial rule that in some cases lasted over a century, it appears no more than natural for intellectuals to articulate a collective sense of self. The resulting similarities between the development of a concept of *aṣāla* in Arab thought and the kind of nativist discourse developed in Iran are obvious.[29] The same can be said about Pan-Africanism and the *négritude* movement, which played a major role in postcolonial thought in the 1950s and 1960s. So clear are these similarities between various postcolonial discourses of authenticity, in fact, that it is understandable why a prominent Arab intellectual like Sami Zubaida would claim that "the question of cultural authenticity arises primarily in contexts of colonial and imperial expansion and domination."[30]

Yet, I would argue that this postcolonial scene *too* should be read in context. While we should always respect local conditions and idiosyncrasies, we must not underestimate the degree to which Arab and other intellectual scenes of the post-war era were part of a global context, reacting directly to events and trends that developed on a global scale. Particularly during these heady years there was a lot to react to. The 1960s were a transformative period for the entire globe. They were the heyday of liberation movements. Maoism began to make headway as the ideology of the radical Left. Just one year after the Arab defeat, in the summer of 1968, the Western world seemed on the cusp of revolution.[31]

Due, in part, to the outsized role of *turāth* and the defeat of 1967 in the periodization of Arab thought, this global context tends to be left undiscussed. Whether liberal or Marxist, common depictions of Arab thought tend to conceive of Arab thought as a local affair. Whether conceived of as a debate about the secular interpretation of *turāth* or as a movement of opposition to the capitalist order, Arab thought is described in terms of a problem that is particular to the Arab world. It may resemble postcolonial debates of the global South, but it does not substantially overlap with them, because of the specificity of the Arab-Islamic heritage. Nor, for that matter, can it enter into a conversation with intellectual discourse in the West, since the problematics that motivate both are seen to differ radically.

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29 Mehrzad Boroujerdi, *Iranian Intellectuals and the West: The Tormented Triumph of Nativism* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1996); Ali Mirsepassi, *Intellectual Discourse and the Politics of Modernization: Negotiating Modernity in Iran* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000); Ali Gheissari, *Iranian Intellectuals in the 20th Century* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1998).

30 Sami Zubaida, "The Search for Authenticity in Middle East Cultures: Religion, Community and Nation," *CCAS Occasional Papers*, 2004, 5.

31 The "global" nature of the authenticity–modernity problematic will be discussed in Chapter 3.

There are some exceptions to this depiction of Arab thought as a self-contained discourse in opposition to the West. One recent example is Sune Haugbolle's attempt "to bring the 1967 war into conversation with the global New Left," which belongs to a growing field of studies of the Arab left that is shedding new light on the development of Arab thought.[32] A recent product of this branch of research is Fadi Bardawil's engaging treatment of the vicissitudes of the Left in Lebanon, in which he, amongst other things, wants to tell a story of contemporary Arab thought and politics "which does not assume 1967 as the cardinal and only historiographical turning point." His point is that, insofar as it was a turning point, it was so in particular for the diaspora, including major figures like Edward Said and Talal Asad.[33]

From a different angle, Carool Kersten, in his study of late twentieth-century Islamic intellectuals, wants to show how their ideas "are grounded in a worldwide intellectual fermentation that had actually already started in the 1950s and 1960s." The upshot of this argument that runs through his book is to question the assumption that a turn towards religion and authenticity in Islamic thought is associated with "the allegedly sudden appearance of a resurgent Islam from the late 1970s onwards."[34] Similarly, Hanssen and Weiss write that "the intellectual and cultural effervescence that characterized the 1960s did not simply vanish in the aftermath of the 1967 defeat," but morphed into an anti-imperialist struggle propelled by the Palestinian cause.[35] They also suggest that the hard 1967 cut-off is partly to blame for the lack of interest in the 1945–1967 period among intellectual historians. Another attempt at relativizing the centrality of 1967 is found in the final chapter of Kassab's book on contemporary Arab thought. In a series of interesting observations, she gestures at how Arab debates about authenticity and modernity echo nineteenth-century European and American philosophy, as well as other postcolonial discourses. Unfortunately, this relativization of her earlier 1967-centered narrative is not as thoroughly researched as the Arab thought that is the main

32 Haugbolle, "The New Arab Left and 1967," 500. A related contribution to the history of the Arab Left is Bardawil, "The Inward Turn and Its Vicissitudes: Culture, Society, and Politics in Post-1967 Arab Leftist Critiques."

33 Bardawil, *Revolution and Disenchantment: Arab Marxism and the Binds of Emancipation*, 85.

34 Kersten, *Cosmopolitans and Heretics: New Muslim Intellectuals and the Study of Islam*, xv–xvi.

35 Jens Hanssen and Max Weiss, "Introduction: Arab Intellectual History between the Postwar and the Postcolonial," in *Arabic Thought Against the Authoritarian Age: Towards an Intellectual History of the Present*, ed. Jens Hanssen and Max Weiss (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 10.

topic of her book. It reads as an afterthought, rather than an attempt to dislodge the existing understanding of contemporary Arab thought.[36]

Not all engagements with Arab thought that intend to break away from the dominant, Arab-oriented model do so by showing historical continuities. Yvonne Albers's narrative of the "crisis" of 1967 in relation to the founding by Adonis of the journal *Mawāqif* takes inspiration from Reinhart Koselleck and Pierre Bourdieu to describe 1967 as a "critical event," that is, a discursive construct that is taken as an opportunity by an intellectual like Adonis to establish himself as a leading voice in the cultural scene of Beirut.[37] Anke von Kügelgen, in another recent publication, covers both historical and geographical fluidity in connecting nineteenth- and twentieth-century Arab debates on the relationship between science, philosophy, and religion to global debates on these issues in what she calls an "entangled history of migrating ideas" (*Verflechtungsgeschichte migrierender Ideen*), and thereby undermines both the temporal and the geographical strictures that characterize the standard narrative.[38] A further critique of reading the *turāth* debate as a local discourse of opposition can be found in a German study of contemporary Arab thought by Geert Hendrich, entitled *Islam und Aufklärung* (*Islam and Enlightenment*). According to Hendrich, the standard narrative of Arab thought, though not entirely incorrect, leads us astray. By painting Arab discourse according to the opposition of authenticity to modernity – where modernity is shorthand for "the West"[39] – Arab thought is apt to appear "purely locally oriented."[40] Arab thought, it seems, is only concerned with its own heritage and does not engage in understanding or critiquing modernity as such. The result is that Arab thinkers are not able to enter into an equal conversation with their Western counterparts. From the Arab-Islamic perspective, the West is something to be followed or rejected, whereas from a Western perspective, the Arab philosopher who

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36 Had she pursued this course, it would have affected the rest of her book, which is written from the standpoint of 1967 and the standard narrative. By admitting that similar trends took place in other regions, Kassab in effect compromises the story that she has told about the specificity of contemporary Arab thought being due to the Arab experience of the June War. This would not necessarily have been a bad thing, as it illustrates the need to approach Arab thought using various narratives. See Kassab. *Contemporary Arab Thought: Cultural Critique in Comparative Perspective chap. 6.*

37 Yvonne Albers, "Relaunching the Arab Intellectual: Beirut's Cultural Journals, the 'Crisis' of 1967 and the Case of Mawaqif," *Middle East Journal of Culture and Communication* 15, no. 1–2 (June 15, 2022): 133–51.

38 von Kügelgen, "Konflikt, Harmonie oder Autonomie? Das Verhältnis von Wissenschaft, Philosophie und Religion," 33.

39 Hendrich, *Islam und Aufklärung: Der Modernediskurs in der arabischen Philosophie*, 154.

40 Hendrich, *Islam und Aufklärung: Der Modernediskurs in der arabischen Philosophie*, 9.

spends his time studying his heritage can appear as no more than a spokesperson for "Islam," not as representative of a particular philosophical position.[41]

What this overlooks, according to Hendrich, is the extent to which modernity, as a global project of economic, political, and social change, has in the course of the previous couple of centuries altered both Western and Arab societies in similar ways. For better or for worse, the world as we know it has been molded according to a liberal, capitalist model. Similar institutions have been created, similar means of government, similar educational regimes, similar personal ideals and values have taken root around the globe. Consequently, intellectuals the world over have found themselves confronted with similar questions concerning what is problematic about modernity and how we ought to cope with it. This shared background, however, is plastered over when contemporary intellectual traditions like that of the Arab world are only described in local terms. such blindness to the international modern origins and sensibilities of contemporary Arab discourse is what leads intellectuals to describe the confrontation between the West and the Islamic tradition as a "Clash of Civilizations." A less dogmatic picture of Arab discourse would characterize it, not as being in opposition to modern Western discourse, but as developing parallel to it. It would stress that, though Arab thinkers refer to a different tradition, due to the globalization of modern ways of life contemporary Arab thought is also concerned with a similar set of questions relating to the effects of Enlightenment and Counter-Enlightenment.[42] Hendrich, like Kassab, points specifically to similarities between contemporary Arab discourse and the German *Lebensphilosophie*, in order to make the case that what we have here is a local instantiation of a familiar form of modernity critique.[43] If this is the case, Hendrich argues, then the right question to ask when turning to Arab thought is not whether it is more "Islamic" or more "modern." Rather, we should direct our attention to the different conceptions of modernity that drive Arab thinkers to adopt or reject aspects of modern life and thought.[44]

Hendrich's approach is interesting for the way in which it not only adduces historical evidence, but also engages in conceptual analysis to come up with a new way of reading contemporary Arab thought. It suggests that, by dissecting the concept of modernity, laying bare its various meanings, interpretations, and connotations, and showing how they give rise to distinctly modern preoccupations in Arab thought, one can break open existing categorizations of Arab intellectuals as well as the political and social debates in which their ideas are embedded. This

41 Hendrich, *Islam und Aufklärung: Der Modernediskurs in der arabischen Philosophie*, 8.
42 Hendrich, *Islam und Aufklärung: Der Modernediskurs in der arabischen Philosophie*, 9.
43 Hendrich, *Islam und Aufklärung: Der Modernediskurs in der arabischen Philosophie*, 22.
44 Hendrich, *Islam und Aufklärung: Der Modernediskurs in der arabischen Philosophie*, 46.

book takes its cue from Hendrich, but it proceeds, as it were, from the opposite side of the divide. Instead of looking chiefly at modernity, we will go deeper into how authenticity (*aṣāla*) could become a quintessentially modern ethical ideal. We will look at how this ideal can be interpreted in different ways, and how different interpretations of authenticity may affect or disrupt the problematic of "authenticity and modernity" that forms the core of the standard narrative of Arab thought.

A book that veers even closer to our approach is Robert D. Lee's *Overcoming Tradition and Modernity: The Search for Islamic Authenticity.* His basic argument is that "the pursuit of authenticity has gathered momentum as a product of both concrete circumstances of dissatisfaction with modernization and an intellectual critique of development and liberalism."[45] In contrast to most studies that detail the concept of authenticity in the Arab world, Lee is familiar with the literature on authenticity and its development in Western thought, and he uses this knowledge to portray the quest for authenticity as part of a global discourse embedded in modernity, rather than as a local obsession; in this sense, Lee presents a counterpart to Hendrich's analysis of modernity.[46] By arguing this, Lee effectively wants to undermine claims by Westerners and Muslims alike that the call for cultural authenticity is "synonymous with reaction and fanaticism,"[47] and to probe how the pursuit of authenticity can be harnessed for productive political projects.

From his study into authenticity theory, Lee distills a list of characteristics of authenticity – particularity, radicalism, autonomy, unicity, equality, and institutionalization – and then aims to show that these ideas can be found in the projects of four Islamic thinkers from various countries and times: Muhammad Iqbal, Sayyid Quṭb, ʻAli Shari'ati, and Mohammad Arkoun. This leads to some interesting observations, especially in the cases of Iqbal and Arkoun, although his treatment of

45 Lee, *Overcoming Tradition and Modernity: The Search for Islamic Authenticity*, 3.

46 An example of what happens when this background to the ideal of authenticity is not taken into account is found in Louay Safi's *The Challenge of Modernity: The Quest for Authenticity in the Arab World.* Here the author, seemingly out of nowhere, concludes his book with the supposedly novel suggestion that "modernization (innovation) and authenticity (originality) are not only compatible with each other, but they are two integral parts of the process of modernization *qua* rationalization" – Louay M. Safi, *The Challenge of Modernity* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1994), 200. Apart from the fact that one may take issue with this way of understanding rationalization (namely as inherently original), it is clear that Safi grapples here with the basic argument of the entire corpus of authenticity studies, namely that authenticity qua originality is an aspect of the modern project.

47 Lee, *Overcoming Tradition and Modernity: The Search for Islamic Authenticity,* 2.

Quṭb, in particular, lacks depth and is therefore less convincing.[48] A further problem with Lee's book is, to my mind, his rigidity in holding fast to the characteristics of authenticity. Authenticity has an intricate genealogy, through which it has found many different ways of entering the academic and everyday vocabulary. This gets lost when one tries to pour each author into the same mold. Moreover, it leaves preciously little space for Muslims to develop their own articulations of this ideal; ways of formulating the meaning of authenticity that do not fit exactly with a European genealogy. Finally, because Lee treats authors from wildly different backgrounds who wrote at different times during the twentieth century, his study lacks the kind of coherence that stems from studying figures who work within the same intellectual discourse in the same language. The people Lee has studied are presumed to have something in common, because they are all Muslim. Lacking a discussion of what Islam is or how it can serve as a connecting thread between a Punjabi philosopher poet like Iqbal, a Shia sociologist like Shariati, an Egyptian proto-fundamentalist like Quṭb, and a Berber-Algerian predominantly francophone critic of "Islamic reason" like Arkoun, it is hard to understand them in an overarching story of Islam in the modern age. Nonetheless, Lee's book remains exceptional, not because it offers an alternative view of Arab-Islamic thought or challenges the standard narrative, but because it does so on the basis of an engagement with the ideal of authenticity as a central concept of modernity.[49]

Robert D. Lee's thesis imparts a richness to the Arabic concept of *aṣāla* that is not often countenanced in works on Arab thought. To uncover this richness, we need to turn to the primary sources, and a good place to start are the several conferences organized around the themes of authenticity, modernity, and *turāth* in the 1970s and 1980s. The 1971 conference mentioned at the outset of Chapter 1 was not the most important of these conferences. Similar occasions, like the Kuwait conference of 1974, and a second conference that took place in Cairo in 1984 (both will be discussed in due course as well), were dominated by issues like "authenticity, specificity, identity, heritage and contemporaneity, cultural renewal, openness, crisis, progress and underdevelopment, and the role of religion, politics, and colonialism in these matters."[50] The other two conferences in Kuwait and Cairo were larger

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48 See Shahrough Akhavi's review of the book for a more detailed critique of Lee's treatment of Quṭb: Shahrough Akhavi, "Review of 'Overcoming Tradition and Modernity: The Search for Islamic Authenticity' by Robert D. Lee," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 30, no. 3 (1998): 459–62.

49 A similar attempt to connect debates on authenticity in Iran with the central issue of authenticity in modern Western philosophy is found in Mirsepassi, *Intellectual Discourse and the Politics of Modernization: Negotiating Modernity in Iran.*

50 Kassab, *Contemporary Arab Thought: Cultural Critique in Comparative Perspective*, 116.

affairs, featuring papers that were, on the whole, more elaborate and of higher quality. They present a later stage in the development of the *turāth* discourse in which authenticity is more frankly defined as a historical, cultural, traditional construct that is opposed to renewal and to the modern age.

Why, then, do I single out the 1971 conference? In a sense, it is precisely the less developed, raw character of the earliest of these conferences that makes it interesting. On the one hand, the orientation of the standard narrative is obvious from the title of the conference itself ("Authenticity and Renewal in Contemporary Arab Culture"), from most of the contributions, and from the summaries of the discussions that took place. On the other hand, I will argue that this conference represents a stage at which the *turāth* has not yet become set in its ways. In particular, the meanings of authenticity and modernity that make up the core of the problematic of *turāth* remain at least somewhat open to question. It was at this point still possible to pose the question of what authenticity actually means, and even to put forward different conceptions of authenticity. To present this claim, I want to do four things. First, we will turn to the first paper presented at the 1971 conference. It was written by Shukrī ʿAyyād, an Egyptian literary critic, and it stands out because ʿAyyād does not start by assuming that he knows what authenticity and renewal, the main themes of this conference, mean. Instead, he leaves this an open question, and then goes on to trace the roots of the notion of authenticity and renewal in Arab cultural life. Second, we will compare ʿAyyād's open discussion of authenticity with the more closed treatment that it receives from other participants of the conference, and how it is subsequently squeezed into the standard narrative by commentators. Third, we will take a look at the 1974 and 1984 conferences to get a sense of how authenticity and modernity are articulated at later stages of the *turāth* debate, and to contrast these discussions of this conceptual pair with the kind of discussion we find in ʿAyyād. To finish off, we will look at two Arab intellectuals (Fuʾād Zakariyyā and ʿAzīz al-ʿAẓma) writing in the two decades after the 1971 conference, who question the prevalent use of these notions in Arabic discourse and see how, though they share ʿAyyād's sensibility for the meanings of authenticity, these authors frame their argument differently, namely as an intervention in a debate that has become stuck, rather than as a candid conceptual analysis.

2.3 Shukrī ʿAyyād on the twofold meaning of authenticity

Authenticity (*aṣāla*), according to Shukrī ʿAyyād, is a relatively new concept that only gained currency among intellectuals after the Second World War. The Arabic term *aṣāla* hardly comes up in Arabic discourse of the 1920s and 1930s, as prefer-

ence is given to two pairs of opposite terms to discuss cultural-philosophical problems: imitation-ingenuity (*al-taqlīd wa-l-ibtikār*) and old-new (*al-qadīm wa-l-jadīd*). Of these four terms, ingenuity (*ibtikār*) paved the way for what was initially the most important sense in which authenticity was used. Referring to the Egyptian journalist poet and literary critic ʿAbbās Maḥmūd al-ʿAqqād (1889–1964), ʿAyyād writes:

> al-ʿAqqād distinguishes four phases in the transition of poetry from stagnation to the level of revival and perfection: The first of these is the level of weak imitation, or, imitation for the sake of imitation; the second is purposeful imitation, or, imitation that requires of the imitator a certain quality and a degree of ability; the third level is that of creativity that grows out of feelings of national freedom, while the fourth level is that of creativity that grows out of personal independence, or feelings of individual freedom.[51]

When the term *aṣāla* becomes in vogue among Arab intellectuals during the 1950s, it is associated with the "subjectivity (*dhātiyya*), ingenuity, and liberation from the chains of imitation" identified by al-ʿAqqād.[52] Authenticity, in a sense, filled the place of ingenuity (*ibtikār*) to become the opposite of imitation; it stood for the expression of the individual self and the effort to break free from constraints placed on it by one's society and tradition.

This is one interpretation of authenticity shared by Arabic and English. There is, however, another meaning of the term common to both languages, one that appears to go in the opposite direction. This is the meaning that is often linked to the triliteral root of the word *aṣāla* (A-Ṣ-L/ل – ص – أ), which refers to "rootedness." It thus conjures up a sense of "nobility" (*ʿarāqa*), a set of essential and distinguished attributes transmitted by one generation to the next. It is, in the words of the Egyptian playwright Tawfīq al-Ḥakīm, a "preserved characteristic, having come down to us from afar."[53]

It would seem that these two senses of authenticity are opposed to each other. However, as ʿAyyād sees it, this opposition is only apparent, because the context in which authenticity is used is different in each case. Whereas in the case of authenticity-qua-personal liberation, the context is that of "talking about individual talent," we tend to talk about authenticity-qua-preservation in the context of discussing "national characteristics." In literature – ʿAyyād is a literary critic after all –

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51 Shukrī ʿAyyād, "Mafhūm al-Aṣāla wa-l-Tajdīd wa-l-Thaqāfa al-ʿArabiyya al-Muʿāsira," in *Muʾtamar al-Aṣāla wa-l-Muʿāsara fī al-Thaqāfa al-ʿArabiyya al-Muʿāsira* (Cairo: al-Munaẓẓama al-ʿArabiyya li-l-Tarbiyya wa-l-Thaqāfa wa-l-ʿUlūm, 1971), 59. The rest of this chapter contains many references to Arabic articles and conference proceedings. All translations of these texts are my own.
52 ʿAyyād, 60.
53 As quoted in ʿAyyād, 60.

the former interpretation of authenticity is used to designate the aim of a writer to express his personal identity, whereas the latter is a way of designating the identity of a nation or a people.

To say that these two senses of authenticity are not opposed to each other because they are used in different contexts is to skip over one major problem. While the context in which authenticity is discussed may differ, the people who use different senses of authenticity remain the same. An author who sees his work as a demonstration of his innermost feelings is also a member of a family, a citizen of a country, a member of a religious community and so on. To see his private sphere for articulation of the self as existing entirely apart from these social, legal, and cultural bonds would neglect the fact that the individual personality is formed by these bonds and, moreover, that its expression may conflict with his communal identities. ʿAyyād is aware of this. In fact, he sees this conflict in particular as the central problem of contemporary Arab culture, for as he explains:

> The problem of Arab culture in our age is what brings together or divides the two identities. Because the two senses are contained in the term 'authenticity' we are able to say that 'authenticity' summarizes the problem of contemporary Arab culture.
>
> The contemporary Arab seeks confirmation of his individuality. This aim comes to the fore clearly in literature and it perhaps exemplifies one of the central thoughts in our narrative literature. Yet, the contemporary Arab feels at the same time that he is losing out if he does not hold on to his deep-rooted heritage in the face of Western civilization intruding in his entire life – in the sense of the inherited virtues of his people.[54]

The term "authenticity" combines the notion of an individual and of a communal identity, and the task of the contemporary Arab intellectual is to balance these two notions. This, however, is not all. Besides referring to the individual as well as to the community, authenticity also harbors a contradiction between conservatism and renewal. People are deemed authentic when they are creative and explore new modes of thought, writing, designing, speaking, living, etc. Interpreted in this way, the central terms of the conference – "authenticity " and "renewal" – are almost synonymous. Yet the opposite is also true. People are said to be authentic when they stick to the old ways, when they respect traditions and customs. Food and household goods, for example, nowadays deserve the epithet "authentic" when they are produced using traditional methods, instead of being churned out in large quantities by a modern factory.

There is a sense in which these two oppositions, *individual–community* and *creativity–conservatism*, hang together. The act of being creative involves going out-

54 ʿAyyād, 61.

side of a set of shared customs, rules, or a shared frame of reference, expanding these shared practices or, to some extent, breaking with them. Because, at the same time, these shared practices form the glue that binds the members of a community, any creative act that breaks with these practices implies an opposition of the individual to his community. This is the kind of authenticity espoused by the paradigmatic revolutionary artist who thrives in opposition to "bourgeois" society. At the other end of the spectrum we find an entirely different individual, one who feels that the times are passing her by, that instead of discovering new and highly personal ways of living, her personality is being molded by new forms she has no influence over. This person may react by fleeing into the comfort of her own heritage (*turāth*) in which she feels more sincere to herself (*akthar ṣidqan maʿ nafsih*).[55] She *too* seeks authenticity, but in the sense of being "sincere" to an established model that she identifies with. What ʿAyyād points out here is a fundamental ambiguity in the meaning of authenticity, both in Arabic and in Western languages. Like originality, authenticity refers to a unique (aspect of) identity. However, uniqueness means different things to different people in different circumstances. Depending on what you take this uniqueness to consist in, it can be attained either by doing something unprecedented, or by having a history or a tradition that is specific to you as an individual or group and honoring it. This ambiguity, I will argue in Chapter 3, is one of the reasons why authenticity is such a powerful force in modern society, and the fact that this ambiguity gets lost in the standard narrative of Arab thought is why it lacks a certain depth.

Returning to ʿAyyād, the fact that there are two related oppositions in play means that the Arab intellectual is burdened with a second task. Besides having to account for the authenticity of the individual and that of the community, he has to strike a balance between entrenched values that make up the community and those that are new. As ʿAyyād puts it, there are:

> Two opposites between which the contemporary Arab man of letters lives: How does he square the two so that authenticity is naturally proportioned, combining the values of the community with those of the individual and the characteristics of the old with those of the new?[56]

The way to navigate these oppositions is to adopt a critical stance towards both the old and the new. The intellectual ought to engage in a process of authentication (*taʾṣīl*), of constantly reinterpreting and balancing changes in the cultural and literary landscape with his intention of remaining sincere to the core of his tradition.

55 ʿAyyād, 63.
56 ʿAyyād, 63.

Foreign novelties may be introduced into one's tradition, but not without critical appraisal. Authenticity cannot therefore be synonymous with sincerity – as the generation of pre-Second World War intellectuals took it to be, but rather has to be seen as "a relative and developing process, a continuous trend that never stops."[57] In this sense, as ʿAyyād notes, authenticity is not a topic that is only of concern to Arabs, but also to any writer in the West, who is equally concerned with preserving "his identity – national as well as individual – in the face of external influences."[58] Indeed, as we will see later on, ʿAyyād touches here on a fundamental ambiguity in the meaning of authenticity, not just in Arabic, but also as a distinctive modern moral ideal, global in scope.

2.4 Whose identity? Which authenticity?

ʿAyyād presents us with an insightful story about *aṣāla.* It may not amount to a complete history of the concept, but it is a start, and an important one at that. ʿAyyād perceptively uncovers the intricate web of meaning that is spun around authenticity, not simply as an objective term, but as an ideal that can be applied differently in different circumstances. Also, in presenting the genealogy of this concept as dating back to the pre-Second World War era, his paper indicates, once more, that authenticity discourse in the Arab world has a history that dates back long before the crisis of 1967, and that it is not a narrow Arab or postcolonial concern, but a topic that interests everyone. What is most striking about ʿAyyād's contribution to the 1971 conference, however, is the contrast with the other papers, all of which evince a collective, culturalist interpretation of authenticity as a matter of course. Ayyād's paper attempts to articulate, analyze, and problematize authenticity. Yet his emphasis on both its individual and its communal aspect, and the inherent tension between the two, is eclipsed by a consensus that presupposes the communal, historical aspect of authenticity, which would mark the standard narrative of contemporary Arab thought.

To illustrate this lack of ambiguity with regard to the term *aṣāla,* let us compare ʿAyyād's paper to that of other attendees. Take, for instance, the Egyptian philosopher Zakī Najīb Maḥmūd, with whom we will become more acquainted later on. In his paper he describes three ways of thinking about authenticity. First, he says, there are those who want to renew Arab culture by "forming it according

57 ʿAyyād, 66.
58 ʿAyyād, 65.

to the molds of the authentic, Arabic culture." Second, he identifies a group of traditionalists who repudiate modernity and "turn their gazes away from the current age." Third, there are those who want to break all ties with Arab culture and take over Western models "without any alteration or modification."[59] In other words, authenticity is presented as something that pertains to a culture as a whole and the only question left is how to configure the common markers of nationalist sentiment – language, history, and religion – in order to retain this sense of a shared identity in the face of a rapidly changing world. No mention is made of the *individual* preserving his authenticity against the onslaught of society, or the conflict between different interpretations of authenticity.

A similar tone is struck by the Tunisian professor Muḥammad Mazālī, whose paper "al-Aṣāla wa-l-Tafattuḥ" ("Authenticity and Openness") portrays authenticity as what is rooted in one's culture – referring to the triliteral root A-Ṣ-L (أ – ص – ل) – as opposed to what is trivial (*tafāha*) or counterfeit (*zayf*).[60] He discusses authenticity in terms of a shared heritage using the classic nationalist tropes of religion, language, and history, and distinguishes the supposedly spiritual East from the materialistic West in order to arrive at his argument that real authenticity should be open to different influences, because both spirituality and an interest in the material world are necessary for man to flourish. ʿAlī al-Raʾī's paper on authenticity and renewal in theater is no different in taking authenticity a cultural notion, describing the mix of foreign and "authentically" Arab influences that have shaped modern playwriting. [61]

Aḥmad Haykal, in his assessment of Arabic poetry, starts out by making a helpful distinction between authenticity, traditionalism (*taqlīdiyya*), and conservatism (*muḥāfaẓa*). He remarks that authenticity and renewal are not necessarily contradictory terms,[62] and that authenticity must pertain to both the individual and the nation (*umma*).[63] However, his primary focus is on describing how Arab

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59 Zakī Najīb Maḥmūd, "Mawqif al-Thaqāfa al-ʿArabiyya al-Ḥadītha fī Muwājahat al-ʿAṣr," in *Muʾtamar al-Aṣāla wa-l-Muʿāsara fī-l-Thaqāfa al-ʿArabiyya al-Muʿāsira* (Cairo: al-Munaẓẓama al-ʿArabiyya li-l-Tarbiyya wa-l-Thaqāfa wa-l-ʿUlūm, 1971), 73–74.

60 Muḥammad Mazālī, "al-Aṣāla wa-l-Tafattuḥ," in *Muʾtamar al-Aṣāla wa-l-Muʿāsara fī al-Thaqāfa al-ʿArabiyya al-Muʿāsira* (Cairo: al-Munaẓẓama al-ʿArabiyya li-l-Tarbiyya wa-l-Thaqāfa wa-l-ʿUlūm, 1971), 116.

61 ʿAlī al-Rāʿī, "al-Aṣāla wa-l-Tajdīd fī al-Masraḥ al-ʿArabī," in *Muʾtamar al-Aṣāla wa-l-Muʿāsara fī al-Thaqāfa al-ʿArabiyya al-Muʿāsira* (Cairo: al-Munaẓẓama al-ʿArabiyya li-l-Tarbiya wa-l-Thaqāfa wa-l-ʿUlūm, 1971), 102–13.

62 Aḥmad Haykal, "al-Shiʿr al-ʿArabī al-Muʿāsir bayn al-Aṣāla wa-l-Tajdīd," in *Muʾtamar al-Aṣāla wa-l-Muʿāsara fī al-Thaqāfa al-ʿArabiyya al-Muʿāsira* (Cairo: al-Munaẓẓama al-ʿArabiyya li-l-Tarbiyya wa-l-Thaqāfa wa-l-ʿUlūm, 1971), 90.

63 Haykal, "al-Shiʿr al-ʿArabī al-Muʿāsir bayn al-Aṣāla wa-l-Tajdīd," 96–97.

poetry developed as a whole; how it acquired different styles and themes and how its particular history supposedly excludes new forms of poetry that would not pass the test of authenticity. He thus reverts to a view of authenticity in terms of essential characteristics of Arab culture. While he acknowledges historical formation of artistic style, he does not consider ʿAyyād's idea that there is a specific way in which an individual can be said to be authentic.

In short, the contributions to the 1971 conference bear witness to what I have earlier described as standard narrative of contemporary Arab thought. Excepting ʿAyyād's paper, authenticity is treated as relating to a historical, cultural, traditional construct that is opposed to renewal and to the modern age. There was little room to put authenticity up for discussion. The stage was set for a period in which the efforts of the intellectual elite were focused on the topic of *turāth*, as the site of a battle between the forces of modernity and those of tradition. This perspective on the concept of authenticity is echoed by some of the Western commentaries mentioned in Chapter 1, and it is particularly noticeable in their appraisal of ʿAyyād's paper. Issa Boullata puts particular emphasis on the achievement of authenticity as a "fluid, continuously changing process in which old and new elements are in constant dialectical relationship,"[64] thus neglecting the tension between individual and community that is central to ʿAyyād's point. Kassab also discusses ʿAyyād's paper, under the subtitle "Shukry Ayad: Authenticity as the Search for a Sense of Self Between One's Own Heritage and the Present Age."[65] Here, too, the emphasis is on the part of ʿAyyād's paper in which he mentions the position of Arab culture in opposition to the West, not on that in which he describes authenticity as a personal ideal, the opposite of inauthenticity.

Before I proceed, I should make it clear that my aim is not to demean the efforts of either Boullata, Kassab, or any of the other commentators who use the standard narrative of Arab thought. Boullata's survey broke new ground by presenting contemporary Arab thought to a Western audience for the first time. Kassab's book is a Herculean effort to give a comprehensive overview of all major thinkers in the Arab world since the 1960s, which serves as the most outstanding introduction to this field in English. Both continue to provide a vital introduction to a neglected field of study. In addition, they are not essentially mistaken in using the standard narrative. Theirs is a neat summary of how Arab thought is approached by the majority of Arab intellectuals. When Boullata explains the rough outline of the intellectual landscape in the Arab world, he uses almost verbatim the formulation of the standard narrative that we find in Zakī Najīb Maḥmūd's paper pre-

64 Boullata, *Trends and Issues in Contemporary Arab Thought*, 15.

65 Kassab, *Contemporary Arab Thought: Cultural Critique in Comparative Perspective*, 118–19.

sented at this conference. In other words, he merely reports what his sources tell him and uses it as a convenient framework for making sense of Arab thought.

These surveys are meant to describe the outlines of Arab thought to an outside audience. They use a helpful narrative that conforms to how many Arab intellectuals themselves perceive the debates that they are engaged in, and this is something that one should never neglect. The dominant internal view of Arab thought, however, should not count as its be-all and end-all. As discussed in the Introduction, a deeper understanding of contemporary Arab thought is gained not by simply registering what Arab intellectuals are saying, or how they perceive what they are saying. It can also allow space for contesting these claims, for arguing with them, for bringing out different voices and alternative perspectives within the Arab world; it can prompt us to explore different ways of embedding Arab thought within a broader framework, geographically, conceptually, and temporally. Apart from description, understanding can also come about through a dialectical engagement with a text or with the discourse of which it is part. If we forego this kind of engagement, then we abide by a narrative that has, as some intellectuals attest, become a suffocating paradigm. As the meanings of authenticity and modernity – still regularly debated in academia, but also in newspapers and on TV shows – are fixed beyond discussion, it becomes virtually impossible to conceive of Arab thought in a radically different way. The fact that many of ʿAyyād's peers and later commentators like Boullata and Kassab can overlook a distinctive voice such as ʿAyyād's is, I argue, not a sign of mere negligence, but a symptom of this paradigm for interpreting Arab thought.

The streamlining of the standard narrative intensified during the final decades of the twentieth century. There is ample evidence that this particular interpretation of authenticity became entrenched in the countless works dedicated to this topic starting in the 1970s and 1980s, as the *turāth* debate truly took off. Books exploring the relationship between authenticity and modernity, tradition and renewal etc. in different fields were authored by both secular and religious intellectuals.[66] This paradigm did not remain consigned to the theoretical debates between intellectuals. It was a hot topic in newspapers, on the airwaves, and in politics. It influenced analyses of Arab society by political and social scientists. An interesting example of how such theoretical discussions can affect scientific re-

66 Hence, this binary could serve as a model, not just for researching culture – for example, Jalāl al-ʿAsharī, *Thaqāfatunā … bayn al-Aṣāla wa-l-Muʿāsara* (Cairo: al-Hayʾa al-Miṣriyya al-ʿĀmma li-l-Kitāb, 1971). – but equally in the field of education – for example, – or in Islamic law – for example, Yūsuf al-Qaraḍāwī, *al-Fiqh al-Islāmī bayn al-Aṣāla wa-l-Tajdīd* (Cairo: Dār al-Ṣaḥwa, 1986).

search can be found in a statistical analysis of the use of the term *aṣāla* in Arab media between 1945 and 1970 that was published in 1983.[67] John Donohue demonstrates that the proportion of articles expressing attitudes on authenticity reached as high as 90 % among intellectual publications in the period 1965–70 – compared to 82 % for religious and 80 % of popular publications, respectively.[68] He concludes that *aṣāla* became an issue in the aftermath of the Second World War, and gradually gained traction in the decades after. Apart from providing the statistical proof to back up ʿAyyād's contention that authenticity discourse was on the rise following the Second World War, it is striking to notice the frankness with which Donohue interprets authenticity. Without giving much thought to possible tensions implied by the concept he investigates, or changes that may have occurred in the use of the term *aṣāla*, Donohue links the rise of authenticity discourse to the confrontations between Arab and Western (or Western-backed) states that took place during this period – that is, the *Nakba* of 1948, the Suez crisis of 1956, and the Six-Day War of 1967. Next, he describes the interest in authenticity as the logical accompaniment to the self-assertion of the Arab world following its post-war era of decolonization. This narrative appears convincing. It offers a nice fit between the development of a national consciousness and the rising interest in authenticity, and it has the added advantage of resonating with the way that Arab thought is viewed among many of the most distinguished Arab intellectuals. Yet it comes at a price. This almost perfect fit is only possible when the ambiguities concerning the concept of "authenticity" are muffled. As a result, the problem of authenticity and modernity continues to be discussed as *the* central problem of contemporary Arab society, and each time, modernity is set up in temporal opposition to various definitions of authenticity, an opposition that simultaneously overlays a cultural opposition between self and other, between Arabs and the West.

2.5 Authenticity and modernity at the 1974 and 1984 conferences

The 1971 conference was not the biggest or most famous meeting of Arab intellectuals in the latter part of the twentieth century, nor do its proceedings contain the most sophisticated contributions. Compared to the 1974 conference in Kuwait and the one in 1984 that again took place in Cairo, it was a rather subdued affair. Its

67 John D. Donohue, "Islam and the Search for Identity in the Arab World," in *Voices of Resurgent Islam*, ed. John L. Esposito (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), 48–61.
68 Donohue, "Islam and the Search for Identity in the Arab World," 51.

importance lies in how it both signaled the advent of *turāth*, in its title and in the presentations, and how it simultaneously contained the kind of open discussion of authenticity that, I argue, we see less of at a later stage. To buttress this claim, I want to take a look at the later conferences to see how the problematic of authenticity and modernity is understood several years on. A detailed discussion of a number of these papers is provided by Elizabeth Kassab in her survey of contemporary Arab thought, and I will therefore refrain from commenting on the general ideas presented in these papers.[69] The purpose here is to document how *turāth* is framed by various authors, and to see whether the kind of open discussion of terms like authenticity and modernity, contemporaneity, or renewal is again evident in these later conferences. The purpose is not to dismiss these articles. While not every contribution is as good or informative as the next, many give elaborate and intelligent commentary on Arab society and its ailments, as perceived at the time. Many of the ideas discussed here, like the question of historicism or the concept of "Arab reason" (*al-ʿaql al-ʿarabī*), are fleshed out in detail in the contemporary classics of Arab thought, such as those by Muḥammad ʿĀbid al-Jābirī, Ḥasan Ḥanafī, or Jūrj Ṭarābīshī. We should not forget, however, that these more elaborate theorizations of *turāth* are worked out and discussed at these gatherings that form a linchpin for the Pan-Arab community of intellectuals. Our goal is not to dismiss these dozens of papers, but to taste a change in tone, a stabilization of a particular way of framing what the main issue in Arab thought is and ought to be about.

2.5.1 The 1974 Kuwait Conference: "The Crisis of Cultural Development in the Arab Nation"

The 1974 conference was not framed explicitly in terms of the problematic of authenticity and modernity/contemporaneity, hence it does not give rise to as many discussions of this conceptual pair as we see in the 1971 and 1984 conferences, which do reference this opposition in the title. Several papers focus on specific issues of family organization (Hishām Sharābī) or the role of the university (Muḥammad Jawād Riḍā) in the retardation or progress of Arab society, and do not obviously relate to the issue of *turāth.* This does not mean, however, that these concepts are not referenced. To start with, Muṣṭafā Shākir, in his paper on "The Historical Dimensions of the Crisis of Arab Civilization Development," represents an important strand in contemporary Arab thought, with his view that the source of Arab civilizational retardation lies in the ahistorical attitude that Arabs hold with re-

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69 Kassab, *Contemporary Arab Thought: Cultural Critique in Comparative Perspective*, 121–70.

gard to their heritage. This constant orientation towards their past has had a decisive influence on the understanding of authenticity in the Arab world. Although he admits that *aṣāla* has several meanings, related to ingenuity (*ibtikār*), making something new (*khalq al-jadīd*), or to a pristine land, he notes that in Arab debates the concept has become intertwined with history and in particular with *turāth*, and (contrary to ʿAyyād) he presents this as an essential trait of Arab thought.[70] This comes out in the characteristic traditionalism (*taqlīdiyya*) and stagnation (*sukūniyya*) found in Arab societies. The dominant urge is to move back in time towards the glory days of a primeval Islam.[71]

The emphasis on ahistoricism in Arab thought is also a theme in Fuʾād Zakariyyā's contribution to the conference with the title "Intellectual Retardation and Its Civilizational Dimensions." He follows the model that we have already seen in Maḥmūd's 1971 paper of dividing Arab intellectuals into a group of *turāth* boosters who praise its many accomplishments, and *turāth* knockers who blame current problems on its inherent irrationality and illiberalism. The latter are ahistorical in their fatalism, which keeps them from understanding why, if the past really has such a hold on the present, the modern European that they admire was able to find a path to rationalism and liberalism out of its own Dark Ages by returning to the classics.[72] The former, meanwhile, are ahistorical in how they try to read the ideas and scientific accomplishments of the West between the lines of their own heritage – a mode of reading that, ironically, turns the West into the ultimate measure of the worth of *turāth.*[73] Foreshadowing the more critical intervention into the *turāth* discourse that we will discuss in the following section, Zakariyyā does not want to find some complete solution for the problem of retardation, but instead suggests that we look more closely at the concepts used in these debates as a first step towards clarity on what these intellectual struggles are truly about.[74] The historicity argument is again voiced by Muḥammad al-Nuwayhī in his paper on the role of religion in the crisis of civilizational development. Islamic clergy, especially nowadays, are averse to reading the Qur'an and Hadith as divinely inspired, but nonetheless historical documents that ought to be reinterpreted according to present-day concerns. The only remedy, as Nuwayhī sees it, is to let our

70 Shākir Musṭafā, "al-Abʿād al-Tārīkhiyya li-Azmat al-Taṭawwur al-Ḥaḍārī al-ʿArabī," *al-Maʿrifa* 148 (1974): 12. Obviously, this essentialist picture of Arab thought runs counter to ʿAyyād's contention that the culturalist meaning of *aṣāla* only became dominant following the Second World War.
71 Musṭafā, "al-Abʿād al-Tārīkhiyya li-Azmat al-Taṭawwur al-Ḥaḍārī al-ʿArabī," 39 – 40.
72 Fuʾād Zakariyyā, "al-Takhalluf al-Fikrī wa-Abʿāduh al-Hadāriyya," *al-Maʿrifa* 148 (1974): 65.
73 Zakariyyā, "al-Takhalluf al-Fikrī wa-Abʿāduh al-Hadāriyya," 68 – 69.
74 Zakariyyā, 79 – 80.

practical daily concerns be governed, not by religion, but by secular reason.[75] The author does not reference *turāth* in his discussion, but he does draw on the historical nature of the divide in Arab thought and connect this specifically to the question of religion. Following the structure of the standard narrative, the opposition is now between the traditional religious and the modern secular outlook.

One paper that forefronts the theme of authenticity, despite the fact that this is not the official topic of the conference, is the Egyptian Marxist political theorist Anwar ʿAbd al-Malik (Anouar Abdel Malek). His contribution, entitled "Particularity and Authenticity," describes how the problematic of "authenticity" (*aṣāla*) and "contemporariness" (*ʿaṣriyya*) as it unfolded in Arab thought is a symptom of Western concepts and modes of thinking, and it argues that Arabs need to develop their own, local analyses of what ails their regions or nations in order to break free from the Western hold on their thought.[76] Although the specifics of cause-and-effect in ʿAbd al-Malik's account remain somewhat murky, he emphasizes that the quest for liberation in the Arab world and other regions in Asia and Africa that have known their own glorious past are different from the struggle seen in Latin America, since the ideal of liberation in the former case is linked to a quest for revival of a lost era of prominence. Invoking the *inḥiṭāṭ* paradigm, he poses the great question faced by "the Arab" as: "Why the decadence? And how is Renaissance realized? (*Li-mādhā al-inḥiṭāṭ? Wa-kayf tataḥaqqaq al-nahḍa?*)[77] The struggle for liberation thus became entangled with the question of authenticity and modernization, giving rise to two familiar camps: A group that affirms authenticity and another that opts instead to follow contemporary liberalism. These groups then split again into a conservative and a radical branch. The liberals split into mainstream conservative bourgeois and the radical Marxist movements, while those defending authenticity split into the more conservative Muslim Brotherhood and the Arab nationalists – specifically the Nasserists. These internal struggles over authenticity are held back, however, by an Orientalist understanding of authenticity as folklore, that is, as a collection of traces from the past that do not matter in the present. ʿAbd al-Malik suggests that instead of focusing on these sym-

75 Muḥammad al-Nuwayhī, "al-Dīn wa-Azmat al-Taṭawwur al-Ḥadārī," *al-Maʿrifa* 148 (1974): 225.
76 This description appears to be an offshoot of the dependency theory developed in Latin America in the 1960s, which held that underdevelopment outside of the Western world is the result of a system of economic dependence of the periphery on the metropole. Against the modernization theory of the 1950s, it argued that underdeveloped countries can only develop if they break loose from the international system of production. For a more detailed description of dependency theory, see: Ramon Grosfoguel, "Developmentalism, Modernity, and Dependency Theory in Latin America," *Nepantla* 1, no. 2 (2000): 347–74.
77 Anwar ʿAbd al-Malik, "al-Khuṣūṣiyya wa-l-Aṣāla," *al-Ādāb* 22, no. 5 (1974): 41.

bols of authenticity like “the stores of Khan al-Khalīlī and the gatherings of the Shādhilī Sufi order,” one should study the *specificity* of Egypt, which lies in the particular role of the army and the Egyptian people throughout its long history.[78] Only by uncovering the specificity of the structures ruling a country, can it break free from the monopoly that Western models have on the possible paths for Arab development. This contribution by ʿAbd al-Malik is interesting for indicating a different treatment of the authenticity–modernity problematic. The author does not propose a reevaluation of the meaning of authenticity, taking it for granted that it refers to folklore. He does, however, propose that such discussions of culture lead Arabs astray, and that they need to be more focused on concrete materialist analysis of local structures of political domination. This Marxist alternative is not our main concern in this study, but it does offer another avenue for studying alternatives to the standard narrative.[79]

A final paper at the 1974 conference worth discussing in more detail was presented by Ibrāhīm Abū Lughud (Abu Lughod). It merits discussion, not because it goes into the question of authenticity, but because it calls out the kind of historical framing for the topic of retardation and development that is the topic of this conference. The title of this paper is “Colonialism and The Crisis of Development in The Arab Nation.” It details how the problem of development dealt with at this conference is indebted to modes of thought and social organization that are integral to the colonial project: On the one hand, a Social Darwinist ideal of progress, and on the other hand, an Arab nation divided into independent nation-states. First, Abū Lughud challenges the common view that renewal in Arab lands was virtually non-existent in before 1798 – in effect he criticizes the *inḥiṭāṭ* paradigm discussed in Chapter 1.[80] He attributes this view of history to the influence that

78 The reference here is to his 1962 publication: Anouar Abdel Malek, *Égypte: Société militaire* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1962).

79 For this one may turn to the recent research into the Arab Left mentioned earlier in this chapter.

80 Kassab notes that Abū Lughud does not give much detail or evidence for this claim. This is partially true. Although he does refer explicitly to the movement of Muḥammad Ibn ʿAbd al-Wahhāb, as well as to movements for renewal of thought and the greater liberty from Ottoman rule throughout the Arab world, he does not give references – see Ibrāhīm Abū Lughud, “al-Istiʿmār wa-Azmat al-Taṭawwur fī al-Waṭan al-ʿArabī,” *al-Maʿrifa* 148 (1974): 242. It would be interesting to know precisely to which literature he was referring, especially since his 1963 book *The Arab Rediscovery of Europe* does start with the Napoleonic invasion of 1798 – see Ibrahim Abu Lughod, *The Arab Rediscovery of Europe: A Study in Cultural Encounters* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963). Although not much literature on this topic is available even now, since the 1960s there has been a growing interest (at least in Western academia) in reform movements of the eighteenth century, in particular the Sufi movements referred to by Fazlur Rahman in the 1960s as neo-Sufism, and the

Western notions of progress had on movements for renewal in the Arab world, even before it was colonized directly. They began to see Western forms of bureaucracy, law, and education as inherently superior to whatever Arabs themselves could come up with, and made them part of their project for social renewal. It was this temporal-geographical opposition between an Arab past and a European present built on the colonial ideal of progress that gave rise to the two orientations that govern Arab thought: The Islamic reformers who aim to preserve the connection to their heritage, and an elite that, though not popular with the masses, has had great influence in secularizing and Westernizing society through modern institutions.[81] The effects of this division are still felt in Arab society, where two forces were making themselves felt in the wake of 1967. On the one hand, there was a "radical" trend which advocated a complete adoption of modern knowledge in order to break the hold of the West on the Arab world and the hold of the Israeli state on Palestine. On the other hand, there arose a "Salafī" trend that advocated a return to pristine Islam as the solution to the troubles brought on by modernity.[82] Neither is obviously favored by Abū Lughud, who instead maintains that Arabs cannot truly develop unless they undo the colonial influence on their thinking that provides the background for this division over *turāth.*

Even though he does not really go into the issue of authenticity, Abū Lughud's presentation at the 1974 conference comes close to the kind of critical appraisal of authenticity–modernity problematic that we saw with Shukrī ʿAyyād. The former does this, not by tackling any definition, but by providing a historical analysis of current debates and how they are indebted to a modern historiography. It will be left for ʿAzīz al-ʿAẓma – discussed in the final section of this chapter – to connect this historiography to the issue of authenticity. Barring Abū Lughud's historical contextualization and ʿAbd al-Malik's effort to direct the discussion from cultural to materialist issues, most of the papers presented at the 1974 conference remain true to the standard narrative by developing authenticity and modernity in historical, communal terms. This is not to say that they merely oppose a modern to a traditional trend. Those who took part reflect on how to overcome the divide by

movement inspired by Muḥammad Ibn ʿAbd al-Wahhāb. For a good (though not entirely impartial) overview of the academic debates on the nature of neo-Sufism that continued through the final decades of the twentieth century, see John Voll, "Neo-Sufism: Reconsidered Again," *Canadian Journal of African Studies / Revue Canadienne Des Études Africaines* 42, no. 2–3 (2008): 314–30. An example of Western academic study into Wahhabism and its roots in earlier reform trends that Abū Lughud may have had in mind is Henri Laoust, "Le réformisme d'Ibn Taymiya," *Islamic Studies* 1, no. 3 (1962): 27–47.

81 Abū Lughud, "al-Istiʿmār wa-Azmat al-Taṭawwur fī al-Waṭan al-ʿArabī," 243–45.

82 Lughud, "al-Istiʿmār wa-Azmat al-Taṭawwur fī al-Waṭan al-ʿArabī," 249.

suggesting ways of thinking about and using the Arab heritage in the interest of modernization.[83] This tendency is captured in the closing statement of this conference. Here, *turāth* is highlighted as a crucial topic, and both the traditionalist longing for the past and the modernist inclination to break completely with the past are rejected.[84] Authenticity is not equated with the past, but it is understood as an intellectual heritage that lies *in* the past and that may be interpreted as a way of going forward into the future. While this framing of the problem contains a definite unease with the opposition between authenticity and modernity, it does not try to overcome it by rethinking what the problem of *turāth* is about. Instead, these attempts to historicize and read history differently largely remain within the strictures of the standard narrative; they take for granted the opposition of authenticity and modernity and try to mediate it.

2.5.2 The 1984 Cairo Conference: "Heritage and the Challenges of the Age in the Arab Nation (Authenticity and Contemporaneity)"

Moving to the 1984 conference organized in Cairo, the proceedings start off with a paper by a figure who was catapulted to prominence as an Arab intellectual in the 1980s with his book *We and the Heritage*, the Moroccan philosopher Muḥammad ʿĀbid al-Jābirī.[85] This conference carried "Authenticity and Contemporaneity" as a subtitle and, unsurprisingly, the papers presented here often refer explicitly to this conceptual duo. Al-Jābirī is perhaps the only one who argues against simply rehearsing this problematic, instead suggesting that it is a problematic that Arabs should overcome.[86] He begins his paper by recalling the standard categorization of Arab thought into a contemporary (*ʿaṣrāniyya*) and a traditionalist (*salafiyya*) group, as well as a selective (*intiqāʾiyya*) group that tries to take the best from both worlds, and he explains these positions as reactions to what he calls the "Renaissance question" (*al-suʾāl al-nahḍawī*): "Why did we (we Arabs, we Muslims, we the East) fall behind and why did others (Christian Europe, the West) develop? Therefore, how do we awaken? How do we catch up and join this modern civiliza-

83 I have not discussed the papers by Zakī Najīb Maḥmūd and Adonis presented at this conference, since we will be looking at them in great detail in Chapters 5 and 6.
84 "Azmat al-Taṭawwur al-Ḥadārī fī al-Waṭan al-ʿArabī: al-Bayān al-Khātimī," *al-Maʿrifa* 148 (1974): 294–95.
85 *al-Jābirī, Naḥnu wa-l-Turāth: Qirāʾāt Muʿāsira fī Turāthinā al-Falsafī.*
86 Parts of this paper have been translated into English; see al-Jābri, "The Problematic of Authenticity and Contemporaneity in Modern and Contemporary Arab Thought."

tion?"[87] Yet, rather than accept this ordering and pick a side, al-Jābirī quickly rejects it, because by presenting the main question of Arab thought in this way, it presupposes that it is up to the Arabs themselves to choose what they want to adopt or not. This, he says, is not the case. The modern ways and institutions were imposed on Arab society from the outside, and the Arab-Islamic heritage that is the subject of so much debate was never and can never be freely chosen. Heritage is something you are born into and are stuck with for the rest of your life. The real problem, therefore, is not that Arabs have not made the correct choice for either authenticity or modernity, or that they have yet to figure out the right mix between the two sides; the real problem is that both strands are now active in Arab consciousness at the same time. Arabs use modern technology and institutions in the public sphere, and allow their private lives to be ruled by traditional custom. They thus come to admire the West for its technological achievements, while detesting its dominance as an attack on their cultural authenticity. They see the problematic of authenticity and modernity not as an opposition between tradition and modernity, but between promise and threat both contained in the "authentic" culture of the Western Other. Like several participants to the 1974 conference, al-Jābirī suggests that the answer to this quandary lies in a thorough historicization of this problematic. A true Renaissance, like the one that took place in Europe, looks back to the past for creative inspiration and as a way of overcoming the present. The Arab Renaissance (*nahḍa*) did not follow this example, but instead looked back to the glories of Arab history mired in nostalgia. The reason for this, according to al-Jābirī, is that the Arab Renaissance did not originate organically from within Arab society, but was imposed from the outside. Modern innovations thus came to be associated with European domination that ought to be resisted. The way out of this quandary is for Arabs to follow the European example, not just by copying modern technologies and consuming Western imports, but by historicizing their own past. The real meaning of contemporaneity, according to al-Jābirī, is not to forget the past, but to rewrite and reorganize it rationally so as to make it fit for the present (as was done in the European Renaissance).[88] This in turn will teach Arabs that the real meaning of authenticity is not

87 al-Jābri, "The Problematic of Authenticity and Contemporaneity in Modern and Contemporary Arab Thought," 176–77; Muḥammad ʿĀbid al-Jābirī, "Ishkāliyyat al-Aṣāla wa-l-Muʿāsara fī al-Fikr al-Ḥadīth wa-l-Muʿāsir: Ṣirāʿ Ṭabaqī am Mushkil Thaqāfī?," in *al-Turāth wa-Taḥaddiyāt al-ʿAṣr fī al-Waṭan al-ʿArabī: al-Aṣāla wa-l-Muʿāsara* (Beirut: Markaz Dirāsāt al-Waḥda al-ʿArabiyya, 1985), 35.
88 al-Jābri, "The Problematic of Authenticity and Contemporaneity in Modern and Contemporary Arab Thought," 184; al-Jābirī, "Ishkāliyyat al-Aṣāla wa-l-Muʿāsara fī al-Fikr al-Ḥadīth wa-l-Muʿāsir: Ṣirāʿ Ṭabaqī am Mushkil Thaqāfī?," 50.

just the outcome of a past Golden Age, but instead it is the act of creating something new. If a particular historical age shows an outpouring of creativity, one should not just keep this heritage alive as it was, but be inspired by the creative impetus that lay at its root to innovate and create something yourself.[89]

Al-Jābirī's contribution to the conference is interesting for our investigation, because while he uses the standard narrative as a starting point, he also suggests a way of breaking with it, of thinking about the problematic of Arab thought anew. In particular, his suggestion that to value authenticity does not simply mean a return to the past, but rather a return to past modes of being innovative is a worthwhile departure from the binary problematic that he criticizes in his contribution. Yet, at the same time, al-Jābirī does not flesh out this alternative conception of authenticity (or of contemporaneity). He instead emphasizes the need to historicize *turāth* and bring out its rational elements, which he thinks align with (Western) modernity.[90] In a sense, this lets the East-–West, irrational–rational distinction in through the back door, and it comes as no surprise that this Eurocentric orientation is one of the issues criticized by various Arab commentators on al-Jābirī's work.[91] What we do not see in al-Jābirī's contribution is the kind of broader historical critique of the concept of authenticity that we find in ʿAyyād (or Fuʾād Zakariyyā and ʿAzīz al-ʿAẓma, whom we will discuss later). Notwithstanding his suggestion that authenticity may refer to a timeless creative impetus, he does not press this issue in order to destabilize the standard narrative, opting instead for a more conventional critique of ahistoricism, that was also prominent in 1974.[92]

89 al-Jābri, "The Problematic of Authenticity and Contemporaneity in Modern and Contemporary Arab Thought," 185; al-Jābirī, "Ishkāliyyat al-Aṣāla wa-l-Muʿāsara fī al-Fikr al-Ḥadīth wa-l-Muʿāsir: Ṣirāʿ Ṭabaqī am Mushkil Thaqāfī?," 54.

90 This critical theory of *turāth* is worked out in *We and the Heritage* and in his four-volume *Critique of Arab Reason*, in particular in the first two volumes – see al-Jābirī, *Naḥnu wa-l-Turāth: Qirāʾāt Muʿāsira fī Turāthinā al-Falsafī;* al-Jābirī, *Naqd al-ʿAql al-ʿArabī,* vol. 1, *Takwīn al-ʿAql al-ʿArabī*; and Muḥammad ʿĀbid al-Jābirī, *Naqd al-ʿAql al-ʿArabī,* vol. 2, *Bunyat al-ʿAql al-ʿArabī* (Beirut: Markaz Dirāsāt al-Waḥda al-ʿArabiyya, 1986).

91 Abdelkader Al Ghouz mentions Ḥasan Ḥanafī, ʿAbd al-Raḥmān Ṭāhā, and Yaḥyā Muḥammad among those taking al-Jābirī to task for his Eurocentrism – see Abdelkader Al Ghouz, *Vernunft und Kanon in der zeitgenössischen arabisch-islamischen Philosophie. Zu Muḥammad ʿĀbed al-Ǧābirīs (1936 – 2010) rationalistischer Lesart des Kulturerbes in seinem Werk "Kritik der arabischen Vernunft,"* (Würzburg: Ergon, 2015), 276.

92 A closer reading of al-Jābirī's philosophical project may reveal a more nuanced picture of how he views the problematic of contemporary Arab thought and its key concept, particularly the interplay between authenticity and modernity. Unfortunately, this lies beyond the scope of our research. However, in light of al-Jābirī's central position in these debates about *turāth* and the reaction that his work has generated, in particular from one of our interlocutors (ʿAbd al-Raḥmān Ṭāhā), it is worthwhile to give a short overview of what al-Jābirī means when he refers to the need to histori-

It is also noteworthy that the comments on his paper did not remark much on the need to overcome the problematic of authenticity and modernity, or on the defini-

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cize Arab history. Rather than stick to received ways of describing Arab history, in particular the history of the sciences, al-Jābirī in the first two volumes of his *Critique of Arab Reason* rewrites this history by dividing the pursuit of knowledge into three systems (*nuẓum* – singular: *niẓām*) of thought:

- the "explicative system" (*al-bayān*), associated with jurisprudence and the Islamic sciences generally (excepting Sufism), and Sunni Islam;
- the "gnostic system" (*al-ʿirfān*), associated with Sufism and the Hermetic sciences – for example, alchemy and astrology, irrationalism, and (according to al-Jābirī) Shia Islam; and
- the "demonstrative system" (*al-burhān*), associated with Aristotelian logic, Greek science, and rationalism.

These systems of thought were formed in what al-Jābirī calls the Age of Codification (*ʿaṣr al-tadwīn*), which fell in the eighth and ninth centuries AD, at the height of the Abbasid caliphate. Al-Jābirī's main point is that the first two systems have dominated Arab thought. The first (*al-bayān*) rendered Arab thought backward-looking, because its focus lies on (re-)interpretating texts and it does not concern itself with experimental knowledge. It leads to a closed system of knowledge that does not admit any new content, and also leads to conception of time as being "dead" (*zaman mayyit*) or "moribund" (*al-mayyit al-ashbah*) – see al-Jābirī, *Naqd al-ʿAql al-ʿArabī*, vol. 1, *Takwīn al-ʿAql al-ʿArabī*, 342. The second system (*ʿirfān*), which together with the first has dominated Arab thought, is dismissed by al-Jābirī as being unfit for any progress, since it is entirely irrational, believing that one can supersede the laws of nature. This leaves the third system of *burhān*, which al-Jābirī thinks has been more actively pursued in the Western part of the Arab world (the Maghrib), than in its eastern part (the Mashriq). The reason for the lack of progress in the Arab world and its inability to adapt to modernity, according to al-Jābirī, lies in the fact that *al-bayān* and *al-ʿirfān* were employed as the epistemological basis for political struggles between different groups (specifically between Sunni and Shia). The solution to this stranglehold is to break the divide between the epistemological field (*al-ḥaql al-maʿrifī* – that is, the system of concepts and premises that allow one to make knowledge claims) and the ideological content (*maḍmūn aydiyūlūjī* – that is, the political use to which these ideas are put) – see al-Jābirī, *Naḥnu wa-l-Turāth: Qirāʾāt Muʿāsira fī Turāthinā al-Falsafī*, 29. This would allow science to advance by embracing the rationalist system of *burhān* combined with a modern empiricist outlook, while sidelining the political struggles which have heretofore impeded scientific progress. For more discussion of al-Jābirī's thesis, see al-Jabri, *The Formation of Arab Reason: Text, Tradition and the Construction of Modernity in the Arab World*; Al Ghouz, *Vernunft und Kanon in der zeitgenössischen arabisch-islamischen Philosophie. Zu Muḥammad ʿĀbed al-Ǧābirīs (1936 – 2010) rationalistischer Lesart des Kulturerbes in seinem Werk "Kritik der arabischen Vernunft"*; Michaelle Browers, "From 'New Partisans of the Heritage' to Post-Secularism: Mohammed Abed al-Jabri and the Development of Arab Liberal Communitarian Thought in the 1980s," in *Arab Liberal Thought After 1967: Old Dilemmas, New Perceptions*, ed. Meir Hatina and Christoph Schumann (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015); Harald Viersen, "Hedendaags Arabisch denken: 1967, al-Jabiri en het turath-debat," *Zemzem: Tijdschrift over het Midden-Oosten, Noord-Afrika en islam* 12, no. 1 (2016): 69 – 96; Viersen, "The Ethical Dialectic in al-Jabri's 'Critique of Arab Reason'"; and Anke von Kügelgen, *Averroes und die arabische Moderne – Ansätze zu einer Neubegründung des Rationalismus* (Leiden: Brill, 1994), 260 – 87.

tion of authenticity and contemporaneity. Most seized on al-Jābirī's claim that the opposition between authenticity and modernity was not rooted in a materialist class struggle, but is rather an entirely cultural affair. Also, we have al-Ḥabīb al-Jinḥānī criticize the fact that the contents of authenticity remain undefined, asking which heritage or which part of it should be returned to.[93] One commenter who did go into the meaning of authenticity in more detail and accuses al-Jābirī of making overly general distinctions using terms like authenticity, identity (*huwwiyya*), or Arabism (*ʿurūba*) is ʿAzīz al-ʿAẓma, whose critique of authenticity discourse will be discussed in more detail towards the end of this chapter.[94]

The next speaker at the conference, the Syrian Marxist thinker Ṭayyib Tīzīnī, is less concerned with redefining the problematic. He goes along with the 1798 starting date for a new phase in the relations between East and West, and frames the problematic of authenticity and modernity as a confrontation between an Arab East and a colonialist, capitalist West.[95] As this problematic was applied to the topic of *turāth*, three trends were formed, one Salafi (*salafiyya*), one contemporary (*ʿaṣriyya*), and one that concocts a mix between the two.[96] Tīzīnī proceeds to explain these positions, and he does so eloquently. It is clear that he feels that each of these strands misses the point in not understanding the underlying socio-economic structure of Arab society, and that they do not give enough weight to the role that the encounter with the modern West has played in shaping the problematic of authenticity and modernity,[97] but he does not work out this criticism, nor does he propose an alternative.[98] Moreover, as the Lebanese philosophy

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93 al-Ḥabīb al-Jinḥānī, "Taʿqīb 3," in *al-Turāth wa-Taḥaddiyāt al-ʿAṣr fī al-Waṭan al-ʿArabī: al-Aṣāla wa-l-Muʿāsara* (Beirut: Markaz Dirāsāt al-Waḥda al-ʿArabiyya, 1985), 72.

94 ʿAzīz al-ʿAẓma, "Taʿqīb 4," in *al-Turāth wa-Taḥaddiyāt al-ʿAṣr fī al-Waṭan al-ʿArabī: al-Aṣāla wa-l-Muʿāsara* (Beirut: Markaz Dirāsāt al-Waḥda al-ʿArabiyya, 1985), 73–74.

95 Tīzīnī, "Ishkāliyyat al-Aṣāla wa-l-Muʿāsara fī al-Waṭan al–ʿArabī," 88.

96 Tīzīnī, "Ishkāliyyat al-Aṣāla wa-l-Muʿāsara fī al-Waṭan al–ʿArabī," 90. Here, Tīzīnī uses the negative term "talfīqiyya," meaning to "concoct," but also to "fabricate" or "falsify."

97 Tīzīnī, 93.

98 Tīzīnī works out his highly theoretical Marxist reading of *turāth* in several monographs that are part of his "Project for a new perspective on Arab thought from the pre-Islamic age to the contemporary stage" (*Mashrūʿ ruʾya jadīda li-l-fikr al-ʿarabī min al-ʿaṣr al-jāhilī ḥatā al-marḥala al-muʿāsira*). Some notable volumes in this project are Ṭayyib Tīzīnī, *Mashrūʿ Ruʾya Jadīda li-l-fikr al-ʿArabī fī al-ʿAṣr al-Wasīṭ*, 5th ed. (Damascus: Dār Dimashq, 1971), and Ṭayyib Tīzīnī, *Min al-Turāth ilā al-Thawra: ḥawl Naẓariyya Muqtaraḥa fī Qaḍiyyat al-Turāth al-ʿArabī,* 2nd ed. (Beirut: Dār Ibn Khaldūn, 1978). For a concise overview of his life and works, see Sarhan Dhouib and Anke von Kügelgen, "§ 8.7 Ṭayyib Tīzīnī," in *Bd. IV "Geschichte der Philosophie in der islamischen Welt des 19. und 20. Jahrhunderts,"* Grundriss der Geschichte der Philosophie (Basel: Schwabe Verlag, 2021), 451–65.

professor Nāṣīf Naṣṣār points out, Tīzīnī does not give any evidence for why this tripartite division is best suited to describing Arab thought.[99]

A contribution that does go into some detail concerning the meaning of the terms mentioned in the title of the conference is the comment on this talk formulated by the Moroccan philosophy professor Muḥammad ʿAzīz al-Ḥabbābī.[100] "Contemporaneity," according to al-Ḥabbābī, signifies an openness and flexibility that allows one to adjust to the current age. In a sense, this adjective applies to everyone, since everyone is contemporary with the current age. He also argues that this concept should not be seen as the opposite of what lies in the past, because one can always conform to the current age while drawing on a shared heritage (*turāth*). Al-Ḥabbābī then goes into the popular opposition between contemporaneity and authenticity (*aṣāla*). He remarks that the latter is the binding element between the "I" and the "We," that is, between the individual and the society in which he lives, and he adds that in order to perform this function, authenticity must always be open to changing appraisals and interpretations in reaction to changing circumstances. In this sense, it is a mistake to oppose it to contemporaneity. We should rather see it as completing contemporaneity, since it provides current generations with useful experience. Hence, he criticizes Arab liberals – mentioning Zakī Najīb Maḥmūd explicitly – who want to adopt Western models wholesale, without regard for what their own authentic heritage has to offer – as opposed to the Islamist demand for cleaning authentic culture of foreign blemish.[101] While it is interesting to see al-Ḥabbābī use a critique of the concept of authenticity as a basis for his critique of Maḥmūd, he does not go as far as ʿAyyād. When he says that a clear definition of authenticity is necessary, he means by this a definition of which time (*li-ayy zamān*) or period it refers to, not whether it necessarily refers to any historical era in the first place.[102] Authentic, for him, is "whatever has become rooted in

99 Nāṣīf Naṣṣār, "Taʿqīb 2," in *al-Turāth wa-Taḥaddiyāt al-ʿAṣr fī al-Waṭan al-ʿArabī: al-Aṣāla wa-l-Muʿāsara* (Beirut: Markaz Dirāsāt al-Waḥda al-ʿArabiyya, 1985), 111–12.

100 Although it is mentioned as a comment (*taʿqīb*), al-Ḥabbābī's contribution can be seen as an individual paper. A footnote at the beginning of his "comment" makes clear that he was not able to join the conference in person, and that his paper was read out following Tīzīnī's presentation, even though it does not react to it – see Muḥammad ʿAzīz al-Ḥabbābī, "Taʿqīb 1," in *al-Turāth wa-Taḥaddiyāt al-ʿAṣr fī al-Waṭan al-ʿArabī: al-Aṣāla wa-l-Muʿāsara* (Beirut: Markaz Dirāsāt al-Waḥda al-ʿArabiyya, 1985), 99.

101 al-Ḥabbābī, "Taʿqīb 1,"101.

102 al-Ḥabbābī, 107. This identification of authenticity with the past is articulated most clearly in another comment on Tīzīnī's paper by al-Anbā Ghrīghūriyūs: "Authenticity and with it *turāth*, or in it *turāth*, is the past with everything that mankind is proud of in being carried on from *turāth*, which is the outcome of religious and social values and experiences that have long been handed over through generations" – see al-Anbā Ghrīghūriyūs, "Taʿqīb 5," in *al-Turāth wa-Taḥaddiyāt al-*

the mindset and behavior of peoples" ("*mā taʾaṣṣal fī dhahniyyat al-shuʿūb wa-sulūkihā*").[103]

In the next major contribution by the internationally renowned Algerian philosopher Mohammed Arkoun (Muḥammad Arkūn), the problematic of authenticity and modernity is not addressed directly. Arkoun does however give a synopsis of his analysis of *turāth*, which he has worked out in more detail elsewhere.[104] According to his analysis, clearly influenced by French structuralist and post-structuralist thinkers, *turāth* exists on four different levels: that which is thought (*la pensée/mā qad fukkir fīh*), what it is possible to think (*le pensable/mā yumkin al-tafkīr fīh*), what it is not possible to think (*l'impensable/mā lā yumkin al-tafkīr fīh*), and what has not yet been thought (*l'impensée/mā lam yufakkar fīh*). Arkoun applies this model to envision a radical transformation of Arab-Islamic thought, which has until now been constrained by strictures that make it impossible to think in directions that go against Muslim orthodoxy. By erasing these strictures through critical historical analysis, a whole field of the unthought is opened up for discovery, and *turāth* may not only be revived but Arab thought as such may be saved from the shackles of the past ("*li-inqādh al-fikr al-ʿarabī min quyūd al-māḍī*").[105] While Arkoun's contribution displays theoretical sophistication, he does not try to break with the standard narrative paradigm. The goal is to break free from the past by unlocking the unthinkable, not to challenge the premise that *turāth* belongs to the past and that the "mythical consciousness" (*conscience mythique*/*wāʿī usṭūrī*) aims to return to that age, while the modern, rational thinker (with whom Arkoun associates himself) looks to the open possibilities of the future.[106] That historical orientation – the hallmark of the standard narrative – is rather a starting point of Arkoun's proposal for the renewal of Arab thought. Con-

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ʿAṣr fī al-Waṭan al-ʿArabī: al-Aṣāla wa-l-Muʿāsara (Beirut: Markaz Dirāsāt al-Waḥda al-ʿArabiyya, 1985), 125.

103 al-Ḥabbābī, "Taʿqīb 1," 107.

104 Mohammed Arkoun, *Pour une critique de la raison islamique* (Paris: Maisonneuve et Larose, 1984). Arkoun wrote mainly in French, although there is one publication on the topic of Arab thought that came out first in English: Mohammed Arkoun, *The Unthought in Contemporary Islamic Thought* (London: Saqi, 2002). For a comprehensive discussion of Arkoun's work, see Ursula Günther, *Mohammed Arkoun: ein moderner Kritiker der islamischen Vernunft* (Würzburg: Ergon, 2004); Ali Mirsepassi and Tadd Graham Fernée, *Islam, Democracy, and Cosmopolitanism: At Home and in the World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), chap. 4; and Kersten, *Cosmopolitans and Heretics: New Muslim Intellectuals and the Study of Islam*, chaps. 9–11.

105 Muḥammad Arkūn, "al-Turāth: Muḥtawāh wa-Huwwiyyatuh – īјābiyyātuh wa-Salbiyyātuh," in *al-Turāth wa-Taḥaddiyāt al-ʿAṣr fī al-Waṭan al-ʿArabī* (Beirut: Markaz Dirāsāt al-Waḥda al-ʿArabiyya, 1985), 167.

106 Arkūn, "al-Turāth: Muḥtawāh wa-Huwwiyyatuh – īјābiyyātuh wa-Salbiyyātuh," 163.

sequently, it differs essentially from the kind of approach that, for example, ʿAzīz al-ʿAẓma proposes in his commentary on Arkoun's contribution, namely to view *turāth* not as a unified whole, but as a reflection of different current ideologies, and to therefore see Salafism, not as anti-modern, but very much as a phenomenon rooted in the modern age.[107]

The papers discussed so far were the contributions to the section of the conference that focused on "Taḥdīd Mafāhīm Ishkāliyyat al-Aṣāla wa-l-Muʿāsara fī Iṭār Muqārin" ("The Definition of the Concepts of the Problematic of Authenticity and Contemporaneity in a Comparative Framework"). Many papers were presented in other panels, and many of these do not directly discuss the problematic, focusing instead on particular questions regarding law or education. In these papers too, however, we can sense the dominance of the standard narrative. For instance, Aḥmad Ṣidqī al-Dajjānī's presentation on "Western Thought and Change in Arab Society" rehearses the familiar frame for dealing with early twentieth-century thought in the Arab world by using the tripartite division of traditionalists, modernists, and in-betweenists, whom he dubs respectively the school that withdraws into itself (*al-munkamisha*), the school that indulges (*al-munghamisa*), and the school that talks back (*al-mustajība*). In conclusion, al-Dajjānī sees the only solution in going with the third option, represented by such thinkers as Ṭāhā Ḥusayn and ʿAbbās Maḥmūd al-ʿAqqād, who "mixed between the authentic and the contemporary."[108] A more topical paper that does break with the trend of taking the definition of authenticity and modernity for granted is that by the Kuwaiti politician Aḥmad Kāmil Abū al-Majd. In his presentation on the topic of politics, he considers first what *turāth*, authenticity, contemporaneity, and renewal mean. His treatment of *turāth* rehearses a common refrain – "a collection of what has come down to us in terms of thought from those who came before and the traces that it has left be-

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107 ʿAzīz al-ʿAẓma, "Taʿqīb 2," in *al-Turāth wa-Taḥaddiyāt al-ʿAṣr fī al-Waṭan al-ʿArabī: al-Aṣāla wa-l-Muʿāsara* (Beirut: Markaz Dirāsāt al-Waḥda al-ʿArabiyya, 1985), 172–76. An even stronger argument for breaking with *turāth* is formulated in response to Arkoun's paper by the Syrian intellectual ʿAbd Allāh ʿAbd ad-Dāʾim. A typical middle course solution that fits the standard narrative is suggested by Tunisian researcher ʿAfīf al-Būnī, who favors taking over from the West what is necessary to modernize and rejecting "colonialism, exploitation, Westernization, submission, and the idea of 'the European model'" – see ʿAfīf al-Būnī, "Taʿqīb 6," in *al-Turāth wa-Taḥaddiyāt al-ʿAṣr fī al-Waṭan al-ʿArabī: al-Aṣāla wa-l-Muʿāsara* (Beirut: Markaz Dirāsāt al-Waḥda al-ʿArabiyya, 1985), 196; ʿAbd Allāh ʿAbd ad-Dāʾim, "Taʿqīb 7," in *al-Turāth wa-Taḥaddiyāt al-ʿAṣr fī al-Waṭan al-ʿArabī: al-Aṣāla wa-l-Muʿāsara* (Beirut: Markaz Dirāsāt al-Waḥda al-ʿArabiyya, 1985), 197–99.

108 Aḥmad Ṣidqī al-Dajjānī, "al-Fikr al-Gharbī wa-l-Taghyīr fī al-Mujtamaʿ al-ʿArabī," in *al-Turāth wa-Taḥaddiyāt al-ʿAṣr fī al-Waṭan al-ʿArabī: al-Aṣāla wa-l-Muʿāsara* (Beirut: Markaz Dirāsāt al-Waḥda al-ʿArabiyya, 1985), 328–29.

hind"[109] – and it sets up a group of traditionalists versus modernists, accusing each side of being unreflective and mechanical in their adherence to one side or the other. What Abū al-Majd has to say about authenticity and contemporaneity is more interesting. He points out that this opposition is false, given that the opposite of authenticity (*aṣāla*) is counterfeit or forgery (*zayf*). [110] Regarding authenticity, he notes that this concept is commonly used to refer to *cultural* authenticity, even though its proponents are not quite clear as to where the borders between their own "authentic" culture and those of others lie, nor what the right unit of analysis is when it comes to authenticity – whether we should look at nationality, language, religion etc. As for contemporaneity, this term has come to be used widely as authenticity's counterpart in Arabic discourse, even though its meaning is not singular and Europeans prefer to use the term modernity, which is also available to Arabs, namely *ḥadātha.* It may be in relation to time (that is, in opposition to the past), in relation to content (that is, the big changes that separate past from present), or in terms of region (*iqlīmī*) – here Abū al-Majd refers to the concept of contemporaneity as an ideal, namely as an ideal of progress (*taqaddum*).[111] Unfortunately, after making these distinctions, it is not clear how Abū al-Majd fleshes them out or how he uses them in his paper, which turns to the role of Islamic principles in contemporary politics, other than as a general guideline to remain critical towards both traditionalism and attempts at renewal.

A final topical paper presented at the 1984 conference that we will discuss was presented by Jalāl Aḥmad Amīn, a well-known Egyptian economist and the son of the renowned *nahḍa* intellectual Aḥmad Amīn. He starts out his contribution on "*Turāth* and Arab Development" by claiming that the lack of development in the Arab world has long been linked to discourse on *turāth* and the return to the roots (*judhūr*) of Arab-Islamic civilization. Whenever Arabs experience foreign domination or a political or economic setback, the reaction has always been to turn to their heritage and stamp out foreign influence. At the same time, this "Salafi" trend has been opposed by a liberal-secular and a Marxist-secular trend, which saw the answer to the problems plaguing Arab society in learning from foreign examples, instead of rejecting them. The struggle between these groups was a chief feature of the *nahḍa,* and while it was put on hold during most of the Nasse-

109 Aḥmad Kāmil Abū al-Majd, "al-Masʾala al-Siyāsiyya: Waṣl al-Turāth bi-l-ʿAṣr wa-l-Niẓām al-Siyāsī li-l-Dawla." In *al-Turāth wa-Taḥaddiyāt al-ʿAṣr fī al-Waṭan al-ʿArabī: al-Aṣāla wa-l-Muʿāsara*, 571–93. Beirut: Markaz Dirāsāt al-Waḥda al-ʿArabiyya, 1985.

110 It is interesting that, whereas *aṣāla* became a central concept in modern Arab public discourse, there is no real equivalent to the notion of inauthenticity in Arabic.

111 Abū al-Majd, "al-Masʾala al-Siyāsiyya: Waṣl al-Turāth bi-l-ʿAṣr wa-l-Niẓām al-Siyāsī li-l-Dawla," 574–75.

rist era, it re-emerged after the 1967 war. So far, Amīn faithfully follows the Marxist version of the standard narrative. He adds to it an interesting gloss, however, by arguing that it is not just the Salafi trend, but also the liberals and the Marxists who are "*turāthī*" in their thinking, or as he puts it, in their "metaphysics."[112] The reason for this is that each of these trends, according to Amīn, turns to its own preferred heritage and idolizes it. Marxists hold up Marxist-materialist philosophy as the ultimate truth, and liberals proclaim the Western natural, social, and human sciences as the sole measure for progress. Even though these groups present their claims as universal, in reality they are following a particular heritage. Moreover, they follow the precepts of these examples slavishly, and are therefore no less traditionalist than the Salafists.[113] This leads the author to conclude that the real question facing Arabs is not about a choice between authentic and modern, or between foreign and domestic, but a choice between two frames of mind, a choice between traditionalism and creativity.[114] Naturally, the latter is the option that leads to development, according to Amīn, and although he admits that he does not have any specific plan for how such creativity is reached or built on the basis of *turāth*, he argues that it can only be achieved by later generations, if they are given the chance to develop their talents through education.[115]

Given the enormity of this topic, it is not surprising that Amīn would leave us with a very general answer to the question of how to develop the Arab world. But that is not the reason for closing our discussion of the 1984 conference with a discussion of his paper; rather, Amīn's paper is interesting for being one of the few that challenges the categorization of Arab thought and tries to change the question. Admittedly, he is not the first to suggest that Marxists and liberals are just as traditionalist in their regard for a particular heritage as the Salafists are in their commitment to *turāth.*[116] It is remarkable however to see him connect this observation to a larger point about the entire problematic of authenticity and modernity; that the really important question is not about what is foreign and what is domestic, what is original to *turāth* and what is not, but rather how Arabs can be creative

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112 He phrases it in a subtitle as: "We Are All Metaphysical *Turāthī*s" (*Kullunā Turāthiyyūn Mītāfīzīqīyyūn*) – see Jalāl Aḥmad Amīn, "al-Turāth wa-l-Tanmiya al-ʿArabiyya," in *al-Turāth wa-Taḥaddiyāt al-ʿAṣr fī al-Waṭan al-ʿArabī: al-Aṣāla wa-l-Muʿāsara* (Beirut: Markaz Dirāsāt al-Waḥda al-ʿarabiyya, 1985), 759.

113 Amīn, "al-Turāth wa-l-Tanmiya al-ʿArabiyya," 763. Amīn argues this in the following section entitled "All of Us Are Also Traditionalists" (*Kullunā Ayḍan Muqallidūn*).

114 Amīn, "al-Turāth wa-l-Tanmiya al-ʿArabiyya," 767.

115 Amīn, "al-Turāth wa-l-Tanmiya al-ʿArabiyya," 774.

116 Al-Jābirī makes this argument, for example, at the beginning of his ground-breaking *We and the Heritage*, published in 1980 – see al-Jābirī, *Naḥnu wa-l-Turāth: Qirāʾāt Muʿāsira fī Turāthinā al-Falsafī*, 12–16.

rather than conventional in their thinking. With this suggestion, Amīn tends towards the kind of analysis we found in ʿAyyād and, to some extent, in al-Jābirī; a kind of questioning that does not take for granted the parameters of the debate in which they are engaged, but attempts to rearrange the landscape in which this debate takes place.

The goal in considering these conferences is to show how little this is in fact done in contemporary Arab thought. Even focusing on the exceptions, there is little discussion of the main line of the *turāth* discourse, and when it is discussed, it does not kindle much response from commentators. The main line of the discussion about authenticity and modernity within the framework of *turāth* appears and increasingly so if we compare ʿAyyād's paper, with which we started, to later discussions in 1974 and 1984. While ʿAyyād feels that he can open a free discussion on the topic of authenticity in order to define it and describe its genealogy and its various meanings, later writers tend to take the historical, culturalist interpretation of authenticity as a given. Even if they do not, even if they question this interpretation of authenticity, they do so from a different position. Once the standard narrative has taken shape, any divergence from it is necessarily framed as an intervention. This change in tone, from free discussion to intervention is a mark of discursive sedimentation. After all, it only makes sense to frame your rethinking of the premises of a debate as an intervention, when these premises are widely known and generally accepted. To illustrate this change in tone, we will close this chapter by looking at two such interventions by authors whom we have already met as participants in the conferences of 1974 and 1984: Fuʾād Zakariyyā and ʿAzīz al-ʿAẓma. We will see how, at the height of the *turāth* debate in the 1980s and 1990s, they both expressed their qualms about the standard narrative in ways resembling ʿAyyād's 1971 paper, and we will notice a marked change in how they present their argument as a way of shaking up the concepts of authenticity and modernity that dominated Arab thought in their time.

2.6 Critical interventions: Fuʾād Zakariyyā and ʿAzīz al-ʿAẓma

Let us start with the Egyptian existentialist philosopher Fuʾād Zakariyyā. In a later book he appears to go against his earlier, more standard treatment of authenticity by pursuing the analysis of concepts that he proposes in his contribution to the 1974 conference. Writing at the height of the *turāth* debate in the 1980s, Fuʾād Zakariyyā captures the dominant trend of the previous two decades as follows:

> The formula (*ṣīgha*) "Authenticity and Contemporaneity" appeared in our cultural life at a certain time during the previous two decades (more or less). It was seized upon soon enough

> by writers and researchers and created a fundamental core that gathered around it a crystal which became bigger and bigger, until it encompassed a large part of our cultural and intellectual production since its first appearance. This formula spread among the old and the young. It came to be present at all symposiums, conferences, and circles. It became a constant fixture in our intellectual magazines and literary pages. Each intellectual, when receiving a cultured young gentleman for a conversation or a meeting, would expect at least one question concerning the problem of authenticity and contemporaneity and, more often than not, his expectation was proven correct.[117]

Given the dominance of this "formula" it is surprising, Zakariyyā writes, to see that "during all of this no one stopped to analyze this formulation itself and become aware of the extent to which it is able to express the problem that is thrust upon us." Although he tentatively goes along with the idea that the formula "authenticity and contemporaneity" became *en vogue* or was created in response to the 1967 defeat, he regards this as merely the most recent articulation of an older problematic.[118] He maintains that a deeper analysis of this problematic is necessary to pinpoint its basic flaws, which have led to "an obvious imbalance in the intellectual framework" of Arab thought.[119] According to Zakariyyā, authenticity has two general meanings, neither of which displays a clear opposition between authenticity and contemporaneity. In its first meaning, authenticity is taken as *temporal*, referring to something that is with us today, but which traces its genealogical roots back to ancient times. This link to the present is important for Zakariyyā, because if the authentic object, animal, or person in question is around today, it shows that authenticity cannot be entirely opposed to the contemporary.[120] The second meaning of authenticity lacks this temporal dimension. This is the kind of authenticity that pertains to "being true to oneself and the true expression of the self (*al-ṣidq maʿa nafsihi wa-l-taʿbīr al-ḥaqīqī ʿan al-dhāt*)." It is the kind of thing often said in relation to the "authenticity of emotion" or "authenticity of the poet."[121] Here also authenticity and contemporaneity are not opposites, because the contemporary includes both emotional authenticity and its opposite forgery or deception.

If we want a true opposite of authenticity, we must turn to the last of these terms, to "forgery (*zayf*), superficiality (*saṭḥiyya*), and literal imitation (*muḥākāa*

117 Zakariyyā, *al-Ṣaḥwa al-Islāmiyya fī Mīzān al-ʿAql*, 87.
118 He notes, in particular, the French historian Jacques Berque as having introduced it as a translation of the French "authenticité."
119 Zakariyyā, *al-Ṣaḥwa al-Islāmiyya fī Mīzān al-ʿAql*, 88.
120 Zakariyyā, *al-Ṣaḥwa al-Islāmiyya fī Mīzān al-ʿAql*, 89.
121 Zakariyyā, *al-Ṣaḥwa al-Islāmiyya fī Mīzān al-ʿAql*, 89.

ḥarfiyya),"[122] in other words, *inauthenticity.*[123] The difficulty is that this is not how the problem of authenticity and contemporaneity is generally perceived. The dominant framework for talking about this problematic is articulated in terms of a binary division (*taqsīm thunāʾī*) that is structured along a temporal axis: You either sympathize with the past or you support a call for the present. This binary, however, is based on oversimplification. It forces Arabs to choose between two kinds of inauthenticity, leading to two kinds of alienation (*ightirāb*), one that is *temporal* – imitating the Arab-Islamic past – and one that is *spatial* – imitating the Western present.[124] The way out of this bind is to recognize that the important problems faced by Arab intellectuals do not fall neatly into either of these two categories. They should see that to be authentic does not imply being out of sync with the current age. "Authenticity," he writes, "entails that we are true to ourselves and that we seek inspiration for solutions to our problems from our reality." To achieve this, Arabs need to pay attention to two dimensions. The first is that of "ingenuity and creativity" (*al-ibtikār wa-l-ibdāʿ*), meaning that authenticity must always involve creating something new that is originally yours. The second is the temporal dimension, by which Zakariyyā means that erasing the binary opposition between authenticity and modernity does *not* imply an erasure of the past. We carry the past on our backs and should make use of it insofar as it "includes elements of creativity and a longing for the future."[125]

Clearly, Zakariyyā's analysis of the problematic of authenticity and modernity has a lot in common with ʿAyyād's. Both of them are sensitive to the different meanings involved in the term authenticity; both are aware of how its temporal opposition to the contemporary influences the way in which the term authenticity is understood; both, moreover, wish to complicate the question of authenticity and go beyond a simple opposition in terms. At the same time, there is a notable difference between the two. ʿAyyād presents us with a reflection, whereas Zakariyyā's text reads as an intervention. In the latter, the exasperation at the direction that Arab thought has taken is palpable. Everyone is now talking about these two terms, authenticity and modernity, without having discussed what they actually mean or how this problematic connects to real problems faced by Arab society.

A few years after Zakariyyā's remarks on authenticity, we find a similar critical stance in an examination of authenticity and modernity in Arab discourse by ʿAzīz al-ʿAẓma. Looking back on how the *turāth* debate has developed thus far, and

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122 Zakariyyā, *al-Ṣaḥwa al-Islāmiyya fī Mīzān al-ʿAql*, 90.

123 As mentioned in footnote 110 of this chapter, there is no real equivalent to the notion of inauthenticity in Arabic.

124 Zakariyyā, *al-Ṣaḥwa al-Islāmiyya fī Mīzān al-ʿAql*, 93.

125 Zakariyyā, 97.

the center stage afforded to authenticity and modernity, al-ʿAẓma notes the conceptual confusion that surrounds this debate: Authenticity (*aṣāla*) is used interchangeably with cognates like subjectivity (*dhātiyya*) and identity (*huwiyya*), while the term *ḥadātha* went from denoting the modernist movement, as well as the contemporary (*muʿāsara*) to being short-hand for a very general sense of "contemporaneity, social-cultural revolutionism, the adoption of modern ideologies like Marxism, and other matters."[126] The discourse of authenticity and modernity among Arab thinkers rests on an essentialist and binary understanding of history. It is essentialist, because it presupposes the continuity of an Arab-Islamic identity that is ahistorical and that will find the sources for its own revitalization buried deep inside itself. It is binary, because it presupposes an Other that is its opposite and its enemy.[127] Modernity, which is associated with the West qua the Arab's Other, represents a break or rupture with the singular Arab-Islamic entity; authenticity is its homecoming.

A fundamental mistake in this picture, according to al-ʿAẓma, is that it does not acknowledge the degree to which authenticity is itself part of modern culture. "The real roots of authenticity," he writes, "do not hide outside of modernity, because modernity is the root of authenticity."[128] Sure enough, the Arabs have a history, they have traditions, but these have always been and will always be refracted through the circumstances of the day.[129] Distinctive about these circumstances is that they are marked by a modernity that is global in scope, and which is built in large part on Western principles, customs, institutions, and tastes. "The West and the universal civilization (*al-madaniyya al-kawniyya*)," writes al-ʿAẓma, "are hiding inside of us in many ways, because we wear trousers and study in universities, we settle our differences in civil courts … and adopt imported political concepts."[130] Moreover, it is incorrect to think of these Western influences as being of a kind. The West, like the East, is a concept that harbors many contradicting tendencies and concepts. It contains both "trends of darkness and of enlightenment (*nazāʿāt iẓlāmiyya wa-tanwīriyya*), openness and closedness, progress and degeneration, democracy and tyranny."[131] Like Zakariyyā, al-ʿAẓma wants to say that the modern world that we actually live in does not lend itself to strict dualisms of authentic and modern or East and West, regardless of the neat categorizations used

126 al-ʿAẓma, *al-Aṣāla aw Siyāsat al-Hurūb min al-Wāqiʿ*, 8.
127 al-ʿAẓma, *al-Aṣāla aw Siyāsat al-Hurūb min al-Wāqiʿ*, 11.
128 al-ʿAẓma, 14.
129 al-ʿAẓma, 15.
130 al-ʿAẓma, 16 – 17.
131 al-ʿAẓma, 17.

by theoreticians of *turāth* like Muḥammad ʿĀbid al-Jābirī, Ḥasan Ḥanafī, or others whom he mentions as representatives of contemporary Arab thought.

This realignment of the concept of modernity naturally has repercussions for the meaning of authenticity. After all, if *ḥadātha* is not something Western, but a global phenomenon that is fundamental to the contemporary reality of the Arab world, then how should we understand its counterpart, *aṣāla?* Al-ʿAẓma finds the origins of the common nativist conception of authenticity in the development of Arab nationalist thought in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, which based itself on the German Romantic nationalist ideology. These concepts were later taken over by Islamist groups, who nowadays are the most vocal defenders of Muslim authenticity.[132] Authenticity, in this political and cultural sense, has come to stand for a nebulous, positive conception of the self that does not do justice to the complexity of people's identities and the societies of which they are members.[133] Notwithstanding the fact that the opposite of authenticity is actually "forgery" (*zayf*),[134] modernity and authenticity have become catchphrases for a general framework for a discourse of binaries (*thunāʾiyyāt*), like "self and other, authentic and foreign, what remains and what occurs in an instant, the lasting and the interrupted, intrinsic and extrinsic, positive and negative, Renaissance (*nahḍa*) and decline, strength and weakness."[135] Interestingly, al-ʿAẓma adds that such a discourse of authenticity is structurally closely related to that of Orientalism. The binaries of authenticity and modernity mirror those of an ontological division of the world into Orient and Occident.[136]

Like ʿAyyād and Zakariyyā, then, al-ʿAẓma gives us an alternative take on authenticity. The difference is that, where ʿAyyād's could still present a recapitulation of the different meanings of *aṣāla*, by the time al-ʿAẓma (and Zakariyyā) tackle the question of authenticity they have to present their analysis as an *intervention* – a clear indication of the extent to which authenticity has taken on a stable role within the standard narrative. Al-ʿAẓma frames his intervention, not by arguing for the party of authenticity, or of modernity, or for some combination of the two, but by examining its structure. A historian by trade, al-ʿAẓma adds to this a measure of historical depth that echoes Abū Lughud's contribution to the 1974 conference. The opposition between modernity and authenticity is, according to al-ʿAẓma, not itself ancient. It is rooted in modern Western ideas that have been fundamen-

132 al-ʿAẓma, 24–25.
133 al-ʿAẓma, 26–27.
134 al-ʿAẓma, 26.
135 al-ʿAẓma, 30.
136 al-ʿAẓma, 31.

tal for articulating the *nahḍa* project of Islamic revival.[137] This is evident in that the earliest notion of a nationalist ideal of authenticity stems from German Romanticism, with figures like Herder and Hegel.[138] We see it in the enthusiasm of early Islamic reformers like al-Afghānī, ʿAbduh, and Riḍā for Rousseauian political ideas and other Enlightenment ideals like natural religion, rejection of immanence, utilitarianism, and empiricist materialism.[139] Most important for these reformers, however, was the addition of nineteenth-century thought, particularly evolutionary theory, Social Darwinism, and the ideal of progress. These Darwinian elements were allied with a Romantic political project of national strength and unity to form the ideological background for the Arab intellectual scene during much of the twentieth century.[140] We see the effect of this nowadays, not only among the Islamists, but equally among contemporary authors of a liberal bent who suggest a reconciliation between the two sides. Rather than debunk the Romantic notion that a people is the guardian of an innate spirit that resides in the marrow of its members, they accept this idea and try to reconcile it with the need to adopt inauthentic Western elements. Again, al-ʿAẓma offers Zakī Najīb Maḥmūd as an example. With his invocation of the "I" and the "We" of an Arab-Islamic identity that carries "a deep-rooted principle from which was emitted – and continues to be emitted – our other judgments in various arenas," Maḥmūd displays precisely the kind of ideological weaponization of *turāth* that one finds among Islamist intellectuals.[141] Here, again, history becomes an unfailing, unalloyed source of identity in a clash of civilizations.

2.7 Authentic interventions

Doubtless these are not the only examples of Arab intellectuals critical of the fundamental discursive structures of Arab thought. This kind of criticism, however, remains rare. My point in presenting these examples is to add substance to the claim that the standard narrative is, indeed, "standard." Yet, a second aim is to show that there are also alternatives out there. My qualms about the straightforward oppo-

137 al-ʿAẓma, 35.
138 al-ʿAẓma, 24.
139 al-ʿAẓma, 37–38.
140 al-ʿAẓma, 39–40.
141 al-ʿAẓma, 57, quoting Maḥmūd.

sition between authenticity and modernity are shared by Arab intellectuals.[142] Interventions like these dislodge any easy classifications of contemporary Arab thought, and it is important to show that this kind of critique has already been articulated for quite a while by Arab authors. At the same time, we must acknowledge that, despite diverging voices, the standard narrative continues to dominate Arab thought unchanged and virtually unchallenged.

There is another, more important takeaway. These critiques may be taken as just that: challenges to the status quo, rather than substantive alternative frameworks for thought. I want to argue, however, that they are (or can be) more than that. Particularly evident in ʿAyyād and Zakariyyā's approach is that they do not simply contrast different meanings of authenticity, but also point to different moral implications of this term. The contradiction between the individual and the community inherent in authenticity is a contradiction in moral claims on the individual, about whether to privilege his creative original impulse or his sense of authentic belonging to a culture and a heritage. In other words, the ambiguity in the meaning of a term like *aṣāla* is not an innocent linguistic one. Authenticity is not ambiguous in the way that the term "bank" can refer to the land alongside a river and a financial establishment, or that in the phrase "thou still unravished beauty of quietness" the term "still" may refer either to a state of being calm or of continuing to be as one was before. Authenticity, particularly in modern times, encompasses a moral ideal, and the two meanings of authenticity point to two related, but in a certain way incompatible moral claims. On the one hand, we understand authenticity as a personal ideal of independence and creativity. We moderns are called upon to be authentic, while to deny someone authenticity – calling him "inauthentic" – is seen as an insult. Here, to be authentic refers to being yourself in a way that is unique to you, that characterizes who you are. On the other hand, authenticity is also used in a collective sense. Here, authenticity rather refers to being in tune with your shared roots, thus implying similarity to your peers that distinguishes you from other groups. In both cases, an intrinsic value is attributed to "staying true to yourself," but naturally their outcomes differ wildly. The personal ideal of authenticity underwrites individualism and, in certain cases, a breaking away from the past. The cultural ideal forms the basis for feelings of solidarity between those who share a past or certain characteristics that they wish to protect and honor. This has, of course, become a powerful political rallying call, at the heart of movements for national independence and the expression of

142 In fact, one of our main interlocutors, ʿAbd al-Raḥmān Ṭaha, refers to it as the "hoary old problematic" (*ishkāliyya mustahlaka istihkākan*) – see ʿAbd al-Raḥmān Ṭāhā, *Suʾāl al-Manhaj: fī Ufuq al-Taʾsīs l-Unmūdaj Fikrī Jadīd* (Beirut: al-Muʾassasa al-ʿArabiyya li-l-Fikr wa-l-Ibdāʿ, 2015), 55.

grievances of minorities in the modern state. This ambiguity in the term authenticity is, as we saw, not alien to the Arabic language. In Arabic, too, *aṣāla* and its adjective *aṣīl* can be used to refer to both ideals of authenticity. Our hypothesis is that "authenticity" in Arabic potentially implies a similar range of conflicting moral claims.

The upshot of bringing out this moral horizon is potentially significant. If authenticity indeed has different interpretations that, moreover, have different moral premises and effects, then a more diverse interpretative framework for looking at authenticity discourse would not just provide a new perspective on Arab thought, but a way of uncovering the ethical in debates that, ostensibly, have shunned any substantive discussion of ethics – a point already discussed in the Introduction. It would be a way of cutting ourselves loose from the one-dimensional framework according to which a thinker either proposes a return to the past or a push towards the future. Instead, it would require us to look in detail at how they articulate an ideal of authenticity (and modernity) and the various ethical claims that this entails. Studying authenticity in detail would provide a tool to paint Arab debates as more than ruminations on the meaning of *turāth.* It would give us a way of reading their texts as opposing perspectives on the role of the individual and the community in contemporary Arab society. Moreover, given that this discourse on authenticity is global in scope, it would provide a firm basis for taking these debates out of the confines of the Arab context and bringing them into conversation with authenticity discourse in other regions, both in the postcolonial world and in the West.

To appreciate this dimension of authenticity, we need to become acquainted with its rich genealogy in the modern age, one that has given rise to a variety of highly influential branches of theory in philosophy, art, psychology, and political and social science, through which it has influenced almost every aspect of mainstream modern thought and society. This will help us to think differently about *aṣāla* in the Arab context, not merely in the one-dimensional straitjacket of a nostalgic longing for the past, but as a potential means for expressing different conceptions of the individual in relation to modern society. Such a reappraisal of authenticity would naturally complicate the familiar standard narrative of Arab thought. The opposition between authenticity and modernity that remains key to contemporary Arab thought requires a simple version of authenticity of the nostalgic-longing type to uphold its opposition to a disenchanted modernity. This straightforward opposition becomes untenable once authenticity takes on different meanings. Moreover, it is hard to discern any kind of opposition to modernity in something like the authentically creative individual, if only because this kind of person is associated with rather than opposed to modern culture. On reflection, this should not come as a surprise. As I mentioned above and as we will explore

in the next chapter, the ideal of authenticity is anything but a relic. It is instead one of the defining characteristics of modern life. The requirement to be authentic, to be true to yourself, is present in all areas of our societies, from advertising, to art, to politics. To see Arab authenticity discourse as entirely reactionary is to neglect the fact that the moral impulse to be true to one's culture or heritage is one that derives its force, not from classical sources, but from distinctively modern ideals about identity and communal belonging that relate to specific conceptions about how the past relates to the present; authenticity discourse is supported by a particular temporal vocabulary.

If this is so, then before we can adequately gauge the meaning of authenticity, we must take a closer look at time. This, in a way, has already been suggested to us by both Zakariyyā and al-ʿAẓma. One fundamental aspect of the standard narrative of Arab thought, according to them, is that it takes for granted the temporal opposition between authenticity and modernity, and uses it as the central axis of its binary conceptual framework. Authenticity *is* past, just as modernity *is* present and future. This, I take it, points us to a deeper truth about authenticity that has remained underdeveloped in discussions of Arab thought. If authenticity is bound up with time, then what you take authenticity to mean will, to some degree, be determined by your conception of how time functions. Different ideas about authenticity and modernity become possible given different perspectives on how past, present, and future are related. If, indeed, different temporal imaginaries are constitutive of different notions of authenticity, then a reappraisal of authenticity in Arab thought will require a simultaneous investigation into conceptions of time. On the one hand, it can help us understand the structure of the standard narrative and explain its dominance. On the other hand, this perspective implies that any diverging conceptions of time put forward by Arab intellectuals, may be studied as attempts at reconfiguring the dominant narrative.

3 Time, modernity, and authenticity

An interesting takeaway from the criticisms of the standard narrative voiced by Arab intellectuals is their emphasis on the relation between time and authenticity. The narrative's binary structure rests on a division between past and present that is evident in the common slogan of "authenticity and modernity," but which is also echoed in divisions between religion and secularism, or progress and backwardness that mark discussions in (and on) the Arab world. The temporal aspect is most aptly illustrated by al-ʿAẓma's critical analysis of the *turāth* debate. More than either ʿAyyād or Zakariyyā, al-ʿAẓma stresses that the authenticity–modernity paradigm fits a broader pattern of thinking about history, progress, and time. The debates about *turāth* are, to his mind, a consequence of an evolutionary historical narrative. Going back to the late nineteenth-century infatuation of Arab intellectuals with Social Darwinist theory, al-ʿAẓma attributes the current binary style of thinking to the faith that these *nahḍawī* predecessors of the current Arab intelligentsia had in a progressive view of history, one in which there is a development from bad to better, along a shared civilizational path. Once the ideal of progress, fundamental to the Social Darwinist project, is taken for granted and, in particular, when the more advanced side of this equation between progress and backwardness is firmly associated with the West, we start to see the outlines of the standard narrative. The labels of the standard narrative make sense against the background of a linear story of human progress, moving from East to West, from backwardness to civilization, but also from religion to secularism, from spiritualism to materialism, from the irrational to the rational. Where ʿAyyād and Zakariyyā are keen to explore what Arab thought could be, what new dimensions Arab thought may yet reveal if it is approached from a different angle, al-ʿAẓma adopts a historical perspective, explaining how Arab thought got to this point. Without the progressive view of history, it would not be possible to think of the opposition between authenticity and modernity in the way it is conceived of right now. Hence, if we want to get a clearer view of the standard narrative, it is sensible to explore this temporal dimension.

As suggested at the beginning of Chapter 2, to explore alternative understandings of Arab thought we need to adopt a broader perspective, both in terms of time and space. If we continue to read contemporary Arab thought through the lens of 1967 as a debate that is limited to the Arab context, it will be difficult to grasp how this discourse hangs together with global shifts in the economic, political, technological, juridical, moral, and psychological fabric of society that have both relied on and made possible the kind of temporal imaginary sketched by al-ʿAẓma. We will have to talk, in other words, about the nature of modernity, how it relates to new

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conceptions of time and space, and how these have been manifested in the Arab context over the previous couple of centuries. Since the term modernity is fraught with ambiguity, I will first discuss how modernity may be conceptualized in this overarching sense – as opposed to the common invocation of modernity as the opposite of authenticity in Arab discourse – and why it continues to be a useful concept. We will then discuss in more detail the way in which theorists have tried to define modernity by focusing on modern conceptions of linear, progressive time. Following this, we will look at how this particular modern conception of time can help us understand the underlying structure of the debates on *turāth* and the standard narrative. This will set us up for a discussion of the concept of authenticity, and how authenticity ended up becoming a central ideal of modernity that contains different seemingly contradictory meanings.

3.1 Modernity as a project

To invoke the term modernity is to enter a conceptual minefield. Ambiguities abound wherever this concept is used, and it is not always clear that it serves a useful analytical purpose. It refers in a general sense to a vague, all-encompassing idea of a global trend, as when intellectuals discuss such phenomena as the "advent of modernity," the "crisis of modernity," the "malaise of modernity," or "postmodernity." Modernity also sometimes refers specifically to the West, which is regarded by many as the producer, promoter, and protector of modernity. It is linked to artistic sensibilities – for example, in modernism – to a particular lifestyle, or simply to whatever is current. Cutting through these many interlinked conceptions remains a hellish job. At the same time, the ubiquity of "the modern" in both contemporary Arab thought and in the Western tradition of postcolonial critique makes it impossible to avoid the topic. Despite the problems surrounding its use, the concept of modernity will turn out to play a vital role in our story, since it is by using this concept to refer to a particular kind of (modern) temporal imaginary that we can analyze the structure of Arab thought, as it is caught in a vague opposition between the modern and the authentic. By picking up on the discussion of modern temporality, we can understand how this opposition can play such a dominant role, and also how it might be challenged.

In a compelling takedown of the "modernity fad of the 1990s and 2000s," Frederick Cooper indexed and debunked various ways of defining "modernity."[1] The

1 Frederick Cooper, *Colonialism in Question: Theory, Knowledge, History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 117.

ordinary way of conceptualizing modernity, he argues, is to associate it with the "new." It is what is with us by virtue of being current, contemporary, or recent. The problem with this definition is that it remains rather empty and of little theoretical use. Modernity is a powerful and much-discussed concept, not because it refers to whatever is contemporaneous, but because it is associated with particular attributes that set it off from what is traditional. A way to account for this is to identify modernity using the classic Aristotelian method of marking its attributes. This approach to modernity is familiar to us, because it is the way modernity tends to be defined in the standard narrative. Concepts like contemporaneity (*muʿāsara*) or modernity (*ḥadātha*) are invoked as a counterweight to "authenticity" (*aṣāla*) in Arab thought in a very circumscribed fashion. The assumption here is that modernity refers to the West and the institutions, ideas, and stereotypes that are standardly associated with it: progress, science, rationalism, secularism, democracy, liberalism, globalization, material wealth, productive industry, technology, materialism, a lack of ethical norms, a lack of spirituality, a disregard for family values. Here, modernity is in a way essentialized, it is identified by a set of attributes that, depending on whether you applaud or oppose modernization, you are for or against. This reified sense of modernity goes back a long time. It can already be discerned in the stagist histories of mankind as a collection of peoples on different stages of a pyramid leading to absolute reason, which proliferated in the eighteenth century. These theories were amended in various ways in the nineteenth century to fit the colonial order of the time, and they are articulated most clearly in the modernization theory of the 1950s and 1960s, when the idea of a "common and essential pattern of 'development,' defined by progress in technology, military and bureaucratic institutions, and the political and social structure" was posited as a roadmap for leading "traditional" society into modernity.[2]

This rather concrete idea of modernity remains common in both Western and non-Western settings. Political and popular debate is suffused with calls for modernization and the threat of backwardness. A related way of thinking about modernity is to see it as an epoch, as a period in time following pre-modernity. The problem here is that, in order to define when this epoch started (or when it might end), you need specific criteria, and to get at these one is again forced into a reified view of modernity. A more complex way of viewing modernity is not to define it in terms of a bundle of attributes, but to conceptualize it as a process or series of interrelated processes – capitalism, bureaucratization, mathematization, disenchantment, etc. This way of characterizing modernity has a lot going

2 Nils Gilman, *Mandarins of the Future: Modernization Theory in Cold War America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University, 2003), 3.

for it. It allows us to tell an overarching story of how either European modernity spread around the world, or how modernities spread in different places, giving rise to a theory of "multiple modernities,"[3] or it can show us how European modernity was formed in relation to and under the influence of the world that it colonized.[4] Yet, what lacks in these narratives of modernity as a process, according to Cooper, is attention to local variance and detail. It either imposes the singular European model, or, in a move to acknowledge local diversity, it tends towards painting "everything that has happened in the last five hundred years" with the brush of "modernity."[5]

Against this, Cooper argues that we should let go of the urge to pin down modernity, and see it rather as a "claim-making device."[6] Modernity is an ideal, and as such it allows people to make claims that further their own stakes. European powers may have justified colonial interventions citing the "white man's burden" to modernize traditional society, but similarly African unions used the discourse of modernity to successfully claim better working conditions. This claim-making view of modernity allows us to look at "how the idea of modernization was

3 The name most associated with the "multiple modernities" theory is the Israeli sociologist Schmuel Eisenstadt, who uses the term at least as early as 1993 – see Schmuel Eisenstadt, "Globalization, Civilizational Traditions and Multiple Modernities," in *Regime Transformations and Global Realignments: Indo-European Dialogues on the Post-Cold War World*, ed. Kanta Ahuja, Huub Coppens, and Herman van der Wusten (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1993). His idea was picked up and developed mainly in the first decade of the new millennium. The aim of this theory is, in essence, to hold on to the notion that capitalism and connected processes lead traditional societies into modernity, while also recognizing that these processes do not necessarily converge into a single, universal type. Theories of this kind differ as to which degree of difference between societies is allowed for, ranging from theories that make slight changes to singular modes of modernization theory, to theories that allow for culturally independent forms of modernity, to those on the edge of this spectrum, which posit entirely autonomous modernities. As Thomas Schwinn notes in a survey of the "Multiple Modernities" literature, the exact conditions for distinguishing multiple modernities are not always clearly stated by proponents of this theory. He sees defining a matrix for categorizing different kinds of modernity as a prerequisite for such theories to be viable. Schwinn also calls for a closer investigation of the role of culture in explaining multiplicity of modernities, both the potential influence of *longue durée* cultural differences and the relative weight of these influences as societies modernized at different times and under different conditions. Lastly, Schwinn argues that we need to be clear about the unit of analysis, that is, whether it ought to be studied at the local, national, or global level – see Thomas Schwinn, "Multiple Modernities: Konkurrierende Thesen und offene Fragen – Ein Literaturbericht in konstruktiver Absicht," *Zeitschrift für Soziologie* 38, no. 6 (2009): 454–76.

4 Timothy Mitchell, "The Stage of Modernity," in *Questions of Modernity*, ed. Timothy Mitchell (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 1–34.

5 Cooper, *Colonialism in Question: Theory, Knowledge, History*, 127.

6 Cooper, *Colonialism in Question: Theory, Knowledge, History*, 146.

used in a particular context, and we can trace the effects of its usage and its relation to politics on the ground."[7]

As is often the case, the critics are one's best guide to an issue. Cooper's index of the various conceptualizations of modernity is insightful, and his critique is incisive. We should, indeed, pay attention to the role that modernity plays "on the ground," in particular as a means of making claims. Unfortunately, for all the effort in criticizing existing conceptions of modernity, Cooper does not quite flesh out his own suggestion, perhaps leaving that to the anthropologist or social scientist to figure out "on the ground." What this leaves out is a serious consideration, not of how claims are made with reference to modernity, but how modernity can take on this role *at all.* The moral weight of modernity as a claim-making device does not float in thin air. It is enabled by a very particular discursive formation, and if this discursive formation can do the same justificatory work for a union in Senegal in 1946 as it does in the British Parliament in the nineteenth century, or in Meji Japan, then we require an explanation as to what makes this possible. What can explain the justificatory effect of the urge to be modern and also its counterpart, the defense of tradition in the face of modernization?

I will not pretend to give a definitive answer to this question. All that I am suggesting at this point is that if it is true that modernity has attained a global justificatory status, then there has to be something that we can rightly call modern discourse, a modern vocabulary, a modern way of staking claims using words and concepts. The way in which this discourse is formed is incredibly varied and constantly changing, but at the same time, we can point to certain general principles that must be in place for this kind of discourse to do its work. In particular, to think of the modern as underpinning a claim requires a specific way (or perhaps more than one) of conceptualizing time. If modernity is inherently linked to something like the current age or the future, then in order for anyone to stake a claim by invoking modernity, this person and her audience must conceive of a temporal order that assigns a prominent and positively laden place for the "modern." Given the common semantics of this term, which Cooper himself summarizes, the modern is associated with the present or the future. Taking the modern as an ideal, then, implies a tangible differentiation from the past. Moreover, if the claim-making is to have any effect, there has to be a moral direction to this temporal order. The kind of claims that Cooper is thinking of can only be made if modernity functions as an ideal worth fighting for. This aspect of modernity is left undiscussed by Cooper. He appears to take it for granted that modernity can underwrite claims, and uses this to argue against an all-encompassing, global definition of modernity,

7 Cooper, 147.

but this simply evades the question of how modernity can have this function in the first place; which discursive landscape it presupposes for these claims to be effective.

A related conception of modernity that countenances the claim-making potential of modernity, and also acknowledges that we need to think about how this potential arose, is perhaps provided by Talal Asad's suggestion that we think of modernity as "a *project*, or rather, a series of interlinked projects – that certain people in power seek to achieve." As Asad explains it:

> The project [of modernity] aims at institutionalizing a number of (sometimes conflicting, often evolving) principles: constitutionalism, moral autonomy, democracy, human rights, civil equality, industry, consumerism, freedom of the market – and secularism. It employs proliferating technologies (of production, warfare, travel, entertainment, medicine) that generate new experiences of space and time, of cruelty and health, of consumption and knowledge.[8]

To conceive of modernity as a project is in effect to see it as a claim-making device. After all, a project is something that needs to be done. A project comes with requirements that need to be fulfilled. Modernity may be a messy affair, pervaded by inconsistencies and local peculiarities. What keeps it together is not any particular process, but a shared aim. Modernity is a goal that makes demands on us. The important question, according to Asad, "is not to determine why the idea of 'modernity' (or of 'the West') is a misdescription, but why it has become hegemonic *as a political goal*, what practical consequences follow from that hegemony, and what social conditions maintain it."

Asad's description of modernity as a project does not fall into the trap of assimilating modernity to any one thing, to a bundle of things, or even to a single process. It is not simply rationalization, or secularization, or scientization of society. Nor should it be seen as a multiplicity of different modernities.[9] Rather, mod-

8 Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity*, 13.

9 It should be noted that this conception of modernity may be combined with an analysis of how modernity is shaped differently under different circumstances in different societies. It emphasizes the extent to which appropriations and local applications of "modern" institutions and sensibilities linked to the nation-state, the market, and the individual are constrained by a similar context, a similar landscape that constrains and enables certain forms of action, control, and expression. Hence, it only recognizes these multiple modernities as modernities insofar as they are meaningfully shaped in such a landscape – one of the claims of this model is, of course, that globalizing this landscape is not only part of the project of modernity, but that this globalization has been largely successful. For this reason also, the perspective on modernity as a project does not tie its fate to that of Westernization. Even if modernities become less and less "Western," which is essentially Eisenstadt's point in presenting the late twentieth century as a time of emerging multiple modern-

ernity is a set of interlinked *projects* that we can study as mutually reinforcing without having to posit some overarching intent. This does not mean that any single element should play a prominent role in all of these projects. The projects are more properly conceived of as showing family resemblances; like the fibers in a piece of rope, they tie in with each other and collectively form a coherent whole. As Ludwig Wittgenstein points out in using this analogy to explain the notion of a family resemblance, "the strength of the thread does not reside in the fact that some one fiber runs through its whole length, but in the overlapping of many fibers."[10] Similarly, to understand modernity as a series of projects can give us insight into how various aspects interlink and support each other. Hence, it provides us with a framework to study how the overarching project of modernity came about, and how it is advanced by particular ideas or sensibilities traveling through these projects. Anticipating our discussion in the next chapter, authenticity provides a good illustration of this. If we treat modernity as a combined set of projects, then we can start to understand authenticity as a central ethical ideal that affects most (if not all) of the "principles" mentioned by Asad. On the one hand, the call for cultural authenticity as a way of preserving one's identity can be seen as a reaction to modernity's globalizing tendency, which erases local difference. On the other hand, personal authenticity is equally a crucial modern value: From the right to freely express one's true self, to the commercialization of authentic products and authentic travel packages, to the idealized position of the authentically creative artist.

Secondly, by conceiving of modernity as a project, one refrains from presenting it in anything like the adversarial mode popular among "Clash of Civilizations"-style analyses of the relationship between the West and the Rest.[11] Instead, by conceiving of modernity as a series of projects, we make room for the study of this phenomenon as a network of processes and projects that have affected us all, and which formed the background for us to conceive of a fundamental clash between modernity and tradition.

Thirdly, and related to this last point, this definition provides an encompassing framework for studying modernity simultaneously on the local and the global level. If we want the above claim about authenticity being a modern ideal to

ities, this does not mean that they becomes less "modern" – see Schmuel Eisenstadt, "Multiple Modernities," *Daedalus* 129, no. 1 (2000): 24.

10 Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G.E.M. Anscombe (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1997), remark no. 67.

11 For a striking, recent example of this adversarial use of modernity, see Rodney Stark, *How the West Won: The Neglected Story of the Triumph of Modernity* (Wilmington, DE: Intercollegiate Studies Institute, 2014).

have any traction in studying the intellectual history of the Arab world, then it would need to be demonstrated that the Arab world is structurally taken up in this modern project. One might object that this is simply not the case, that contemporary Arab society differs substantially from Western societies. This objection can also be answered by referring to modernity as a series of interlinked projects. To speak of a global modernity in a way that justifies linking developments in a discourse on authenticity between different contexts, it is not necessary for modernity to manifest itself everywhere in exactly the same form. Although Europeanization and Americanization have certainly played their part in shaping contemporary culture in the Arab world, and "traditionalists" have from very early on used instances of "foreign intrusion" as fodder for their own anti-modernist campaigns, it is clearly not the case that life on the streets of Casablanca, Cairo, or Baghdad is an exact copy of that in any major Western city, either materially or culturally.

This, however, is not the point of conceiving of modernity as a project in Asad's sense. Required for this is not a uniform culture, but rather what Asad refers to as "certain shared modalities of legal-moral behavior, forms of national-political structuration, and rhythms of progressive historicity."[12] Modernity is an aspiration for a certain kind of society, a certain kind of reform motivated by a particular set of sensibilities, one of which is the elusive notion of authenticity. Western power in the Arab world has not only been exercised directly, at the point of a gun. Its most effective manifestation has arguably been the way in which it has molded the discursive landscape, the possibilities for people to conceptualize and express their discontent. Reforms in institutions like schools, governments, and the judiciary, together with the introduction of new concepts and ideas about the human self as citizen of a nation-state, have done much to open up, as well as close down, particular ways of assenting to and contesting ideas of what society ought to look like, and how this should be achieved. Binary designations of the world into modern and non-modern, into Western and non-Western, are not just descriptive of who have signed on to modernity as a project; they are about who is in front and who is lagging behind. Modernity creates certain categories like modern and traditional, or as Asad writes, "of the secular and the religious in terms of which modern living is required to take place, and nonmodern peoples are invited to assess their adequacy."[13] The opposition between modernity and authenticity (and its cognates) thus functions as an ordering principle for peoples, societies, and ideas. Moreover, the normative force of this ordering continues to carry the justificatory

12 Talal Asad, "A Comment on Aijaz Ahmad's *In Theory*," *Public Culture* 6 (1993): 36.

13 Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity*, 14.

potential for action. Modernity as a narrative ideal underwrites claims. At the national level, plans for high-risk economic development schemes, or for disenfranchising groups that presumably stifle progress, or for ridding the country of its inauthentically Western rulers, continue to invoke variations on the theme of authenticity and modernity. At the personal and the communal level, ideals of progress and authenticity form the background for shaping the aspirations of individuals, from the now ubiquitous quest for self-improvement, to the need for personal artistic or religious expression, to the powerful injunction to find your true self, whether that be by digging up your family history or going to a spiritual retreat.

If we want to understand how these claims are made and how they are contested, we need to understand how this discourse was formed. And since this discursive formation is global in scope, we cannot evade talking about modern thought from a global perspective, even if we are ultimately interested in how it is manifested in the Arab context. Arab thought in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries became integrated in a global network of thinkers and ideas that are the intellectual backbone of modernity, and many of the trends and persons that feature in the development of the ideal of authenticity, like Rousseau, Marx, or Sartre, figure prominently in the history of thought in the Arab world. Of course, one has to be careful in speaking about such influences so as not to read every expression of Arab thought as merely a local imitation of some latest trend introduced by the Western intellectual metropole. Each of these strands of thought was taken up and transformed in various ways, linked in new ways to different traditions, both native and foreign.

One of the relevant things for intellectual historiography to come out of postcolonial theory is the insistence that we cannot assume similarity, but must look for difference in an effort to write intellectual history on a global scale. At the same time, it would not be wise to discount every hint of influence on ideological grounds to preserve the independence and agency of the Arab intellectual. Although it is important to describe ways in which colonialism was contested, we should not unduly highlight contestations at the expense of the larger picture, which is that of colonialism as a force that radically restructured societies throughout the world, shaping their infrastructure, laws, bureaucracies, educational systems, and through them personal sensibilities, subjectivities, and common epistemologies. Scholars in the previous decades have described the extent to which the encounter with the West and the colonial occupation that affected vast swathes of the planet resulted in a radical reshaping of society, not just in terms of its infrastructure, its economy, and its institutions, but equally in terms of the vocabulary that was used and the network of ideals, behavioral patterns, and theories of mind

that provided the groundwork for conceiving of subjects as citizens, as consumers, or as voters.

The development of this modern project should not simply be understood as a one-sided move by a colonizing power to rearrange the subject country so as to make it amenable to efficient control from the metropole – although that too played a role. A more balanced perspective does not simply try to attribute individual or collective intent, but instead tries to make sense of the changes that have shaken the world in the last couple of centuries as the result of a potent mixture of forces linked to shifts in the global economic system, social uprooting, political innovations, and technological innovations that created an environment in which it became possible, and sometimes also necessary, to develop new ways of thinking about society and the individuals that inhabit it. Insightful studies in this field uncover how certain options for being and expressing oneself were opened up, and others were closed down. They show how possibilities were created for both contesting decisions by authorities and for assenting to them. Rather than think of colonialism as a confrontation between colonial subjects and the West, this approach studies the formation of the colonial subject as a fundamental aspect of the colonial endeavor – as Vivek Dhareshwar puts it succinctly, "the interpellation of the colonial subject qua subject takes place within the colonial *habitus.*"[14]

3.2 Time conceptions and the study of Arab thought

Returning to the Arab context, the relevant question becomes how a constellation of forces, innovations, ideas, practices, sensibilities, and ways of life that we collectively refer to as the Arab Renaissance, or *nahḍa*, cooperated to create the modern landscape of the Arab world. This, in essence, is the task of what Stephen Sheehi has dubbed the "critical theory of *al-nahḍa.*"[15] In his view, the *nahḍa* is seen as a time during which new paradigms were configured by "intellectuals, literati, and activists of all confessions during the nineteenth century," that would serve as the basis for subsequent developments in Arab politics and intellectual life.[16] Innovations in the Arabic language pioneered by people like Rifāʿa al-Ṭahṭāwī and Buṭrus

14 Vivek Dhareshwar, "Toward a Narrative Epistemology of the Postcolonial Predicament," in *Traveling Theories, Traveling Theorists*, ed. James Clifford and Vivek Dhareshwar, vol. 5 (Santa Cruz: University of California Press, 1989), 146, https://culturalstudies.ucsc.edu/inscriptions/volume-5/vivek-dhareshwar/.

15 Sheehi, "Towards a Critical Theory of *al-Nahḍah:* Epistemology, Ideology and Capital."

16 Sheehi, *Foundations of Modern Arab Identity*, 3.

al-Bustānī do not simply illustrate the need to adapt classical Arabic to the requirements of the new and vastly more complex state, the development of new scientific methods and paradigms, and the need to communicate to a larger public through mass media. They signal the articulation of a new epistemology, a new worldview, a modern Arab subjectivity. As Sheehi indicates, the crucial innovation in this respect was the institution of a paradigm of "progress and backwardness" that lies at the root of the *inḥiṭāṭ* paradigm and the more recent Arab intellectual obsession with "failure."[17]

What studies like Sheehi's show, is that one can tell a story about how these *nahḍa* paradigms came about under the influence of Western thought, without thereby subscribing to an entirely Eurocentric view that understands the reception of Western thought simplistically as an effect of overawed Arab intellectuals clutching at the latest intellectual novelties from Europe, following a period of stagnation under Ottoman rule that was broken by the Promethean intervention of Napoleon's 1798 invasion of Egypt. One should not focus on the intellectual dimension, but view these ideas and the relevant vocabulary as introduced and adapted locally *together with the modern form of life in which they are embedded and which they helped shape.* Ideas only stick when they address issues that people are actually faced with. If they do not address what is seen to be a personal or social problem, they are adapted or simply thrown aside. A more sensible way to look at how ideas about authenticity and new modes of historical consciousness made their way into the Arab world is to see them as addressing issues that arose as society was being reshaped to resemble the modern ideal. A vital part of this story lies in the changes in the temporal imaginary that hang together with the advent of modernity, and which formed the foundation for the paradigm of progress and backwardness signaled by Sheehi.

In recent years, the "temporal turn" has become increasingly prominent in academia.[18] This interest in time has been taken up with vigor by scholars of the Middle East. These studies, however, have tended to focus on the development of clock time and its effect on society, rather than on the changing conceptions of historical time.[19] Even rarer are the occasions where the changing conceptions of

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17 Indeed, as I will argue in more detail shortly, it is precisely this paradigm of progress and backwardness that can help explain the dominance of the standard narrative, which posits a progressive modernity over and against a backward but authentic tradition.

18 This observation is supported by, for example, David Scott, when he writes that "new time-consciousness is emerging everywhere in contemporary theory" – see David Scott, *Omens of Adversity: Tragedy, Time, Memory, Justice* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014), 1.

19 Several studies detail the formation of modern uses and imaginings of time in the Middle East. Vanessa Ogle's *The Global Transformation of Time* comes to mind, in which she takes an in-depth

time have been related the *turāth* debates. One exception is al-ʿAẓma, who, following Abū Lughud's example, made much of the link between a modern historical orientation based on an idea of progress, and the *turāth* debate. The roots of the discourse on authenticity and modernity, according to him, lie in the peculiar discursive formation that arose during the *nahḍa.* Another figure in contemporary thought who has put considerable effort into thinking about the role that time plays in shaping modern Arab intellectual history is the Moroccan thinker Abdallah Laroui.[20] This temporal approach to the question of authenticity and its role in thought does not seem to have resonated in the Arab world, however. On the side of Western academia, pickings are equally slim. One notable exception is Reinhard Schulze, who has, on more than one occasion, emphasized the fundamentally diachronic nature of the discourse on *turāth.*[21] While he attributes the ubiquity of this

look at the changes wrought in the Arab world through the introduction of new European ideas on time and time management – see Ogle, *The Global Transformation of Time: 1870–1950.* Another is Avner Wishnitzer's *Reading Clocks, Alla Turca*, a study that tries to show that "by the late eighteenth century clocks were already an integral part of Ottoman temporal culture," thus undermining the common assumption that modern time management was wholly taken over from the West – see Avner Wishnitzer, *Reading Clocks, Alla Turca: Time and Society in The Late Ottoman Empire* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2015). A somewhat different take on modern time in the Middle is presented in On Barak's *Time in Egypt*, which, even while it consciously avoids the technology of timekeeping, tries to give a sense of the myriad ways in which modern technologies and regimes have introduced new perceptions of time, as well as "countertemporal" movements of resistance to these innovations – see Barak, *On Time: Technology and Temporality in Modern Egypt.* These studies, in different ways, grapple with the problem of modernity in relation to temporality. At the center of attention in each of these studies are technological and social changes that make it necessary to measure, regiment, and communicate time more effectively. In addition, they stress the commodification of time and the spirited debates about the need to stop wasting time. They pay less attention, however, to what is of primary concern, namely the changing nature of ideas about *historical time.* A notable exception to the focus on clock time is Yoav Di-Capua's work, which does go into more detail on how the changing modes of Arab historiography relate to the emergence of the nation-state and, with it, a linear conception of time – see Di-Capua, *Gatekeepers of the Arab Past: Historians and History Writing in Twentieth-Century Egypt*, chap. 1.

20 I will not refer extensively to the work of Laroui (al-ʿArwī). His work is interesting and surely relevant to a discussion of temporality in contemporary Arab thought; however, the reason for not discussing it in more depth is that, first of all, it would overburden this already substantial study. Also, Laroui has already received a fair amount of attention in Western scholarship. His historical-temporal imaginary is discussed in depth by Nils Riecken – see Nils Riecken, "History, Time, and Temporality in a Global Frame: Abdallah Laroui's Historical Epistemology of History," *History and Theory* 54, no. 1 (2015): 5–26, and Nils Riecken, "Frames of Time: Periodization and Universals in the Works of Abdallah Laroui," *Der Islam* 91, no. 1 (2014): 115–34.

21 Reinhard Schulze, "The Birth of Tradition and Modernity in 18th and 19th Century Islamic Culture – The Case of Printing," in *The Introduction of the Printing Press in the Middle East*, *Culture & History* 16 (1997): 29–72; Schulze, "Is There an Islamic Modernity?"

temporal opposition between tradition and modernity in the post-war years to the popularity of modernization theory, he eventually traces its origins to "the efforts of a Western and Muslim elite in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries to interpret the social and cultural life of their time."[22] Another academic to pick up on this suggestion and work it into a broader critique of contemporary Arab thought is Joseph Massad. Following both Schulze's and al-ʿAẓma's analysis,[23] he remarks on the prevailing trend in Arab thought that I have been referring to as the "standard narrative" that:

> What remains constant then is a commitment to an evolutionary temporal schema that recognizes change only within the dyad of *turath* and modernity ... what is needed – not only for Arab intellectuals but especially for their European counterparts – is a view of *turath* and modernity that is located outside this dualism, one that is not subject to their temporal peregrinations.[24]

According to Massad, the fundamental flaw of those who take part in the *turāth* debate, but also of those who comment on it, is that they leave the structure of the *turāth* debate untouched. Instead of laying bare the temporal assumptions that make possible the kinds of opposition between modernity and authenticity, progress and backwardness, West and East, that fuel these debates, they replicate these oppositions by focusing on the surface level of this discourse. They describe the intellectual deadlock, the constant to and fro over how to save *turāth* in the face of modernity, without giving thought to what is really at stake. Massad reminds us that the way in which the *turāth* debate is described, the way in which the stakes are claimed by its participants and by those who describe it from the outside, is reliant on a particular view of time. The centrality of *turāth* relies on a certain view of what the normal course of civilization ought to be. It is motivated by the thought that something has gone wrong, that the Arab world has for centuries been gripped by degeneration (*inḥiṭāṭ*), that something has been holding back Arab societies which needs to be set right.

This temporal framework is not a neutral given. It creates a particular conceptual landscape, one that makes it possible to view the development of contemporary Arab thought as a tug of war between a progressive and a conservative, a crit-

22 Schulze, "Is There an Islamic Modernity?," 22 and 25. In another article, Schulze discusses in particular the role that modern printing technology played in the formulation of this binary; see Schulze, "The Birth of Tradition and Modernity in 18th and 19th Century Islamic Culture – The Case of Printing."

23 Massad, though acknowledging al-ʿAẓma as a "very perceptive critic," also accuses him of reinscribing his own binary oppositions on the same model – see Massad, *Desiring Arabs*, 25.

24 Massad, *Desiring Arabs*, 29.

ical and a non-critical party, resulting in a long list of interrelated binary concepts that form the core of Arab discourse. This conceptual landscape fuels the idea that East and West are ensnared in an existential clash of civilizations, as well as the paternalistic tendency of well-meaning Westerners to guide Arab society away from its backward ways. For this reason, Massad suggests that it is not just Arabs, but especially *their European counterparts* who need to leave behind their dyadic view of *turāth* and modernity. Being enmeshed with stereotypical depictions of East and West that are upheld by a still dominant Western culture, this dyadic temporal framework concerns Western society as much as it concerns the Arab world. Any fundamental assessment of the evolutionary temporal schema, and the role it plays in discussions of *turāth,* will need to be accompanied by an equally serious and fundamental assessment of the role that this schema has played in Western views of Arab-Islamic culture.

Of course, one may disagree with the implacable "anti-orientalist" ideological slant of Massad's writings, or with his somewhat unbalanced negative perception that all that Arab intellectuals have been doing is:

> adopting and failing to question these recently invented European notions of "civilization" and "culture" and their commensurate insertion in a social Darwinist idiom of "evolution," "progress," "advancement," "development," "degeneration," and most important, "decadence" and "renaissance."[25]

Massad does not give us a comprehensive historical analysis of the development of time conceptions among Arab intellectuals, or of the ideal of progress and how the development of this ideal hangs together with the modern decline paradigm in Arab historiography. Lacking this, a firm, generalizing statement such as this is premature to say the least.[26] The story is certainly more complicated. Concepts like civilization, culture, evolution, and progress all have their own history in Arabic; a history that was for a long time oriented towards Persian and Ottoman Turkish and which, starting in the nineteenth century, became more entwined with European conceptual history. A concept like decadence (*inḥiṭāṭ*), for instance, was not unfamiliar to Arabs before the modern age any more than it was to pre-modern

25 Massad, *Desiring Arabs,* 5.

26 Manfred Sing goes further in judging that Massad is blinded by his anti-Orientalist ideological orientation. See Sing, "The Decline of Islam and the Rise of Inḥiṭāṭ: The Discrete Charm of Language Games about Decadence in the 19th and 20th Centuries."

Europeans.[27] Its meaning began to change, however, as underlying conceptions of time were unhooked. The same goes for other time-related concepts. In the vein of Sheehi's "critical *nahḍa* studies" project, historians have started to uncover more nuanced histories of how these concepts circulated and were reconfigured locally, and the more we learn about these, the less we can concur with the kind of blanket statement proposed by Massad.

Yet, scholarly imprudence notwithstanding, Massad has a point. It is no coincidence that ideas of time and concepts related to time, progress, and evolution began to shift under growing European influence. These shifts can be linked to the introduction of new forms of historiography, to the introduction of evolutionary theory, or to the introduction of new technologies. Particular reworkings of ideas can and should be studied against this global background, but it should be done with care. A nice example of this approach is the balanced and carefully argued study on the formation of the social sciences in Egypt by Omnia El Shakry. She reminds us that European knowledge was not "simply transplanted into the colonies; rather, forms of knowledge, such as positivism, were refracted, deflected, or reconfigured in colonial contexts."[28] Yet, at the same time, she argues that, in creating a specifically Arab social science, Arab reformers also "accepted many of the very premises central to Western categories of thought (progress, reason, the nation-state)."[29] It is through the adoption of these general categories of thought that we can understand and study the Arab world in its *modernity*, because it is these categories that are the necessary conditions for using *the modern* as a device for making claims; it is these categories that structure Arab modernity as a *project.*

One of these central categories for the modern is the ideal of *progress.* It is the forward thrust of progress that gives modernity its future-directed moral direction. It therefore comes as no surprise that, as part of the changes in Arabic temporal vocabulary in the nineteenth century, we see the introduction of a new ideal of progress (*taqaddum*).[30] This is ultimately what Massad is getting at with his men-

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27 See the various articles on this topic included in Syrinx von Hees, ed., *Inḥiṭāṭ – The Decline Paradigm: Its Influence and Persistence in the Writing of Arab Cultural History*, vol. 2, *Arabische Literatur Und Rhetorik – Elfhundert Bis Achtzehnhundert* (Würzburg: Ergon, 2017).

28 El Shakry, *The Great Laboratory: Subjects of Knowledge in Colonial and Postcolonial Egypt*, 2.

29 El Shakry, *The Great Laboratory: Subjects of Knowledge in Colonial and Postcolonial Egypt*, 5.

30 It has commonly been assumed that the "religion of progress" espoused by the liberal *nahḍa* press piggybacked on the popularity of late nineteenth-century European sociological and historical literature. We see this for instance in Vanessa Ogle's study of time in the Arab world – Ogle, *The Global Transformation of Time: 1870–1950*, 143. – and in Yoav Di-Capua's study of Egyptian historiography. Both refer to the Syrian émigré Jurjī Zaydān, a central late nineteenth-century figure, as a harbinger of a historicist Arab historiography, in particular because he uses terms like prog-

tion of an "evolutionary temporal schema." Niceties of conceptual historiography aside, his point is that the introduction of an ideal of progress was essential to the emergence of the binary problematic of authenticity and modernity that continues to shape Arab thought. This is a valuable insight. It implies that, if we want to get to the basic structure of Arab thought, we must gain a better understanding of the ideal of progress and the linear temporal schema, and how they relate to modernity.

3.3 Linear time and the ideal of progress

The rise of the ideal of progress is often discussed in contemporary theory as a vital change in the discursive landscape of modernity. The idea is, roughly, that the formulation of many of the features commonly associated with modernity depends, in part, on the introduction of a linear temporal imaginary which directs mankind towards a progressively better future. There are various ways in which this link between progress and modernity has been articulated. Walter Benjamin was probably the one to spark interest in the relation between time, progress, and modernity. In one of the last essays written before his tragic death on the run from the Nazis, he suggested that the ideal of progress cannot be conceived of without a

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ress and backwardness and refers to different ages as being "Golden" or "Dark." In a figure like Zaydān, Di-Capua argues, we glimpse the beginning of modern Egyptian historiography, based on a modern conception of *time*, one that exhibits a historical process described "from the point of view of the future" – see Di-Capua, *Gatekeepers of the Arab Past: Historians and History Writing in Twentieth-Century Egypt*, 46.

The late nineteenth-century "high *Nahda*" doubtlessly marks an important era in the development of Egyptian and Arab historiography, articulating and disseminating a full-fledged modern historiographical model grounded in the idea of progress and serving as a frame of reference for the nascent nation-state. Yet, as more recent research has shown, we would do well to consider this the end product rather than the inception of an Arabic discourse of progress (*taqaddum*). Wael Abu-'Uksa argues that the ideas of civilization (*tamaddun*) and progress were already at the center of attention during the first half of the nineteenth century. When during these years Arabs began to systematically read and translate European books, they were particularly impressed by Enlightenment ideals of civilization and progress that they found, especially among French authors – see Wael Abu-'Uksa, *Freedom in the Arab World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 67, and Peter Hill, "The First Arabic Translations of Enlightenment Literature: The Damietta Circle of the 1800s and 1810s," *Intellectual History Review* 25, no. 2 (2015): 209–33. Distinctly modern conceptions of history, like Voltaire's pyramidal categorization of human societies according to their level of civilization – in which the Europeans were naturally placed at the top – and his conception of historical progress according to three stages – Antiquity, Middle Ages, and Modernity – were eagerly translated.

representation of time as "homogenous and empty."[31] The liberal ideal of progress requires a perception of time as a container in which man is free to make his own history, and a trust in the powers that be that they are able and willing to steer history in the right direction. Benjamin's remark can be understood as an indictment of this naïve, anti-revolutionary liberal reliance on progress as a force for the good. The idea that there is an inherent link between linear time and progress has been taken up by twentieth-century intellectuals less inclined towards revolution and more concerned about the nature of modernity. Anthony Giddens, for example, has taken the idea of an "emptying of time" as a precondition for the "emptying of space" characteristic of a globalized world.[32] In a similar vein, Timothy Mitchell analyzes the link between time and space in shaping colonial modernity. He states that "historical time, the time of the West, is what gives modern geography its order" and suggests that one of the vital concerns of postcolonial theory ought to be to question this temporality.[33] In another context, Charles Taylor has used the idea of "empty time" to characterize the temporal aspect of secularism. Moderns, according to him, tend to see their lives "exclusively within the horizontal flow of secular time."[34] Secular time is no longer embedded in a larger cosmic order. It has come to be thought of along Newtonian lines, as a container within which to move objects around. The flow of time has lost the kind of meaning inherent in earlier, kairotic conceptions of time – that is, conceptions that are built around moments that have a particular salience, because they mark points of reversal or renewal, or announce the approach of a future event.

In his groundbreaking articles on conceptual history, Reinhart Koselleck has shone a light on the changing perception of time and progress as a hallmark of modernity. Modern time, as opposed to the cyclical Greek conceptions of time and the eschatological medieval Christian view, is marked by an infinite future horizon for progress – an idea that started to be articulated in the eighteenth century. No longer is decline thought to be the necessary outcome of progress. Rather, decline starts to be described more and more as partial or temporary.[35] Moreover, there is no end goal. Human existence is a process of constant and continuing perfection. This change in the temporal imaginary forms the background for the formation of the modern concept of progress in three stages: first, the agent of prog-

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31 Walter Benjamin, "Über den Begriff der Geschichte," in *Walter Benjamin: Gesammelte Schriften* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1991), 701.

32 Anthony Giddens, *The Consequences of Modernity* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 1991), 17–21.

33 Mitchell, "The Stage of Modernity," 7.

34 Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), 59.

35 Reinhart Koselleck, *Begriffsgeschichten* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2006), 168–69.

ress is universalized. Whereas at first, progress was acknowledged within particular fields of the arts and sciences, at the end of the eighteenth century one starts reading about the progress of peoples or even of mankind as a whole. In the second phase, progress is historicized, it comes to be used as a historical category fundamental to the study of the "progress of history." In the third stage, progress takes on a life of its own. It becomes a guiding ideal of society, as is most obvious in the political context, where "since the nineteenth century [it becomes difficult] to legitimate oneself politically without simultaneously being progressive."[36]

Combining these various insights, a concise formulation of the modern, progressive view of historical time is given by David Scott, who writes that:

> As is well enough known, modern historical time – the collective time of nations and classes and subjects and populations – has been organized around a notion of discrete but continuous, modular change, in particular, modular change as a linear, diachronically stretched-out *succession* of cumulative instants, an endless chain of displacements of before and after.[37]

Crucially, as Scott notes, this temporal framework is marked by *progress* which gives not just a temporal but also a moral direction that, as Koselleck also noted, is politically relevant:

> Such succession, moreover, is progressive: change *is* improvement. Change, therefore, not only has a formal built-in rhythm of movement and alteration but also a built-in *vector* of moral direction. Secular Enlightenment change is pictured as temporal movement in which, with regular periodicity, the future overcomes the past, and in which the present is a state of expectation and waiting for the fulfillment of the promise of social and political improvement.

The *moral* import of this view of history is crucial for our understanding, not just of historical time as such, but specifically, I argue, for understanding Arab thought. The morally charged binary oppositions attached to modernity and tradition in discussions about *turāth* only make sense within an equally morally charged temporal framework. Tradition comes to be associated with backwardness within a framework that links the course of time to progress. The future is not only different, it is better, more developed, more civilized, more rational. By implication, the past is backward and irrational. History, in this view, moves inexorably along a path that rises into the future. This perspective on time has its roots in the familiar Enlightenment story of human development from a state of "self-imposed immaturity" and religious superstition to one in which the rational, secularized individual judges the world around him critically. It is the story of the increased rule of

36 Koselleck, *Begriffsgeschichten*, 174.
37 Scott, *Omens of Adversity: Tragedy, Time, Memory, Justice*, 5.

mankind over Nature, but also, as later critics would argue, the story of the attendant loss of man's link to its spiritual meaning, the story of disenchantment. It is also this story that makes it possible to invoke modernity as what Cooper calls a "claim-making device."

This counterpart to the story of modern progress is an important (though less often discussed) aspect of Koselleck's article on progress and decline. According to him, it was Rousseau who, at the time when the modern idea of progress was gaining ground, managed to formulate a complementary formula that is useful for grasping many modern phenomena. Rousseau, as we will see in the next chapter, is also a crucial figure in the development of authenticity, and it is through him that we can most easily grasp the link between progress, modernity, and authenticity. For now, it is important to note that it was Rousseau who pointed out the negative side of progress. He theorized that, though man may be a historical being, fated to develop himself, his surroundings, and his society through the use of reason, this positive side of progress is only one side of the equation. Progress also implies corruption of human virtue, "loss of natural innocence, decline of morals, instrumentalization of language at the expense of oneness of feeling and reason."[38] The decadence that results from progress is, as Koselleck calls it, a "temporal compensatory concept" (*temporaler Kompensationsbegriff*). In other words, following Rousseau's intervention, decline is no longer thought of merely as a phase that naturally follows an age of growth and prosperity, nor is it a temporal setback. Instead, decline is now seen as the necessary concomitant of progress: material and scientific progress = moral decay.

The idea of progress thus came to embody a variety of morally contradictory meanings, and it is through these contradictions that it has become a defining feature of the modern age, namely as a source for making claims and justifying projects. Progress continues to mark our experience of a world changing at an exponential pace. The epistemology of progress, which includes the ideal of progress itself as well as the compensatory concept of progressive moral decay, offers fertile ground for a dialectic between proponents of the ideals of the Enlightenment and their opponents. This dialectic continues to suffuse modern thought the world over as liberal ideals of freedom, equality, and the boons of modern science are defended and challenged by a myriad of groups and politicians. The ideas central to this dialectic were of course sharpened, redefined, and translated in the centuries that followed. Koselleck mentions Nietzsche as a more provocative iteration of Rousseau's argument, but there are many more, not just inside, but also outside Europe

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38 Koselleck, *Begriffsgeschichten*, 177.

who adopted and universalized this basic temporal division based on the ideal of progress.

In fact, it was precisely in the nineteenth-century encounter between a few Western European states and the (soon to be) colonized world that the ideal of progress and the dialectic between modernity and tradition was further articulated and gained a spatial dimension. As the West increasingly imagined itself to be the harbinger of reason and progress, the imagined East was thrust more and more into the role of the sensual, the spiritual, the irrational counterpart to Western rationalism. This hardly happened overnight or in singular fashion. Building on older discourses of stagnation and decline, the still relatively benign Enlightenment notion of "an *inclusive* Eurocentrism" gestated over a long period before it was slowly transformed into the late nineteenth-century "*exclusive* Eurocentrism that took such superiority as axiomatic."[39] This process cannot be captured in any monograph or from any single angle. It certainly cannot be described solely by referencing concepts of progress and rationality. However, it is equally clear that any explanation of this phenomenon will need to include at some point the connection between these concepts. Both suffuse the modern identification of the West, and were used in justifying the project of colonization. As Partha Chatterjee tells it, the link between reason and progress led to rationality becoming "the normative principle of a certain way of life which is said to promote a certain way of thinking, namely, science." This connection would then be used to essentialize a difference between peoples, in particular between the European metropole and the colonies – an essentialization partly legitimated by the very real economic and technological disparities that were starting to emerge. As Chatterjee continues:

> the ethic of rationality is now seen to be characteristic of 'scientifically oriented' or 'theoretically-oriented' cultures. And thus, by a conceptual sleight of hand, the epistemic privilege which is due to 'scientific truth' is appropriated by entire cultures. What results is an essentialism: certain historically specific correspondences between certain elements in the structure of beliefs in European society and certain, albeit spectacular, changes in techno-economic conditions of production are attributed the quality of essences which are said to characterize Western cultures as a whole.[40]

Such essential differences between East and West are often taken over by the intellectual elite. Stereotypical images of the West as technologically advanced, hardworking, disciplined, but materialistic and therefore unethical as opposed to a lazy,

39 Jürgen Osterhammel, *Unfabling the East: The Enlightenment's Encounter with Asia* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018), 489.
40 Partha Chatterjee, *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World: A Derivative Discourse* (Minneapolis, MN: Zed Books, 1986), 16.

backward, but spiritually rich East are not uncommon in the writings of both *nahḍa* authors and intellectuals. Although they have been and continue to be challenged by Arab intellectuals, they continue to serve as important tropes in contemporary debates.[41] What is important to remember is that this is not just a self-standing aspect of Orientalist discourse. As Massad reminds us with his reference to the "evolutionary temporal schema," this binary is rooted in a temporal imaginary particular to modernity. The stereotypical images of supposedly Eastern and Western personalities are related to more basic conceptions of linear-progressive time and, through it, to a general dialectic of Enlightenment and anti-Enlightenment discourse.

We can see the effects of this general dialectic in what Omnia El Shakry has identified as the "epistemological grounding in late nineteenth- and twentieth-century Egypt" on the basis of two strands of thought: Positivism and Romanticism.[42] On the one hand, there was a realization among a burgeoning literate and well-informed middle class that to achieve greater national independence the nation needed to adopt science and, particularly, positivist sociological methods required for administration and planning. On the other hand, the romantic tradition of the human sciences emphasized the need for a social science that preserved and fos-

41 This claim to moral superiority, of course, plays a major role in Islamist discourse – witness Sayyid Quṭb's critique of Western culture undermining the morality of the Muslim world. However, it is equally taken up by secular opponents. Take for instance Zakī Najīb Maḥmūd's conviction that ethics is the "characterizing feature of the Arab-Islamic culture" – see Zakī Najīb Maḥmūd, *Qiyam min al-Turāth*, 2nd ed. (Cairo: Dar al-Shurūq, 1989), 10. Or compare this previously mentioned, revealing quotation from the first volume of Muḥammad ʿĀbid al-Jābirī's *Critique of Arab Reason*, in which he explicitly opposes the causal reason of the West with the normative reason of the East:

> If the concept of reason [*ʿaql*] in Greek culture and modern and contemporary European culture is bound up with the 'understanding of causes', namely with cognition, as we previously demonstrated, the meaning of the term 'reason' in the Arabic language, and consequently in Arab thought, is related mainly to conduct [*sulūk*] and ethics [*akhlāq*]. (al-Jābirī, *Naqd al-ʿAql al-ʿArabī,* vol 1, *Takwīn al-ʿAql al-ʿArabī,* 29 – 30)

42 El Shakry, *The Great Laboratory: Subjects of Knowledge in Colonial and Postcolonial Egypt*, 10. Although she does not mention him, El Shakry echoes J.W. Burrow's analysis that the establishment of evolutionary social theory, which was hugely influential in the development of Arab social sciences, was very largely "the outcome of a tension between English positivistic attitudes to science on the one hand and, on the other, a more profound reading of history coming to a large extent from German romanticism" – see J.W. Burrow, *Evolution and Society: A Study in Victorian Social Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1966), xv.

tered the national essence by instituting a "moral project of social uplift."[43] These two tendencies were constantly at odds in the development of a national social science in Egypt, as elsewhere in the colonized world, leading El Shakry to comment on anti-colonial nationalism being a "deeply contradictory endeavor."[44] Colonialism was portrayed as the root of all evil and current backwardness, while at the same time, "the nationalist opposition to colonialism … often reaffirmed the various projects of modernity – unilinear progressive temporality, scientific progress, the nation-state as the culmination of history."

This critical discussion of the structure of anti-colonial nationalism leads El Shakry to a conclusion remarkably similar to Massad's claim about the structure of Arab thought being determined by divisions leading back to the *nahḍa.* She notes that the crisis that resulted from this nationalist endeavor to combine two incommensurable projects resulted in a division of the intellectual landscape between "liberal secular (modern) and Islamist (traditional) thought" – that is, the rudimentary structure of the standard narrative. Instead of going along with this formulation of Arab thought, El Shakry collapses the two sides, regarding "both sets of intellectuals as modern," because they both "attempted to formulate positivist scientific research agendas that would address the relative stagnation of Arab ideas, institutions, and populations."[45]

I agree with El Shakry's conclusion, but for slightly different reasons. Instead of focusing on the positivist inclination of both sides – a claim that would seem to depend on the questionable assumption that these sides use a commensurable notion of science – I would like to highlight how the claims of both traditionalists and modernists as opposite sides of a continuum are *made possible* within a progressive, linear temporal framework. At root, it is not just the scientific ideal that marks both parties as "modern," but the fact that their opposition only makes sense within a paradigm of "progress and backwardness," which, in turn, relies on a particular way of conceptualizing the flow of historical time. Traditionalists and modernists are equally modern because they abide by a modern way of thinking about history. This perspective is *morally charged*, in the sense that the positive valuation of progress enables both sides to stake normative claims concerning the individual and his place in society by articulating the notion of progress in different ways. This is evident in the range of binary concepts that keep on recurring in standard depictions of Arab thought, among them the opposition between secularism and religion, culture and nature, negative and positive freedom, masculine and

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43 El Shakry, *The Great Laboratory: Subjects of Knowledge in Colonial and Postcolonial Egypt*, 11.
44 El Shakry, 13.
45 El Shakry, 13.

feminine identity, and, of course, the dichotomous relationship between East and West that continues to loom over Arab thought. This dialectic is reminiscent of the dialectic between Enlightenment ideals and their Rousseauian discontents, *not* so much because individual Arab intellectuals were impressed by European debates, but because these structural positions made sense to them with the introduction of a particular historical outlook.

A full account of how this happened, of how the progress paradigm was adopted and developed, will require a more detailed history. Some elements for telling this history are already in place. We know that the concept of progress came to denote a "general article of faith"[46] in the Arab world as much as in the West, as debates over the need for progress were a defining feature of the *nahḍa.*[47] There is also evidence that the adoption of progress was accompanied by a reconceptualization of time oriented towards the future.[48] The ideal of progress touched all aspects of society, from political renewal, to industrialization, to workers' rights, to the introduction of sports, to debates over the "woman's question." We know, moreover, that these debates were significantly influenced by Western trends

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46 J.B. Bury, *The Idea of Progress* (London: MacMillan and Co., 1920), 346. This work is perhaps the most complete survey of the development of progress in the West.

47 Nadia Farag, for example, in her unpublished study of the prominent nineteenth-century journal *al-Muqtaṭaf,* argues that, although the intellectuals who set the tone may have differed widely in their ideas, they were "linked together by a common climate of ideas and by shared problems and attitudes." Foremost among these connecting links was the shared "desire to achieve progress along Western lines" – see Nadia Farag, "Al-Muqtataf 1876–1900: A Study of the Influence of Victorian Thought on Modern Arabic Thought" (PhD diss., University of Oxford, 1969), 1–2. This is confirmed by the author of the most detailed study in Arabic, Fahmī Jadʿān's massive "The Foundations of Progress Among the Thinkers of Islam in the Modern Arab World" – see Fahmī Jadʿān, *Usus al-Taqaddum ʿind Mufakkirī al-Islām fī al-ʿĀlam al-ʿArabī al-Ḥadīth*, 5th ed. (Beirut: al-Shabaka al-ʿArabiyya li-l-Abḥāth wa-l-Nashr, 2014). He acknowledges that "the principal problem, the problem of progress, continued to torment the minds and hearts of the Islamic thinkers" (ibid.,207). Although his work is a very helpful guide to discourse on progress in Arabic, it is focused on the Islamic *islāḥ* movement. Lacking a more thorough discussion of progress and modern conceptions of time, his account reads more like an account of who said what about progress (*taqaddum*), premised on the standard narrative of Arab thought.

48 In his interesting analysis, Abu-ʻUksa explains that, with this nascent belief in future improvement there occurred a simultaneous shift in temporal orientation and this shift is exemplified in the word that would acquire the meaning of 'progress': *taqaddum.* Traditionally, *taqaddum* had referred to what was first in time past. As Wael Abu-ʻUksa explains, "*zamān mutaqaddim*" meant "preceding time," while "*zamān mutaʾakhkhir*" denoted "recent time" – see Abu-'Uksa, *Freedom in the Arab World*, 68–69. This changed, however, as the general frame of reference for time in Arabic started to shift towards the future. In later dictionaries *taqaddum* no longer refers to what was first in the past, but rather to what is first in the future. From denoting "precedence," *taqaddum* morphs into the generally accepted term for "progress."

like evolutionary theory and Social Darwinism, and that the survival-of-the-fittest mentality that was introduced in this way, bound the question of progress to the issue of national survival.[49] This evolutionary mode of thinking, as Massad suggested, likely helped shape ideas about national and racial superiority, feeding into the imagined opposition between advanced and backward countries already in place.

This is primarily a study of contemporary Arab thought, not of Arabic conceptual history. For the purposes of this study, I will take it for granted that, as was the case for Europe's relationship with the East as a whole, the idea of progress gradually became entangled with orientalist stereotypes that helped polarize the dichotomies between East and West, in terms of vitality and moribundity, creativity and intellectual sterility, materialism, and spiritualism, progressiveness, and backwardness. Assuming this story of the crystallization of various binaries attaching themselves to the paradigm of progress and backwardness, we will fast forward to the post-1967 debates, to see what became of this paradigm. We will look specifically at the prominent Egyptian intellectual Zakī Najīb Maḥmūd as a distinct representative of it, someone who articulates clearly the problematic of "authenticity and modernity" and the binaries connected to it, while also connecting explicitly to an ideal of progress.

Before we get to the actual dissection of Arab thought, however, there is one more topic to address. We have until now only looked at the temporal underpinnings of the standard narrative of Arab thought, and at the modern aspect of the problematic of authenticity and modernity. We have not yet looked at the first part of this story. If we want to go beyond understanding the structure of the standard narrative of Arab thought and follow ʿAyyād, Zakariyyā, and al-ʿAẓma in exploring different conceptions of Arab thought, then we will need to think differently about one more central value in this schema, namely the ideal of authenticity and how it is connected to the modern project.

3.4 Authenticity as a modern ideal

When Shukrī ʿAyyād in his contribution to the 1971 Cairo conference describes authenticity as pertaining to "individuality (*dhātiyya*), creativity, and liberation from the chains of imitation," his story diverged markedly from the standard narrative, in which authenticity is related to nostalgic longing for the past. It is even more

49 The pivotal role played by evolutionary theorizing in the development of the *nahḍa* is discussed in Marwa Elshakry's *Reading Darwin in Arabic, 1860–1950* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2013), and in Adel Ziadat's, *Western Science in the Arab World: The Impact of Darwinism, 1860–1930* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 1986).

surprising, therefore, that ʿAyyād takes this individualist, creative notion of authenticity to be its *primary* meaning, at least when the term *aṣāla* started to become used more widely in the wake of the Second World War. This statement would seem outré, wrong, or even incomprehensible a decade or two later.

Yet, while it is seemingly incongruent with the common meaning attributed to *aṣāla* in contemporary Arab thought, in the broader scheme of things it makes sense to think of authenticity in this way. Authenticity is "a highly volatile and historically contingent concept."[50] Although it started out as a term denoting mimesis, in the modern, Western context it has become associated with the ethical demand on the subject to be true to oneself and express one's true nature. As such, it has become a cornerstone of modern subjectivity, influencing societies across the world on all levels. In addition, the ideal of authenticity is used to buttress claims of a collective identity of groups distinguished by national, racial, linguistic, or other characteristics. Moreover, these three general ways of articulating the notion of authenticity overlap to form a complicated history that is essential to understanding the current centrality of authenticity as a moral ideal. Even though we have to take into account how authenticity discourse has taken on a different tone in the Arab world, we cannot understand such dissenting voices as ʿAyyād's and others if we do not take stock of how this local, Arab discourse on authenticity fits with a convoluted, global genealogy of authenticity.

The term "authentic" derives via the Latin "authenticus" from the Greek "authentikos" (αυθεντικός), which denoted any person who brings something about on his own authority.[51] It first entered European languages through Old French in the middle of the fourteenth century, making its way into non-Roman languages like late Middle English and German two centuries later. By this time, the term had taken on a somewhat different meaning, as it was used to describe something as real, original, or true. Thus, in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, "authentic" often appears in historiographical and exegetic contexts to signify that a certain manuscript is not a forged copy, or that a historical event actually took place and is not a product of fancy. This made the term particularly relevant to burgeoning theological debates, as early modern Protestant exegetes became more and more concerned about the historical authenticity – that is, veridicality – of the Scriptures.[52]

50 Thomas Claviez, Britta Sweers, and Kornelia Imesch, eds., *Critique of Authenticity* (Wilmington, NC: Vernon Press, 2020), vii.

51 The original Greek term is quite literally a combination of the words for self (αυτός) and doer (εντης).

52 Henry Ainsworth, for example, writing in 1609, speaks of "the psalms in Scripture, and other authentik books." See Henry Ainsworth, *A Defence of the Holy Scriptures, Worship, and Ministerie,*

Although here we do not yet find the "authentic" in its full-fledged current meaning of a moral ideal, authenticity is generally regarded as something positive. The authenticity of the scriptures is something worth defending, while travel descriptions are marketed as being authentic. It would take over a hundred years more for the term "authentic" to become attached to the personal and communal ideal of being true to one's most inner being. Several studies of the modern ideal of authenticity – most prominently those of Lionel Trilling, Alessandro Ferrara, and Charles Taylor – have emphasized the centrality of this ideal to modern life, and shown how it developed historically from roughly the second half of the eighteenth century. What follows is a short summary of these studies, the point of which is twofold. First, it explains the origins of the ambiguity in the term authenticity that we saw in ʿAyyād, that is, a reverence for the past combined with an extolment of the radically new, as well as an emphasis on both collective belonging and deep-felt individualism. Second, it emphasizes the ways in which this ideal has become entrenched in various fields of modern life the world over.

A good place to start is with the oldest recounting of the story of authenticity in Lionel Trilling's evocative study *Sincerity and Authenticity.* As the title suggests, Trilling introduces authenticity by contrasting it with the older ideal of sincerity. The latter was meant as being truthful, in the sense of not appearing to be what you are not. The value of this ideal rose, so the argument goes, as social mobility in northwestern Europe increased in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries due to the decline of the feudal order and the attendant growth of the cities. Coupled with the rising popularity of a more egalitarian Protestant doctrine, these socioeconomic transformations caused a gradual breakdown of the existing order. People of different backgrounds mingled. No longer continuously surrounded by family, friends, and acquaintances, their personal identity, which used to be determined almost exclusively by social class or standing in a local community, became more individualized and private. People began to require the protection of this private sphere. At the same time, they demanded a greater participation in public life

Used in the Christian Churches Separated from Antichrist Against the Challenges, Cavils and Contradiction of M. Smyth: In His Book Intituled The Differences of the Churches of the Separation (Amsterdam: Giles Thorpe, 1609), 21. While over a hundred years later, works invoking terms like authentic or authenticity are still preponderantly religious in nature, we also see the term applied to veridicality of everyday experience, in particular in travel literature – compare Archbald Campbell, *The Authenticity of the Gospel-History Justified: And the Truth of the Christian Revelation Demonstrated, from the Laws and Constitution of Human Nature.* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh: Hamilton, Balfour, and Neill, 1759), and Tobias George Smollett, *A Compendium of Authentic and Entertaining Voyages, Digested in a Chronological Series. the Whole Exhibiting a Clear View of the Customs, Manners, Religion, Government, Commerce, and Natural History* (Strahan et.al., 1766).

and a degree of respect from their peers, not because of descent, but due simply to the fact that they are fellow human beings. This burgeoning individualism was reinforced by novel scientific conceptions.[53] New mechanistic natural theories conjured up a world that can be analyzed in detail according to its smallest constituent elements, and which can be explained in its entirety without recourse to mysterious incalculable powers. Together with this atomized, mechanistic, and increasingly disenchanted view of the natural world we see a similar change in the conceptualization of society. The medieval view of a human community as a providentially determined whole in which each element plays its specific part was always supported by a similarly teleological ontological structure. When this falls away, new social theories arise with a more atomized view of the structure of society, mirroring that of mechanistic ontology. Communities come to be thought of in terms of aggregates of individuals, each of whom is moved by his personal desires and beliefs. This, in turn, laid the groundwork for early thinkers in the liberal tradition to argue that these desires and beliefs ought to be respected, that the individual has a right to be respected in this sense, at least insofar as this did not infringe on the rights of others.[54]

Combined, these revolutions in the natural, social, and political imagination lead to a growing sense of what Charles Taylor calls "inwardness" or "internal space."[55] The growing sense of individualism and the novel conception of man as a pure, passive, observing mind together create the conditions for thinking of the human subject as more aloof from the world and able to act independently. As a consequence, man's conduct becomes less predictable. The fact that people are less able to pin others down on social expectations, coupled with the fact that people interact more with others whom they do not know, effectively puts a premium on sincerity and "plain speaking." The sixteenth century was, in Trilling's

53 Charles Guignon, *On Being Authentic* (London: Routledge, 2004), 16–17.

54 We see this development illustrated in Thomas Hobbes's *Leviathan*. The first part of the *Leviathan*, before the author describes his ideas on the Commonwealth, is taken up entirely by a mechanistic theory of man as an integral part of nature. The Commonwealth or State, according to Hobbes, "is but an artificial man; though of greater stature and strength than the natural, for whose protection and defence it was intended" (Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996], 7). The new scientific view of man in nature is thus replicated by Hobbes on a larger scale, giving rise to a new entity, the commonwealth. The subsequent formulation of a human right for freedom of conscience finds its most eloquent advocate in John Locke. (Of course, the claim here is not that any mechanistic, materialistic theory necessarily leads to the conclusion reached by Hobbes, but rather the weaker claim that humans find justification for their political and moral views in these novel views of the natural world.)

55 Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), 111; Charles Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991), 26.

words, “preoccupied to an extreme degree with dissimulation, feigning, and pretense,” a fact that he sees epitomized in Shakespearian theater, with its constant merry-go-round of inter-character impersonation.

One important aspect of this ethic of sincerity is that it is not simply about the creation of the modern individual, but about the relationship to all the individuals that make up society. This is key, specifically because it is in the interplay between the individual and society that we find both the secret of sincerity’s rise and the kernel of its demise. As the sense of individualism grew, a new conception of society arose that posited aggregates of individuals as having their own agency. Modern societies are separate entities; they have a life of their own, including their own structures and rules. One salient trait of society, differentiating it from a mere aggregate of individuals, “is that it is available to critical examination by individual persons.”[56] Society avows certain principles. Man is therefore in a position not only to evaluate the congruence between his own principles and his actions, but also to judge whether society actually abides by its avowed principles. Moreover, it becomes possible for man to judge “the extent to which a society fosters, or corrupts, the sincerity of its citizens.”[57]

It is at this point that the seeds of sincerity’s demise come to fruition and that, according to Trilling, the new ideal of authenticity comes to the fore. Given the growing importance attached to the individual and his internal space, along with the growth of the idea of society, the possibility opens up for the two to collide. We see this for instance in the work of Rousseau, when he criticizes society for corrupting the voice of nature, and in Hegel’s commenting on Diderot’s novel *Le neveu de Rameau*, where he inverts the significance of sincerity, by portraying it as the dumb, passive observation of social norms. In Shakespeare’s view, the key to being sincere is to be true to oneself, but now it turns out that by being sincere, one is prevented from being true to oneself. Or as Trilling phrases it:

> Society requires of us that we present ourselves as being sincere, and the most efficacious way of satisfying this demand is to see to it that we really are sincere, that we actually are what we want our community to know we are. In short, we play the role of being ourselves, we sincerely act the part of the sincere person, with the result that a judgement may be passed upon our sincerity that it is not authentic. [58]

Modern society, in other words, with its demand for sincerity, corrupts the individual by forcing him to be what we may anachronistically call “inauthentic.” This

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56 Lionel Trilling, *Sincerity and Authenticity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1972), 26.
57 Trilling, *Sincerity and Authenticity*, 27.
58 Trilling, *Sincerity and Authenticity*, 10 – 11.

idea turned out to be extremely powerful, both as a critique of the ethics of sincerity, the ethics associated with the Enlightenment, and as a basis for a new ethic, one that privileges the authenticity of the individual or even of the community over their sincerity and abidance by universal standards. This combination of Enlightenment critique in the form of a Romantic championing of the individual we find in several places in eighteenth-century thought, from the late writings of Giambattista Vico to the religious Counter-Enlightenment of Johann Georg Hamann and his disciple Johann Gottfried Herder. For its most thorough and influential articulation, however, we must turn to France, where the austere Savoyard Jean-Jacques Rousseau channeled his disgust of modern Parisian society in an imaginative body of writings that would play a profound role in the formation of a modern subjectivity.

3.4.1 Rousseauian beginnings

Rousseau is not the first to argue against the austere ethics of the Enlightenment. The ethics of sentiment developed by Shaftesbury and Francis Hutcheson already move away from the singular dependence on reason. In the arts – notably in Edward Young's *Conjectures on Original Composition* – we see a related move away from classical models and towards an aestheticism based on individual originality, or "genius."[59] Rousseau, however, is the most innovative thinker of his age to occupy himself with these matters. On the surface, his writings appear to fit with those of his contemporaries. He uses the same concepts. Moreover, he continues the tradition of thinking about human motivation as guided by two basic motives: self-love and altruism. His reconceptualization of this relationship, however, turns the whole framework on its head.

To illustrate how Rousseau does this, it is instructive to contrast his theory with that of a contemporary of his, the Scottish philosopher Francis Hutcheson. The latter portrays man's actions as the outcome of a constant game of rope-pulling between "a calm self-love" and an inherent sense of altruism.[60] To act morally, in his view, is to act in such a way as to balance these two motivations. To achieve this balance, man is assigned a "moral sense." This "moral sense" functions like any other sense; that is, like sight, hearing, or touch, it allows one to discern certain qualities in the world. The only difference is that moral sense can discern

59 Edward Young, *Conjectures on Original Composition: In a Letter to the Author of Sir Charles Grandison.* (London: A. Millar & R and J. Dodsley, 1759), 29.
60 Francis Hutcheson, *A System of Moral Philosophy*, vol. 1 (London: A. Millar & T. Longman, 1755), 41.

moral qualities. Of course, it cannot do so without proper moral training. We need to use our moral sense to be able to perceive goodness and badness in the world, and act according to what creates more of the former and less of the latter.

There is an obvious objection to such a theory: If it is really the case that man is naturally capable of discerning good from bad, then why does so much disagreement about the foundations of morality persist? Rousseau answers this question, but in a way that radically changes the concept of moral sense and hence transforms the original question. He uses "conscience," a cognate of moral sense, for the same purpose that Hutcheson had in mind for it: to adjudicate between the claims of what he calls "love of the self" (*amour de soi*) and "pity" (*pitié*). However, instead of taking moral sense to be outward looking – perceiving Goodness in the world – Rousseau's idea of *conscience* is that of an *inward* application of Reason. It is our rational, almost aesthetic appreciation of God's order in the world, which we are able to apply within ourselves that tells right from wrong.

Rousseau then goes on to make the further claim. It is not our lack of moral inculcation, but its excess that led us away from our natural goodness. The opening line of his *Emile* catches this idea accurately: "Everything is good as it leaves the hands of the Author of things; everything degenerates in the hands of man."[61] As we already saw in Koselleck's commentary on the dual nature of progress, Rousseau blames modern society for this degeneration. The modern social order, characterized as it is by a structure of property rights that lead to inequality and economic dependency on others, creates an incentive for people to struggle over resources that can secure them a favorable spot within society. It turns our *amour de soi* into what Rousseau calls self-love (*amour propre*), the love of oneself to the exclusion of others. In this struggle it is most essential that one conform to societal norms, at least outwardly. It is important that others believe you to be rich, powerful, and trustworthy, in order for them to defer to you instead of the other way around. Hence, "it now became the interest of men to appear what they really were not."[62] As pointed out by Trilling, when a premium is put on sincerity, the result is "that a judgement may be passed upon our sincerity that it is not authentic." This is precisely Rousseau's conclusion. We try to please people who hold power over us, we flatter them, we care about their opinions of us, and we do so while keeping up the appearance that our utterances and actions are sincere, that they are true to ourselves.

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61 Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Emile: Or, On Education*, trans. Allan Bloom (New York: Basic Books, 1979), 37.

62 Jean-Jacques Rousseau, "Discourse on the Origin of Inequality," in *The Social Contract & Discourses*, trans. G.D.H. Cole (London and Toronto: J.M. Dent & Sons, 1913), 218.

What is revolutionary in Rousseau is that he frames this inauthenticity as *morally* wrong. Because, according to him, the source of the Good resides in ourselves, any deviation from ourselves counts as a deviation from what is good. Rousseau's novel idea is not that we have selves, or that we each have a distinctive character. It is rather that being true to our self becomes for Rousseau the highest virtue.[63] This early ethic of authenticity makes different demands on the subject. It requires a different set of sensibilities and virtues, a new concept of the individual. It is no coincidence that Rousseau, besides being seen as the originator of the ideal of authenticity, is also regarded as the harbinger of a different conception of freedom, one that stresses the "self-determining" aspect of being free.[64] Man, according to this view, is free when he decides for himself what to do, when he is the source of his actions and of limits on his actions.[65]

3.4.2 Authenticity branching out

The ground thus cleared by Rousseau has proven incredibly fertile. This was particularly the case in Germany, where his proto-conception of authenticity as a moral ideal was taken up and developed into a central tenet of Romanticism.

63 This idea is most forcefully presented for the first time in his novel *La nouvelle Heloise*. The book, written in epistolary form, was an instant sensation. Seventy editions of the work had been published before 1800 – see Robert Darnton, *The Great Cat Massacre and Other Episodes in French Cultural History* (New York: Viking, 1984), 242. Readers flooded Rousseau with letters reporting their feelings of ecstasy, of "no longer crying, but howling like a beast" – Daniel Mornet, *Le Romantisme En France Au XVIIIe Siècle* (Paris: Hachette, 1912), 128.

64 Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity*, 27.

65 It is worth mentioning that, although there are some indications of the influence that Rousseau has had on *nahḍa* intellectuals, a comprehensive study of his reception in the Arab world is unfortunately still lacking. We find the most thorough engagement with Rousseau in Muḥammad Ḥusayn Haykal's study published in 1921, in which the author advocates "ideals of tolerance, freedom of thought and … the separation of religion and state in the Islamic context" – see Sarhan Dhouib and Anke von Kügelgen, "Einleitung des zweiten Kapitels 'Arabischer Sprachraum – Ausdifferenzierung philosophischer Richtungen (1920er bis 1960er Jahre),'" in *Bd. IV "Geschichte der Philosophie in der islamischen Welt des 19. und 20. Jahrhunderts,"* Grundriss der Geschichte der Philosophie (Basel: Schwabe Verlag, 2021), 167–68. There are indications that Rousseau found readers in the Arab world much earlier, however. The famous French orientalist Silvestre de Sacy claimed that Rousseau and Voltaire had already been translated during the early 1800s by a member of what Peter Hill has described as the "Damietta Circle" – see Hill, "The First Arabic Translations of Enlightenment Literature: The Damietta Circle of the 1800s and 1810s," 216. Hill also implies a Rousseauian influence on the later thinking of the Syrian scholar Fransīs Marrāsh (d. 1874) – see Hill, *Utopia and Civilisation in the Arab Nahda*, 240.

The works of Johann Gottfried Herder are illustrative of this development. Going one step further than Rousseau, Herder contends that the good in us is not some natural Divine set of precepts, but rather something particular to each individual. Each person, according to Herder, "has his own measure, so to speak, his own attunement of all his sensuous feelings to one another."[66] Not only does each man have his own measure, it is also incumbent on him to realize this measure, *because it is his own.* To strive for authenticity is no longer a mere antidote to the corrupting influence of society; it does not serve to reconnect with the natural state intended by our Author. By being true to oneself, rather, one is true to one's very particular and original identity, and this is a good in itself.

This change of direction, the increased centrality of the individual at the expense both of his society and his Maker, entailed a new set of virtues. In order to know what his nature is, a person must become aware of what sets him apart from others. He will moreover need to be able to stand up to general opinion in order to defend his nature against the pressures of society. But he will also need to be able to gauge what is the nature of others, what moves *them.* He thus needs a measure of empathy or *Einfühlung.*[67] Together with this Romantic interpretation of authenticity, we see a different branch of authenticity developing in the arts. Art was being transformed from a craft focused on mimesis to one that drew its power from personal expression. As Meyer Howard Abrams has described in *The Mirror and the Lamp*, Romantic literature upset the order of storytelling from the model of a veridical description of events to that of a light of an individual's truth that illuminates the subject about which he writes.[68] But it is equally visible in the expressive poetry of Coleridge or Hölderlin and the paintings of Constable, Turner, Friedrich, or Delacroix.

The effects of authenticity were not only felt at the personal level. They would also have a profound impact on politics. This is seen in another aspect in which Herder goes one step further than Rousseau, namely in his development of nationalism. The Romantic nationalism of the nineteenth century is linked to questions of authenticity and freedom in interesting ways. Herder takes over from Rousseau the idea that the only true sovereign ought to be a people, a group of individuals bound by a common purpose or identity. He adds to this his idea that each person has her own measure, and that by living in a particular area with a particular cli-

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66 Johann Gottfried Herder, "Metakritik zur Kritik der Vernunft," in *Werke in zehn Bänden*, vol. 8 (Frankfurt am Main: Hans Dietrich Irmscher, 1998), 184–85.

67 Not coincidentally, this expression presumably originates with Herder; see Magdalena Nowak, "The Complicated History of *Einfühlung*," *Argument* 1, no. 2 (2011): 303.

68 Meyer Howard Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition* (London, 1979), 59.

mate and speaking a particular language, people who live together and thus form a community become alike in their respective measures. They come to share in a single spirit, or *Volksgeist.* Each *Volk* therefore manifests its own way of being and feeling. The individual flourishes within a society that is allowed to explore and develop this shared spirit. Hence, just as it is the individual's duty to realize his own way of being, it becomes the duty of a people to realize its national nature, based on things like a common language and a shared past.

In the first half of the nineteenth century, we also see the first important innovation in the ideal of authenticity, attributable mainly to Hegel. Whereas Rousseau's model presents authenticity as being true to something already existing, an inner conscience that is particular to each person, the Hegelian model presents authenticity as an achievement of a dialectical process in which man becomes conscious of himself through the encounter with another being like him. The intersubjective model resurfaces in different forms throughout modern thought. Perhaps its most influential reconfiguration is found in Marx. The Rousseauian idea that one can lose one's authenticity, that man can become alienated due to his interactions with society is taken over by Marx, when he writes of the modern worker being alienated from the product of his labor due to the capitalist process of manufacturing. Marx combines the Rousseauian idea of alienation with the Hegelian notion that man is a social animal whose authentic nature is not unchanging, but is formed by his surroundings and his interactions with others – that is, the material conditions of his society. Man's essence, according to Marx, is to labor and thereby to change the world around him. His authenticity is therefore neither the result of introspection, nor of the manifestation of a rational *Weltgeist.* Rather, allowing man to work and be master of the fruits of his labor secures authenticity.

Against Hegel's impersonal mode of philosophy, which, in a way, abstracts from the uniqueness of the individual by locating it in the dialectical unfolding of reason, we find various figures stressing the value of the specific, individual person. Examples of this trend are Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi and Rudolph Hermann Lotze, who reasoned from a theistic background for the indispensability of the person and the prohibition of subsuming him as an individual under any sort of collective. A resistance not just to such idealistic impersonalism, but equally to later nineteenth-century materialist and reductionist perspectives on man, like Comtean positivism and Darwinian evolutionary theory, can be seen to appear in twentieth-century theories of personalism. These theories, which were mostly propounded by Catholic intellectuals like Emmanuel Mounier and Jacques Maritain, and Karol Wojtyla, later to become Pope John Paul II.

Another branch of nineteenth-century theorizing about the idea of authenticity that was to become very influential takes the pre-eminence of the person in a slightly different direction. Instead of affirming the existence of values and human

rights, these thinkers opted to challenge them and think through the consequences of a world devoid of God and devoid of meaning. This is what was later to become the existentialist tradition. This label has been used to describe a wide variety of thinkers, with an equally varied range of ideas and worldviews. What binds them is, to some degree, a common genealogy and a common theme, namely how to make sense of the freedom of the modern individual. Thus, a work like Dostoyevsky's *Underground Man* has been described as existentialist, because it details the protagonist's irrationality and his refusal of modern society as an act of freedom. Søren Kierkegaard, similarly, focuses on the modern individual, but instead portrays him as a beacon of hope, or as he calls it, the "eternal truth." To be an individual for Kierkegaard was to have achieved the highest goal, the real goal of the Christian teaching: become what one is. It is, as we find in an early journal entry, "to find a truth which is true *for me*, to find the idea for which I can live and die." The authentic, for Kierkegaard, must be something deeply personal, not subsumable under any general law.[69]

Kierkegaard's view on authenticity carried over into the twentieth century as the intellectual bedrock for the burgeoning existentialist movement. This is particularly true for the early philosophy of Martin Heidegger, epitomized in *Sein und Zeit* (1927). Heidegger starts from a view of the self, not as an object, but as a relation of being (*Seinsverhältnis*). Man, or *Dasein* as he refers to it, is the kind of being for which its own being is an *issue.* We care about what we are and will become, and want our actions to fit coherently into an overall project. What this overall project is, is to a large extent determined by the environment in which we grow up. Man's choices are constrained by his physical and mental capacities and by the particularities of the culture in which he grows up. Usually, we tend to live out our lives unreflectively, coping with everyday situations and doing so mostly in conformity with the rules of society. This is not in itself a bad thing. It is only by living according to these shared practices that man is able to live at all. At the same time, there is a sense in which this unreflective living alongside the They (*das Man*) is not one's own (*eigen*) and that it is therefore inauthentic (*uneigentlich*). There is, however, a way out of this inauthentic mode of being. Insight into the peculiar nature of *Dasein*, the inherent insignificance of the world, the realization that one's death means the end of all possible futures for *Dasein,* leads to our understanding that we are future-oriented beings who give meaning to our lives by pursuing projects, and that we need to accept responsibility for these projects and for the actions that they entail.

69 Jacob Golomb, *In Search of Authenticity: From Kierkegaard to Camus* (London/New York: Routledge, 1995), 20.

Heidegger's emphasis on history and tradition is, in turn, diluted in the later French development of existentialism. Influenced by Heidegger, Jean-Paul Sartre speaks merely of man's facticity – all the facts one can describe about a person, as described from a third person perspective – in relation to one's transcendence – the first-person, future-directed view. Peculiar about the human mode of existence, as opposed to that of other animals, is that we can call our own being into question. We can ask about what is not the case, an ability that allows us to project a possible future version of ourselves and wonder about the kind of person we want to be. In this sense we are radically free to interpret the world in whatever way we like, to assign meaning and value to it and to follow up on this imputation of meaning by pursuing certain projects that we consider meaningful. In this process of interpreting the world and shaping our lives, however, people are liable to deceive themselves, to be untrue to themselves, to be *inauthentic.* They rule out their transcendence or their facticity, telling themselves and others either that "that's simply the way I am," or things like "that's not really me." Such acts of self-deception are what Sartre calls *bad faith.* They either deny human freedom, or responsibility for this freedom. The way to overcome *bad faith* to accept contingency as the basic principle of human life and to take responsibility for the things that one chooses. Much like Heidegger, Sartre argues that the authentic person accepts her radical freedom, the terrifying fact that she is ultimately the source of all value.

Turning back to the nineteenth century, we also see a very different strand of thought about authenticity emerge; one that discards completely the idea that in order to be authentic one must strive to be true to any stable, authentic essence. Rather, it stresses the need to constantly produce one's identity.[70] This strand of authenticity discourse finds its most forceful philosophical formulations in the works of Friedrich Nietzsche. It is notoriously hard to distill a coherent theory from Nietzsche's writings, or even to pin him down on a single point of view. This is certainly true for his views on the authenticity of the individual. There is the strand of his thinking about ethics and religion in which we can sense overtones of an ethic of authenticity. Following his proclamation of the death of God and the uncovering of religion and its accompanying morality as the structural attempt of the many to rein in the individual, he opens up a field of inquiry into what can constitute a new, modern, post-religious ethical order. In the absence of a moral law, man is required to create a norm for himself beyond the familiar norms of Good and Evil. This, naturally, is a task for the authentic individual, the

70 Varga specifically refers to this strand of authenticity discourse as "productionism." See Somogy Varga, *Authenticity as an Ethical Ideal* (New York/London: Routledge, 2012).

modern man who is not beholden to the strictures of Scripture that, for centuries, undergirded the moral fabric of Christian society. At times, Nietzsche appears to go even further, calling into question the very notion of a self as a substantive, holistic unit, for example in the following quotation from *Unzeitgemäße Betrachtungen:*

> But how do we retrieve ourselves? How can man know himself? He is a dark, veiled thing; and if the hare has seven skins, man can take off seven times seventy and we would still not be able to say: "There you truly are, that is no longer a shell"[71]

What Nietzsche grapples with is the idea of man, not as a unity, but as a constant tussle between various selves, none of which can with any certainty be called more real than any other. Within this perspective it makes no sense to think of authenticity in terms of being true to oneself. Rather, to be authentic becomes a way of coping with this inner chaos in a beautiful and balanced way. Authenticity lies in originality, in finding a personal style, an aesthetic of living that blends the different inner impulses in a way that is pleasing. It is not a return to, but an overcoming of the self.[72]

This aesthetic interpretation of authenticity is connected with a trend that originates in Romanticism. Though the later Nietzsche vociferously distanced himself from his earlier Romantic self,[73] in his own way he continues the romantic habit of putting the creative artist on a pedestal. The poetic genius, the visionary who, through an act of imagination, can conjure epiphanies that reveal a different moral and spiritual universe – one that may well go against the norms that rule bourgeois society – is an important Romantic addition to the modern vocabulary that was developed further by Nietzsche. It is this part of the Romantic heritage, one that we also see crop up in nineteenth-century poets like Charles Baudelaire and Victor Hugo, that became an important inspiration for later generations of artists or intellectuals with an artistic bent, as witnessed for example in the Surrealist movement. This legacy, which stresses the imperative to aesthetically create one's own identity, became an important trope, moreover, in the second half of the twentieth century within the French post-structuralist thought of Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida, and in the works of the American philosopher Richard Rorty. What these writers took from Nietzsche, in different ways, was his rejection of the humanist notion of a "true self." One of the areas of public life where this

71 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Unzeitgemäße Betrachtungen*, vol. 3, *Nietzsche: Werke in vier Bänden* (Salzburg: Caesar Verlag, 1983), 77.

72 Varga, *Authenticity as an Ethical Ideal*, 51.

73 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Die Fröhliche Wissenschaft* (Stuttgart: Reclam, 2000), sec. 370.

way of thinking about subjectivity echoes most clearly is in contemporary queer theory, which explicitly rejects stable, discrete labels for sexual identity and proposes "inbetween-ness" as an alternative to "replace the idea of authentic natures."[74]

This brings us to one more important strand in modern thought that stems from early anti-holistic articulations of the self and has done much to affect popular, mainstream conceptions of authenticity: psychoanalysis. Regardless of the degree to which Freud read and was influenced by Nietzsche – a topic that continues to stir discussion[75] – the spiritual father of psychoanalysis at least adopted certain Nietzschean sensibilities, in particular with regard to the make-up of the individual, his deeper urges, his relation to modern society, and his multi-leveled subjectivity. According to the psychoanalytic perspective, man's conscious everyday way of living – the *ego* – is a façade. It keeps a person in check, repressing his impulses, allowing him to live together with other people, without whom he would not be able to survive. The *ego* masks the animal self – the *id* – whose sole aim is the pursuit of pleasure. The visceral urges of the *id* strive to manifest themselves by breaking through the outer layer of respectability. Being denied their manifestation, the impulses crop up inside one's unconscious, where they enter into subversive relationships with the conscious system, leading to their symbolic expression, notably in dreams. This leads to what Freud takes to be the universal state of human neurosis. Of course, the notion that there is or might be an unconscious did not originate with Freud. Nor, for that matter, was Freud the first person to suggest a treatment for ailments connected to the unconscious.[76] He is, however, the founder of a particularly modern approach to the unconscious, both in propagating psychoanalysis as a rigorous science, and in framing the unconscious within modern debates that stress the opposition of the authentic individual to the equalizing power of society.

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74 Kayley Vernallis, "Queer Philosophy: Presentations of the Society for Lesbian and Gay Philosophy, 1998–2008," in *Queer Portraiture and the Politics of Representation*, ed. Raja Halwani, Carol Quinn, and Andrew Wible (Amsterdam/New York: Rodopi, 2012), 175.

75 The most comprehensive account of their relation to date is Paul-Laurent Assoun, *Freud and Nietzsche*, trans. Richard Collier (London/New York: Continuum, 2000).

76 Henri Ellenberger, *The Discovery of the Unconscious: The History and Evolution of Dynamic Psychiatry* (London: Fontana Press, 1994).

3.4.3 The age of authenticity

This is but a cursory overview of the genealogy of authenticity, but it gives a sense of the development and richness of the modern ideal of authenticity. Although interesting in its own right, an inquiry into authenticity would not have been half as interesting had this ideal not spread outside the ivory tower of Western philosophers to shape modern life as we know it. It does not take much effort for anyone living in the twenty-first century to recognize the deep and lasting impact that authenticity has had on our society. We live in what Charles Taylor terms "The Age of Authenticity," an age in which the ideal of being authentic has become accepted as a global "mass phenomenon."[77] An "ethic of authenticity" – that is,, different iterations of the notion that people have very particular ways of being, and that it is incumbent on each one of them to try to realize this personal way of being – informs many aspects of modern life. These include the job market, where work is ideally experienced as a personal calling rather than a way to make ends meet; our love lives, where love and sex have quite recently come to be thought of as expressions of our true nature; and our commercial dealings, where advertisements try to lure customers by describing products as authentic or uniquely suited for the particular person that you are. Someone living in a modern society is constantly urged, in some way or other, to be who he or she truly is. Authenticity has found its way into psychology and management studies, as witnessed by such measures as the "Internal/External Authenticity Evaluation Scale" (IAS/EAS) and the "Leader Authenticity Scale" (LAS).[78] It is an important part of a tourist industry that thrives on offering the global middle class a so-called authentic experience. It has found its way into the modern classroom through pedagogical studies that advocate educating children into authentic individuals.[79] It has given rise to a massive self-help industry that helps people achieve the best version of themselves. And last but not least, the ideal of individual authenticity can be seen in modern forms of worship, where the emphasis on spontaneity and "the effusions of free prayer [lives] on in today's televangelism and megachurches."[80] The ethic of authenticity is also evident in the variety of derisive connotations attached to the absence of authenticity – fake, bad, not genuine, lacking creativity, etc.

Apart from our quotidian encounters with authenticity, the ideal has played a significant role in articulating political positions, particularly in the second half of

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77 Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 473.
78 Thomas Noetzel, *Authentizität als politisches Problem* (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1999), 21–22.
79 Noetzel, 24–25.
80 Lori Branch, *Rituals of Spontaneity: Sentiment and Secularism from Free Prayer to Wordsworth* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2006), 3.

the twentieth century. During the 1950s and 1960s, it was the New Left in the United States, France's génération '68, and the hippie movement who embraced some version of self-realization as their motto. At the same time this post-Second World War era also witnessed the highpoint of another branch of authenticity discourse, namely as an ideological building block in the quest for the anti-colonial movement. Drawing both on older ideas of cultural authenticity that lead back to the Romantics, and the newfangled existentialist conceptions of authenticity espoused by Sartre, the call for authenticity becomes a rallying cry for peoples throughout the (formerly) colonized world. In short, the ideal of authenticity has developed in myriad ways, becoming an omnipresent feature of modern life. This is something that is all too often lost sight of when studying Arab thought. Given the way in which authenticity tends to be understood within the standard narrative, namely as a catch-all for opposition to Western modernity, it is easy to forget that authenticity is an ideal central to the discourse of modernity as such. This, I argue, is a serious oversight. Arab thought may be oriented primarily towards issues that concern Arab society, but it is equally embedded in modernity as a discursive formation. If we want to get a more complete view of the meaning of authenticity in Arab thought, we need to therefore take this global context into consideration.

In light of this, it is interesting to note that most of the articulations and reworkings of the ideal of authenticity have an Arabic pendant. The influence of Romanticism on both Arabic poetry and literature, as well as on the formation of Arab nationalism, is well documented, and was referred to by ʿAyyād as one of the main drivers of authenticity discourse in Arabic. Hegel found a reception in the Arab world, although not a profound one.[81] Marxism was to have a profound effect on the Arab intellectual scene in the twentieth century, and in the wake of the Arab Spring the history of the Arab Left has gained renewed attention from scholars.[82] As Yoav Di-Capua aptly demonstrated, in the period leading up to the 1967 war, existentialism was the most influential philosophical influence on the Arab scene.[83] Naturally, it was not the same creature that one would find on the Left Bank or on American campuses around the same time. It was a distinctly *Arab* existentialism, but its vocabulary was to a large degree shaped by the existentialist tradition. The same may be said about psychoanalysis, which had a big

81 Lorella Ventura, *Hegel in the Arab World: Modernity, Colonialism, and Freedom* (Cham, Switz.: Palgrave Pivot, 2018).

82 Tariq Ismael, *The Communist Movement in the Arab World* (Oxford: Routledge, 2005).

83 Yoav Di-Capua, *No Exit: Arab Existentialism, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Decolonization* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2018).

impact on the formation of modern Arab subjectivity.[84] Personalism had a marked effect in the 1950s – on the cultural avant-garde of Beirut through the efforts of Charles Malik, and also in Morocco in the form of Muḥammad ʿAzīz al-Ḥabbābī's (Lahbabi) Islamic personalism.[85] Heidegger, though not as centrally important in the Arab world as he was to Iranian intellectuals, was influential in the Arab world as well.[86]

To repeat a point made earlier, this does not mean that these ideas were taken on without comment. ʿAbd al-Raḥmān Badawī was a respected philosopher in his own right, inspired by Heidegger to create his Arab brand of existentialism.[87] The same goes for Lahbabi's personalist inspiration, or for the hugely productive Arab Left, whose innovations in Marxist theory are only just being brought to our attention by inquisitive scholars looking to explore Arab thought beyond the paradigm of 1967.[88] Discussing the influence of Freudian theory, Omnia El Shakry notes that the formation of the "bourgeois modern individual" in the Arab world was not a mere act of replication, but a merging of different traditions where a "new grammar of the subject was soldered to older notions of the ethical cultivation of sexual ideals and practices."[89]

At the same time, if we want to approach these scholars holistically, we need to acknowledge not just difference, but also sameness. The standard narrative has portrayed the call for authenticity as something particular to the Arab world, or at least to the postcolonial nations. But as we can see, this is only part of the story. Not only has the quest for authenticity become a defining characteristic of the modern age, but the Arab world has, for better or for worse, over the past couple of centuries become part of this modern world. Even if the systems of government, personal sensibilities, or intellectual discourse take on a local tone, they re-

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84 Stefania Pandolfo, *Knot of the Soul: Madness, Psychoanalysis, Islam* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2018); Omnia El Shakry, *The Arabic Freud: Psychoanalysis and Islam in Modern Egypt* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017).

85 For an overview of some of the effect that Malik had on the Beiruti scene, see Robyn Creswell, *City of Beginnings* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019), 74–75. As for Lahbabi, his Islamic personalism is contrasted to E.S. Brightman's Christian version in Nurten Gökalp, "An Essay on Islamic and Christian Personalism," *The Personalist Forum* 13, no. 2 (1997): 277–86.

86 Kata Moser, "La Réception Arabe de Heidegger," *Bulletin Heideggerien* 5 (2015): 4–16. For a study of Heidegger's influence in the Islamicate world generally, see Kata Moser, Urs Gösken, and Josh Hayes, eds., *Heidegger in the Islamicate World* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2019).

87 Badawī's "Existential Time" (*al-Zamān al-Wujūdī*), his doctoral dissertation at Cairo University, was a landmark in the history of Arab thought. The defence has been described as a "national event" – see Di-Capua, *No Exit: Arab Existentialism, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Decolonization*, 52.

88 Bardawil, *Revolution and Disenchantment: Arab Marxism and the Binds of Emancipation.*

89 El Shakry, *The Arabic Freud: Psychoanalysis and Islam in Modern Egypt*, 81–82.

flect an increasingly shared reality. Hence, when we talk about authenticity, we need to take into account the broader, global genealogy of this concept. Even where authenticity is presented straightforwardly in binary opposition to modernity, and where this problematic is explained as a natural reaction peculiar to societies that find themselves confronted with a hegemonic Western culture, we have to beware not to take this assertion at face value. It is possible to both countenance the very real nativist tendencies of which authenticity talk can be an expression, and at the same time look for subtle differences in the way that these ideas are formulated. This, I take it, is what people like ʿAyyād, Zakariyyā, and al-ʿAẓma are suggesting; that if we look closely at authenticity we will see that its meaning is not as straightforward as is commonly supposed, that authenticity is not merely "the opposite of modernity"; that it includes references to both individual and communal forms of authenticity, each with their own differentiations and subtleties; that authenticity does not necessarily pertain to a collective sense of belonging, but that it can equally well be used to champion the individual against his community; that these articulations of what it means and why we ought to be authentic bear different relations to the modern, sometimes opposing modernity, sometimes not; in short, that conceptions of authenticity are varied and often contradictory. *This* is why authenticity deserves much more close analysis, specifically in relation to Arab discourse. It is through a deeper analysis of what authenticity means that we may break open the debates on authenticity and modernity that dominate Arab thought to this day, and discover more varied ways of understanding intellectual production in this part of the world.

Naturally, a comprehensive study of how these circumstances and ideas cooperated in shaping the modern imaginary and modern Arab subjectivity lies beyond the scope of this monograph, and as is the case with the ideal of progress, there remains an interesting story to be told about how different conceptions of authenticity were formulated by modern Arab intellectuals, and how they interacted with the social and political climate of their day to form part of the discursive landscape in which the standard narrative has come to thrive. This book, rather than look at the genealogy of this ideal, looks at the effects of this ideal, at the ways in which a more diversified perspective on authenticity can help us discover new, more interesting ways of reading Arab thought. It builds on the hypothesis put forward by ʿAyyād and other Arab thinkers that *aṣāla*, notwithstanding its common one-dimensional interpretation, has different meanings, and that by uncovering contestations of the ordinary problematic of authenticity and modernity we can gain greater insight into what Arab thought is and what it might become, both in its own right and as part of a global conversation about modernity and its distinct forms of subjectivity.

Having said this, there remains an elephant in the room. In ʿAyyād's description of *aṣāla* we found not just an individualist notion of authenticity, but also a collective one that draws sustenance from the claim to a common identity rooted in a shared history. Indeed, this collective sense of authenticity comes much closer to the sense given to authenticity in the standard narrative of Arab thought. When authenticity is mentioned in the Arab context, what it commonly refers to is not an individual ethical ideal, but a distinct set of characteristics that can pertain to an individual or a collective. Like modernity, authenticity is defined on the basis of certain properties. And since authenticity is taken to mean the *opposite of modernity*, these properties are precisely the inverse of the properties assigned to modernity. The pivotal problematic of contemporary Arab thought remains the opposition between *aṣāla* and contemporaneity (*muʿāṣara*) or modernity (*ḥadātha*), where the latter stands for the dehumanizing effects of a materialist, hyperrational, disenchanted kind of society, while the former denotes a nostalgia for a time of spiritual wholeness and a more humane and simple form of life. The story of authenticity thus far shows the semantic and moral richness of authenticity, and it places authenticity at the center of the modern project, but it does not explain the other meaning of authenticity that has dominated Arab thought, namely as a concept *contrary* to modernity. This adversarial use of authenticity against modernity is, as I will argue, also connected to the modern project. In particular, it goes back to what Reinhart Koselleck has picked out as progress's "temporal compensatory concept," Rousseau's innovative portrayal of moral decay in the modern world that is equal to the progress of the arts and sciences. I will conclude, moreover, by indicating how Rousseau's articulation of authenticity as an individual ethical ideal can be read as part of this opposition; the call for a return to man's "inner light" was born out of dissatisfaction with the exigencies and inequities of modernity. In this sense, the personal ideal of authenticity and the collective opposition to a materialist, impersonal, domineering West that are characteristic of the nativist formulation of authenticity are joined at the hip.[90] To argue this, we

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90 It should be emphasized that to trace this conceptual historical bond does not imply an affirmation on philosophical grounds that the notions of "personal authenticity" and "collective, anti-modernism authenticity" form a coherent whole. As Seyla Benhabib rightly points out, there is no necessary conceptual link "between the politics of collective difference and the recognition of one's individual, unique identity" – see Seyla Benhabib, *The Claims of Culture: Equality and Diversity in the Global Era* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), 52. Our analysis diverges from Benhabib's in one important sense. Whereas she uses the incoherence between these ideas as a starting point to critique those who turn authenticity into a basis for political choices to protect forms of collective belonging, for us it is precisely the concept's ambiguity that is interesting. It is this ambiguity, after all, that offers a rich landscape of articulations of authenticity, many of which are at loggerheads with each other.

will return briefly to where the ideal of authenticity took off, to the critical voice of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who as most experts in this field agree, was crucial in laying the groundwork for the modern, global discourse of authenticity.

3.5 Anti-modern authenticity and Counter-Enlightenment

Until now we have looked at authenticity as an ideal that sprang from a coalescence of social, economic, religious, political, and philosophical currents in early modernity. Broadly speaking, authenticity developed as an ethic suited to the modern, individualized, atomized, disenchanted world, in which the individual has to guard his own identity against the demands of modern society, and is forced to rely on his own senses rather than on a pre-established framework to understand the world as a realm of meaning. This is one part of the story, a positive part in the sense that it presents new ways of thinking about man's place in the world. Another part of this story is more negatively laden, and relates to what this conception of man agitated *against.* Rousseau's proto-conception of authenticity is a result of interpretation after the fact; it is a reflection by people like Lionel Trilling, Charles Taylor, Alessandro Ferrara, and others, on what in hindsight can be discerned as a momentous reinterpretation of a personal ethic. It remains at least open to question whether Rousseau himself would have concurred that this is what he was doing. What is much clearer and more pronounced in Rousseau's writings is what he was against. He was against the spirit of his time, against life in the city of Paris, against the blind championing of reason, against philosophers, against the arts, against atheism, against man's growing smugness and his confidence in progress. In short, he was against many of the features that we associate with the Enlightenment, or at the very least, against the way these ideals turned out in practice. For this reason, although he was in many ways a child of the Enlightenment and a father to its most momentous manifestation during the French Revolution, he was also one of its earliest and fiercest critics, a founding figure in what has later been called the "Counter-Enlightenment."

The concept of a Counter-Enlightenment is a tricky one, and the term has received a fair amount of scrutiny over the years. Although it was not invented by him, it was Isaiah Berlin who popularized the term during his lifetime of thinking through the basis and implications of the influential strands opposed to the ideals of the Enlightenment that, for better or for worse, have defined Western thought over the last few centuries. The Counter-Enlightenment pertains to a ragtag group of intellectuals who for various reasons rejected the "Enlightenment perversion of

reason."[91] This perversion may be understood in Rousseauian fashion as a blind reverence for the power of reason at the expense of sentiment. It may also be formulated in more contemporary terms as the instrumentalization of reason, familiar from Adorno and Horkheimer's description of the dialectics of Enlightenment. It may take the form of a Nietzschean accusation that what poses as pure and objective application of reason is, in reality, an expression of a subjective will to power. It may express the misgivings with the universalizing pretensions of the Enlightenment, its disregard for local, traditional specificity. Or it may refer to reservations about the virtues of progress, and combine this with the moral indictment of modern society as corrupting the individual human being. In addition, if the spatial and cultural location of the Enlightenment in the West is emphasized, the aforementioned contestations of the Enlightenment may be associated with opposition to Western cultural, economic, and military dominance. In sum, what you take Counter-Enlightenment to mean will depend largely on how you imagine the Enlightenment.

It is precisely the fickle nature of this concept that detractors point to. The term is used loosely for a group of thinkers with wildly inconsistent views, many of whom can also be understood as Enlightenment thinkers themselves – Rousseau, who himself contributed to the *Encyclopédie* and was admired by many of the major figures we associate with the Enlightenment, is a case in point. Moreover, because the one thing that connects these figures is their opposition to an ideal construction of a coherent "Enlightenment," the fact that this monolithic notion has been debunked in recent decades would seem to undermine the permissibility of speaking about a single "Counter-Enlightenment." Also, Berlin's analyses have been criticized for being overly teleological. Writing during the Cold War, a notion like Counter-Enlightenment reflected historical debates of the time, which portrayed the Second World War and the Gulag as the natural outcome of the ideologies spawned by the Enlightenment's detractors. In addition, Berlin and his sympathizers have been accused of "shoddy scholarship,"[92] bending the writings of thinkers like Hamann and Herder to fit their origins story of an eighteenth-century Counter-Enlightenment, when in reality this entire fiction was born in the nineteenth century with Wilhelm Dilthey and other proponents of the anti-positivist *Lebensphilosophie.*

91 Graeme Garrard, *Counter-Enlightenments: From the Eighteenth Century to the Present* (London/New York: Routledge, 2006), 126.

92 Robert Norton, "The Myth of the Counter-Enlightenment," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 68, no. 4 (2007): 650.

These criticisms notwithstanding, I agree with Darrin McMahon that "if the term 'Counter-Enlightenment' can certainly be abused, it does not follow that it should not be used at all."[93] One can discard the teleology and look simply at contestations of Enlightenment ideals, without setting out a future path to the gallows; one can speak about different contestations of Enlightenment – different *Counter-Enlightenments* – without needing to discount the many differences between the people who articulate them. The question is how to do so profitably. I believe one way to do this is to move away from a focus on particular positions or ideas and to look at the Counter-Enlightenment as an integral part of the discursive field of modernity. It is helpful in this case to refer back to Asad's conception of modernity as a series of interrelated projects.

Modernity is obviously linked to the project of the Enlightenment. The reliance on universal reason and an ideal of progress are fundamental ingredients in many of the changes in government, economy, law, religion, and education over the previous couple of centuries. This does not mean, however, that modernity is equal to the Enlightenment project. The modern world is not the logical conclusion of the ideals of the *philosophes*, but the result of ongoing attempts to implement these ideas, to contest them and transform them. Notwithstanding, it is true that modernity is *in fact* often equated with the Enlightenment. For example, in Arab intellectual discourse the traditionalist camp is often (though not always) defined by its rejection of modern, liberal, or enlightened Western ideas and customs which are referred to as "modernity" (*al-ḥadātha*), whereas the secular trend among Arab intellectuals in the decades leading up to the Arab revolutions was marked by intense debate about the optic of Enlightenment (*tanwīr*).[94] However, we should realize that this is a mere question of definition, a move within a discursive game. If we conceive of modernity not as a position within the playing field of this game, but as the playing field itself – that is, if we go along with the view that modernity is a broader category, consisting of various interlocking, competing projects and sometimes contradictory projects that are to a large extent simultaneously made possible and constrained by a modern vocabulary – then it becomes possible to envision Enlightenment and Counter-Enlightenment as broad designations for contrary positions within this single discursive field. It is then possible to think of their contradiction as producing some of the most important conceptual innovations that define modern life. For instance, as Colin Campbell has argued, the cap-

93 Darrin McMahon, "What Is Counter-Enlightenment?," *International Journal for History, Culture, and Modernity* 5, no. 1 (2017): 36.

94 These "Enlightenment debates" are the subject of a recent book by Elizabeth Kassab; see *Kassab, Enlightenment on the Eve of Revolution: The Egyptian and Syrian Debates.*

italist system that is often invoked as a marker of a truly global modernity could not have developed in the way it has without the formation of the modern consumer, a development that, in turn, was made possible through the creative anti-Enlightened impetus of the Romantics.[95] Similarly, while the core idea of the nation-state can be traced to the Enlightenment, the further articulations of this idea owe just as much to Enlightenment's supposed detractors, in particular to Romantic nationalism. In short, I want to suggest that a fruitful way of using the notions of Enlightenment and Counter-Enlightenment is to refrain from defining them rigidly in terms of propositions and intellectuals who espouse them, but as mutually complementary positions within the modern discursive field. This field covers a range of interconnected discourses about science, rationality, man, society, authenticity, etc. that create a space for making and contesting claims, for thinking particular thoughts and for acting on them.

In suggesting this, I am in a sense following up on the suggestion made by Koselleck that Rousseau's crucial innovation was to conceive of a "temporal compensatory concept" to balance out the Enlightened reliance on progress. What his analysis of the temporal underpinnings of modernity suggests is that the innovation in the temporal imaginary that enabled the conception of a linear-progressive longing for the future, also enabled the articulation of its opposite, of a steady decline in morality to match the increased productivity and mastery over nature. In other words, the introduction of this "modern," progressive conception of time did more than simply formulate a way of looking at history. It simultaneously opened up a discursive field, a space for making claims and justifying them in relation to time. When Rousseau contested the achievements of the Enlightenment in this way, he in fact changed and enlarged the scope of this field, introducing new positions with regard to the project of the Enlightenment. If we conceive of modernity in Cooper's terms, namely as a claim-making device, then it rests on this temporal foundation of both the progressive push towards the future *and* its negative, the idea of "anti-progress" or a longing for an uncorrupted past that may (but certainly does not need to) serve as fuel for traditionalist nostalgia.

We arrive now at a point familiar from the discussion of time conceptions earlier in this chapter. There, I suggested that the structure of the standard narrative of Arab thought is premised on the progressive temporal outlook. The current discussion on the Counter-Enlightenment reiterates the point about the linear temporal idea of time making possible the kind of dialectic that we see in Arab thought since the *nahḍa*, between a modernist and a traditionalist camp. By invoking the

95 Colin Campbell, *The Romantic Ethic and the Spirit of Modern Consumerism* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1987).

Counter-Enlightenment, my aim is to add substance to this division. The temporal order is a structure, it forms the dimensions of a playing field. But this playing field only starts to make sense if we fill it in. A mere field can be used for anything; it is only when we add lines, goal posts, and, eventually, players that it starts to become meaningful as a game. Similarly, the temporal, discursive playing field only becomes meaningful if we start reading it in terms of the specific claims that are made and the people who make these claims. Enlightenment and Counter-Enlightenment may be vaguely defined, but they are recognizable bundles of claims about freedom, the worth of the individual, the relationship between people, national and cultural belonging, aesthetics, religion, and much more. The temporal structure provides the background for this substantive narrative about things that people genuinely care about.

Moreover, it is when we talk about these substantial claims that we can see how the abstract story of time applies to Arab thought and, in particular, how a subset of these claims has come to dominate Arab discussions of authenticity and define what authenticity stands for. When authenticity is invoked in Arab thought, it is generally meant to refer to the past, to tradition. Our earlier discussion of time and progress places this notion of authenticity in a binary opposition over and against modernity. It is only when this playing field takes shape that we can see more clearly what the effect of this binary opposition is, how the temporal binary hangs together with lots of other binary divisions: Secularism–religion, criticism–obedience, man–woman, West–East. In this context, authenticity is about more than mere tradition or nostalgia. It becomes a claim of identity, a claim about the need to champion the particular in opposition to both the Western Other and the universalist dismissal of specificity. At the same time, it includes a claim about meaning, about the loss of value due to the progress of society and the need to preserve meaning, truth, and beauty in the face of modernity's onslaught.

We should bear in mind that there are different ways of dealing with these problems. One is to reject or go outside the temporal model in which these problems are articulated. Here, the progressive move is not opposed by working against it, but by formulating the problematic in new ways, finding new forms of identity and meaning that do not reference the same temporal structure. This is done in certain branches of the tree of authenticity discussed above. Another reaction to the malaise of modernity is to accept this playing field and resist modernity by pulling in a different direction, towards the past. This, I argue, is what we see in traditionalist understandings of authenticity dominant in Arab thought. Claims to authentic identity of this traditionalist kind only make sense in opposition to the Other. They confirm the structure that makes their own formulation possible. If this is the case for Arab thought, if it is indeed ruled by opposite tendencies within a shared temporal discursive framework, then we may ask whether it is possible

to articulate claims of identity outside the confines of this field, whether it is possible, as Massad suggests, to formulate a "view of *turath* and modernity that is located outside this dualism, one that is not subject to their temporal peregrinations,"[96] and use this as a basis for talking about identity. As our discussion of the genealogy of authenticity has shown, one direction in which such a non-binary view of *turāth* may take us is in that of an alternative, personal kind of authenticity. Perhaps there are other ways of going beyond these confines. Clearly, however, any novel interpretation of time will almost surely involve a radical revision of the concept of authenticity. Authenticity and time are joined at the hip.[97]

96 Massad, *Desiring Arabs*, 29.

97 There is a deeper point lurking here at which I can only gesture, namely the relationship between the Counter-Enlightenment and Rousseau's articulation of the root idea of personal authenticity described above. The point is the following: One of the positions associated with the Counter-Enlightenment is the opposition to universalism and the defense of the particular. This tendency can be worked out in the culturalist sense – in terms of a propagation of national, linguistic, and cultural ties – but it can equally give rise to a rethinking of the concept of the individual as not just a rational being amongst others, but as a rational being with a particular, personal identity. In other words, the ideal of authenticity can be fruitfully read as belonging to the general sphere of the Counter-Enlightenment. Interestingly, this authenticity has also been expressed in temporal terms, as is seen for instance in the following rumination from Herder entitled "Eigenzeit," or "a time of one's own," in which he reacts to the Kantian notion of time as a transcendental form:

> Truly, each changeable thing has the measure of its time within itself; this exists, even when nothing else is there; not two things in the world have the same measure of time. My pulse, the pace or flight of my thoughts is not a time measure for others; the current of a river, the growth of a tree is not a time measurer for all rivers, trees, or plants.
> The lifetimes of the elephant and of the ephemeral are not equal to each other and how different is the measure of time in all the planets! There are, therefore (one may say this truly and boldly) in the universe at any one time uncountably many times; the time that we imagine as the measure of all things is but a relative measure in our thoughts, in the same way that with the totality of all locations of single creatures in the universe there was infinite space. (Herder, "Metakritik zur Kritik der Vernunft," 360.)

What we have here, I would suggest, is an attempt to create space for articulating a personal, authentic self by arguing against the universalistic pretensions of the Newtonian model of time and space. I will not follow up on this suggestion, because it would take us too far beyond the confines of this book, but at the very least this connection noted by Herder supports the claim that authenticity and time are inherently intertwined.

3.6 The viability of an Arab Counter-Enlightenment

Let us close the first part of this study, in which we laid the groundwork for an analysis of Arab thinkers, by recapitulating the relationship about authenticity, time, and Counter-Enlightenment in the Arab context. We will do this by looking at a recent article by Hisham Hamad and Robbert Woltering that argues against what I have just proposed we might do, namely to apply the notion of Counter-Enlightenment to Arab thought. In setting up their argument the authors focus on the central *nahḍa* figure Rifaʿat al-Ṭahṭāwī.[98] Motivating their argument is the understandable worry that, if we start reading them in terms of Western designations, thinkers like al-Ṭahṭāwī are downgraded to mere appendages of a modern Western tradition. Hamad and Woltering reject the kind of historiography that portrays *nahḍa* intellectuals as merely taking over Western ideas without relating them to the local circumstances of the societies in which they lived and worked. Against this, they show that al-Ṭahṭāwī's writings are, first and foremost, concerned with the situation in Egypt, and that they spring from local problems, influenced by local traditions of thought.

It is easy to sympathize with this argument. Intellectuals should be read against their personal background, and intellectual historiography of the Middle East has made great progress by turning in this direction and not looking at Arab, Turkish, or Persian intellectuals as mere Western surrogates. I will also grant that Hamad and Woltering's specific point is that al-Ṭahṭāwī's allegiances – like any person's – are not always clear or fixed, that he does not display a clear tendency towards either supporting the Enlightenment or opposing it. Yet, to my mind, this is not sufficient to claim that there is no use at all in invoking the Counter-Enlightenment when reading al-Ṭahṭāwī, other *nahḍa* intellectuals, or their successors. In my interpretation of this concept, the point in speaking about an Arab Counter-Enlightenment is not to categorize intellectuals into opposing camps.[99] Instead, to use this term is first and foremost a way of recognizing an

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98 Hisham Hamad and Robbert Woltering, "Télémaque, Ṭahṭāwī and the (Counter-) Enlightenment in the Arab World," *International Journal for History, Culture, and Modernity* 6 (2018): 22.

99 The benefit in applying the term as a strict measure for categorization is debatable in the case of European intellectuals too. After all, Rousseau's own mixed image as a key Enlightenment intellectual *and* the founding father of the Counter-Enlightenment shows that it is too facile to conclude from the fact that an author displays inconsistent tendencies, that he therefore cannot be read as (partly) fitting a certain paradigm. People *are* inconsistent, not only over time, but even in the kinds of things they believe, profess, or do at any single time. The same goes for the trends of which they are part. Were we to follow the rule that in order to fit a certain trend, an author needs to display near-perfect consistency, that would be the end of much of intellectual historiography.

author as relating to the kind of discourse that is part of the modern project, in particular because it evinces a progressive, linear conception of time. In this view, what is remarkable about someone like al-Ṭahṭāwī or contemporaries like al-Bustānī or Khayr al-Dīn al-Ṭunsī, is not the answers that they give to our questions about ideals we associate with the Enlightenment or its counter-image. Rather, it is the sheer fact that we are able to coherently ask questions regarding their presumed adherence to (Counter-)Enlightenment ideals *at all.*

Put differently, Hamad and Woltering take for granted something that should strike us as quite revolutionary, namely the fact that, inconsistencies notwithstanding, al-Ṭahṭāwī's ideas can be understood and classified according to the parameters of a dialectic of the Enlightenment and its detractors. The interesting question to ask with regard to al-Ṭahṭāwī and other early *nahḍa* luminaries is not whether it is possible to read them consistently as exponents of this or that European trend, but whether they help introduce the kind of vocabulary in which it becomes possible to articulate oppositions of a (Counter-)Enlightenment kind. This is not to say that the challenge posed by Hamad and Woltering is senseless. We ought still to consider whether these thinkers tend towards certain concrete positions instead of others – although we would, as Hamad and Woltering emphasize, need to ask what we stand to gain by making such distinctions. What we should keep in mind, however, is that such distinctions can only be made within a discursive landscape that is recognizably modern, a landscape that is suffused by an ideal of progress to which everyone has to react.

It is for this same reason that I believe it makes sense to read contemporary Arab thought through this lens. It is, after all, similarly premised on a distinctively modern progressive temporal sensibility. As Koselleck points out, progress is a double-edged sword: It may be taken as the *telos* of the Enlightenment, but it also gives rise to its temporal compensatory concept, the negative reading of progress formulated by Rousseau. The dialectic we find in Arab thought, now and then, between modernists and traditionalists mirrors the dialectic of the (Counter-)Enlightenment, not so much because *nahḍa* intellectuals took over the specific ideas associated with the Enlightenment and its detractors, but because they began to frame their own debates in a modern temporal framework. This is precisely what Omnia El Shakry hints at when she suggests that both the traditionalist and the modernist camp that make up contemporary Arab thought are modern. They are modern, because for them to even be able to express their opposition to each other, they need first to acknowledge a modern conception of historical time within which the concept of progress and its "temporal compensatory concept" make sense. If we understand modernity not as a set of universal enlightened ideals, in the way familiar from the standard narrative of Arab thought, but as a project that is held together by sensibilities that are linked in distinctive ways to certain vocabularies, then it

makes sense to say that, even where it criticizes the modern age, the Counter-Enlightenment is not anti-modern. It is, rather, part and parcel of a dialectic that issues from contradictions at the core of modernity. This, I take it, is also what Stephen Sheehi has in mind when he refers to people like al-Ṭahṭāwī as forming a modern epistemology for the formation of a "modern Arab subject," premised on the opposition between progress and backwardness. Modernization here does not refer to a predominance of a "progressive" orientation among Arab intellectuals, but to the institution of a paradigm that makes it possible to talk about progress and backwardness at all.

We should certainly remain attentive to the local character of al-Ṭahṭāwī's project, which was, as Hamad and Woltering point out, "about addressing the needs created by his local context of political reform, religion, rapid and radical societal change, and of course his own personal upbringing, education and experiences."[100] But it is equally true that these reforms and changes in nineteenth-century Egypt resembled a global shift. Al-Ṭahṭāwī may not have taken a clear line in opting for the Enlightenment party of progress or the Counter-Enlightenment party of spirit and values, but his explorations of the ideas of progress, and how these relate to the concept of civilization (*tamaddun*), laid the groundwork for future discussions of authenticity and modernity that bear a striking resemblance to the paradigm of Enlightenment and Counter-Enlightenment. One explanation for this is that they rely on a shared temporal frame of reference.[101]

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100 Hamad and Woltering, "Télémaque, Ṭahṭāwī and the (Counter-) Enlightenment in the Arab World," 22.

101 It is worth mentioning, in this regard, to note how similar trends of, roughly, Counter-Enlightenment thought spring up around the globe in the early twentieth century, for example in Punjab (Muhammad Iqbal), India (Rabindranath Tagore), and China (Liang Shuming) and in post-war Iran with someone like Ali Shariati and Jalal Al-e Ahmad—Andrew Webb, "The Countermodern Moment: A World-Historical Perspective on the Thought of Rabindranath Tagore, Muhammad Iqbal, and Liang Shuming," *Journal of World History* 19, no. 2 (2008): 189 – 212; Mirsepassi, *Intellectual Discourse and the Politics of Modernization: Negotiating Modernity in Iran*, 96 – 128.

Part I: Conclusion

With this discussion of concepts of time and authenticity and how they shape the Arabic discursive landscape, we have reached the end of the first part of this book. We began in Chapter 1 by painting a picture of the standard narrative and how it assumes a recurring binary of authenticity and modernity as a framework for understanding the debates that have dominated Arab intellectual discourse. In Chapter 2, we began chipping away at this standard narrative, first by relativizing the importance of the crisis of 1967 as a starting point for contemporary Arab thought; then by suggesting that Arab debates about authenticity ought to be read also as expressions of a global turn towards authenticity; and finally by discussing alternative conceptions of authenticity articulated by three contemporary Arab thinkers – Shukrī ʿAyyād, Fuʾād Zakariyyā, and ʿAzīz al-ʿAẓma. In Chapter 3, we took our cue from these lively yet largely neglected Arab discussions of authenticity to look at the temporal structure that underlies the standard narrative. We looked at how modernity may be conceived as a project supported by a particular linear-progressive conception of time, and how, given this temporal framework, a form of binary thinking that pits authenticity over and against modernity seems natural. Next, we looked at how, in contrast to the relatively simplistic culturalist conception of authenticity prevalent in Arab thought, this concept is in fact an ideal distinctive of modernity that has given rise to an abundance of different interpretations that have particular ethical significance. In conclusion, we saw how the relation between the culturalist interpretation of authenticity and the more individualistic interpretations may be read as an effect of what has in retrospect been dubbed the Counter-Enlightenment. Moreover, I argued why it is legitimate to apply this concept to some of the intellectual developments in the Arab world over the previous two centuries, namely as an effect of a secular trend in the shaping of a modern intellectual discourse in Arabic that is based in part on the modern conceptions of time discussed earlier in this chapter.

These three chapters (together with the Introduction) have laid the groundwork for part II of this book, in which we will take an in-depth look at three Arab thinkers: Zakī Najīb Maḥmūd, Adonis, and ʿAbd al-Raḥmān Ṭāhā. Building on our discussion of the standard narrative, the Arab contestations of this narrative, and the examinations of time, authenticity, and modernity, we will explore how these concepts are used in their writings, particularly those on *turāth.* Rather than take for granted the standard narrative depiction of an opposition between authenticity and modernity, the next three chapters present a critical review of how each author uses these concepts. As we will see, each of them recognizes the problematic nature of the opposition between authenticity and modernity,

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but whereas Maḥmūd tries tackle this problem head-on, namely by finding a pragmatic solution for deciding which “authentic” and which “modern” aspects a society should respects or introduce, Adonis and Ṭāhā suggest a different way of coping with the authenticity–modernity problematic. Instead of acknowledging this as a necessary opposition, these two authors, each in their own way, try to redefine the problem at hand. By adopting a different, non-linear conception of time, they change the meaning of these terms in such a way that authenticity and modernity are no longer in conflict with each other. While these coming chapters may be read as individual analyses of Arab thinkers, they collectively serve a higher aim announced in the Introduction. There, it was argued that it is not just possible but desirable to articulate different ways of understanding Arab thought that go beyond the familiar paradigm. The analyses in Part II do just that; without wanting to present anything like a definitive reading of Arab thought, they show how it is possible to present Arab thinkers and the problems they engage with in a new light by looking at the broader discursive landscape in which they operate. Such analysis is able to show not just how they react to ongoing debates, but also how they may reconfigure them by redefining some fundamental concepts of Arabic intellectual discourse.

Part II

4 Zakī Najīb Maḥmūd: Searching for the golden mean

In the first of three encounters with contemporary Arab philosophers, we take a closer look at Zakī Najīb Maḥmūd. This Egyptian philosopher provides a convenient starting point. He has gained renown throughout the Arab world particularly through his many books and articles in which he comments on the *turāth* debate, and judging by the new editions of his writings that continue to be published, he is still read today.[1] Also, his perspective on the problematic of *turāth* is as close as it gets to the standard narrative described in Chapter 1. His views on the topic of *turāth*, which he began to articulate in the early 1960s, were built on and promoted the opposition between authenticity and modernity that is the backbone of contemporary Arab thought. Added to that, Maḥmūd links this conception of *turāth* explicitly to a linear view of time and to his abiding faith in progress. This progressive temporal imaginary plays a pivotal role in his treatment of *turāth* and is essential to understanding his view of authenticity, if not his entire philosophy. In a sense, then, Maḥmūd's writings on *turāth* can be read as a microcosm of the "evolutionary temporal schema" that, as Joseph Massad argued, has guided modern Arab thought. Our analysis of Maḥmūd, besides offering the most extensive treatment of his thought in the English language so far, thus elaborates and demonstrates the structure of the standard narrative, and creates a benchmark for our subsequent inquiries into the works of Adonis and ʿAbd al-Raḥmān Ṭāhā.

The chapter is divided into three parts. The first provides some background about Maḥmūd's past and his influence in the Arab context. Following this general introduction, we take a closer look at the logical-positivist underpinnings of his worldview. This philosophical context is then used to analyze Maḥmūd's conception of time and his uncompromising faith in an ideal of human progress. In the second part, we take a look at the pivotal work in his oeuvre on *turāth: Tajdīd al-Fikr al-ʿArabī* (*The Renewal of Arab Thought;* henceforth *The Renewal*). A detailed study of this work, together with the theoretical background presented in the first part, will set us up for a discussion of Maḥmūd's views of time and authenticity. It will be argued that his work displays two principal time conceptions, both of which arise from the linear-progressive temporal framework, and that his views of authenticity can be differentiated accordingly. At times, authenticity is

1 It is worth mentioning that he is surprisingly well-represented on YouTube as well, with videos made during his lifetime, as well as more recent discussions of his work by older and younger generations of Arabs.

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presented as whatever lies irredeemably in the past, whereas at others, authenticity is held up as a source of values in an otherwise valueless world. In this way, Maḥmūd demonstrates the opposite pull of two claims of modernity: progressive rationalism, as well as more Romantically inclined misgivings about technological and social progressivism.

4.1 Zakī Najīb Maḥmūd: Some background

4.1.1 Biography

Zakī Najīb Maḥmūd was born in Egypt on 1 February 1905 in the village of Mīt al-Khūlī ʿAbd Allah, near the coastal city of Damietta, at the mouth of the Nile. He was sent to the traditional *madrasa* before attending primary school in Cairo, where his father worked as a cleric for the Sudanese Government. This job forced the Maḥmūds to relocate to Khartoum, where Zakī attended Gordon College, a colonial institution where he was not only taught primarily in English, but also acquired a worldview oriented towards British culture that would mark his career.[2] Maḥmūd describes himself as a rebellious type in his early teens, someone moved by his immediate urges and without any clear direction in his life.[3] This stopped when he returned to Cairo in 1925 to begin his studies at the High Teachers' School (Madrasat al-Muʿallimīn al-ʿUlyā). He describes this period as a rational awakening, a time during which he was introduced to all that was new and interesting in the cultural and scientific scene at the time.[4]

After his graduation in 1930, Maḥmūd became a teacher, first in Damietta and later in Cairo. During this time, he further cultivated his interest in philosophy, writing introductions to the thought of various Western philosophers for the cultural magazine *al-Risāla.* Interestingly, his writing at the time was steeped in the kind of metaphysical ideas that his later, logical-positivist self would vehemently reject. His first publication of the 1930s, for example, was an article entitled "A

2 A useful tabulated overview of Maḥmūd's personal history can be found in Zakī Najīb Maḥmūd, *Min Khizānat Awrāqī* (Dār al-Hidāya, 1996), 11–13. When not referenced, the dates and events described in what follows have been taken from this overview. Also, it should be noted that all of the works by Maḥmūd referenced here were written in Arabic. Translations of these works are my own.

3 Saʿīd Murād, *Zakī Najīb Maḥmūd: Ārāʾ wa-Afkār* (Cairo: Maktabat al-Anjlū al-Miṣriyya, 1997), 32.

4 Zakī Najīb Maḥmūd, *Qiṣṣat ʿAql* (Cairo: Dar al-Shurūq, 1983), 12–16.

Study of Sufism" ("Dars fī al-Taṣawwuf"), which was followed by more articles indicating skepticism about the ability of the senses to serve as a yardstick for truth and as an aspiration to travel to the "world of spirit" (*ʿālam al-rūḥ*).[5] This metaphysical, idealist, quasi-Sufi orientation, however, should not be interpreted as an indication of quietism, of turning away from the *nahḍa* project of modernization. As Fāṭima Ismāʿīl emphasizes in her discussion of this early period, the underlying goal was to change reality for the better through philosophical reflection on the problems of the modern Arab world.[6] This emphasis on the practical applicability of philosophy remains with Maḥmūd throughout his life, and is expressed evocatively in an article written in the 1960s entitled "With Which Philosophy Shall We Proceed?" ("Bi-ayy Falsafa Nasīr?), in which he contrasts the idealist philosophical mode of ruminating on first principles with a mode of philosophy that uses these abstractions to effect real change.[7]

Maḥmūd's writings caught the attention of the journal's editor, the reform-minded public intellectual Aḥmad Amīn. Like Maḥmūd, Amīn thought it crucial to introduce the Arab reading public to Western culture. To this end they published a popular history of philosophy and of world literature, as well as several other works through the years.[8] Between 1944 and 1947, Maḥmūd lived in London as a doctoral student in philosophy. The plan was to write a dissertation on the topic of *Self-Determination* – the eventual title of the dissertation. The setup for this project was very much rooted in the Zakī Najīb Maḥmūd of the 1930s, with his orientation towards metaphysics. In exploring and substantiating the idea of a free individual self, he uses an ontologically thick description of the self as consisting in both a stable and a changing aspect; he refers to "the nature of the constitution of the actor" or how "willful acts express that nature" and how this undergirds a "process of realizing the self." All of these concepts, as ʿAbd al-Bāsiṭ Sīdā notes in his study of logical positivism and Arabic heritage, would be rejected by the Zakī Najīb Maḥmūd of the 1950s.[9]

As Maḥmūd notes in the introduction to the Arabic translation of his dissertation, the Humean and behaviorist principles that he opposed in his dissertation

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5 Maḥmūd, *Min Khizānat Awrāqī*, 34. Other articles from this period are included in the same volume. For a useful summary of these early articles, see Fāṭima Ismāʿīl, *al-Tafkīr al-Falsafī ʿind Zakī Najīb Maḥmūd…Manhaj wa-Taṭbīquhu* (Cairo: al-Hayʾa al-Miṣriyya al-ʿĀmma li-l-Kitāb, 2013), 15–30.
6 Ismāʿīl, *al-Tafkīr al-Falsafī ʿind Zakī Najīb Maḥmūd…Manhaj wa-Taṭbīquhu*, 26.
7 Zakī Najīb Maḥmūd, "Bi-ayy Falsafa Nasīr?," in *Wijhat Naẓar* (Windsor, UK: Hindāwī, 2017), 187–98.
8 Maḥmūd, *Qiṣṣat ʿAql*, 31–32.
9 ʿAbd al-Bāsiṭ Sīdā, *al-Waḍʿiyya al-Manṭiqiyya wa-l-Turāth al-ʿArabī: Namūdhaj Fikr Zakī Najīb Maḥmūd al-Falsafī* (Beirut: Dār al-Farābī, 1990), 41.

were the foundation for his later philosophical thinking.[10] For the cause of this turn and the start of a new phase in his intellectual development we must look to these momentous years spent at King's College London. The decidedly anti-metaphysical school of logical positivism – also referred to as logical empiricism in the British context – was a major force in British philosophical circles at the time. One of its leading voices was the young Alfred Jules Ayer, whose *Truth and Logic*, published in 1936, propelled him to the forefront of British philosophy when he was only 26 years of age. It was, Maḥmūd tells us, Ayer's inaugural lecture as head of the faculty of philosophy at the University of London, that converted him to logical-positivism.[11] Although his newly adopted worldview is not yet obvious in the 1947 dissertation, the new creed would dominate his thinking during the 1950s. Returning to Egypt to take a job as an associate professor at Cairo University, Maḥmūd published three books on philosophy. The titles of these works clearly carry the stamp of Ayer's positivist approach to philosophy – the respective titles being *al-Manṭiq al-Waḍʿī* (*Positivist Logic*), 1951, *Khurāfat al-Mītāfīzīqā* (*The Nonsense of Metaphysics*), 1953,[12] and *Naḥw Falsafa ʿIlmiyya* (*Towards a Scientific Philosophy*), 1958. During this decade, Maḥmūd also spent a considerable amount of time in the United States, both as a visiting fellow at various universities and as a cultural attaché at the Egyptian embassy.[13]

The clearest expression of his *motivation* for adopting the logical-positivist outlook is found in his introduction to logical positivism that he wrote after his return from England. Here, he describes logical positivism as the philosophy most closely aligned with the modern "scientific spirit" (*al-rūḥ al-ʿilmī*).[14] Philosophy, in this view, does not aspire to uncover any deeper structure of meaning behind the way the world appears to us, nor does it construct elaborate metaphysical structures. Instead, it serves as the handmaiden of science by clarifying the meaning of terms through analysis. In other words, the objective which he shared with

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10 Zakī Najīb Maḥmūd and Imām ʿAbd al-Fattāḥ Imām, *Riḥla fī Fikr Zakī Najīb Maḥmūd maʿa Naṣṣ Risalātih ʿan al-Jabr al-Dhātī*, trans. Imām ʿAbd al-Fattāḥ Imām (al-Majlis al-Aʿlā li-l-Thaqāfa, 1973), 252. This book contains an Arabic translation of Maḥmūd's dissertation, which was written in English.

11 Maḥmūd, *Qiṣṣat ʿAql*, 56.

12 The rather confrontational title of this work caused quite a backlash in Egyptian intellectual circles at the time. As Maḥmūd explains, he tried to accommodate his critics by changing the title of subsequent editions to "A Position on Metaphysics" (*Mawqif min al-Mītāfīzīqā*)—see Maḥmūd, *Qiṣṣat ʿAql*, 111.

13 These experiences were recorded in Zakī Najīb Maḥmūd, *Ayyām fī Amrīkā* (Cairo: al-Hayʾa al-Miṣriyya al-ʿĀmma li-l-Kitāb, 2011).

14 Zakī Najīb Maḥmūd, *al-Manṭiq al-Waḍʿī* (Cairo: Maktabat al-Anjlū al-Miṣriyya, 1951) Introduction (no page number).

other liberal reformers, namely to modernize Arab society through modernizing its thought, remained set. What changed was that he now identified logical-positivism as the most suitable *means* for achieving this goal.

Whether this shift in Maḥmūd's thinking was already in the making, or really the effect of a sudden conversion, is hard to divine. As Sīdā remarks, the break with his metaphysical stage is not as complete as it may appear. His earlier period was already marked by the clarity of meaning and expression that is evident in his style of writing throughout his life.[15] Also, the thorough discussion of Hume in his dissertation made him intimately familiar with the kind of empiricist framework of which Ayer theory is a twentieth- century heir.[16] This may have made it easier for Maḥmūd to appreciate arguments in favor of a logical-positivist outlook. Moreover, its association with modern scientific inquiry suited the kind of liberal modernizing spirit of a Western orientation that he had demonstrated before his move to England, for example in the publications of translations from English together with Aḥmad Amīn. Lacking a more detailed study of Maḥmūd's time spent in England, these remain mere conjectures.[17] It is obvious, however, that his conception of philosophy witnesses a fundamental change following his return to Egypt.

In 1960, Maḥmūd was made professor at Cairo University, a position he held until his retirement in 1965. This period is marked by another change in his orientation, if not in his entire philosophical project. Where the 1950s were taken up with setting out the logical-positivist project and making it accessible to the Arab public, the 1960s are a time when Maḥmūd becomes interested in the Arab-Islamic intellectual heritage. This part of his life is often portrayed as the "third stage" of his philosophical career. Whether the turn to *turāth* in fact signals the same kind of break as the earlier one between a metaphysical and an anti-metaphysical stage is open to discussion. One may side with Sīdā and Ṣādiq Jalāl al-ʿAẓm (to whom the former attributes this view) that Maḥmūd, at root, remains

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15 Sīdā, *al-Waḍʿiyya al-Manṭiqiyya wa-l-Turāth al-ʿArabī: Namūdhaj Fikr Zakī Najīb Maḥmūd al-Falsafī*, 42.

16 Ayer, in fact, refers to his own theory as logical-*empiricism*, rather than logical-positivism. The boundaries between the two are so fluid that they make the two trends indistinguishable to all intents and purposes – see R. Creath, "Logical Empiricism," in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 2022, https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/logical-empiricism/.

17 Sīdā, in a section entitled "Why does Zakī Najīb Maḥmūd reject metaphysics?," does not quite answer this question. That is to say, he reports how Maḥmūd echoes Ayer's argument (based on the claims of the early Wittgenstein) that propositions expressing metaphysical claims are unverifiable and therefore devoid of meaning – see Sīdā, *al-Waḍʿiyya al-Manṭiqiyya wa-l-Turāth al-ʿArabī: Namūdhaj Fikr Zakī Najīb Maḥmūd al-Falsafī*, 115–17. This, however, does not give any further answer as to why this argument had such force for Maḥmūd at the time.

wedded to the logical-positivist outlook, and merely applies it to a new field.[18] A different question is what caused this turn to *turāth.* Ḥasan Ḥanafī, a former student of Maḥmūd at the Cairo University, mentions three hypotheses in this regard. First, he mentions Maḥmūd's taking up a position as a professor at Kuwait University in 1968, where he encountered libraries stocked with many works belonging to the Islamic heritage. Ḥanafī also notes Maḥmūd's own admission that the Arab nationalist mood of the 1950s had already prompted him and many other intellectuals to read up on their Arab history, as well as the increased attention to questions of religion and religious identity beginning in the 1960s, as a background for his interest in *turāth.* A second hypothesis offered by Ḥanafī refers to the catastrophe of 1967 as a common motive for changing from a secular to a more religious and *turāth*-oriented mindset. A third hypothesis for Maḥmūd's transformation into a student and critic of *turāth* may have been his realization that his logical-positivist writings had been too elitist, and failed to address the general public wedded to their heritage. Ḥanafī does not express a preference for any one of these hypotheses. He does echo Sīdā's judgment on the earlier move from metaphysics to anti-metaphysical logical-positivism in claiming the move to *turāth* as a continuous development, rather than a radical break with the earlier orientation, although he also notes Maḥmūd's own inconclusive and contradictory statements about what moved him in this new direction.[19]

We will be in a better position to judge the origins and implications of the turn to *turāth* following a deeper discussion of his writings. What is beyond discussion is that the discussion of *turāth* would occupy the remainder of his career, which stretched into the 1990s. As mentioned, after a short stint as an emeritus, Maḥmūd again became a professor of philosophy, this time at Kuwait University, where he stayed until 1973. Afterwards, he returned to Cairo, where he gained more popular recognition writing weekly columns for the state newspaper *al-Ahrām* that, for the most part, discussed the role of Arab-Islamic heritage in a modern age. He remained active as a public intellectual for the rest of his life, both in and outside Egypt, attending many conferences, receiving various honors from academic institutions and generally promoting the cause of the renewal of Arab thought.[20] Zakī Najīb Maḥmūd died on 8 September 1993.

18 Sīdā, *al-Waḍʿiyya al-Manṭiqiyya wa-l-Turāth al-ʿArabī: Namūdhaj Fikr Zakī Najīb Maḥmūd al-Falsafī*, 57.

19 Ḥasan Ḥanafī, *Hiwār al-Ajyāl* (Cairo: Dār al-Qabbāʾ, 1998), 229–33.

20 Maḥmūd, *Min Khizānat Awrāqī*, 13.

4.1.2 Influence

Maḥmūd's influence on Arab thought should not be underestimated. "He has," as ʿAzīz al-ʿAẓma already wrote during Maḥmūd's lifetime, "a vast readership."[21] The many eulogies published after his death in 1993 praise him not only as a "pyramid of culture" in the Egyptian intellectual scene, but as a major force in the entire Arab world.[22] The latter is attested to by ʿAbd al-Raḥmān Ṭāhā, who mentions that when in the late 1980s he returned to Morocco to work as a lecturer after having attained his PhD in France, he found Maḥmūd's logical-positivism to be very influential among the faculty at the university in Rabat.[23] Until this day his works are widely read, and new printings of his works continue to line the shelves of Cairo's major bookstores.[24]

Whether his fame and recognition also led to the acceptance of his ideas is a different matter. Certainly, several eulogies published in 1993 doubted that this was the case. This negative view of his influence in steering Arab discourse and thought towards a more rationalist course was apparently shared by Maḥmūd himself during the final years of his life.[25] The growing clout of Islamists and their intimidation of intellectuals is likely to have added to his worries late in life. Although he never experienced an attempt on his life, like the unsuccessful attack against Nobel Prize-winning author Naguib Mahfouz or the tragic assassination of Farag Foda, he did get embroiled in an argument with the popular sheikh Muḥammad Mitwallī al-Shaʿrāwī, who accused Maḥmūd of unbelief after the latter had questioned the scientific merit of a hadith about the effects that flies may have on human health.[26]

21 Aziz al-Azmeh, *Islams and Modernities*, 3rd ed. (London/New York: Verso, 2009), 112.

22 Margot Scheffold, *Authentisch arabisch und dennoch modern? Zakī Nağib Maḥmūds kulturtheoretische Essayistik als Beitrag zum euro-arabischen Dialog* (Berlin: Klaus Schwarz Verlag, 1996), 95–96.

23 ʿAbd al-Raḥmān Ṭāhā, *al-Lisān wa-l-Mīzān aw al-Takawthur al-ʿAqlī*, 3rd ed. (Beirut: al-Markaz al-Thaqāfī al-ʿArabī, 2012), 13–14.

24 As an illustration of his influence on the development on Arab thought, and on the *turāth* debate in particular, it is perhaps not altogether coincidental that all three of the major Arab philosophy conferences after 1967, the 1971 and 1984 conferences in Cairo and the one in Kuwait in 1974, were organized in the two cities where Maḥmūd had worked as a professor. All conferences took *turāth* and the opposition between authenticity and modernity as their theme, and framed this problematic in terms that carry more than a passing resemblance to Maḥmūd's depiction of this problematic.

25 Scheffold, *Authentisch arabisch und dennoch modern? Zakī Nağib Maḥmūds kulturtheoretische Essayistik als Beitrag zum euro-arabischen Dialog*, 100–1.

26 For Maḥmūd's account of this episode, see Maḥmūd, *Qiyam min al-Turāth*, 154–63.

While Maḥmūd first gained recognition as a proponent of logical-positivism, it was for his later writings on *turāth* and the question of how to square the demands of authenticity with the need to modernize that he would be remembered most after his death.[27] No doubt, part of Maḥmūd's appeal to the Arab reading public is due to his clear and refined style of writing. In a book like *Qiṣṣat Nafs* (*Story of a Self*) he deftly uses a quasi-literary point of view to describe the course of his life until then. Throughout his writings he makes use of the first person to engage his readers at a personal level. At other times, he addresses his reader directly in order to motivate or chastise them. Through short stories, anecdotes, and imagined historical dialogue he tries to present his readings of *turāth* to a broad audience. His writings are full of evocative imagery, even if these references are at times a bit far-fetched; they include metaphors relating culture to the growth of trees, the flow of water, nourishment, and human dwellings.[28] It is little wonder that he is remembered as "the philosopher of the novelists and the novelist of the philosophers" (*faylasūf al-udabāʾ wa-adīb al-falāsifa*).[29]

Despite his importance to Arab thought, not much attention has been paid to Maḥmūd in Western literature. When he is mentioned he is often characterized as a straightforward Arab proponent of Western liberal ideas. Hans Jansen penned a couple of lively introductory articles in the 1970s in which the author's admiration for Maḥmūd's rationalism and his disdain for excessive metaphysical thinking come to the fore.[30] Maḥmūd is treated at considerable length by Leonard Binder in a chapter titled "The Hermeneutic of Authenticity" as "a courageous and outspoken defender of liberalism."[31] This consideration of Maḥmūd as a liberal and as a

27 Scheffold, *Authentisch arabisch und dennoch modern? Zakī Naǧīb Maḥmūds kulturtheoretische Essayistik als Beitrag zum euro-arabischen Dialog*, 103.

28 Margot Scheffold mentions some of these elements; see Scheffold, 292–302.

29 Muṣṭafā Ṭāhir, "'Faylasūf al-Udabāʾ wa-Adīb al-Falāsifa'…27 ʿĀman ʿalā Raḥīl Zakī Najīb Maḥmūd," *al-Ahrām*, August 9, 2020, gate.ahram.org.eg/News/2459007.aspx. See also the monograph with the same title: ʿAbd al-Qādir Maḥmūd, *Zakī Najīb Maḥmūd…Faylasūf al-Udabāʾ wa-Adīb al-Falāsifa* (Cairo: Dār al-Maʿārif, 1993). For a deeper discussion of Maḥmūd's aesthetic literary sensibility and his literary criticism, see Sāmir Munīr ʿĀmir, "al-Qirāʾa al-Tadhawwuqiyya min Khilāl al-Falsafa al-Waḍʿiyya ʿind Zakī Najīb Maḥmūd," *al-Fuṣūl* 9, no. 3–4 (1991): 67–80, and Ḥasan Yūsuf Ṭāhā, "Zakī Najīb Maḥmūd: al-Fann bayn al-Naqd wa-l-Tadhawwuq," *al-Fann al-Muʿāsir*, no. 11–12 (2011): 257–70.

30 J.J.G. Jansen, "Een westers filosoof in Egypte: Zaki Naguib Mahmoud," *Amersfoortse Stemmen* 59, no. 1 (1978): 2–16; J.J.G. Jansen, "The Philosophical Development of Zakī Nagīb Maḥmūd," *Bibliotheca Orientalis* 34, no. 5–6 (1977): 289–300.

31 Leonard Binder, *Islamic Liberalism* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1988), 299. This sentiment is shared by Halim Barakat in his more succinct discussion of Maḥmūd: Halim Barakat, *The Arab World: Society, Culture, and State* (Berkeley/Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1993), 257.

"secularist according to a Western mold" is shared by Anke von Kügelgen in her study of Maḥmūd's interpretation of Averroës (Ibn Rushd).[32] In a more recent article on the central question in Arab philosophy of the relationship between religion and science, Von Kügelgen returns to Maḥmūd to show how, notwithstanding the different phases in his philosophical development, he has continued to advocate a separation between science and religion as two autonomous fields of human inquiry.[33] Geert Hendrich also discusses Maḥmūd at some length. While he agrees with Von Kügelgen and Binder in understanding him as a liberal in that he argues for pluralism, parliamentary democracy, and equality between the sexes, he also faults him for a conservative unwillingness to engage in serious critique. Maḥmūd, in his opinion, pairs a rather naive faith in the blessings of modern science and technology with a selective reading of Arab-Islamic history that buttresses his claim to revive the rationalist elements in *turāth.*[34] Surprisingly, Maḥmūd's work is covered only minimally in the general surveys of Arab thought. Issa Boullata and Elizabeth Kassab only discuss very briefly his contribution to the 1971 conference in Cairo. Kassab also mentions his participation in the 1974 conference in Kuwait, and describes him as equating Arab culture with religion and opposing it to Western culture in a "confrontation between reason and religion." Ibrahim Abu-Rabi' does mention Maḥmūd on several occasions, but he does not discuss his work, categorizing him only as a proponent of the liberal Enlightenment.[35]

The philosophy professor Muhammad Ali Khalidi is one of the few Western commentators who has focused on Maḥmūd's logical positivism instead of his better-known writings on *turāth.* In an article on Maḥmūd's book titled "Towards a Scientific Philosophy," he introduces Maḥmūd to his Western readers as being "almost single-handedly responsible for transmitting the ideas of the Vienna Circle and logical empiricism to the Arab world."[36] Majid Fakhry also portrays Maḥmūd as "the best-known Arab exponent of positivism," although this focus on his pre-*turāth* phase may be due to the fact that Fakhry, quite incorrectly, re-

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32 von Kügelgen, *Averroes und die arabische Moderne – Ansätze zu einer Neubegründung des Rationalismus*, 299.

33 von Kügelgen, "Konflikt, Harmonie oder Autonomie? Das Verhältnis von Wissenschaft, Philosophie und Religion," 108–12.

34 Hendrich, *Islam und Aufklärung: Der Modernediskurs in der arabischen Philosophie*, 177.

35 Abu-Rabi', *Contemporary Arab Thought: Studies in Post-1967 Arab Intellectual History*, 107; Kassab, *Contemporary Arab Thought: Cultural Critique in Comparative Perspective*, 120–22; Boullata, *Trends and Issues in Contemporary Arab Thought*, 13–14.

36 Muhammad Ali Khalidi, "Zakī Najīb Maḥmūd (d. 1993), Naḥwa Falsafa ʿIlmiyya (Toward a Scientific Philosophy)," in *Oxford Handbook of Islamic Philosophy*, ed. Khaled El-Rouayheb and Sabine Schmidtke (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 682.

cords 1975 as the year of Maḥmūd's death, cutting short his career as one of the main voices in the *turāth* debate until his actual passing in 1993 by eighteen years.[37] Another author who pays serious attention to Maḥmūd's logical positivist phase is Jean-Pierre Nakhlé. In a well-researched recent study, he insightfully relates the Maḥmūd of the 1950s to his later incarnation as a cultural critic, to show some of the links between these two phases.[38]

The most thorough engagement with the ideas of Zakī Najīb Maḥmūd in Western academia is Margot Scheffold's dissertation on the problematic of authenticity and modernity in Maḥmūd's thought. In the end, her assessment of him does not differ qualitatively from those previously mentioned. His oeuvre is presented as revolving around the opposition between contemporaneity and authenticity. Scheffold concurs that Maḥmūd displays clear liberal, secular, and scientific sensibilities, but she sees these as not entirely compatible with his nationalist streak.[39] Scheffold is impressed by this Arab intellectual who makes the effort "to examine 'his own heritage' as critically as he examines the foreign phenomena [that present] a challenge."[40] She regards his reflections on authenticity (*aṣāla*) and contemporaneity (*muʿāsara*) as "an exemplary contribution for safeguarding peace" due to their potential to articulate and help overcome this fundamental opposition in contemporary Arab thought.[41]

The number of books and articles describing, summarizing, praising, or criticizing Maḥmūd's works in Arabic is huge, and may be taken as an indication of the central role that Maḥmūd has played, at least in intellectual circles. Hence, a selection of some of these works will have to suffice as an illustration of Maḥmūd's pivotal role in Arab thought.[42] His most prominent acolyte is probably his star pupil ʿĀṭif al-ʿIrāqī, who has praised his former teacher in various publications and defended his legacy posthumously against critics.[43] A younger sympathetic student of

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37 Majid Fakhry, *A History of Islamic Philosophy*, 3rd ed (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 388.

38 Jean-Pierre Nakhlé, *Le déclin du discours métaphysique dans la pensée arabe contemporaine: essai sur le positivisme de Zakî Najîb Maḫmūd* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2017).

39 Scheffold, *Authentisch arabisch und dennoch modern? Zakī Nağīb Maḥmūds kulturtheoretische Essayistik als Beitrag zum euro-arabischen Dialog*, 314–15.

40 Scheffold, *Authentisch arabisch und dennoch modern? Zakī Nağīb Maḥmūds kulturtheoretische Essayistik als Beitrag zum euro-arabischen Dialog*, 315.

41 Scheffold, *Authentisch arabisch und dennoch modern? Zakī Nağīb Maḥmūds kulturtheoretische Essayistik als Beitrag zum euro-arabischen Dialog*, 320–21.

42 A useful overview with summaries of some of the books and dissertations published about Maḥmūd can be found in Maḥmūd, *Min Khizānat Awrāqī*, 337–80.

43 Margot Scheffold mentions his defense of Maḥmūd's legacy; see Scheffold, *Authentisch arabisch und dennoch modern? Zakī Nağīb Maḥmūds kulturtheoretische Essayistik als Beitrag zum euro-ara-*

Maḥmūd's philosophical project is Saʿīd Murād, whose monograph provides a clear overview of Maḥmūd's development as a thinker, as well as the main aspects of his thinking; his positive rendering of Maḥmūd's philosophical project was commended by al-ʿIrāqī in the introduction to this book.[44] Notably, there are several monographs that focus specifically on the methodological aspects of his work and the changes in his philosophical methodology that mark the various phases of his career. The works by Usāma ʿAlī Ḥasan al-Mūsa and Fāṭima Ismāʿīl are representative in this regard, although both of these books can also be read as a thorough study of Maḥmūd's development as an intellectual generally.[45]

A detached and very informative account of Maḥmūd's philosophy was written by the previously mentioned ʿAbd al-Bāsiṭ Sīdā. Concentrating on the logical-positivist angle, both before and after Maḥmūd's turn to *turāth*, Sīdā concludes that instead of presenting a philosophy that is recognizably Maḥmūdian, his writings offer a pastiche of utilitarian, empiricist, Enlightenment, and logical-positivist ideas. He adds that Maḥmūd does not take any position on these topics, preferring to shine his light without advocating any single position.[46] This mercurial character leads to instability and contradictions even within a single book like *Tajdīd al-Fikr al-ʿArabī* (*The Renewal of Arab Thought*), to the extent that it may appear as if the book is a collection of essays by several authors.[47] In a comprehensive evaluation, he adds several other points of critique that pertain to Maḥmūd's project as a whole.[48] For example, he faults Maḥmūd for making very general and unsubstantiated claims, for uncritically adopting the West as a model for Arab society, and for transposing the many real social problems plaguing Arab societies into a

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bischen Dialog, 104–5. For the most comprehensive work by al-ʿIrāqī on his teacher, see ʿĀṭif al-ʿIrāqī, *Rāʾid al-Tanwīr Zakī Najīb Maḥmūd: Dhikrāyātī al-Falsafiyya wa-l-Adabiyya maʿa al-Mufakkir wa-l-Insān* (Cairo: Dār al-Hānī, 2007).

44 *Murād, Zakī Najīb Maḥmūd: Ārāʾ wa-Afkār.*

45 Ismāʿīl, *al-Tafkīr al-Falsafī ʿind Zakī Najīb Maḥmūd…Manhaj wa-Taṭbīquhu*; Usāma ʿAlī Ḥasan al-Mūsa, *al-Mufāraqāt al-Manhajiyya fī Fikr Zakī Najīb Maḥmūd* (Kuwait: Majlis al-Nashr al-ʿIlmī, 1997).

46 Sīdā, *al-Waḍʿiyya al-Manṭiqiyya wa-l-Turāth al-ʿArabī: Namūdhaj Fikr Zakī Najīb Maḥmūd al-Falsafī*, 13.

47 Sīdā, *al-Waḍʿiyya al-Manṭiqiyya wa-l-Turāth al-ʿArabī: Namūdhaj Fikr Zakī Najīb Maḥmūd al-Falsafī*, 270. The mercurial (*ziʾbaqiyya*) nature of Maḥmūd's writings, also ascribed to him by Tayyib Tīzīnī (ibid., 278), is fleshed out in more detail by Ghālī Shukrī in an article in which he rather harshly criticizes the pro-Western, bourgeois orientation of Maḥmūd as the source of his lack of political commitment and the ease with which he has adapted his ideological commitments to the political situation current at the time – see Ghālī Shukrī, "Zakī Najīb Maḥmūd: al-ʿAql al-Murāwigh," *al-Nāqid* 29 (1990): 30–37.

48 Sīdā, *al-Waḍʿiyya al-Manṭiqiyya wa-l-Turāth al-ʿArabī: Namūdhaj Fikr Zakī Najīb Maḥmūd al-Falsafī*, 257–89.

one-size-fits-all model that can be solved simply by using clear language and adhering to the latest science and technology.

In his evaluation, Sīdā often echoes the critique of the Marxist intellectual Ṭayyib Tīzīnī. The latter was one of the earliest critics of Maḥmūd's philosophy of *turāth.* In a response to Maḥmūd's lecture at the 1974 Kuwait conference, he argues that the principal mistake in his thinking is an idealist conception of history that distorts the relationship between intellectual and manual labor, thereby stunting social progress. Relatedly, he points out that the radical break that Maḥmūd envisions between the natural sciences and the arts denies any active role for the latter in shaping civilization and allowing it to progress – in Tīzīnī's words, he does not uncover "the epistemological function of art and poetry" (*al-waẓīfa al-maʿrifiyya li-l-fann wa-l-shiʿr*).[49] Another prominent intellectual who reacted early to Maḥmūd's turn to *turāth* is Fuʾād Zakariyyā. While his thorough review of *The Renewal of Arab Thought* praises the author's bravery in writing such a quaint and thought-provoking analysis of *turāth*, he questions whether Maḥmūd is true to his intention of studying the Arab-Islamic tradition from the inside. He remains rather detached from his own heritage, looking to the West for inspiration in construing a rational and modern society.[50] Moreover, Zakariyyā is sceptical about Maḥmūd's radical binary division between a rational Western and an irrational Eastern culture, arguing that it does not do justice to how these elements are intertwined in all cultures. The attempt to separate the two leads Maḥmūd to contradict himself on various occasions, for example, attributing to Arab-Islamic culture a perfect balance of the rational and the sentimental aspects of human nature while also rejecting its tendency to doubt the universality of natural laws.[51]

Overall, Maḥmūd's work on *turāth* from the early 1970s onwards is well received by critics, and he has carved out an important spot in these debates, particularly through his popularization of the phrase "Authenticity and contemporaneity" to denote the kind of problematic central to the *turāth* discourse. The abiding popularity of this phrase is evident in the title of the 1984 conference discussed earlier, as it carried "Authenticity and Contemporaneity" as its subtitle. Although Maḥmūd did not feature at the 1984 conference in Cairo, his prominence as a voice in the *turāth* debate does shine through, in particular in the article by the Moroccan philosopher Muḥammad ʿAzīz al-Ḥabbābī (Lahbabi). He singles out Maḥmūd's book *Thaqāfatunā fī Muwājahat al-ʿAṣr* (*Our Culture in Opposition to the Age*), and in particular the question it asks as to whether a person can be an

49 Ṭayyib Tīzīnī, "Mafhūm al-Ḥadāra laday Zakī Najīb Maḥmūd," *al-Ādāb* 19, no. 6 (1974): 15.
50 Fuʾād Zakariyyā, "'Tajdīd al-Fikr al-ʿArabī' fī al-Mīzān," *al-Maʿrifa* 137 (1973): 9.
51 Zakariyyā, 17–18.

Arab as well as contemporary who "develops with time and its fast changes." First, his use of the term "Arab" is, according to al-Ḥabbābī, undefined and leads to broad and unjustified generalizations. Second, Maḥmūd assumes that there is the option of being "contemporary" without any regard for authenticity, whereas this is not at all an option (as al-Ḥabbābī argues in this paper). Third, Maḥmūd's essentialist differentiation between a modern Western and an antediluvian Arab mindset (*dhihniyya*) uncritically incorporates Orientalist discourse.[52]

Although the foregoing is by no means a full account of what is written about, in favor of, or against Maḥmūd's legacy, it gives us a sense of the breadth of interest in his work. It is precisely this status as a much-read pioneer (*rāʾid*) of contemporary thought that justifies our interest in him. He is the most obvious representative among the cohort of late twentieth-century intellectuals who shaped the *turāth* debate of the liberal *nahḍa* worldview. His unwavering commitment to the value of progress, and the belief that progress can only be achieved through a thorough rationalization of Arab society, is most pronounced in his writings. Moreover, his early contributions to the debate, starting with *The Renewal,* did much to shape the discourse of authenticity and modernity that later thinkers like Muḥammad ʿĀbid al-Jābirī and Ḥasan Ḥanafī would develop further. In addition, Maḥmūd very helpfully connects readings of *turāth* to specific conceptions of time. His work contains both allusions to a linear temporal model in which authenticity lies in the irredeemable past, and to authenticity's essential opposition to modernity. In other words, Maḥmūd offers a microcosm of different time conceptions linked to the fundamental liberal-*nahḍa* progressive outlook. However, comparatively little interest has been shown in his work in the West. There are no translations of his work, and academic studies tend to favor a younger generation of thinkers like Muḥammad ʿĀbid al-Jābirī, Ḥasan Ḥanafī, and Sādiq Jalāl al-ʿAẓm, who present more intricate theories of *turāth* or offer a more revolutionary, inflammatory reading of it. Thus, quite apart from any theoretical considerations, the following critical study of Maḥmūd's philosophy adds to the scant literature on contemporary Arab thought in the English language.

52 al-Ḥabbābī, "Taʿqīb 1," 105–6. In a later part of the essay he also, very briefly, shines a light on the other two books that make up Maḥmūd's "trilogy": *The Rational and the Irrational in Our Intellectual Heritage* and *The Renewal of Arab Thought.*

4.1.3 Maḥmūd and the question of *turāth*

As discussed above, when assessing Maḥmūd's academic life it may be helpful to think of his career as developing in three stages.[53] During his early years, Maḥmūd was drawn to the kind of deep metaphysical reflection that his later self would find utterly meaningless.[54] This changed with the aforementioned "conversion" during his time in London that led him to recognize the truth of logical positivism. The second phase, during which he dedicated himself fully to touting the gospel of logical positivism, ended somewhere in the 1960s or perhaps even the late 1950s. During the autumn of Maḥmūd's career there occurs an important shift in his orientation. Having dedicated his time at Cairo University until 1965 to championing logical positivism in the Arab world, the publication of his book *The Renewal* in 1971 signals a break with this trend. Although it is not the first of Maḥmūd's writings in which he turns his attention to the relationship between Eastern and Western thought,[55] the publication of *The Renewal,* together with the paper presented at the 1971 Cairo conference, marks the beginning of a long-term project aimed at analyzing Arab intellectual heritage to pinpoint the underlying causes of the failure of Arab thought in the modern world.

Three books that Maḥmūd together refers to as his "trilogy" occupy a central place in his oeuvre.[56] *The Renewal* is the first of these, and may be read as a manifesto of sorts. It lays out the problem of how to remain true to one's heritage while also being up to date with contemporary science and culture. The second is titled *al-Maʿqūl wa-l-Lā-Maʿqūl fī Turāthinā al-Fikrī* (*The Rational and the Irrational in*

53 Alternatively, Maḥmūd in *Qiṣṣat ʿAql* (*A Story of Reason*) orders his intellectual development according to the decades, starting in the 1930s – see Maḥmūd, *Qiṣṣat ʿAql*, 8 – 9.

54 An essay from this earlier period was included in a book published in 1957 and prefaced by a brief exculpation of this youthful digression; see Jansen, "Een westers filosoof in Egypte: Zaki Naguib Mahmoud," 7.

55 This he already did in *al-Sharq al-Fannān* (1960) and to a lesser extent in *al-Kūmīdīyā al-Arḍiyya,* a collection of essays written between 1951 and 1953 – see Zakī Najīb Maḥmūd, *al-Sharq al-Fannān* (Doha: Wizārat al-Thaqāfa wa-l-Funūn wa-l-Turāth – Dawlat Qatar, 2014); Zakī Najīb Maḥmūd, *al-Kūmīdiyyā al-Arḍiyya* (Windsor, UK: Hindāwī, 2017).

56 Maḥmūd refers to this "trilogy" on several occasions: see Zakī Najīb Maḥmūd, *Thaqāfatunā fī Muwājahat al-ʿAsr* (Cairo: Dar al-Shurūq, 1979), 7, and Maḥmūd, *Qiṣṣat ʿAql*, 176. While Western commentators mention this trilogy as the core of Maḥmūd's later philosophy, they tend to focus their attention on the first two books – that is, *The Renewal* and *The Rational* – putting particular emphasis on the first of these. See the discussions of Maḥmūd in von Kügelgen, *Averroes und die arabische Moderne – Ansätze zu einer Neubegründung des Rationalismus*, 288 – 99; Jansen, "Een westers filosoof in Egypte: Zaki Naguib Mahmoud"; Jansen, "The Philosophical Development of Zakī Nagīb Maḥmūd"; and Binder, *Islamic Liberalism*, 299 – 314.

Our Intellectual Heritage; henceforth referred to as *The Rational*). Published in 1972, this work reflects on the degeneration (*inḥiṭāṭ*) paradigm discussed in Chapter 1. It contains a detailed reading of Arab-Islamic history that is supposed to demonstrate when and why this culture started to deteriorate, and how this deterioration may be reversed. The last book in this trilogy is a less unified work entitled *Thaqāfatuna fī Muwājahat al-ʿAṣr* (*Our Culture in Opposition to The Age*). It was first published in 1976, and is made up of essays that were published earlier in several journals that detail the problems plaguing Arab society and Arab thought in particular.[57]

To understand Maḥmūd's later philosophical project, we ought to return to the basic question that inspired it. He introduces this question, right at the beginning of *The Renewal*, in terms of a dilemma faced by every modern Arab: "How to achieve a unified, consistent culture in which the man of culture lives a life in this time of ours, in such a manner as to include in it what is taken over (*manqūl*) and what is authentic (*aṣīl*) in one perspective?"[58] Clarifying this neat summary of the standard narrative problematic, Maḥmūd asserts that the modern Arab is faced with a radical choice: he either adopts the perspective of modern science and rejects everything that opposes it, or he holds on to traditional culture with all its moral and spiritual blessings.[59] Like many of his peers, Maḥmūd himself used to believe that this choice was strictly binary; you either go with tradition or with modern science. The rigid adherence of his former self to the teachings of Ayer, Carnap, and other logical positivists was the result of having made this choice in favor of the latter.

During the 1960s however, he began to doubt whether this choice was of the either-or variety.[60] As the Arab nationalist movement was at the height of its influence in the 1950s and early 1960s, its goal of defending a pure Arab identity pushed intellectuals like Maḥmūd to study their Arab intellectual heritage, of which he says they were not at all cognizant at the time.[61] This experience led him to appreciate his own cultural tradition and consider how it might fit together with his modern, Western orientation.[62] Maḥmūd became interested in how one could

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57 The first essay in this book is in fact the lecture he gave at the 1971 Cairo conference.

58 Zakī Najīb Maḥmūd, *Tajdīd al-Fikr al-ʿArabī*, 9th ed. (Cairo: Dār al-Shurūq, 1993), 6.

59 Maḥmūd, *Tajdīd al-Fikr al-ʿArabī*, 12.

60 Maḥmūd, *Tajdīd al-Fikr al-ʿArabī*, 10. Maḥmūd does not mention any specific date, only that it was about five years ago at the time of writing, which would imply somewhere around 1966. The June War, in any event, is never mentioned as a crucial factor in come to this insight.

61 Maḥmūd, *Tajdīd al-Fikr al-ʿArabī*, 13.

62 We may already see this turn to *turāth* around 1960 when Maḥmūd, following a string of books on logical positivism, publishes the book *al-Sharq al-Fannān (The Artistic East)*, in which he ex-

be truly Arab and truly contemporary (*ʿarabiyyan ḥaqqan wa-muʿāsiran ḥaqqan*) at the same time. His central occupation in his later works would be to explore the middle ground between being (culturally) authentic and being modern, between being Arab and being Western.[63]

4.1.4 Logical-positivist leanings

It is important to understand that as Maḥmūd embarks on his new philosophical project, he does not discard his logical positivist outlook.[64] Looking back on his career in the 1980s, Maḥmūd describes his role as a philosopher in logical-positivist fashion as that of clarifying what can or cannot be decided on the basis of reason.[65] Moreover, his characteristically positivist dismissal of metaphysics, for which he was criticized in the 1950s, "remained [his] position until this hour."[66] These logical positivist leanings, as well as his favoritism towards a pragmatic, Anglo-Saxon style of philosophy generally, are clear from his treatment of *turāth,* and we would therefore do well to discuss them before diving into Maḥmūd's writings.

plains how Middle Eastern (or rather Arab) culture presents a perfect mix of Western rationality and Eastern attunedness to spiritual values.

63 The persistent salience of this aim of finding a golden mean between West and East is attested by the title of one of his final collections of essays entitled An Arab Between Two Cultures": see Maḥmūd, *ʿArabī bayn Thaqāfatayn* (Cairo: Dār al-Shurūq, 1990). This work largely rehearses themes that we see in earlier writings, such as the readiness of modern Western culture to regard the principles (*mabādiʾ*) of their culture as hypothetical and open to change, whereas Arabs regard principles as set in stone, adopting them as part of their essential inner self (*juzʾ min ḍamīrih*) – see Ibid., 397. Also, Maḥmūd stresses the need for Arabs to preserve as much of their authentic ways and modes of thought as possible, while simultaneously adopting an empiricist outlook to conform with "the age of science and its secrets" – see Ibid., 409. This, as we will see, is essentially the conclusion reached at the end of *The Renewal.*

64 As mentioned earlier, this point is also made in other studies of Maḥmūd's work, notably in Sīdā, *al-Waḍʿiyya al-Manṭiqiyya wa-l-Turāth al-ʿArabī: Namūdhaj Fikr Zakī Najīb Maḥmūd al-Falsafī.* In what follows, the term logical-positivism will be used instead of logical empiricism. The two mostly overlap, to the extent that even Alfred J. Ayer, the informally acknowledged founder of logical empiricism, consistently describes himself as a logical-positivist. Since logical-positivism is the title of one of the books on the topic, and it is through this work that Maḥmūd became known as an advocate of this philosophical trend, I have decided to stick to this term.

65 Maḥmūd, *Qiṣṣat ʿAql*, 142–43.

66 Maḥmūd, *Qiṣṣat ʿAql*, 111."This hour" here means somewhere during the late 1970s when Maḥmūd wrote this academic autobiography.

One of the first things to note about Maḥmūd's thinking is that he assumes a quasi-Humean empiricist view of reason.[67] Reason is the human power to draw inferences (*quwwatuh al-istidlāliyya*) on the basis of judgments (*aḥkām*) and ideas (*afkār*).[68] Reason is a kind of "movement" (*ḥaraka*); in epistemic reasoning it leads man from how things appear to what causes these appearances, whereas in practical reasoning it shows him how to move towards a given end using the most effective means to reach this end.[69] Inferences, whether epistemic or practical, are true if reason is not muddled by irrationality, or misconceptions about the state of the world.

This conception of reason has serious implications for Maḥmūd's worldview, both for his epistemology and for his view on morality. For one, it informs his idea of what philosophy is or ought to be. If reason is a power that makes correct inferences as long as it remains free from irrational muddling, then philosophy, insofar as it represents the search for truth, ought to remove anything that may distort the inferential power of reason. In fact, Maḥmūd regards this as the only function of philosophy. The role of the philosopher is not to come up with independent philosophical theses, but to serve as science's handmaiden. Philosophy refines the scientific worldview by critically questioning its logical structures and inferences.[70] In particular, philosophy is tasked with cleaning up language by getting rid of senseless statements, that is, statements that do not refer to the physical world studied by the natural sciences.

In other words, the task of philosophy is to streamline thought by removing lingering metaphysical notions. This anti-metaphysical streak is crucial to Maḥmūd's later thought, including his analysis of *turāth*. For one, the renewal of Arab society, he believes, is stymied by the sway that a pre-modern worldview laden with metaphysical substance still has over the Arab mind. This prevents Arabs from adopting modern scientific thinking. A large part of his *turāth* project aims at rooting out the pre-modern views that are embedded in the Arab-Islamic heritage. At the same time, this anti-metaphysical, analytical approach is fundamental to his methodology. The problem with metaphysics is that it confronts scientists with pseudo-problems, that is, problems that cannot in principle be answered. This concept of a problem without an answer is at the heart of *The*

67 As noted by Jean-Pierre Nakhlé, Maḥmūd takes David Hume to be "the father of the contemporary philosophical movement that is logical positivism, or what we also call scientific empiricism" (*Le déclin du discours métaphysique dans la pensée arabe contemporaine*, 18–19)

68 Maḥmūd, *Tajdīd al-Fikr al-ʿArabī*, 1993, 21.

69 Maḥmūd, *Tajdīd al-Fikr al-ʿArabī*, 310.

70 Maḥmūd, *Qiṣṣat ʿAql*, 119; Zakī Najīb Maḥmūd, *Mawqif min al-Mītāfīzīqā* (Cairo: Dar al-Shurūq, 1994), 16.

Renewal. It is only after Maḥmūd realizes that his earlier conception of the problem of *turāth* presented a pseudo-problem that he sets out to renew Arab thought. He presents this development using the following syllogism: his earlier self tried to combine modernity and tradition at same time. Yet this is a logical impossibility, since modernity and tradition are each other's opposites, and opposites cannot both be true at the same time.[71] This shows that this way of framing the question of *turāth* is mistaken, since a question that does not allow for an answer is meaningless.[72]

Maḥmūd then rephrases the question in order to make it meaningful. This new perspective on the question of *turāth*, he says, was inspired by the British art critic Herbert Read. According to Maḥmūd's slightly expurgated rendering of an article entitled "To Hell with Culture,"[73] Read suggests that the right question to ask about any culture is not how one can be true to it and be modern at the same time, but to judge for which elements of both cultures one has most use. In line with this perspective, Maḥmūd explains that cultural elements are not unchanging principles, but rather hypotheses (*furūḍ*) that one may shed as the situation in which a society finds itself changes.[74] Where these hypotheses originate, whether in Arab-Islamic culture or in the West, does not matter as much as the fact that they do their job.

4.1.5 Maḥmūd and the Humean perspective on value

As noted above, Maḥmūd views logical-positivism as the twentieth-century inheritance of David Hume.[75] Given his deep acquaintance with Hume, dating back at least to his dissertation, as well as A. J. Ayer's great fondness for this Scottish skeptic, it is understandable why Maḥmūd's later philosophy would be distinguished by a certain Humean tendency.[76] We already saw this influence in his rejection of

71 Maḥmūd, *Tajdīd al-Fikr al-ʿArabī*, 1993, 16.

72 As taught by the Holy Grail of early logical positivism, Wittgenstein's Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus, any tautology or contradiction is meaningless (*sinnlos*); see in particular remark 4.461 in Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, ed. D.F. Pears and B.F. McGuinnes (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1974).

73 The mitigation of Read's rather crass language through both non-literal translation and leaving out the first and last sentence of the passage quoted in *The Renewal* is noted by Hans Jansen – see Jansen, "Een westers filosoof in Egypte: Zaki Naguib Mahmoud," 13.

74 Maḥmūd, *Tajdīd al-Fikr al-ʿArabī*, 1993, 190 – 200.

75 See footnote 67 of this chapter.

76 We should recall here that Ayer was Maḥmūd's main inspiration in turning to logical-positivism. Ayer himself has called Hume his "favorite philosopher" – see A. J. Ayer, "What I Saw

claims to metaphysical knowledge. In his later writings, many of which discuss the topic of *turāth*, we find that he also transposes this rejection of metaphysical contemplation to his thinking about value. This is not to say that he rejects values and morals. However, the inability within this logical-positivist framework to talk about what makes something valuable in any metaphysical, non-materialist, or non-subjectivist sense, is vital to understanding his later writings in which the division between a materialist, rationalist, and immanent Western culture and a spiritual, transcendent Eastern culture is a crucial element. Adopting a Humean perspective, or at least the distinction between fact and value often attributed to him, as a theoretical lens will help us understand the logic underlying Maḥmūd's *turāth* writings and his understanding of values.[77]

A good starting point in the fact–value distinction is to realize what, in Hume's view, reason is not able to do. Because Hume conceives of reason as the power to make inferences – to establish relations between ideas – reason itself cannot have any motivating force. It cannot give any indication as to what you ought to desire. Given a desire, reason can do two things. First, it can help you find out what the world is like. This will help you establish whether the thing that you desire is at all there. Second, it can forecast the likely results of your actions on the basis of previous experience. In this way, reason can help you find the right means to fulfill your ends. Reason cannot, however, furnish you with any ultimate goal. It is entirely instrumental.

This argument is backed up if we reflect on where motivation *does* originate. In Hume's account, the only motivating force is found in the "passions," or what we would nowadays call an emotion or feeling. Passions are impressions – that is, non-representative "original existences" – rather than "ideas," which are representative and are grasped by reason. Briefly, the proposition "it is raining outside" relates an idea about the world in which it is currently raining. A feeling of anger or dismay, even though it may relate to the fact that it is currently raining, does not

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When I Was Dead," *Sunday Telegraph*, August 8, 1988, https://www.philosopher.eu/others-writings/a-j-ayer-what-i-saw-when-i-was-dead/. His engagement with the British empiricist tradition, with which Hume has been associated, goes back to his early days, and his thinking has been described as "close to Hume's" – see Karl Britton, "Review: British Empirical Philosophers by A. J. Ayer and Raymond Winch," *Philosophy* 28, no. 104 (1953): 83.

77 For the sake of clarity I will not consider the philosophical literature on how Hume's distinction between "is" and "ought" might be understood, and whether it in fact amounts to a hard distinction between facts and values. The important thing for our purposes is that a hard division is a useful aid in understanding how Maḥmūd injects this distinction in his conceptualization of *turāth.* For an overview of some of the critiques of the fact–value distinction, see: Philip S. Gorski, "Beyond the Fact/Value Distinction: Ethical Naturalism and the Social Sciences," *Society* 50, no. 6 (2013): 543–53, https://doi.org/10.1007/s12115-013-9709-2.

itself carry any representational content about the world.[78] Consequently, ideas and impressions (and therefore also reason and passion) cannot be in disagreement with each other. They are of two different categories. My contention that it is raining outside may be trumped by your telling me that you just had a look and you noticed that the sun is out. However, neither of these can be opposed by a feeling of anger, guilt, pleasure, etc. Only another passion can oppose the original one. It is this conclusion which leads Hume to exclaim famously that "'tis not contrary to reason to prefer the destruction of the whole world to the scratching of my finger."[79] This is simply a hyperbolic way of underlining the idea that reason and passion belong to two different realms: one is the realm of reason, which describes the world as it is or could be, the other is the realm of passion which judges how the world is right now and thus furnishes the evaluative substrate for visions of how it might be improved.

This split between facts and values associated with David Hume is a defining feature of modern Western thought. Of course, related divisions between the inner and the outer, between mind and world were important themes in Western thought earlier on. As is the case with any philosopher, the work of David Hume may be understood as the result of a long-running tendency in this tradition. Nonetheless, it is in the works of David Hume that, as Charles Taylor notes, "one sees emerging and becoming a dominant theme in [the twentieth] century" this fact–value distinction.[80] Following Hume's lead, Western philosophers have until this day occupied themselves to a considerable extent with working out this problematic. Their theories can be read as attempts at defining and distinguishing the natural world of non-normative facts from the moral realm of norms and values, and exploring ways of bridging (or erasing) the gap between the two.

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78 As Ayer would put it in his emotivist theory of ethics, such utterances are not verifiable, because they are used "to express feeling about certain objects, but not to make any assertion about them" – see A. J. Ayer, *Language, Truth & Logic* (New York: Dover, 1952), 108. It is noteworthy to point out that Ayer himself describes the difference between scientific and emotivist language as that between a person primarily interested in expressing true propositions and another who is in the business of creating "a work of art" – see Ibid., 44. This differentiation, as we will see, maps precisely onto Maḥmūd's distinction between modernity and authenticity.

79 David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature* (Oxford: Clarendon, 2007), 267.

80 Charles Taylor, "Justice After Virtue," in *After MacIntyre: Critical Perspectives on the Work of Alasdair MacIntyre* (South Bend: Notre Dame University Press, 1994), 18.

4.1.6 The fact–value distinction and the value of *turāth*

The effect of this distinction is clearly visible in logical-positivism. In fact, Maḥmūd singles it out as logical-positivism's defining feature. Writing in the early 1960s in his book *al-Sharq al-Fannān* (*The Artistic East*) about his allegiance to "this philosophical school to which he belongs and which he supports," he summarizes its worldview as follows: human discourse falls into one of two categories. It either "refers to the expression of personal ideas and what is hidden in conscience," or it refers to "the outside world as it manifests itself to the senses."[81] Maḥmūd is quite correct in describing this division as pivotal to the logical-positivist project. The aim of the logical-positivists, after all, was to separate these two fields and rid scientific discourse of the kinds of metaphysical claims that distort the use of reason and muddy the view of reality. In sum, the Humean distinction between fact and value is crucial to Maḥmūd's epistemological concerns, because it underlies the logical-positivist claim that the task of philosophy is to demarcate the two realms.

This, in turn, helps us understand a further aspect of Maḥmūd's thinking. A central aim of his later philosophy is to draw apart science and culture. Importantly, Maḥmūd models the distinction between these two fields on the distinction between fact and value. Science, in his view, is the attempt to capture the workings of nature using reason. It is therefore universal in its claims. Culture, on the other hand, is a storehouse of values. Like the individual with his personal preferences, his habits, his likes and his dislikes, a culture represents the shared habits and values of a group of people. Culture is the product of sentiment; it belongs to the realm of morality and art, both of which are based on value. Following well-established orientalist practice, moreover, Maḥmūd roughly associates these realms with the cultural-geographical distinction between West and East. Again in *The Artistic East*, Maḥmūd concludes that:

> We may say – generally speaking – that in this world there are two different sides with regard to the philosophical reflection on existence. One side is represented by the Far East: India, China, and the neighboring areas. The other side is represented by the West: Europe and America. In between the two sides there is the Middle East, combining both characters.[82]

This last sentence points to the kind of answer that Maḥmūd will develop, first in *The Artistic East* and later more fully in his renewal project of the 1970s and beyond. The West is the face of scientific progress, whereas the East represents senti-

81 Maḥmūd, *al-Sharq al-Fannān*, 101.
82 Maḥmūd, *al-Sharq al-Fannān*, 12.

ment. The Middle East marks a convergence of these two realms, and is therefore perfectly positioned to offer a worldview that gives both sides of human existence their due.

We will discuss this solution to the problem of authenticity and modernity later in more detail. At this point it is important to recognize the extent to which the fact–value distinction underlies Maḥmūd's thinking. It shapes his view of what philosophy is and ought to do. It forms the basis for his definition of culture. It creates a model for the distinction between East and West in terms of a realm of value versus one of fact. Particularly in his later writings on culture, it is this distinction that creates the temporal interpretative framework for opposing authenticity to modernity along an axis of progressive historical time. Finally, we will see how this Humean framework informs his moral outlook to a considerable degree.

I should perhaps emphasize that the "Humean" framework here is used heuristically. To what extent Hume or Ayer's Hume-inspired, empiricist philosophy in fact influenced Maḥmūd is not all that important for our purposes. In fact, the general sense that there is a strict division between fact and value was shared more broadly among intellectuals in the (post-)colonial world and, as with Maḥmūd, it became enmeshed with culturalist and nationalist theories on more than one occasion. Partha Chatterjee, for example, has made this point with regard to the Indian context, where early nationalist thought formulated the problematic of East and West in terms of the latter's superiority in "the materiality of its culture, exemplified by its science, technology and love of progress." The East, meanwhile, was characterized by its immaterial, spiritual values. Presaging Maḥmūd, Indian intellectuals like Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay suggested that "true modernity for the non-European nations would lie in combining the superior material qualities of Western cultures with the spiritual greatness of the East."[83] While it is not something that we will pursue here, this analogy with the Indian context suggests that the fact–value distinction was a broadly accepted frame for thinking about the relationships between cultures, in particular between the Western powers and the Orient. Instead of attributing Maḥmūd's articulation of the difference between Western and Eastern cultures to his acquaintance with Hume, it may be more appropriate to see the fact–value distinction as implied in orientalist modes of thought generally, of which Maḥmūd's and, very indirectly, Hume's work are symptomatic.[84]

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83 Chatterjee, *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World: A Derivative Discourse*, 51.

84 The connection between the fact–value distinction and orientalism is posited quite forcefully by Wael Hallaq, but remains without much historical and philosophical backing – see Wael Hallaq,

The "Humean" conception of normativity also presents a problem for Maḥmūd. How can he convince his Arab readers that the renewal of Arab thought is necessary? Since the only source of normativity is subjective, there cannot be any objective reasons for preferring one type of thought to another. Insofar as one does prefer one to the other, this preference must be based on personal predilection. But if that is the case, then the reader may just as well pay no heed to Maḥmūd's calls for renewal. After all, from a Humean perspective, and in particular from the perspective of the kind of radically subjective moral expressionism developed by Ayer, Maḥmūd is just another person expressing just another vision of a new, modern future for Arab society.

At this point Maḥmūd turns to the American side of his Anglo-American philosophical proclivities: Pragmatism.[85] Roughly, pragmatists argue that knowledge cannot be severed from agency. Truth, in the pragmatic conception, is not essentially seen in terms of correspondence to objective reality. Truth is whatever works. Of any two theories, the one with most claim to truth is the one that allows you to manipulate the world more effectively in accomplishing your goals. Although pragmatism is not of a piece with logical-positivism – early reactions to this novel, New World movement by Old World grandees like Bertrand Russell tended to be rather disparaging – both square nicely with the hypothetico-deductive model to which Maḥmūd professes allegiance. Both regard theories as hypothetical statements that may be debunked upon further investigation. They moreover share a dislike for metaphysical inquiry into the true nature of the world. This anti-metaphysical stance is no doubt attractive to Maḥmūd. Where his pragmatist disposition really comes out, however, is in his theory of culture. Throughout his analysis of Arab culture, we find that Maḥmūd's criterion for treating the problematic of authenticity and modernity is not to think of culture in relation to a set of core principles, but to judge whether an aspect of a culture or a way of understanding the relation between Arab-Islamic heritage and modernity is useful.

Reasonable though this criterion may appear, it is also question-begging. "Useful" is in itself an empty criterion. In order give it any normative purchase one needs to answer an additional question: "Useful for what?" Maḥmūd does not

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Restating Orientalism: A Critique of Modern Knowledge (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018), 105–6. Our discussion of Maḥmūd illustrates and elaborates this phenomenon, but it would be on firmer ground were there to be a comprehensive account of how this particular aspect of Western philosophy has become intertwined with orientalist distinctions between East and West.

85 Maḥmūd designates pragmatism as the essence of North American thought. As noted by Nakhlé, Maḥmūd was likely influenced by Charles Sanders Peirce: see Nakhlé, *Le déclin du discours métaphysique dans la pensée arabe contemporaine: essai sur le positivisme de Zakî Najîb Maḥmūd*, 11.

pose this question explicitly. He often comes back to the assertion that Arabs need to "live in their age," that they need to confront its problems with answers that fit the circumstances. Arab culture needs to be updated and become "contemporary" (*muʿāsir*). Obviously, being historically conscious, being "contemporary" does not in itself imply any particular values. Values are merely reflections of the pragmatist view that one ought to do what works in a particular context. The only way for temporal notions like contemporaneity and modernity to become normative is by being taken up in a normatively charged temporal framework that allows these concepts to be interpreted, not as neutral terms denoting past, present, and future, but as indications of progress or regress.

4.1.7 The need for progress

Briefly revisiting our discussion of modernity and progress in Chapter 3, we can now better appreciate how Maḥmūd exemplifies the modern ideal of progress. On the linear-progressive or "evolutionary" temporal schema, time has "a built-in *vector* of moral direction." Change is good, change is improvement, change is necessary. Likewise, for Maḥmūd, progress is the ultimate goal of his philosophical framework. The development of Arab society is the constant theme in his writings. Progress, Maḥmūd avers, is universally considered a good thing. Every school of thought sees itself as promoting progress in all areas of life, which is to say that every one of them aspires to move from a situation that is worse to one that is better (*naqla mimmā huwwa aswaʾ ilā mā huwwa afḍal*).[86] The renewal of Arab thought is, ultimately, to serve the goal of progress. The aim is to adopt a new way of looking at the world, one that looks forward not backward, one that perceives the objects that make up this world not in terms of immutable essences, but as objects that are constructed of discrete parts and that are therefore in constant flux.

This change in worldview requires a change in temporal orientation. Whereas, according to Maḥmūd, previous ages conceived of time as a geometric line (*khaṭṭ handasī*) that continues to stretch on and on without ever changing shape, and of which any section resembles any other section of similar length, our age is characterized by a conical conception of time (*taṣawwur makhrūṭī li-l-zaman*). It imagines a world that develops, in which life grows and develops and becomes lusher than it ever was before without the need for a higher power to move it forward.

86 Maḥmūd, *Thaqāfatunā fī Muwājahat al-ʿAsr*, 95–96.

When he exhorts his Arab readers to live in their age and be contemporary, on his mind is the future progress of the Arab World:

> You are keeping up with your age, outwardly and inwardly, if you are fully able to accept this conception and everything that it implies, and the least that it implies is that it is impossible for the past to give more guidance, be more intellectually fertile, or provide a more secure path than the present.[87]

The effort to purge Arab thought of essentialist thinking and to encourage the adoption of a belief in progress links up with Maḥmūd's interest in historicization.[88] An essentialist view of the world precludes the possibility of real change. Getting rid of this worldview opens up a possible future in which things change for the better, in which there is progress. This perspective on the future, however, also requires one to historicize one's own past. Historicization of history and progressionist interpretation are, as Koselleck lucidly remarks, "only two sides of the same coin."[89] For if time is and always has been marked by progressive change, then this must be exhibited in the past. History then becomes an exercise in describing the stages of this progressive move of human civilization.

Maḥmūd's later writings are a testament to this quest for historicization. He dedicates many books and essays to describing Arab history, Islamic history, and world history from a progressionist standpoint. The basic conception of the historical imaginary that underlies Maḥmūd's worldview is best illustrated by turning to his major historical work: *The Rational.*

4.1.8 Historical time in *The Rational*

The Rational elaborates on the forays into *turāth* on which Maḥmūd set out in *The Renewal.* These will be described in more detail later on, but because it is important to understand Maḥmūd's view of history, and since this is best exemplified in *The Rational,* we will turn to this book first. Briefly, in *The Rational*, Maḥmūd shows how Arab forebears reacted to problems in a particular historical context in both rational and irrational ways. The goal is to distill rational and irrational modes of thinking from the Arab-Islamic intellectual heritage, so modern-day Arabs know which ones to take over and which ones to discard. In line with a prag-

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87 Maḥmūd, *Thaqāfatunā fī Muwājahat al-ʿAsr*, 104.

88 This is also noted by ʿAbd al-Laṭīf Fatḥ al-Dīn in ʿAbd al-Laṭīf Fatḥ al-Dīn, *Taḥdīth al-Fikr al-ʿArabī fī Falsafat Zakī Najīb Maḥmūd* (Beirut: Markaz Dirāsāt al-Waḥda al-ʿArabiyya, 2011), 26–27.

89 Reinhart Koselleck, *Vergangene Zukunft* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1989), 192.

matist methodology for assessing *turāth* established in *The Renewal*, Maḥmūd does not position himself as a historian who wants to relive the past – "to see with their eyes and feel with their hearts" – but as an objective observer who takes in what happens around him, takes over some of it and rejects what does not seem worthwhile.[90]

Interestingly, Maḥmūd structures his treatment of *turāth* in *The Rational* according to a schema used by Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī in his work *Mishkāt al-Anwār* (*The Niche of Lights*). What makes his invocation of al-Ghazālī particularly interesting is that he is *the* figure whom Maḥmūd associates with the eclipse of Arab thought.[91] As he explains in the second part of this book, Al-Ghazālī, as a scholar of logic and philosophy who in his later life turns to Sufism, represents most clearly the turn from the rational towards the irrational that doomed Arab society.[92] On first glance then, it seems strange that Maḥmūd would base his reading of *turāth* on the work of the person he holds responsible for ruining Arab culture. This particular book, it should be noted, is a masterpiece of Sufi literature. Inspired by the Qur'anic Āyat al-Nūr (Verse of Light), a verse much discussed in Sufism due to its allegorical value, al-Ghazālī describes human conscience as developing in four stages, which are represented by the elements contained in the verse. The verse itself runs as follows:

> God is the Light of the heavens and earth. His Light is like this: there is a niche, and in it a lamp, the lamp inside a glass, a glass like a glittering star, fuelled from a blessed olive tree from neither east nor west, whose oil almost gives light even when no fire touches it – light upon light – God guides whoever He will to his Light; God draws such comparisons for people; God has full knowledge of everything.[93]

As Maḥmūd understands it, al-Ghazālī takes the light to represent the power of understanding (*quwwat al-idrāk*). As he makes clear in a later work, Maḥmūd's intention here is to portray how the light of understanding becomes progressively stron-

90 Zakī Najīb Maḥmūd, *al-Maʿqūl wa-l-Lā-Maʿqūl fī Turāthinā al-Fikrī* (Cairo: Dār al-Shurūq, 1987), 8.

91 The trope that al-Ghazālī was the main cause of the decline in Muslim intellectual fervor goes back at least to the middle of the nineteenth century. Frank Griffel mentions Solomon Munk and Ernest Renan as the first such negative perceptions of al-Ghazālī among European orientalists – see Frank Griffel, *Al-Ghazālī's Philosophical Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 5.

92 Needless to say, using a figure universally respected among conservatively inclined Muslims carries a certain rhetorical weight. This tactical use of al-Ghazālī, whom he presents in the same book as an "oppressive reactionary force" (*quwwa rajaʿiyya qābiḍa*, 318) opposed to the rational modernity Maḥmūd envisions, has been pointed out by Anke von Kügelgen; see von Kügelgen, *Averroes und die arabische Moderne – Ansätze zu einer Neubegründung des Rationalismus*, 295.

93 24:35, M. A. Abdel Haleem, trans., *The Qur'an* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 223.

ger as it moves through a series of stages.[94] The movement of the light is an allegory for the development from direct sensation to an abstract theoretical understanding of the world. Thus, the niche stands for the earliest stage in the development of understanding in which man relies on sensory input alone to know what happens in the world around him. The next stage is that of the glass lamp, which represents the power of reason (*ʿaql*). Here man is able to abstract from the sensory input and understand its deeper meanings. The glass, meanwhile, represents the imagination, which is the power that allows man to store sensory impressions and present them to reason when the need arises. But where then does this power of imagination come from? This, Maḥmūd argues, is derived from the blessed olive tree, which stands for divine inspiration, the basic principles of thought that allow man to make sense of the world.

Basing himself on this, admittedly, somewhat idiosyncratic reading of *The Verse of Light*, Maḥmūd maintains that it is obvious that al-Ghazālī intended this schema to apply to the individual believer. Yet, Maḥmūd asks himself, what if we applied it to the development of societies and their culture? What if we applied it to Arab culture? Would we see a similar progression?[95] Indeed, Maḥmūd thinks that we would (at least during the first five centuries of the Islamic calendar). The Arabs of the seventh century AD (roughly the first century of the Islamic calendar) faced their world with natural impulsivity (*bi-fiṭrat al-badīha*). Those of the eighth century set about designing general rules in accordance with reason. Those living during the ninth and tenth centuries proceeded to relate these diverse rules to a limited set of general principles by using the power of the imagination. Finally, during the eleventh century, we see a Sufi-inspired turn inwards, an attempt to find a direct relation to truth in the self.[96]

What makes this invocation of al-Ghazālī doubly interesting is Maḥmūd's juxtaposition of his four-part schema with a three-part schema of education described by the British philosopher and mathematician Alfred North Whitehead in his book "The Aims of Education." In this book, Maḥmūd explains, the first stage is marked by "creative spontaneity" (*ʿafwiyya khallāqa*). The young child picks up and touches everything he can lay his hands on, taking in as much sensory input as possible. The second stage is one in which the child learns to think in terms of rules that structure the hubbub of sensorial input. The third stage is the highest, in which a human learns how to relate these diverse rules to a set of principles and see the world as a single unified entity.[97]

94 Maḥmūd, *Qiṣṣat ʿAql*, 202–3.
95 Maḥmūd, *al-Maʿqūl wa-l-Lā-Maʿqūl fī Turāthinā al-Fikrī*, 23–24.
96 Maḥmūd, *al-Maʿqūl wa-l-Lā-Maʿqūl fī Turāthinā al-Fikrī*, 9.
97 Maḥmūd, *al-Maʿqūl wa-l-Lā-Maʿqūl fī Turāthinā al-Fikrī*, 24–25.

The similarities between Whitehead and al-Ghazālī, Maḥmūd thinks, are obvious. Both subscribe to a progression of the human understanding in successive stages, from free spontaneity, to structured rule-following, to principled understanding. They differ only in that al-Ghazālī adds one more stage, namely that of "contemplation guided by the power of inspiration" (*taʾammul musaddad bi-quwwat al-ilhām*).[98] Of course, in light of the constant refrain of attacking the anti-modern, irrational side of *turāth*, the implication appears to be the following: Arab culture went along fine as long as it developed in the spirit of rationalism. The Arabs were duped, however, by al-Ghazālī, who led them on a path towards a mystical conception of knowledge.

Maḥmūd's treatment of history in *The Rational* is indicative of his rationalist, progressive orientation and its relation to time. In this regard I want to point to two aspects in particular. First, in dividing history into centuries starting from the seventh century AD, Maḥmūd consistently uses homogenous blocks of time as his main point of reference. There are no cycles, no breaks, no speeding up, or slowing down. Time is conceived as empty, secular, containing all worldly events in a single objective framework that can be mechanically divided into discrete units. Time goes on regardless of what happens in it. This secular notion of time is, in fact, so integral to Maḥmūd's worldview that he also uses it to structure his personal experience. When describing his intellectual career in *Qiṣṣat ʿAql* (*A Story of Reason*), he similarly divides his life up into decades of the twentieth century, each decade representing a new phase in his life.[99]

Second, besides an empty, scientific conception of time for the marking of eras, Maḥmūd also at times uses a different way of looking at time to tell a story of civilizational progress. Each stage of Arab culture, Maḥmūd claims, is characterized by a more abstract set of problems. This is a reflection of its rationalization. As Arab society rationalizes it moves away from the concrete problems faced by the primitive and sentimental mind of the early Arabs. Later generations of Arabs also become less prone to magical and metaphysical thinking. With rationality, moreover, comes a greater measure of control over one's impulses. From a state of uninhibited responsiveness to every personal urge, characteristic of primitive societies, the persons who grow up in more advanced societies learn how to control these urges and channel them, allowing them to be more effective in reaching their ultimate goals. In other words, as they become more rational Arabs are

98 Maḥmūd, *al-Maʿqūl wa-l-Lā-Maʿqūl fī Turāthinā al-Fikrī*, 26.
99 Maḥmūd, *Qiṣṣat ʿAql*, 8.

progressing up the ladder of civilization.[100] Harping on the nineteenth-century theme of Arab decadence (*inḥiṭāṭ*), Maḥmūd argues that it is only when Arabs exchange their rational mindset for the empty but soothing promises of Sufi mystics that Arab society regresses into a state of ignorance and loses its edge over the West, just as the latter, during its "Renaissance," starts to discover rationalist methods for investigating the world.

4.1.9 The moral implications of progress

Clearly, the ideal of progress plays an outsized role in Maḥmūd's view of history. Progress gives direction to the movement of history. It furnishes the development of civilization with an indeterminate *telos*, what Walter Benjamin referred to as the "infinite perfectibility of mankind."[101] Moreover, progress is inherently linked to the power of reason. It is reason which makes the difference between a civilization that progresses and one that falls behind. As Maḥmūd states most succinctly in the third installment of his trilogy, the defining characteristic of civilizations everywhere and throughout the ages is their adherence to reason.[102]

What explains this link between progress and reason? Maḥmūd is clear on this question. Reason results in progress because it shows man the best way to achieve his goals. Moreover, this definition of man equally applies at the group level: rational civilizations are those civilizations that know how to find the right means for achieving their goals and this, according to Maḥmūd, explains their success and hence their ascent on the ladder of civilization.[103] In other words, a Humean, instrumental view of reason is combined with an evolutionary conception of civilizational competition to explain the progress and relative success of different societies.

Interestingly, this result relates to the earlier question about the content of Maḥmūd's pragmatism. Our question was how, given Maḥmūd's pragmatism,

100 The link between rationality and control over one's natural impulses and emotions is crucial to a modern ideal of civilization that increasingly became intertwined with the notion of progress, both in Europe and in the global order that it dominated in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries – see Margrit Pernau and Helge Jordheim, eds., *Civilizing Emotions: Concepts in Nineteenth Century Asia and Europe*, First edition, Emotions in History (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 4–6.
101 Walter Benjamin, "Über den Begriff der Geschichte," in *Walter Benjamin: Gesammelte Schriften* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1991), 700.
102 Maḥmūd, *Thaqāfatunā fī Muwājahat al-ʿAsr*, 196.
103 Maḥmūd uses the metaphor of a ladder of civilization in the same article; see Maḥmūd, *Thaqāfatunā fī Muwājahat al-ʿAsr*, 193.

this could lead to any normative statements, since pragmatism does not itself include any normative measure. This led us to the notion of progress being the *summum bonum*, the driving force in Maḥmūd's worldview. To do what works implies "to do what brings progress." We then concluded that progress is inherently linked to reason, because the latter allows us to find the right means for advancing our goals, that is, to achieve progress. Hence, to follow reason is to do what works, which is the essence of pragmatism.

What this shows, then, is that pragmatism, progress, and rationality are, within the Maḥmūdian constellation, almost indistinguishable. Each is definable in terms of the others. Though this clears things up somewhat, it hardly makes it easier to give a straight answer as to what the moral consequences of Maḥmūd's progressive evolutionary worldview are. The ideal of progress looms over it all, as a vague shadow of a promise of a better, safer, healthier, more productive future. It does not give clear guidance as to what one should do.

That being said, this worldview obviously affects Maḥmūd's moral imagination. First and foremost, it has the consequence of pointing to a realm of human thought that one ought to avoid. If the way to modernity leads through the expanding role of reason, then irrationalism must lead to its opposite, to civilizational decline and backwardness. Moreover, if reason is also, as Hume has argued, opposed to sentiment (*ʿāṭifiyya*), then by implication, sentiment is linked to irrationality.[104] This in turn means that all areas of life that are rooted in sentiment, such as religion, ethics, and the arts, must be kept in check and not be allowed to gain command over society, lest they drag it into irrationality and eventual decline. In essence, *turāth* needs to be constrained to the private sphere, it needs to be secularized. This will be the aim of his best-known book: *The Renewal of Arab Thought.*

4.2 Maḥmūd's philosophy of *turāth*

4.2.1 The Renewal of Arab Thought

In the foregoing, we have looked at several aspects of Maḥmūd's thinking: his logical-positivist leanings, which hang together with a firm belief in reason and a deeply felt contempt for the irrational, a pragmatism that issues from his faith in human progress, and his perspective on history and historical time. These elements are drawn together most clearly in *The Renewal.* Not only is it Maḥmūd's

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104 Maḥmūd, *al-Maʿqūl wa-l-Lā-Maʿqūl fī Turāthinā al-Fikrī*, 17–18.

most famous work, the book also introduces his project of rereading *turāth* as the first installment of his "trilogy." Central to this project is the familiar opposition between authenticity and contemporaneity. As we saw earlier, there is an imbalance between the straightforward reading of this opposition (along the lines of the standard narrative), and the ambiguities that arise when we consider the meanings of authenticity and modernity in light of different time conceptions. Whether this ambiguity arises in Maḥmūd is an interesting question. He certainly presents his pronouncements on temporal order and his interpretation of the authenticity–modernity dichotomy as common sense, and it is clearly not his intention to undermine this dichotomy. That does not mean, however, that Maḥmūd's understanding of the problem of *turāth* is entirely coherent. Maḥmūd's related views on time – the empty, secular, and the linear-progressive model – merge with a conceptual field in which the concept of authenticity overlaps with many other notions, such as irrationalism, ahistoricism, and sentimentalism. This leads to an interesting instability in the *turāth* conception of someone who most closely aligns with the standard narrative.

To properly understand this instability and whether it shows us a side of Maḥmūd that moves away from the standard narrative, we have to start with the more standard position articulated in *The Renewal* and elsewhere, namely that to be authentic is to hold onto traditional Arab-Islamic values, while to be modern implies embracing the latest ideas and fashions issuing from the West. Maḥmūd's pragmatic solution to squaring these two was to ask for which elements of these two sides one has most use. This naturally requires him to relativize the concepts and values he finds in *turāth.* Rather than presenting them as immutable principles, Maḥmūd wants his reader to think of traditional values in scientific terms, namely as hypotheses that can be taken up if they serve a useful purpose and discarded after they have run their course. *Turāth* thus becomes a repository of values, a storehouse of hypotheses that one can adopt and tweak depending on the circumstances.

Central to this endeavor is a process of historicization. To judge which elements of different cultures at different times are useful, one needs to think clearly about the role that certain ideas played in answering questions that people considered important at a particular time. As societies progress, the problems they face change. When this happens, the conceptual framework used to deal with these problems should change along with it. This is one reason why the meanings of terms used in politics, sociology, or philosophy vary over time. Current debates on questions of freedom, science, or religion may resonate with earlier ones, but they are not entirely the same, and one has to take this into account. To move from old to new thought means to adapt the content of these concepts to a new age. Arabs may continue to use similar expressions, but the concepts and

contents underlying them must be different.[105] They must be interpreted anew and given new meanings.

Unfortunately, according to Maḥmūd, contemporary Arab society lacks this historical consciousness. Arabs continue to live in thrall to the stories of their past. The past is considered free from any blemish and is used as a perfect model for the present. This romantic state of mind keeps Arabs from changing their thought and adjusting to modern life.[106] It leads to a society characterized by continuous imitation (*talqīn*).[107] In dramatic fashion, Maḥmūd laments having to work through "regurgitation, upon regurgitation, upon regurgitation … when I turn my attention to a medley of texts from the *turāth*,"[108] with only a very few containing a hint of authenticity and ingenuity (*fīhā aṣāla wa-ibtikār*).[109] He contrasts this situation with the West, which broke with the dutiful adherence to historical ways of thinking during the Renaissance and went on to progress in the centuries thereafter.[110]

4.2.2 Historicizing *turāth*

What would such a historicization of *turāth* look like? Central to any historicization, according to Maḥmūd, is the distinction between the rational and the irrational. The rational is practically oriented, and leads man to real understanding of his surroundings, allowing him to change them to his advantage. The irrational, on the other hand, relates to a metaphysical realm outside of reality, and does not result in any practical advantages in the sublunar world ruled by the laws of nature. When looking at their heritage and adopting from it what is useful, Arabs should therefore distinguish between the rational and the irrational in Arab thought, and adopt only the former whenever the two conflict.[111]

The rationality of an idea does not depend on whether it accurately represents reality *sub specie aeternitatis.* If factual correctness were to serve as a measure, then there would hardly be anything useful to adopt among the historical plethora

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105 Maḥmūd, *Tajdīd al-Fikr al-ʿArabī*, 1993, 183.
106 Maḥmūd, *Tajdīd al-Fikr al-ʿArabī*, 53.
107 Maḥmūd, *Tajdīd al-Fikr al-ʿArabī*, 57.
108 Maḥmūd, *Tajdīd al-Fikr al-ʿArabī*, 55.
109 Maḥmūd, *Tajdīd al-Fikr al-ʿArabī*, 55 – 56. It is interesting to note how, in this case, authenticity (*aṣāla*) is used synonymously with ingenuity (*ibtikār*). Maḥmūd diverges from his dominant use of this term here, tending towards the individualist meaning of authenticity.
110 Maḥmūd, *Tajdīd al-Fikr al-ʿArabī*, 54.
111 Maḥmūd, *al-Maʿqūl wa-l-Lā-Maʿqūl fī Turāthinā al-Fikrī*, 19.

of refuted theories. We should realize, however, that these faulty beliefs were not the result of bad arguments, but of good arguments that used false premises. Aristotle's views on nature were factually mistaken, but that does not make them irrational. His reasoning was sound, despite the fact that its content was faulty. Moreover, we should always realize that the problems that people faced in earlier times are different from ours. Therefore, a modern society will not benefit from taking earlier ideas and meticulously implementing them in this different context.

For modern Arabs, this means that they must critically assess the history of the Arab world and abstract from it the *form* of different ideas that illustrious predecessors have formulated. This will allow them to judge which idea is rational and which is not. The trick is to take over the form without its content (*al-shakl dūn maḍmūnihi*).[112] Of course, given that each age is characterized by a different set of problems, it would be futile to scour *turāth* for exactly the same problematic that modern society faces. Rather, the task of the contemporary student of *turāth* is to find structural resemblances between the past and the present, and to extract from them formal examples that can benefit us today.[113]

Maḥmūd demonstrates this approach by going back to early theological debates about how to interpret the Qur'an. He describes three schools. First, there are the Shia, who, he claims, adopted a Sufi outlook and interpret scripture allegorically, in order to arrive at its hidden meaning. Second, there are the Muʿtazilites, who advocated a rationalist reading of the Qur'an. Third, there is the majority of Muslims referred to as the people of the sunna (*ahl al-sunna*) – that is, the traditions of the Prophet Muḥammad, who held that one should stick to the literal wording of the Scripture. The intellectuals who engaged in these theological debates represented distinct social groups with different interests. As Maḥmūd explains, Sufism was used as a mystical religious cover by the disenfranchised who wanted to make a play for power during the Umayyad and Abbasid caliphates. The Umayyad caliphs legitimized their position as God's viceregent on earth with reference to their Arab ancestry and the special relationship that Arabs have to Islam. Opposing this proto-nationalistic form of legitimation, the various non-Arab groups that successfully rose up against the Umayyads emphasized the primacy of that great unifying identity that encompasses all Muslims, namely Islam

112 Maḥmūd, *Tajdīd al-Fikr al-ʿArabī*, 1993, 102. A comparable method for distinguishing form and content in *turāth* would gain wider recognition in the 1980s with the popular writings of Muḥammad ʿĀbid al-Jābirī. The parallels between the latter's approach to *turāth* and Maḥmūd's have been commented upon – see Anke von Kügelgen, "§ 6.6 Logischer Positivismus und Instrumentalismus Zakī Nağīb Maḥmūd," in *Bd. IV "Geschichte der Philosophie in der islamischen Welt des 19. und 20. Jahrhunderts,"* Grundriss der Geschichte der Philosophie (Basel: Schwabe Verlag, 2021), 304.
113 Maḥmūd, *Tajdīd al-Fikr al-ʿArabī*, 1993, 103.

as a universal religion. Moreover, as part of this power struggle, they merged non-Islamic mystical, irrational, and even atheist elements stemming from Persian culture with their new Islam "in order to corrupt the Islamic faith and to feed it with Persian elements and ideas, so as to resurrect the old religion on the ruins of the religion that had suppressed it."[114] Maḥmūd is convinced that the majority of the Arab population nowadays is committed to these irrational beliefs.[115] (Of course, blaming this popular, irrational side of *turāth* on Persian influences helps inoculate Arab contributions to *turāth* from the threat of irrationalism.[116])

The second, rationalist group was formed in reaction to these foreign intrusions. Basing themselves on the rational Greek heritage, the intellectual elite would counter the irrational tendencies promoted by the Persians with rational argument and a non-transcendental worldview.[117] This in particular was the position of the Muʿtazilites. Thirdly, the traditionalists merely wanted to preserve the social order, submit to the rule of the caliph (*tāʿa*), and refine their "conduct" (*sulūk*) according to Islamic law.[118] Some of their leading intellectuals, like al-Shahrazūrī and Ibn Taymiyya, forcefully opposed logic and philosophy on the grounds that they would lead to a subversion of the faith.[119]

If we were to look only at the content of the ideas that these three parties put forward, Maḥmūd contends, we would find none of it very useful. Their problematic revolves around defining the relationship between man and God through different approaches to reading Scripture. Moderns, by contrast, are concerned with the relationship between humans amongst themselves. If, however, we abstract from this content and look at the *form* of these three parties' thinking, we recognize different rational and irrational approaches. Thus, Sufism represents an irrational form of thinking, useful perhaps for the afterlife, but no good for the "children of this age, engaged in a mortal struggle for power in all its forms, military, industrial, scientific, financial, medical and others."[120] The rationalist worldview

114 Maḥmūd, *Tajdīd al-Fikr al-ʿArabī,* 157.This naturally buttresses his claim that not everything found in Arab-Islamic *turāth* is equally worthy of respect. Arab nationalists in particular ought to make a distinction between the purely Islamic and the imported, Persian elements in their heritage.

115 Maḥmūd, *Tajdīd al-Fikr al-ʿArabī,* 140.

116 Note that this strategy is used much more structurally in Muḥammad ʿĀbid al-Jābirī's four-volume *Critique of Arab Reason.* For a discussion of this aspect of al-Jābirī's work, see Viersen, "The Ethical Dialectic in al-Jabri's 'Critique of Arab Reason,'" 260 – 64.

117 Maḥmūd, *Tajdīd al-Fikr al-ʿArabī*, 1993, 164 – 65.

118 Maḥmūd, *Tajdīd al-Fikr al-ʿArabī*, 145.

119 Maḥmūd, *Tajdīd al-Fikr al-ʿArabī*, 169 – 171.

120 Maḥmūd, *Tajdīd al-Fikr al-ʿArabī*, 115. For an in-depth analysis of Maḥmūd's critique of and his simultaneous sympathy for Sufism, see Muḥammad Ḥilmī ʿAbd al-Wahhāb, *al-Taṣawwuf fī Siyāq al-*

of the Muʿtazilites, which tries to justify all claims on rational grounds, is helpful in understanding the natural world. However, its rational precepts cannot give man any guidance with regard to the divine, to what is invisible (*al-ghayb*).[121] Meanwhile, the conservative focus on perfecting one's moral comportment in accordance with Islamic scripture is commendable, but it is liable to stifle progress and therefore it is in large part to be blamed for the stagnation of the Arab world.

As people at the time realized all too well, none of these options is ideal. Therefore, there was bound to be someone who would seek a middle way between the rationalist and the literalist position. This happened with the arrival of Abū al-Ḥasan al-Ashʿarī (d. 936),[122] who settled the dispute by assigning reason and faith their own realms.[123] Maḥmūd believes that the modern Arab can find in this dialectic a position that is useful today, one that takes elements from both the Muʿṭazilī and the Ashʿarī positions:

> From the Muʿtazilites we take their rational approach and from the Ashʿarites we take their extension of reason to its furthest limit. Thus we assign religion to faith and we assign science to reason, without attempting to extend either side so as to get involved in the affairs of the other.[124]

This method of contextualizing a debate – dividing its participants into a modernist and a reactionary camp, looking for the contextual meaning of central concepts, and finding a middle position – is emblematic of mainstream discourse on *turāth.* Maḥmūd's clear exposition of this paradigm, and the conspicuous use he makes of it in his reading of *turāth,* identifies him as an exemplary exponent of the standard narrative of Arab thought. This narrative was evident in his analysis of contemporary Arab thought as presented at the 1971 Cairo conference, and it will be crucial to Maḥmūd's vision for *turāth* throughout his project of renewal. Moreover, we can now see how it dovetails with his linear-progressive conception of time. In his final

Nahḍa min Muḥammad ʿAbduh ilā Saʿīd al-Nursī (Beirut: Markaz Dirāsāt al-Waḥda al-ʿArabiyya, 2018), 103–38.

121 Maḥmūd, *Tajdīd al-Fikr al-ʿArabī*, 1993, 135.

122 This positive use of al-Ashʿarī may also be read as a tactical move, akin to the rhetorical use of al-Ghazālī in *The Rational.* Like al-Ghazālī, al-Ashʿarī is a pivotal figure in the traditional Sunni consensus. To take him as an example for a renewal of Arab thought carries an obvious rhetorical appeal. At the same time, it is hard to see how al-Ashʿarī can be said to have taken reason "to its furthest limit" and not beyond it, when his occasionalist theology is primarily known for the kind of anti-causal stance that, as will be discussed below, Maḥmūd sees as the one of the main causes for Arab backwardness.

123 Maḥmūd, *Tajdīd al-Fikr al-ʿArabī*, 1993, 135.

124 Maḥmūd, *Tajdīd al-Fikr al-ʿArabī*, 136.

analysis, Maḥmūd will propose that contemporary thought can be analyzed along similar lines: one group clings to tradition in order to uphold a form of spiritual guidance, a second wants to do away with tradition in the name of modern science, and a third tries to bridge the gap between spirit and the world through irrational Sufi means. To solve this modern dilemma, Maḥmūd proposes an *Ashʿariesque* solution that combines the best of both worlds; adopting technological novelties while adhering to older religious and moral precepts.

Before we get to this final synthesis, however, we should first look at the obstacles to modernization that Maḥmūd identifies in contemporary Arab societies. As pointed out earlier, Maḥmūd is committed to a picture of reason heavily influenced by his regard for Humean and logical-positivist psychology. He holds that the power of reason is that of making correct inferences from any arbitrary hypothesis. The obstacles that Maḥmūd identifies in Arab thought are of the kind that distorts the clear and correct use of reason. These obstacles have to be uprooted; Arab thought needs to be cleansed before it can adopt modern ideas.

4.2.3 The obstacles to modernization

At the beginning of *The Renewal,* Maḥmūd identifies three restraining factors (*ʿawāmil muʿawwiqa*) or obstacles holding back the use of reason in Arab thought: lack of freedom, ahistorical thinking, and belief in magic.[125] As argued above, the penchant for "ahistorical thinking" is of a different kind than the other two. It is ultimately through historicization that the other obstacles to modernization are removed. Historicization provides the clarity that allows one to pick the rational solution in any situation, be it questions of freedom or of contemporary belief in magic. Therefore, I will not discuss historicization as a separate obstacle, even though it is mentioned as such by Maḥmūd.

Additionally, there is a more profound reason to think of the problems of freedom and knowledge as different in kind. Maḥmūd thinks that the most coherent and productive way to view the world is to conceive of it in terms of two radically distinct spheres. On the one hand, there is the world of nature, which is studied by scientists who try to establish its laws. On the other hand, there is the realm of the self, in which the human spirit is allowed absolute freedom. What is wrong with contemporary Arab society, according to Maḥmūd, is that it orders both realms according to the wrong principles. It does not allow any freedom of expression and demands complete subservience of the subject to the ruler. At the same time, the

125 Maḥmūd, *Tajdīd al-Fikr al-ʿArabī*, 25–26.

Arab views the realm of nature as being entirely free and undetermined. He has not yet come to grips with a modern, causal, scientific perspective on nature, and clings to the belief that events are in the end ruled by some higher power. In other words, the two obstacles identified by Maḥmūd (besides a lack of historicism) each relate to one of the realms of human experience: the inner and the outer. If he can remove both these obstacles, he will have achieved a comprehensive worldview that creates space for the rational understanding of nature as well as for the expression of what resides in the depths of the human soul.

Freedom

The first obstacle mentioned, and the one Maḥmūd considers the main problem of his day, is the lack of freedom in the Arab world. According to Maḥmūd, freedom is not merely a moral requirement, but an essential prerequisite for getting at the truth. By and large, Maḥmūd here echoes J. S. Mill's famous argument for freedom of expression in *On Liberty*.[126] He starts by defining thought in terms of a conversation between two people in which statements are either affirmed or denied. This is done based on the merit of the statement in question. Neither those who childishly deny everything, nor those who blindly accept anything another person says, are engaged in thought. Maḥmūd also points out that since our knowledge of the world is incomplete – only God can comprehend the entire truth about the universe[127] – our beliefs are always hypothetical. Anything we take to be true may turn out not to be true in the end. The only way to get at the truth is to allow for a form of Socratic philosophical dialogue to emerge in which, through the use of reason and without ruling out any options in principle, what is right is distinguished from what is wrong, what is rational is set apart from what is mere fancy of passion (*nazwat al-hawā*).[128] In other words, the aim is to create what

126 Mill's argument for liberty as a necessary requirement for getting at the truth is stated most succinctly in the following quotation:

> That mankind are not infallible; that their truths, for the most part, are only half-truths; that unity of opinion, unless resulting from the fullest and freest comparison of opposite opinions, is not desirable, and diversity not an evil, but a good, until mankind are much more capable than at present of recognizing all sides of the truth, are principles applicable to men's modes of action, not less than to their opinions." (J.S. Mill, *On Liberty and Other Writings*, ed. Stefan Collini [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989], 121–22.

127 Maḥmūd, *Tajdīd al-Fikr al-ʿArabī*, 1993, 30–31.

128 Maḥmūd, *Tajdīd al-Fikr al-ʿArabī*, 32.

has been called a "marketplace of ideas," and to allow ideas to compete with each other in the understanding that truth wins out in the end.

What is important to note about this argument is that even though it is not formulated in moral terms, it turns on at least one central value: *truth.* Freedom is not primarily defended as a right that any citizen has, but as a right that supports the human quest for truth, specifically scientific truth. Moreover, given the strong connection between science and progress, freedom of expression may at the same time be considered a requirement for progress. As Maḥmūd makes clear, if the free expression of ideas is not allowed, people will only follow what they know and continue what they have been doing before, meaning that there is no progress. This dim-witted, blind following of tradition should be rebelled against (*fa-naḥnu idh nathūr ʿalā ittibāʿ al-taqlīd al-ghabbī al-aʿmā*).[129] It represents the irrational side of Arab heritage that, unfortunately, has dominated Arab-Islamic culture and held back its development.[130]

Related to this lack of free thinking is the traditional political system still ruling the Arab world. As Maḥmūd sees it, opinion (*al-raʾī*) and political power – represented by the sword (*al-sayf*) – have traditionally been held by the same person. Concurrently, in Arab thought notions of freedom traditionally revolved around the relationship between master and slave. There was less emphasis on the role of the state serving the needs of the people, or having to heed their demands. This has changed. Modern man has an entirely different conception of freedom. He demands political freedom, that is, freedom from oppression by the ruling party, and he demands social rights that allow him to make use of his political rights, without having to fear for his livelihood.[131] To work with this conception of freedom and the problems that it raises, it is impossible for Arabs to fall back on their *turāth*, since it never dealt with anything remotely like this comprehensive modern notion of freedom. Instead, Arabs will need to learn from contemporary cultures where modern concepts of freedom have already been formulated.

129 Maḥmūd, *Tajdīd al-Fikr al-ʿArabī*, 29.

130 The entanglement of freedom with the idea of progress and civilization is, as Wael Abu-Uksa has shown, a familiar trope in Arabic discourse dating back to at least the middle of the nineteenth century. This set the stage for the "political theorization of the concept" (Abu-'Uksa, *Freedom in the Arab World*, 53).

131 Somewhat ironically, the two pages (75–76) on which these controversial matters are discussed appear to be absent from the Egyptian version of *The Renewal.* A version printed in Lebanon does contain these pages.

Knowledge

Central to Maḥmūd's critique of contemporary Arab culture is its tendency to admit the possibility that laws of nature may be suspended by miracles (*taʿṭīl al-qawānīn al-ṭabīʿīyya bi-l-karāmāt*).[132] Arabs do not have a unified view of the world around them. Even when they are cognizant of modern science, they tend to stick to their magical beliefs.[133] They find it impossible to regard nature completely in terms of causes that are ruled by immutable laws. Instead they relate what happens in nature to the realm of the metaphysical, beyond the reach of human understanding. This must change. Arab society, which at its core remains in a state of superstition not very different from that of primitive man, must adopt a firm trust in natural law if it is ever to progress and become truly modern.[134] Only then will Arabs be fit to enter the age of knowledge and production (*al-dukhūl fī ʿaṣr al-maʿrifa wa-l-ṣināʿa*).

It is worth noting that this problem of epistemology is in Maḥmūd's mind linked to that of freedom. As he explains more clearly later on in *The Renewal*, the lack of faith in the causal workings of the universe links up with the traditional Arab view of the relationship "between earth and heaven, between Creation and the Creator, between the real and the ideal, this world and the hereafter, between the rational and the irrational."[135] When all is said and done, the Arab still regards the heavens as ordering whatever ought to happen in the sublunar world. This worldview not only implies that causal laws can never be entirely relied upon – seeing that the One up there has it in his power to break them – but it also reinforces the servile disposition of the people.[136]

As he did with the problem of freedom, Maḥmūd discusses that of adopting a modern epistemology with the help of historicization. In the olden days, he argues, one had to engage in a kind of scholastic practice to achieve knowledge. Knowledge came down to knowledge of linguistic expression (*maʿrifat al-lafẓ*), through which one could gain knowledge of God and, ultimately, achieve happiness in the hereafter.[137] In contrast, modern knowledge is valued according to its (technological)

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132 Maḥmūd, *Tajdīd al-Fikr al-ʿArabī*, 1993, 57.

133 Likely speaking from his own experience, Maḥmūd laments that even university professors, after teaching natural sciences in class, will revert to their private magical perspective as soon as they leave the classroom – see Maḥmūd, *Tajdīd al-Fikr al-ʿArabī*, 1993, 60.

134 Maḥmūd, *Tajdīd al-Fikr al-ʿArabī*, 1993, 61.

135 Maḥmūd, *Tajdīd al-Fikr al-ʿArabī*, 1993, 294.

136 Maḥmūd, *Tajdīd al-Fikr al-ʿArabī*, 1993, 296.

137 Maḥmūd, *Tajdīd al-Fikr al-ʿArabī*, 1993, 182.

use – *maʿrifat al-adāʾ*.[138] It is directed at understanding nature and achieving happiness in this world. This fact of modern life, Maḥmūd notes, is hard for Arabs to deal with, since "the genius of the Arabs has been their language."[139] Arabs have always looked at their language as a vehicle for aesthetic expression, not as a tool to be used for understanding the world, and their sense of identity and self-esteem is intimately linked to their poetic prowess. Regardless, what the modern Arab needs to realize is that modern society is moved by a different set of problems. Modern thinkers are concerned with "problems that revolve around the relationship between man and nature, industry (*ṣināʿa*), and his fellow man."[140] If Arab society wants to modernize and change from a society that focuses on linguistic expression to one that prioritizes science, technology, and production, it will need to adopt a more practical view of both knowledge and language.

Language

This brings us to a central issue in the renewal of Arab thought, namely the old-fashioned relationship that the Arab has to his language. Although the problem of language does not rank as an "obstacle" to modernization, it is sufficiently central to Maḥmūd's project to merit a section of its own. Of course, given his logical-positivist pedigree, the fact that language plays a central role in Maḥmūd's project for the renewal of Arab thought should not come as a surprise. The logical-positivist idea of philosophy centered largely on the analysis of language in order to clean it for exact use in the sciences, free of fuzzy metaphysical notions. Maḥmūd's hopes for linguistic renewal in fact run even deeper. "Language is thought," he exclaims, "the former cannot change without the latter changing along with it."[141] In short, Maḥmūd is convinced that by changing language, he can change thought, and that by changing thought he can change Arab society. But then, what is wrong with Arabic in its current state?

The main problem with the Arabic language, according to Maḥmūd, is that it was never conceived of as a language to state matters of fact, to refer to what is out there in the world.[142] The reason for this is to be found in one of the cornerstones of Arab culture, namely a rigid conceptual divide between the self and objects that

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138 For an extended discussion of this move between forms of knowledge, see Maḥmūd, *Tajdīd al-Fikr al-ʿArabī*, 1993, 224–41.
139 Maḥmūd, *Tajdīd al-Fikr al-ʿArabī*, 1993, 81.
140 Maḥmūd, *Tajdīd al-Fikr al-ʿArabī*, 1993, 96.
141 Maḥmūd, *Tajdīd al-Fikr al-ʿArabī*, 1993, 205.
142 Maḥmūd, *Tajdīd al-Fikr al-ʿArabī*, 1993, 233.

are out there in nature.[143] In order to overcome this divide, the Arab replaces things with words (*yastaʿīḍ ʿan al-ashyāʾ bi-alfāẓ*), creating for himself a web of linguistic references that have no connection to the world. The result is that Arabic, in its current form, does not lend itself for use in the empirical sciences, and therefore does not provide Arabs with the means to build a productive society. Harping on the Arabic term *kalām*, which refers to both speech and to scholastic theology, he laments that Arabs avoid the study of nature in favor of "Kalamology."[144]

Now, if one were to ask why Arabs need to adapt to this world of production in the first place, the answer is that this is necessary if Arabs want to live in their current age and achieve progress. As he makes clear, the secret to progress (*sirr taqaddum*) in this day and age is: "sciences, production, and technological training."[145] Whereas mankind in earlier stages of his development may have lived as a savage, believing in magicians and fortune tellers, the advanced nations of this era have all adopted modern science and technology.[146] If Arabs want to move ahead, they need to accept this different approach to language. Their civilization, which continues to be a civilization centered on linguistic expression (*ḥaḍārat al-lafẓ*), needs to be recast as a "civilization of the instrument" (*ḥaḍārat al-adāʾ*), so that it will be able to compete in a world in which strength is measured by economic and scientific output.[147] Arabs should add "ugly" language (*lugha "qabīḥa"*) in which they can speak about the world as it is,[148] while retaining the extraordinary poetic resources that their language offers for non-scientific pursuits. Culture, the arts, and Arabic literature in particular, should be kept as an agreeable diversion for one's spare time.[149]

Harking back to the previous section as well as to Maḥmūd's logical positivist inclination, we can see that the renewal of language is closely linked to the renewal of the Arab's relationship to knowledge. By purging language of the remnants of a metaphysical past, language can be made more exact, which in turn will help push science to greater heights. It is therefore no coincidence that Maḥmūd associates the metaphysical side of the Arabic language with the maligned metaphysi-

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143 Maḥmūd, *Tajdīd al-Fikr al-ʿArabī*, 1993, 245–46.
144 Maḥmūd, *Thaqāfatunā fī Muwājahat al-ʿAsr*, 126.
145 Zakī Najīb Maḥmūd, *Tajdīd al-Fikr al-ʿArabī*, 11th ed. (Cairo: Dār al-Shurūq, 2018), 195. The quotation comes from a more recent version of *The Renewal*. This version is substantially different from the older one, and in the absence of an editor's preface, the origin of the paragraphs from which this quotation has been taken, which appear to have been inserted into the older version that serves as our main reference, remain obscure.
146 Maḥmūd, *Tajdīd al-Fikr al-ʿArabī*, 1993, 234.
147 Maḥmūd, *Tajdīd al-Fikr al-ʿArabī*, 1993, 236–37.
148 Maḥmūd, *Tajdīd al-Fikr al-ʿArabī*, 1993, 251.
149 Maḥmūd, *Tajdīd al-Fikr al-ʿArabī*, 1993, 241.

cally oriented Sufi heritage that continues to dominate Arab culture. Arabic, in his view, is reminiscent of an earlier age that was:

> ruled by a Sufi, religious spirit, which looks for what is unseen behind what is observed, for what is hidden behind what is apparent, for the stable behind the changing, for the absolute behind the partial, relative, and fleeting, for what is permanent behind the evanescent.[150]

4.2.4 The middle path

Given Maḥmūd's criticism of Arab culture, the reader may be forgiven for thinking that there is not much worth salvaging. Indeed, that is what a younger Maḥmūd would have answered. The Zakī Najīb Maḥmūd of the 1970s, however, is no longer the radical modernist of the 1950s who would commit literature, the arts, and traditional ways to the flames without giving it a second thought. Revisiting a theme that he started to explore in his book *The Artistic East*, which signaled Maḥmūd's early move to the study of *turāth* in the early 1960s,[151] Maḥmūd claims that Arabs have inherited a culture with both theoretical and practical elements, "a nation that combines reason with religion, the world with the hereafter, the individual with the community."[152] In this age of rapid technological changes, characterized by spiritual shallowness, Arab culture offers a third way, an antidote to the meaningless, materialistic life of the West that, unlike the irrational cultures of the East, allows space for the flourishing of modern science.

In order to make this point, Maḥmūd returns to a distinctive feature of Arab culture that he referred to in describing the Arabic language: the radical divide between self and world. According to him, Arab culture is characterized by a stark divide between the Creator and his creatures, between heaven and earth, between the infinite and the finite.[153] While this has kept Arabs from developing a tradition of empirical-scientific investigations, focused as their intellectuals were on deepening the hermeneutical web of interesting linguistic references without any relationship to the real world, it can now serve as the basis for a new paradigm that combines modern science with the human need to express his moral and spiritual sentiment. The idea is that, precisely because Arab culture has always maintained a strict divide between the worldly and the spiritual, it is able to keep both

150 Maḥmūd, *Tajdīd al-Fikr al-ʿArabī*, 1993, 205–6.
151 In his autobiographical work *Qiṣṣat ʿAql* (*A Story of Reason*), Maḥmūd in fact takes *The Artistic East* and his trilogy together to constitute a complement to his earlier logical-positivist works. See Maḥmūd, *Qiṣṣat ʿAql*, 176.
152 Maḥmūd, *Tajdīd al-Fikr al-ʿArabī*, 1993, 253.
153 Maḥmūd, *Tajdīd al-Fikr al-ʿArabī*, 1993, 279–80.

in their place. The world of nature can then be studied with modern scientific means, whereas the world of the spirit is left to rule over matters of morals and aesthetics "and it is not allowed for either of the two fields to dispute the methods of the other" (*wa la yajūz li-ʾayy min al-niṭāqayn an yuzāḥim al-ākhar fī wasāʾilih*).[154]

What we have here is a clear example of the method that Maḥmūd laid out earlier. Instead of adopting the content of an idea found in *turāth*, he takes from it a *form* of thinking. The form of dualism is useful as it is, but if used the wrong way it can lead to undesirable consequences. As he explains:

> The division between heaven and earth bred the despotism of the ruler over the ruled. This undermined the necessity of laws in nature as well as in human society. Will came to rule over thought. The power of status took precedence over the superiority of truth. Virtue became [a set of] prescribed duties. Art remained a form empty of content.[155]

The goal should not be to get rid of the dualism, but to create a new one that is suited for our age. That way Arabs can profit from the insight found in *turāth* and stay true to it, without having to forsake modern science. As a replacement for the old dualities like heaven-earth and ruler-subject, Maḥmūd suggests a modern alternative that emphasizes the opposition between self and world, between a realm of freedom and a realm of science.[156]

But why exactly would such a dualistic picture help him? To understand this, we need to recap Maḥmūd's idea of reason and the source of human knowledge. According to him, the authentic Arab was a man of reason.[157] What he means is that the authentic Arab thought in terms of a movement from evidence to cause, from what is seen to what is unseen (*min al-shāhid ilā al-ghāʾib*).[158] This allowed him to relate a plurality of seemingly different ideas to a single principle, what in Arabic is called *taʾammul* (contemplation) or *naẓr* (sight). Maḥmūd is thus in fact suggesting that Arabs, in contrast to the peoples living to their east, are logicians by nature.[159] Along with this rational mode Maḥmūd explains that there are two other forms of understanding. First, there is understanding gained through the senses (*al-idrāk bi-l-ḥiss*) – particularly favored by the English. Second, there is understanding through intuition (*al-idrāk bi-l-ḥads*) – characteristic of the

154 Maḥmūd, *Tajdīd al-Fikr al-ʿArabī*, 1993, 282.
155 Maḥmūd, *Tajdīd al-Fikr al-ʿArabī*, 1993, 299.
156 Maḥmūd, *Tajdīd al-Fikr al-ʿArabī*, 1993, 300.
157 Maḥmūd, *Tajdīd al-Fikr al-ʿArabī*, 1993, 307–8.
158 Maḥmūd, *Tajdīd al-Fikr al-ʿArabī*, 1993, 311.
159 Maḥmūd, *Tajdīd al-Fikr al-ʿArabī*, 1993, 314.

Far East. For any civilization to fall under the sway of the latter kind of understanding – that is, through intuition – spells disaster. This form of direct contact with the truth through one's sentiment (*wijdān*) is entirely illusory. It is typically more prevalent among women, children, and certain kinds of animal, and it leads to undisciplined and sudden behavior among these groups, because it keeps them from thinking clearly in terms of cause and effect. When this mode of understanding is adopted on a larger scale, it is likely to lead to civilizational weakness, as in fact happened to the Arab world between the sixteenth and the nineteenth centuries.[160]

However, if the Arabs can recover their rationalist roots and shake off this lethargy-inducing Sufi spirit they will be in a position not only to catch up with the West, but even to go beyond it by answering the great question of this age. This question, according to Maḥmūd, is that of how to square the position of man with modern science.[161] For all its technological advantages, its great wealth, and strong armies, the West has failed to answer this question; "it has science, but it has lost the human being" (*fa-kān lahu al-ʿilm wa-lakinnahu faqad al-insān*). Western literature is witness to the weariness, boredom, misery, confusion, and destruction felt by Westerners. Every Westerner is like a Faustian character who has sold his soul to the devil and lives without guidance from moral values.[162] Maḥmūd decries the affluent Western youths who, faced with an otherwise meaningless existence:

> aim to retreat from the world, sometimes by using drugs, sometimes by immersing themselves in a yogic trance. Or they seek to engage in perversities, sometimes through violence, sometimes through queer behavior. This is all due to their being in desperate straits, trying to reconcile themselves to a life that is being suffocated by science and industry. Science and industry have indeed increased their wealth and power, but they have deprived them of a life of peace and well-being, reconciled with the voice of conscience.[163]

This voice of conscience (*ṣawt al-ḍamīr*) can be activated by a reformed Arab culture. Being positioned not just geographically, but also intellectually between the materialist West and the spiritual East, Arabs are able to combine the two. This combination is evident in the Arabic language, which due to its very regulated grammatical structure allows for both very precise, scientific expression and a

160 Maḥmūd, *Tajdīd al-Fikr al-ʿArabī*, 1993, 316–17. Here Maḥmūd clearly invokes the *inḥiṭāṭ* paradigm discussed earlier.
161 Maḥmūd, *Tajdīd al-Fikr al-ʿArabī*, 1993, 270–71.
162 Maḥmūd, *Tajdīd al-Fikr al-ʿArabī*, 1993, 271.
163 Maḥmūd, *Tajdīd al-Fikr al-ʿArabī*, 1993, 284.

great measure of poetic flexibility.[164] It shows in how Arab thinkers like Ibn Miskawayh, al-Ghaẓālī, and al-Rāzī[165] built on the logical, rationalist heritage of the Greeks, going beyond the abstract, theoretical limit (*al-ḥadd al-naẓarī al-mujarrad*) of Greek philosophy and adding a practical dimension focused on improving man's actions. Following a lengthy summary of modern Western philosophy, Maḥmūd concludes that in confronting the great question of our age, namely the proper relation between man and nature, modern Western philosophy has tended to take an epistemological route. Western thinkers from Galileo to our age have argued over how man can gain secure knowledge of his surroundings. In contrast, Arab thought has traditionally revolved around the question of ethics (*akhlāq*), its most formidable additions to world heritage being the ordering of moral acts derived from the Islamic faith.[166]

In short, the Arab world can offer a more stable moral framework to a technologically advanced yet ethically wayward West. Instead of a fickle utilitarian ethics, Arab-Islamic values can prove a steady basis for judging human actions.[167] Instead of the West's aestheticism, which only aims for instant gratification of the senses, Arab culture offers a more cerebral aesthetic form based on formal architectonic principles through which the viewer is transported from the world of the senses to that of the rational. Instead of a literary tradition that centers on the contingent personal experience of the self, Arabic literature focuses on what is constant (*thābit*), and can serve as an absolute model for the reader.[168]

4.3 An analysis of Maḥmūd's philosophy: Time and authenticity

Zakī Najīb Maḥmūd's writings on *turāth* serve as one of the clearest articulations of what Chapter 1 introduced as the standard narrative of Arab thought. His approach is premised on the opposition of two realms of authenticity and modernity. The task of the intellectual, according to Maḥmūd, is to work within these parameters, so as to find a way of balancing these two forces. On the surface, this oppo-

164 Maḥmūd, *Tajdīd al-Fikr al-ʿArabī*, 1993, 363.

165 It should be noted that not one of these thinkers was Arab by blood, although they did write in Arabic.

166 Maḥmūd, *Tajdīd al-Fikr al-ʿArabī*, 1993, 380. Interestingly, Maḥmūd prefigures ʿAbd al-Raḥmān Ṭāhā's contention that Arabic is more ethical because it is more action-oriented, due to the fact that its sentences tend to start with a verb.

167 Maḥmūd, *Tajdīd al-Fikr al-ʿArabī*, 1993, 277.

168 Maḥmūd, *Tajdīd al-Fikr al-ʿArabī*, 1993, 278–79.

sition is framed in logical-positivist terms: first, Maḥmūd conceives of his task in positivist terms as the removal of obstacles to the lucid use of reason. Second, he makes use of a radical separation between fact and value to formulate a perspective of two separate spheres: one universal, rational, and scientific, the other local, sentimental, and oriented towards artistic expression and upholding moral values. Clearly, however, this kind of division is not particular to logical-positivism. Rather, it is a reflection of a broader trend in Western thought that has, in part, fueled Orientalist divisions between a materialist, worldly West and a more spiritual, other-worldly East. It is this opposition that is reflected in the standard narrative, where authenticity has a tendency to become shorthand for a conglomerate of "Eastern" concepts that function as counterweight to concepts related to (Western) modernity. Moreover, Maḥmūd's discussions of historical time showed us how this opposition is premised on a particular temporal imaginary. A conception of horizontal, empty time forms the background against which authenticity and modernity are plotted *diachronically.*

Permeating this structure is an ideal, a *hypergood*,[169] a value that motivates his project from the get-go and is implicated throughout: progress. Arab society needs to move along with the age. It needs to pursue modern science. It needs to be creative and rational. Of course, Maḥmūd admits that morals, art, and cultural expression are important in their own right, but they are trumped by the need to progress. Why is progress so important? On the one hand, Maḥmūd at times suggests that progress is simply a good in itself. For instance, he makes the argument from definition that progress simply means that things get better and why would anyone be against making things better? At other times, he tends towards an evolutionary mode of reasoning. This is the case when he suggests that Arab society would have moved along just fine if it had not been for the rise of modern science and technology in the West. The power they have over the Arab states can only be broken if Arabs adopt the way forward, which means adopting rationality and the scientific method. More often than not, no explanation is given, and progress is simply assumed or implied as the aim of his or really anyone's reflections on *turāth.*

It is important to keep in mind that the conflict between science and morality that is at the heart of Maḥmūd's philosophy only becomes pertinent because of the supposed need to progress. If it had not been essential for the survival of an independent Arab civilization to move towards a scientifically more advanced future, there would have been no reason to prefer one over the other. It is only once progress is linked to science, and science is held back by an attachment to the value

169 This term was introduced by Charles Taylor in Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 63.

system embedded in *turāth*, that *turāth* becomes a burden that one must either shake off or learn to deal with. As we discussed earlier, the adoption of the modern ideal of progress gives a temporal dimension as well as a moral direction to the opposition between science and morality. Progress is a central feature of a recognizably modern discursive landscape, an environment in which the idea and the narrative of modernity functions as a platform for making normative claims.

The task is now to see how this temporal dimension structurally affects Maḥmūd's philosophy. How does his conception of authenticity depend on this temporal framework? What are the political and ethical repercussions of this view of authenticity vis-à-vis modernity? How does this play out in Maḥmūd's conception of the modern Arab self? A full treatment of these last two questions would take us too far afield. Instead, I aim to focus here on the more basic question concerning the relationship between time and authenticity, and present this as a prism through which to read Maḥmūd's philosophy, including his pronouncements on ethical topics closely tied to the question of authenticity.

4.3.1 Time

In Maḥmūd's references to the shape and movement of time we see two related perspectives, each of which serves a different purpose in his narrative. The first of these is the linear perspective that traces the path of progress. The second is a more dialectical temporal perspective that describes the movement of the individual intellectual, and of trends in thought generally, as moving between two extremes before settling on a reasonable synthesis. The former appears most clearly wherever Maḥmūd explicitly references time. One example is when he contrasts two ways of looking at the history of human civilization: history as a single line versus history as a cone-shaped development from humble beginnings to ever greater levels of knowledge and power. Interestingly, Maḥmūd at this point does not consider an alternative way of imagining time, a model, say, of history as recurrence of the same. Rather, traditionalism is portrayed as staying a course, not as an attempt to return to what once was. Traditionalism is an absence, an absence of progress. It "refutes the logic of history" by measuring our current era according to the standards of previous ones.[170]

This view is illustrative of Maḥmūd's adherence to the ideal of progress. The incremental, infinite accumulation of knowledge exemplified by the cone *is* the march of progress that he wants the Arab world to join. During his earlier logi-

170 Maḥmūd, *Qiyam min al-Turāth*, 276.

cal-positivist period he thought that he could help this endeavor by ridding the Arab mind of its ingrained superstitions. The study of *turāth*, however, convinced him that the more fundamental problem is the Arab's ahistorical sentiment. To weed out this sentiment, he needs to engage his readers on the historical level, by showing how the success of the Arab-Islamic civilization can be explained as the effect of a rational, pragmatic attitude oriented towards the future. To engage his readers, he needs a less abstract picture than that of a cone-shaped timeline. He needs to let history come alive. With this in mind, Maḥmūd sets out to write his overtly programmatic histories of the Arab-Islamic intellectual heritage. The way he arranges his history is revealing. Maḥmūd follows the modern model of progressive historiography by carving the abstract linear timeline up into eras – Maḥmūd typically takes these eras to last for a century – that allow for a telling of progressive history in discrete stages, like rungs on a ladder leading man from infancy to maturity. The comparison between individual and civilizational development is not spurious. Maḥmūd intentionally models the development of society on that of the individual. This model of development is fundamental to Maḥmūd's worldview, something that he himself implies by using it in his own intellectual autobiography in which each stage comprises more or less a single decade. He even goes so far as to describe himself as someone who is wedded to the idea of discrete ages.[171]

While the linear-progressive model of development is central to Maḥmūd's conception of history, in his later writings we also see a different perspective. This model portrays intellectual development not in terms of continuous accumulation, but as a dialectical movement between the extremes of reason and sentiment. It is first of all evident in the way that Maḥmūd describes his own development as an intellectual who started out with a naïve, irrational metaphysical outlook and who, after having been convinced of the necessity of adopting a rational, logical-postivist worldview in order to foster progress, settles on a median position that combines the best of both worlds through a historicized reading of *turāth.*

Again, Maḥmūd's perspective on the history of civilization and his own personal development turn out to be isomorphic. The thrust of his exploration of Arab-Islamic heritage is precisely the constant tension between (irrational) sentiment and austere rationalism – as captured by the title of his most detailed and coherent analysis of *turāth* in *The Rational.*[172] There, he describes Arab-Islamic thought as having reverted to its earlier irrational position following al-Ghazālī.

171 Maḥmūd, *Qiṣṣat ʿAql*, 52.

172 The book's complete title being *The Rational and the Irrational in Our Intellectual Heritage.*

He is not, however, saying that because the mystical turn was a mistake, the route taken by the West is therefore correct. His whole point is that the West has remained exclusively on the side of reason, neglecting man's spiritual needs. He instead favors an intermediate position, a compromise of the kind he admires in al-Ashʿarī's reconciliation of the metaphysical visions of the Shia and the traditionalism of the *ahl al-sunna* with the abstract rationalism of the Muʿtazilites. In a similar vein, he seeks a reconciliation between the spiritual East and the rational West via the intellectual heritage of the Arab world. In a sense, his own biography serves as a model for the development of human civilization, which until now has remained stuck with an impossible choice between two opposed tendencies, one rational and the other irrational.

In presenting Maḥmūd's temporal imaginary as having two aspects, he may appear to diverge from the linear-progressive temporal framework that is fundamental to the standard narrative. While this would be true if the standard narrative really did allow for only one way of conceiving of time, we have already noted a certain instability in it that we see recurring here in Maḥmūd. After all, the linear view and the dialectical view of a movement between the rational and the irrational is held together by a shared ideal of progress. What starts out as a commitment to advancing society by adopting scientific and technological innovations turns into a celebration of a set of concepts, sensibilities, and virtues that are associated with the modern scientific enterprise as well as with the West. Reason, critical thinking, a vigorous work ethic, the scientific method, an orientation towards the future, secularism, and many other aspects besides form an amalgam that provides moral direction. The future is better and therefore we *ought* to strive for it. Here, "future" does not mean whatever has not yet happened. Rather, it refers to a project, a vision of a world to come yet never quite reachable, because it always stays just on the horizon. The aforementioned virtues and sensibilities are the fuel that propel us forward towards the elusive goal of progress. In turn, this gives rise to a new question: considering that Maḥmūd uses two models to think about the movement of time, and that both of these are suffused with the ideal of progress, what does that tell us about his views of authenticity? How is authenticity as a diachronic concept interpreted differently according to these different (but related) views of time?

4.3.2 Authenticity

In light of the central role that authenticity plays in the standard narrative of Arab thought, and the importance that Maḥmūd attributes to the opposition between authenticity and modernity – a problematic that, after all, he dubs "the mother

of all cultural questions"[173] – mention of the actual term *aṣāla* is surprisingly rare. Rather, what we see in Maḥmūd is that he uses a host of connected terms to shed light on this binary from different angles. Hence we find him referring to identity (*huwiyya*), personality (*shakhṣiyya*), characteristics (*khaṣāʾiṣ*), the point of view (*wijhat naẓr*) of a culture, distinctive traits (*mumayyizāt*), character (*ṭābiʿ*), or cultural type (*namaṭ thaqāfī*).[174] None of these terms has an obvious temporal character. They may be used to express an essentialist view of culture and tradition, but not one that is by itself opposed to another culture *in time.* This changes when Maḥmūd makes use of the term *turāth* or history (*tārīkh*) to emphasize the historicity of authenticity as opposed to the modern age (*al-muʿāsara*). Here, the original meaning of *aṣāla* as relating to the roots (*uṣūl*) of a culture or national identity comes to the fore. Cultural authenticity (*al-aṣāla al-thaqāfiyya*) is said to "touch with its roots [*bi-judhūrihā*] the primary foundational elements that have made an Arab into an Arab for the whole of Arab history."[175]

One confusing (and at the same time revealing) element in Maḥmūd's writings is that these two conceptions of authenticity – synchronic and diachronic – are often run together. A revealing passage in this regard is the following, in which he reacts to the modern (Western) tendency to naturalize man and analyze the human mind in entirely factual terms:

> This is the age [*al-ʿaṣr*]… but we, by virtue of our authentic cultural framework [*bi-ḥukm iṭārinā al-thaqāfī al-aṣīl*], would feel great anxiety [*qalaq*] if we were to bring down man to this level that would put him in the same predicament as nature, and if we were to bring down 'reason' to a degree that makes it an organic function like all the functions that are performed with the bodily organs. For this perspective would, by its very nature, lead us to deny what comes after death. Therefore, our Arab culture has tried to hold on to its authentic traditional point of view [*bi-naẓratihā al-taqlīdiyya al-aṣīla*] that differentiates between body and spirit, in order that this differentiation may serve as a point of entry into the more general and perhaps more important differentiation between world and religion, between a life of this world and one of the beyond.[176]

What is confusing here is that Maḥmūd conflates the idea of authenticity as pertaining to "our authentic cultural framework" – that is, the essential Arab outlook – with the conception of authenticity as a temporal notion – that is, what is *not* belonging to this age (*al-ʿaṣr*). Authenticity at the same time functions as a cultural

173 Maḥmūd, *Qiṣṣat ʿAql*, 222.
174 Scheffold, *Authentisch arabisch und dennoch modern? Zakī Nağib Maḥmūds kulturtheoretische Essayistik als Beitrag zum euro-arabischen Dialog*, 245.
175 Maḥmūd, *Qiṣṣat ʿAql*, 222.
176 Maḥmūd, *Thaqāfatunā fī Muwājahat al-ʿAsr*, 35.

and as a temporal conceptual marker that sets Arab society apart, not simply because it is different from Western culture, but because it is conceptually opposed to it as a West that represents modernity.

Adding to this confusion, Maḥmūd also at certain points refers to a different, creative, or engaged sense of the term "authentic" (*aṣīl*), for instance when he argues that the authentic intellectual (*al-mufakkir al-aṣīl*) occupies himself with the problems of life, as opposed to the intellectual who only trails behind him and records, studies, and teaches these authentic ideas without adding any of his own.[177] A similar understanding of *aṣāla* can be seen in his lament that "our selves remain buried, waiting for the authentic artist" (*dhawātunā ma zālat maṭmūra tantaẓir al-fannān al-aṣīl*).[178] The result is a multifarious idea of authenticity. It takes on a range of meanings, from cultural authenticity, to traditionalism, to whatever lies in the past, to an individual sense of creativity.

How can we make sense of this network of interlocking concepts braided around the opposition between authenticity and contemporaneity? I suggest we start by differentiating according to the two conceptions of time used by Maḥmūd. The linear conception of time is implicated wherever Maḥmūd writes about the need for change, growth, or progress. Here, authenticity largely refers to backwardness, to inertness, to those who refuse to live in their own age. When this perspective is adopted, the reader is presented with a situation that admits no alternative. We all must move with the times and be contemporary. Authenticity here is opposed to progress, the *hypergood* in Maḥmūd's moral constellation. The second conception of time presents a contrast to this one-sided perspective. Here, authenticity is treated as a legitimate counterpart to modernity. It represents its complement, the yin to modernity's yang; authenticity stands for the sentimental, for an alternative way of living, in tune with one's feelings and with one's original culture, and opposed to the fast-paced, morally destitute West. Authenticity here may be used as an umbrella term for what makes Arab-Islamic culture (or any other culture for that matter) specific, but at the same time it functions as a marker for cultural and moral opposition. What is particular to Arab-Islamic culture *is* its moral orientation. It is therefore not just different, but its very difference serves as a riposte to an amoral Western modernity. All the while, we must keep in mind that these two conceptions are connected at the hip. It is the progressive impetus in the linear conception that creates the conceptual space for articulating a divide between a rational modernity versus a spiritual tradition (resembling the dialectic between Enlightenment and Counter-Enlightenment discussed in Chapter 3).

177 Zakī Najīb Maḥmūd, *Fī Taḥdīth al-Thaqāfa al-ʿArabiyya* (Cairo: Dar al-Shurūq, 1987), 360.
178 Maḥmūd, *Tajdīd al-Fikr al-ʿArabī*, 1993, 301.

Authenticity qua traditionalism

When authenticity is explicitly opposed to contemporaneity, it is in the first instance meant as a temporal opposition: the authentic refers to what lies in the past. If we conceive of time as inexorably moving forward, the march of time leaves in its wake an ever-growing collection of quaint relics. This sentiment is expressed most clearly in the passages where Maḥmūd describes the changing philosophical problematics concerning freedom or science. As far as intellectual history is concerned, each era presents a particular constellation of issues and problems. When we move from one age to the next, certain problems fade away, whereas others become salient. Importantly, Maḥmūd contends that this development is, on the whole, unidirectional. Human civilization progresses along a particular path. Once questions have become obsolete, we do not return to them. We will always continue to discuss the same general philosophical topics, but the terms in which we discuss these things will be entirely different. Freedom, for example, is now conceived of as a right of the individual citizen, while modern knowledge is connected to technology and production, instead of striving for intellectual cognition of God. While these older discussions may be interesting from a historical point of view, they should not serve as a measure for our own. We do not look backwards, only forwards. When we believe in progress, "our measure is the future."[179]

Of course, this forward direction does not proceed haphazardly. It is directed, the result of a specific rationalist trend in the development of human civilization. Our discussions tend over time to become more abstract and rational. Man moves from a primitive state in which he grasps the world in its everyday particularity, to a steadily more abstract and rule-bound, holistic, and truthful understanding of nature. This knowledge confers many benefits on him, in science, but also in health and in his personal freedoms.[180] Progress, therefore, is an unmitigated good. It is something that no sane person can conceivably be against.[181] Progress, Maḥmūd argues, is good by definition, since it pertains to "a move from that which is worse to that which is better."[182]

The main problem of contemporary Arab culture is that it has adequately historicized its own past and therefore cannot recognize progress. It treats the past as contemporaneous with the present and does not acknowledge a linear temporal progression nor a need to move with the age. It lives in awe of its own *turāth*

179 Maḥmūd, *Thaqāfatunā fī Muwājahat al-ʿAsr*, 97.
180 Maḥmūd, *Qiṣṣat ʿAql*, 250.
181 Maḥmūd, *Thaqāfatunā fī Muwājahat al-ʿAsr*, 95.
182 Maḥmūd, *Qiṣṣat ʿAql*, 249. Obviously, such a definition remains question-begging without an independent measure for what it means to be better or worse.

and looks to the past as an absolute measure and a safe guide for the future. It is concerned with preserving its authenticity, understood as holding on to age-old practices, ideas, and traditions. Arabs look at their past and seeing that they have always done without modern innovations, conclude that they may continue their lives as they always have. This, however, is a mistake. As times change and progress moves steadily along, things that were not necessary in the past become necessary for living a respectable life in the present.[183]

Distinctive about this perception of authenticity *qua* traditionalism is that it relies solely on a linear-progressive conception of time. Authenticity lies in the past because that is the domain of traditionalism. Given that progress functions as the ultimate ideal, authenticity is necessarily given a negative meaning. Since traditionalism is the negation of progress and progress is good by definition, authenticity must by its very nature be something bad. If the future is persistently getting better, then the past must have always been worse. What saves Maḥmūd from this wholly negative portrayal of authenticity is the fact that he adds to this progressive, linear view of history the dialectical perspective in which authenticity is conceived of as modernity's antithesis. This is not to say that the conception of authenticity as traditionalism is out of the picture. Both conceptions of time and authenticity stay with him, and provide Maḥmūd with different and seemingly inconsistent registers that ostensibly let him have his cake and eat it. They found an understanding of *turāth* that fosters the urge for progress along a Western path and that simultaneously preserves Arab-Islamic identity.

Authenticity as a counterpart to modernity

Seen from the perspective of an ideal of progress, authenticity can only be the negation of this ideal, the lack of progress and all the blessings that it brings. This is no longer the case once authenticity is articulated within a dialectical temporal framework. Here, authenticity and modernity serve as two ends of a binary divide, reminiscent of the division between Enlightenment and Counter-Enlightenment. Authenticity is portrayed not as backwardness and being stuck in one's ways, but as the negation of everything modern. Modernity, conceived of as a variety of interconnected concepts, is the mirror-image of the authentic. As we saw earlier, these various concepts attach themselves to the template of a distinction between fact and value. Reason, science, materialism, masculinity, secularism, and the contemporary as such are on the side of the former, and represented in its civilization-

183 Zakī Najīb Maḥmūd, *Mujtamaʿ Jadīd aw al-Kāritha*, 4th ed. (Cairo: Dar al-Shurūq, 1987), 237; Maḥmūd, *ʿArabī bayn Thaqāfatayn*, 407.

al form by the West. Authenticity, on the other hand, relates to sentiment, art, spiritualism, femininity, and the abiding presence of religion.

Recurring throughout the oeuvre of Maḥmūd is the refrain of the rational versus the irrational. As he explains in *The Rational*, history is a continuous back-and-forth between reason and sentiment.[184] With reason is meant the positivist ideal of the scientific method, or what Maḥmūd terms *burhān* or demonstrative reasoning.[185] Whereas sentiment makes up its own truth without any basis in evidence, reason proceeds via *burhān*, meaning that it either deduces conclusions from general rules, or it relies on empirical evidence to furnish it with data about what is or is not the case.[186] The rational is that which is "general and shared between people."[187]

Sentiment, on the other hand, is always merely expressive of personal convictions. It has no evidential basis because it is normative, and norms, as Hume taught us, have no basis in fact. In Maḥmūd's view, this is also characteristic of authenticity. It too is rooted in sentiment and expressive of personal conviction. It is normative rather than descriptive, relating to the beliefs of a person or a group of persons who share the same cultural heritage. Importantly, some cultures are more given to sentimentality (and hence to venerating the ideal of authenticity) than others. Arabs are, generally, culturally predisposed towards expressing themselves in terms that stir sentiment (*al-ʿibāra al-muthīra li-l-wijdān*).[188] Theirs is a rural culture steeped in Romanticism, as opposed to the rational mind of the city.[189] What's more, they are proud of it; "they boast to the rest of the world that their hearts are full of sentiment" (*aṣḥāb qulūb ʿāmira bi-l-wijdān*).[190]

Somewhat ironically, this lack of basis in fact also makes the authentic more unyielding. Scientific propositions must always remain provisional best-guesses. They are never beyond dispute. This is why the modern age is dynamic. This is the age of change (*hadhā huwwa ʿaṣr al-taḥawwul*[191]), because it relies on a flexible, hypothetical reason. The past, in this view, is inherently static. Its claims rest on personal conviction. One can voice them with complete confidence in the

184 Maḥmūd, *al-Maʿqūl wa-l-Lā-Maʿqūl fī Turāthinā al-Fikrī*, 18.

185 This is the term used to refer to Aristotelian demonstrative reasoning in the Arabic philosophical tradition. In the debates surrounding *turāth,* the term *burhān* was adopted as a standard by rationalists like Maḥmūd, but also famously by Muḥammad ʿĀbid al-Jābirī.

186 Maḥmūd, *Qiṣṣat ʿAql*, 184–85.

187 Maḥmūd, *Qiṣṣat ʿAql*, 121.

188 Maḥmūd, *Qiṣṣat ʿAql*, 121.

189 Maḥmūd, *Thaqāfatunā fī Muwājahat al-ʿAsr*, 73.

190 Maḥmūd, *Qiṣṣat ʿAql*, 140.

191 Maḥmūd, *Tajdīd al-Fikr al-ʿArabī*, 1993, 234.

knowledge that there is nothing that can possibly prove a conviction or a deeply held value wrong; they simply do not belong to the realm of fact, and hence the question of right and wrong does not apply. Add to this the relative stability of values, which are part of a firm sediment of our cultural background, and we find that not only is authenticity opposed to rationality, it is also static and opposed to modern dynamism.

The reason–unreason binary is the most prominent of the oppositions that surface in Maḥmūd's writings; it forms the skeleton that other oppositions can latch onto. One of these is the opposition between matter and spirit. Modernity, reason, and science are concerned with the material world, with things (*ashyāʾ*),[192] with controlling and predicting events and producing things that make human life more agreeable. After having lived in an age of the word, we now live in an age of the instrument, of technology,[193] one that is oriented towards production.[194] In this materialist day and age, scientists are even convinced that reason itself can be naturalized, that it can be analyzed in purely factual, material terms. This creates serious anxiety "on account of our [the Arab's] authentic cultural framework" (*"bi-ḥukm iṭārinā al-thaqāfī al-aṣīl"*).[195] A completely naturalized conception of man contradicts the Islamic principle that man has a spirit that lives on after the body has perished; it precludes the authentic dualism of body and spirit that is the cornerstone of Arab thought. What's more, it denies any space to authenticity. Authenticity is, according to the dialectical account, associated with the spiritual. It deals with the otherworldly. A completely naturalized epistemology would undercut the authentic, as well as Maḥmūd's attempt at reconciling the two sides of the divide.

Interestingly, the spiritual also has a temporal component, or rather, it lacks one. The Arab is convinced that he can force his will on time and death through supplication. Instead, he himself is forced by the fickle nature of time to take refuge in a place that is not temporal by nature, "to flee into a self that is an atemporal being" (*fa-yaljaʾ ilā dhātan* [*sic*] *al-latī kāʾin lā-zamanī*).[196] The authentic, in other words, is not simply opposed to the modern because it is in the past. It is also in complete contradiction to it, because it is atemporal; it does not admit the modern category of the historical.

There are several more binaries that Maḥmūd connects to the overarching theme of reason–unreason. We could draw attention to the opposition between

192 Zakī Najīb Maḥmūd, *ʿAn al-Ḥurriyya Ataḥaddath* (Cairo: Dar al-Shurūq, 1989), 66.
193 Zakī Najīb Maḥmūd, *Humūm al-Muthaqqafīn* (Cairo: Dar al-Shurūq, 1981), 31.
194 Maḥmūd, *Qiyam min al-Turāth*, 276; Maḥmūd, *Tajdīd al-Fikr al-ʿArabī*, 1993, 234.
195 Maḥmūd, *Thaqāfatunā fī Muwājahat al-ʿAsr*, 35.
196 Maḥmūd, *Thaqāfatunā fī Muwājahat al-ʿAsr*, 59.

the rational male and the slightly less rational female who is more disposed towards a sentimental temperament. Or we could point to how sentiment serves to draw together authenticity and religiosity. These are important aspects of Maḥmūd's thinking and of the kind of liberal *nahḍa* worldview he represents, but in essence a discussion of these ideas would rehearse the structural opposition sketched in the foregoing.

There remains one opposition, however, that merits deeper discussion: the opposition between East and West. We can only understand the standard narrative and the Orientalist binaries that accompany it against the background of a constant looming presence of the metropole and the love-hate relationship between Arab intellectuals like Maḥmūd and an essentialized modern Western culture. The West and the contemporary are, in Maḥmūd's eyes, virtually synonymous. The West, in his words, "only has in its hands a single civilization and that is the civilization that it has made for this age";[197] for this reason, "the West is the age (*al-ʿaṣr*)."[198] It is the West that knows how to handle the problems of this age, and therefore it is up to every man to follow its lead. When Maḥmūd discusses the opposition between authenticity and contemporaneity as "the mother of all cultural questions," he does so in the context of this opposition between a scientifically advanced West and an Eastern world that continues to lag behind.[199] The West represents all the aspects that Maḥmūd ascribes to modernity. It is marked by rationality, a scientific mind, materialism, technology, production, freedom, democracy, individualism, secularism, masculinity, etc. At the same time, it shows a lack of the very attributes ascribed to the East, such as morality, spirituality, and an artistic frame of mind. This opens up a new avenue for exploring authenticity, this time as a positive force of moral worth.

Authenticity as the repository of value

On the whole, authenticity has so far been given a negative connotation. It is irrational, unmodern, opposed to progress. By presenting authenticity in opposition to the Western rationalist sensibility, however, Maḥmūd creates room for a positive reading of authenticity, namely as the repository of values. The West, as Maḥmūd writes repeatedly, presents us with a culture of rationalism, science, and technology. Its orientation is towards matters of fact. This has come at the expense of the normative, sentimental, moral side of human experience. It has forgotten the importance of moral and artistic values, leading to a sterile worldview

197 Maḥmūd, *Qiyam min al-Turāth*, 276.
198 Maḥmūd, *Qiṣṣat ʿAql*, 62.
199 Maḥmūd, *Qiṣṣat ʿAql*, 222.

in which man has lost touch with his innermost self.[200] It has lost its grip on the sources of value in religion, leaving its younger generations with all the opportunity in the world, but nothing to live for. This can be remedied by learning from the East, which, due to its spiritual and moral orientation, is better positioned to articulate what is valuable and thereby give direction to our lives. In essence, this represents the association of the fact–value distinction with an Orientalist ontological framework. After all, working from the fact–value distinction, reason is the slave of the passions; the subjective inkling, whether whimsical or managed by culturally embedded values, is the indispensable motivating force behind all human action. The East now appears to stand in for this subjective feeling, prescribing passions in the form of common values at the civilizational level.

What these values exactly are appears to be less important than the fact that they are the provenance of the Eastern mind. Religion is often invoked as a source of values, leading to the assumption that it is Islamic values that Maḥmūd is interested in.[201] However, a thorough discussion of these values is largely absent.[202] Maḥmūd marks Islamic ethics, in contradistinction to modern, Western ethical theory, as absolute and objective, instead of circumstantial and dependent on the perspective and interests of the individual, but what the effect of this meta-ethical framework is on particular moral judgments is not elaborated; a specification made even more difficult by the fact that these objective values are only acknowledged formally, their content (*muḥtawā*) changing with the times.[203] *Turāth* is offered as a source of values, yet it is not clear what we should adopt from it, other than that the values we do adopt should be beneficial to us. Maḥmūd picks out ar-

200 Maḥmūd, *Qiṣṣat ʿAql*, 189.
201 Maḥmūd, *Thaqāfatunā fī Muwājahat al-ʿAsr*, 10.
202 This is also the case in a book like *Qiyam min al-Turāth* (*Values from the Turāth*), which is ostensibly about values. Like most books published after *The Rational*, it is a collection of essays that, although pertaining very generally to the topic in the title of the book, do not together form a single argument. Rather, they may be seen as meditations on religion and ethics within the framework sketched in *The Renewal,* and where the emphasis is on *turāth* rather than on values. Hence, one finds discussions of how one can follow the Islamic faith and still remain "modern" (p. 142), of how Egyptian nature has historically been able to combine religion with worldly affairs (p. 305), of how the West has experienced too much individualization due to the overbearing influence of science, while Arabs have communal values but lack modern science (pp. 18–19), of how one ought to combine the past and the present (pp. 98 – 99), or of how there is a tendency to hold on to and relive the past (pp. 322 – 324). This is not to say that this book cannot give us some insight into the specifics of Maḥmūd's moral outlook (a discussion of which lies outside the scope of this research). However, what we do not find in this work is a sustained argument that develops a theory of what values are, how they relate to each other, or how they are justified.
203 Maḥmūd, *Ḥaṣād al-Sinīn* (Cairo: Dār al-Shurūq, 2018), 407– 8; Maḥmūd, *Thaqāfatunā fī Muwājahat al-ʿAsr*, 57.

tists and writers as the creators of values, but here too it is the general idea that counts, not any idea that a particular artist or writer has articulated.[204] Values as such are praised, first, as a marker of cultural identity and second, as a defining characteristic versus a supposed Western lack of values. What these values express is largely beside the point.

Why this inconclusiveness? It could be argued that Maḥmūd does not want to do more than paint a broad strokes picture, a model for conceiving of the world as divided into different spheres, and that he can leave it up to others to fill in the details. I believe, however, that this runs deeper, that the absence of any detailed discussion of what the Eastern ethical perspective entails is due to a fundamental implication of his mode of thought.

As we have seen, Maḥmūd's model for differentiating the factual from the evaluative evinces a clear Humean streak. According to this perspective, statements of fact are essentially hypothetical. They are best guesses based on past experience that can be proven wrong by experience. Statements of value are different, because they are entirely based on subjective feelings and thus cannot be proven wrong or right. The logical-positivist Maḥmūd of the 1950s explicitly follows a twentieth-century iteration of this non-cognitivist perspective in the form of Ayer's "emotivism," according to which moral or aesthetic judgments are merely expressions of approval or disapproval. In other words, they express nothing more than the equivalent of "hurrah, *X!*" or "boo, *Y!*" Such statements do not refer to anything objectively verifiable. It may be the case that a group of individuals holds that certain things are good or bad, because they share a certain interest in them. When these opinions metastasize, they become the kind of shared values that make up cultures. These values, however, are not objectively given, but arise only from intersubjective agreement and only with regard to specific shared goals. Such values are measured in terms of how helpful they are in coping with current circumstances, but they remain only relative to our practical use for them.[205]

This picture does not appear to change much as Maḥmūd enters into his explorations of *turāth.* Here, too, he appears to differentiate between beliefs about the state of the world, and values which instruct us on how to behave in such a way that we are most at ease with ourselves and can live cooperatively with others. Since the effect that values have on our own well-being and that of the community changes with changing circumstances, values themselves must always remain flex-

204 Maḥmūd, *Qiṣṣat ʿAql,* 227–28; Maḥmūd, *Mujtamaʿ Jadīd aw al-Kāritha,* 217.
205 Anke von Kügelgen mentions emotivism as Maḥmūd's basic orientation in matters of ethics as well as the intersubjective and pragmatic grounding for his conception of value; see von Kügelgen, "§ 6.6 Logischer Positivismus und Instrumentalismus Zakī Nağīb Maḥmūd," 300.

ible. This means that there cannot, in principle, be any absolute value.[206] Every value is by necessity hypothetical. Thus, insofar as such general terms as "authenticity" and "the East" function as repositories of values, they can only do so in the abstract. Any particular value is ephemeral since it is measured against a particular context in which it either does or does not work.[207]

Authenticity qua personal expression?

Until now, the discussion has largely turned on an understanding of authenticity in cultural terms, as pertaining to Arab, Islamic, or Western tradition as a whole, not the individuals who make up these traditions. What, you may ask, does Maḥmūd have to say about that other understanding of authenticity? The one that views authenticity as a personal ideal of creativity and originality? What about the connection between authenticity and individual freedom? The short answer is: "Not much." Admittedly, on one occasion in *The Renewal* Maḥmūd expresses the Arab craving for an "authentic artist," and in a later work he differentiates between the authentic artist and the artist who is merely following along.[208] But also when referring to authenticity in the arts, he does not clearly refer to the authentic artist as someone who stands apart from society. As Maḥmūd explains in another passage, the "authentic artist" should be seen as someone who gives artistic expression to the culture and society in which he lives. He "absorbs the life of his community until it is as if it runs through his veins," at which point the artistic talent inspires him to use this material in his art.[209]

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206 The only value that comes close to being absolute is the abstract ideal of progress that serves as a standard for judging whether anything is helpful in current circumstances.

207 It may be hard to see how Maḥmūd can square his fundamentally subjective, hypothetical, and contextual conception of values with the absolute and objective form of ethics he ascribes to Islam. Indeed, this is precisely what Anke von Kügelgen points to in discussing Maḥmūd. She remarks that despite Maḥmūd's own assurance that he never wavers from his relativist stance on values, his simultaneous reliance on conscience, tradition, and in particular on Revelation as sources of value opens the door somewhat to a shariʿa-oriented "value-objectivism, that is to say, a divine voluntarism" – see von Kügelgen, "Konflikt, Harmonie oder Autonomie? Das Verhältnis von Wissenschaft, Philosophie und Religion," 112, and von Kügelgen, "§ 6.6 Logischer Positivismus und Instrumentalismus Zakī Nağīb Maḥmūd," 303. A possible reply to this on Maḥmūd's behalf would be the point discussed previously, that even where Arab-Islamic culture adheres to the universality of values revealed in the Qur'an, the content (*muḥtawā*) of these values may change along with the times – see the discussion referred to in footnote 203. This would indeed leave room for some form of divine command theory, albeit a light version in which the actual moral judgments remain dependent on personal, social, and cultural circumstances.

208 Maḥmūd, *Fī Taḥdīth al-Thaqāfa al-ʿArabiyya*, 360.

209 Maḥmūd, *ʿArabī bayn Thaqāfatayn*, 56.

Again, the absence of a more developed sense of personal authenticity is significant. First, it aligns with Maḥmūd's adoption of the standard narrative, according to which authenticity derives its meaning primarily from its opposition to modernity. This leaves less space for a personal conception of authenticity that is not plotted diachronically against the scale of an authentic past and a modern present, and tips the balance in favor of a collective sense of belonging to the same authentic culture. This relates to a second point, namely his view of freedom. True to his "(at times) naïve embrace of liberalism,"[210] Maḥmūd is a keen advocate for individual freedom. One of the things that Maḥmūd took away from his stay in England was the great respect for individual freedom that he found in European culture.[211] This high regard for the individual is, according to him, a necessary aspect of contemporary culture that should be adopted in the Arab world.[212] Freedom, moreover, helps us get at the truth, allowing people to put new ideas to the test.[213] What Maḥmūd has in mind when he talks about freedom, however, is clearly a negative conception. Freedom is presented as the absence of constraints, as the opportunity to develop your own ideas and use your reason and other capacities to their utmost extent. Maḥmūd is against oppression, and presents freedom as a constant philosophical concern for humankind. His ideal, however, does not concern the freedom of individuals to realize their authentic selves. Freedom from oppression is a right that every society, every culture, every state should try to secure for itself. Authenticity is what members of these collectives achieve by being part of a free society, but this can only be a collective, cultural sense of authenticity based on shared values. An alternative form of authenticity of the kind discussed for example by Maḥmūd's compatriot Fuʾād Zakariyyā, one that relates to the creative "authenticity of the poet" is not seriously considered.[214]

4.4 Conclusion

Zakī Najīb Maḥmūd was a remarkable and influential intellectual. He was a bridging figure who grew up during the late *nahḍa* period, but only gained recognition as a philosopher during a time when the liberal reformist credo had lost ground to

210 Khalidi, "Zakī Najīb Maḥmūd (d. 1993), Naḥwa Falsafa ʿIlmiyya (Toward a Scientific Philosophy)," 693.
211 Maḥmūd, *Qiṣṣat ʿAql*, 50.
212 Maḥmūd, *Qiṣṣat ʿAql*, 74.
213 Maḥmūd, *Tajdīd al-Fikr al-ʿArabī*, 1993, 32.
214 See the discussion of Zakariyyā's critical approach to the discourse of authenticity and modernity in section 2.6.

Marxist and existentialist thought. During this post-war period, he was not swayed by these strands that were popular with a younger cohort of Arab thinkers. Instead, he charted his own logical-positivist course as a sort of reinvention of the liberal ideals of his own generation. Adding to his idiosyncratic biography, he reinvented himself once again, years into his retirement, with the publication of *The Renewal* in 1971. His newly discovered interest in *turāth* set him up for another two productive decades in which he became an internationally recognized representative of Arab thought.

That being said, judging by his intellectual biography, one may question how new this turn to *turāth* really was. It is true that the topic of his many articles changed, showing much more concern with pre-modern Arabic sources, but did this change in topic also mark a change in his general outlook? Did he develop a perspective different from his earlier logical-positivism? Granted, Maḥmūd gradually came to realize that it would be impossible to promote his program of liberal modernization without addressing the issue of culture. But if we look at the central ideals that motivate him and his deeper analysis of the problems of Arab thought, these stay largely intact. His rereading of *turāth*, instead of being a move away from his logical-positivist phase of the 1950s, can be understood as an application of a logical-positivist perspective to the question of *turāth*. Maḥmūd finds in *turāth* precisely the kind of metaphysical attachments that logical-positivism wants purged. By ridding *turāth* of its irrational commitment to the past, he thinks that Arabs can come to view the world in rational, scientific terms that lead the way to progress. To do this, one does not need to erase all Arab culture. One must simply quarantine the moral and aesthetic values that are attached to culture so as not to bother the work of the scientist.

What this chapter has shown, amongst other things, is what such a project of secularizing *turāth* presupposes, and the extent to which it continues on a path set out during his earlier phase. For one, it requires a strict separation of fact and value. The quarantine only works if you can differentiate clearly between matters of fact that are the provenance of the natural sciences, and matters of value or sentiment that belong to the field of culture. When this division is combined with a particular way of organizing time, namely as a linear progression from value to fact, it allows one to categorize societies according to how adept they are at describing the factual and using this knowledge to further their own ends. This is seen in Maḥmūd's description of the Western modernity, which is rooted in fact, and the Eastern sentimentality that stifles its modernization. This is essentially the old tale of modern progress that finds its roots in eighteenth-century ideal of rationalization, and the nineteenth-century constellation of evolution and constant development. It is also no coincidence that the central value, the *hypergood* in Maḥmūd's system, is progress. It is the pursuit of progress that provides the ulti-

mate reason for his project, both the logical-positivist phase and the subsequent dissection of *turāth.*

What the later period of Maḥmūd's writings adds to this picture is an acknowledgement of the countermovement to this story of progress. This Counter-Enlightenment perspective introduces a different conception of time that, rather than being opposed to the linear-progressive model, grows dialectically out of it. It acknowledges the progress of reason in the modern world, but it equates this with ethical degeneration. Maḥmūd is not blind to these dissenters who question the accomplishments of the Enlightenment, and he wants to placate them by showing how modernity and progress do not need to imply moral degeneration, as long as you separate the two realms of fact and value and allow each to thrive within their own field, one of which is ruled by a clear progressive historical trend, whereas the other is inherently timeless.

The aim of this chapter has not been to dismiss this project of Maḥmūd. Sure enough, his rather coarse definition of culture is problematic, as is his rash division between fact and value, let alone his essentialist depiction of cultures and societies along these lines. It is important to be frank about these matters, but their detailed discussion is not what we are after. Maḥmūd is interesting because of what he represents. His philosophy resembles a microcosm of the discourse on *turāth* that we have described as the "standard narrative." We saw earlier how the division between traditionalists and modernists that has defined Arab thought is premised on a linear-progressive conception of time – Massad's "evolutionary temporal schema." Not only is this time conception discussed by Maḥmūd in detail as a cornerstone of his philosophical project, it is also evident through his description how it gives rise to the traditionalist–modernist division. It is the value of progress that defines the two sides, and it is its moral import that leads to the conflict that Maḥmūd intends to resolve with his renewal of Arab thought.

Our discussion of Maḥmūd also shows how this time conception may impact discussions of authenticity. While we should remain careful about sounding overly deterministic, his worldview makes a particular view of authenticity appear salient. Progress, in this schema, is not something that is accomplished by the individual. Modernity is a shared feat of a culture, a nation, or a society. The central question revolves around how to safeguard modernization while continuing to do justice to collective cultural attachments. By posing the question in collective terms, the question of personal authenticity, of individualism as a goal in its own right, is downplayed. Authenticity now stands for a collective defense of traditional values in the face of a modern onslaught.

Finally, there is one result of this discussion that merits reflection. In spite of Maḥmūd's emphasis on ethics and values in the later philosophy, it has been hard to pin him down on any particular moral ideal. His deep-rooted non-cognitivist,

emotivist, and therefore largely subjectivist stance prevents him from taking a rigorous stance on what matters. The most that this allows him to countenance is an intersubjective standard for identifying values that help people get ahead collectively. This, in turn, opens him up to the charge of relativism, one that he explicitly embraces, but which also at times appears to conflict with his adherence to the objective, essential truth of those values revealed in Scripture.

Yet, despite the fact that Maḥmūd himself largely rejects the idea that values are stable and objective, it would not be correct to conclude that there is no ethical dimension to his thinking. In his writings, there is at least one important and abiding value, which is that of *progress.* His belief in progress as a fundamental value or *hypergood* is something he reiterates in his final reflections on his intellectual life. He recalls that in the 1930s, he already "inclined with his whole mind and heart to the idea of 'progress' [*taqaddum*]," and this is something that stays with him throughout.[215] Similarly, a guiding thread throughout Maḥmūd's oeuvre is the value of reason. The defence of clear rational thought provides the impetus for his logical-positivist project, and it is the perceived need to preserve the free, objective exercise of reason in the Arab world that informed his turn to *turāth.* To these may be added the value of self-sacrifice. Giving up one's own personal benefit to serve the interests of the group is, Maḥmūd argues, a vital innovation that was introduced by Islam in a society that before that time had relied only on the subjective guidance provided by conscience (*ḍamīr*).[216] This value is closely connected to a sense of duty, which in turn was a key element in the Victorian-esque Arabic ethical literature popular among liberal reformers of the early twentieth century.[217] These values, moreover, are connected. It is through reason that scientific, technological, and therefore social progress can be assured. Meanwhile, the contrast between a subjective appeal to conscience and the objective reliance on a revelational ethics is explained by Maḥmūd in terms of the latter's rational basis. Only rational judgments can truly aspire to general appeal, which in turn would imply that the move towards an ethics that encourages self-sacrifice for the sake of the community is a development towards a more rational ethics.[218]

215 Maḥmūd, *Ḥaṣād al-Sinīn*, 9.

216 Zakī Najīb Maḥmūd, *Tajdīd al-Fikr al-ʿArabī*, 11th ed. (Cairo: Dār al-Shurūq, 2018), 311–12.

217 The prime example of this ethical literature is Aḥmad Amīn's *Book of Ethics*, which contains chapters on both conscience and duty. For a detailed account of the centrality of duty to the Victorian ethical landscape, see Stefan Collini, *Public Moralists: Political Thought and Intellectual Life in Britain 1850–1930* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), chap. 2.

218 Zakī Najīb Maḥmūd, *Qiṣṣat ʿAql*, 121. It should be noted that in this case, Maḥmūd uses a different term for conscience – that is, *wijdān* – than he does in the section of *The Renewal* referenced in footnotes 163 and 216.

Although it is not our purpose to work these observations into a full-fledged theory, this does indicate that there is more to Maḥmūd's concept of ethics than meets the eye. Ethical aspects of someone's thinking are often not found in an explicit adherence to virtues or values, and must be gleaned from how an author's worldview is expressed in his writings. In this way, even a philosophy that explicitly turns against metaphysical and ethical speculation carries within it the kernels of an ethical point of view, a perspective on what one ought to do, the kind of person one ought to be. To map this ethical perspective, however, we need general parameters that structure their thinking. General conceptions of time, of rationality, and of authenticity can help us do this. This is how our inquiry into time and authenticity, even if it does not aim primarily to investigate ethics, provides us with tools for thinking about the ethical dimensions of contemporary Arab thought.

We will continue on this path in the following two chapters. We will look at two intellectuals who present a different take on authenticity, built on a different conception of time, modernity, and progress. Our discussion of Maḥmūd lays the groundwork for this. It shows, by example, the way the standard narrative functions, how it is bound up with specific ideas about time, authenticity, and modernity. The standard narrative is a symptom of a specific discursive formation, a set of rules for talking about Arab society and the modern Arab subject through a discussion of *turāth.* Maḥmūd, as a representative of an older generation of liberal intellectuals and a central voice in the debates of the 1970s and 1980s, presents us with an insightful illustration of how the dyadic schema of authenticity and modernity, and the temporal imaginaries that underlie this narrative, have shaped contemporary Arab thought. In the following two chapters, we will look at how this schema may be upended, and how this can pave the way for different perspectives on the individual and the community in modern Arab societies.

5 Adonis: Authenticity and exploration of meaning

In the previous chapter on Zakī Najīb Maḥmūd, we encountered a reading of *turāth* that combines logical-positivism with the standard narrative of contemporary Arab thought. Maḥmūd's discussion of the problematic of *turāth,* grounded in the familiar opposition between authenticity and modernity and articulated largely within a progressive-linear temporal framework, offers an instructive illustration of the *turāth* discourse paradigm. In this chapter (and the next), our aim is to explore possibilities beyond this paradigm. We will closely examine the ideas of two individuals who, as a staunch modernist (Adonis) and a committed traditionalist (Ṭāhā), appear to be polar opposites.[1] As we look more closely, however, we will see that such straightforward classifications break down once we let go of the parameters of the standard narrative. Once we do that, we may begin to understand these figures as subverting the common understanding of Arab thought by redefining concepts of authenticity and modernity by applying different temporal lenses.

This chapter will concentrate on someone who is better known as a poet than as a theorist of *turāth:* ʿAlī Aḥmad Saʿīd Isbir, also known as Adonis. At first glance, his contribution to the *turāth* debate can be (and has been) read as simply another modernist, secularist rejection of traditionalism. Adonis's critique of *turāth*, which he formulated most comprehensively in his dissertation *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥth fī al-Ibdāʿ wa-l-Ittibāʿ ʿind al-ʿArab* (*The Static and the Dynamic: An Inquiry into Creativity and Conformity Among the Arabs*); henceforth *The Static*), appears to have much in common with Maḥmūd's and those of others critics of contemporary Arab culture. He lambasts Arabs for being uncritical, passive, conformist, uncreative, and fearful of what is new. He blames the control of traditional religious practices and beliefs for the current state of apathy. He holds up modernity as a model for Arabs and the only way towards self-determination. Hence, within the scope of the *turāth* debate it is understandable why this work would be read as yet another "study of the dialectical relationship between 'tradition' and 'modernity' in the history of 'Arab civilization.'"[2] Relatedly, Adonis is easy to read as

1 Given his relative fame outside the Arab world, and the fact that translations of his work tend to use the transcription "Adonis" and not "Adūnīs" for his pen-name, he will be referred to in the text using the former, more common spelling. In the references, a distinction is made between sources in Arabic (Adūnīs) and those in other languages (Adonis).

2 Hanssen and Weiss, "Introduction: Arab Intellectual History between the Postwar and the Postcolonial," 28.

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someone who essentializes Arab culture in terms of a religious and conformist society, opposed to an Enlightened, free, and Western other.[3] He has also been described as "an articulate spokesman of the new radical sensibility,"[4] or as someone who wants to "destroy the cultural and political heritage for the sake of the progress of Arab society."[5] He has been called a "late modernist liberal"[6] or even a Marxist.[7]

There is some truth to these claims. At base, Adonis's interest in *turāth* was kindled by his aversion to traditionalism, in the sense of a mindless collective following of precedent in any area of life, be it art, philosophy, politics, religion, law etc. Seen from this angle, it is easy to see in Adonis a standard bearer for the modernist cause, a champion of rationalism similar to Maḥmūd, as well as a host of other Arab intellectuals, like Muḥammad ʿĀbid al-Jābirī, Murād Wahba, and Ṣādiq Jalāl al-ʿAẓm. Although in his *The Static* he does not engage polemically with the work of contemporary authors, he does attack historical figures up to the twentieth-century conservative intellectual Muṣṭafā Ṣādiq al-Rāfiʿī in a way that would seem to align him with the rationalist-modernist faction in post-1960s Arab thought. In addition, with his thesis about "the static and the dynamic" in Arab thought, Adonis appears to go along with the rationalist trend of offering a grand critical analysis of "Arab reason" – the most complete and well-known exponent of which is al-Jābirī's *Critique of Arab Reason.* This kind of analysis of "Arab culture" or even of the "Arab mind" in terms of a single conceptual opposition appears to presuppose an essentialist outlook. But, we should not rush to judgment. We need to distinguish between whether essentialist description is used here as an end or as a means, whether he affirms an essentialist outlook or questions it.

Adonis can be seen as a radical of sorts. Following 1967, he briefly flirted with Maoist ideas in vogue at the time, and endorsed the Iranian revolution in its early stages. Then again, his reasons for supporting these revolutionary movements have always been rather idiosyncratic. The kind of revolution that he envisions has never been of the violent kind. His is an aesthetic revolution, a contestation of norms through art. This not-so-radical sensibility is evidenced by his fundamental

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3 Kassab, *Contemporary Arab Thought: Cultural Critique in Comparative Perspective*, 132.

4 Ajami, *The Arab Predicament: Arab Political Thought and Practice Since 1967*, 32.

5 Eiji Nagasawa, "An Introductory Note on Contemporary Arabic Thought," *The Mediterranean World* 13 (1992): 66.

6 Creswell, *City of Beginnings*, 182.

7 Both Boullata and Abu-Rabi' attribute an essentially Marxist position to Adonis. See Boullata, *Trends and Issues in Contemporary Arab Thought*, 31, and Abu-Rabi', *Contemporary Arab Thought: Studies in Post-1967 Arab Intellectual History*, 107.

humanist commitment to the ultimate value of the person. However, this should not lead us to think of him as a run-of-the-mill proponent of liberal individualism, with its dull, bourgeois talk of rights and duties. Also, though he may have flirted with Marxism, his interest in *turāth* was never premised on activating the elements in Arab-Islamic cultural history that express revolutionary and anti-hierarchical tendencies. Rather, as Robyn Creswell notes, he distinguishes himself from Marxist readings of *turāth*, because instead of affirming its unity, his aim is to unmask its *divisions.* He wants to bring to the fore all the marginalized figures and movements in this history as a way of demonstrating the different possibilities for self-expression inherent to the Arab-Islamic heritage.[8]

In what follows, I propose a reading of Adonis beyond common attributions of being a modernist, a liberal, or a Marxist. As in the discussion of Maḥmūd, this reading will turn on an analysis of time and authenticity in Adonis's writings on *turāth.* Building mainly on *The Static*, I suggest that the opposition between the two concepts in the title of this work – that is, the "static" and the "dynamic" – does not so much adopt the familiar opposition between authenticity and modernity as replaces it. With this intervention, Adonis changes the opposition from a temporal into a purely conceptual one, centered on creativity. The "static," as we will see, is associated with a lack of creativity, whereas the "dynamic" represents its abundance. The ongoing struggle between these forces is what pushes human civilization to cover new ground and explore hitherto unknown realms of the imagination. Its end goal is not a loosely defined ideal of societal progress, but an aesthetic one. The struggle between the static and the dynamic leads to an exploration of beauty and meaning. In the course of describing this dialectic, Adonis redefines the problematic of *turāth.* His structuralist analysis takes the antithetical pair of modernity (*ḥadātha*) and authenticity (*aṣāla*) out of its familiar surroundings, allowing these concepts to stand for more or less the same thing: *The dynamic.*

As in Chapter 4, this chapter is divided into three parts. We will first look at Adonis's biographical, artistic, and philosophical background. This is followed by a survey of the view of *turāth* presented in his dissertation; and in the third part, we will look more closely at how the dialectical pair of static and dynamic articulate a particular conception of time that helps to redefine a different perception of authenticity and modernity.

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8 Creswell, *City of Beginnings*, 152–53.

5.1 Adonis: Some background

5.1.1 Early years in Syria

The Syrian intellectual ʿAlī Aḥmad Saʿīd Isbir, who later gained renown using his pen-name Adonis, was born into an Alawite family in the Latakian village of al-Qaṣṣābīn in 1930. He developed an interest in poetry from a young age.[9] He adopted his pseudonym early on, when he found that his poems, when sent in under his own name, kept being rejected. Adonis, the beautiful, mythical figure, resurrected after being killed by a boar, appealed to him, as he imagined his own resurrection following many rejections from the "swine" working at the newspapers where he had vainly sent samples of his work for publication.[10] In retrospect, Adonis also ascribes a deeper meaning to his early name-change. Adopting his sobriquet implied adopting a new, self-styled identity. Although he was not entirely conscious of what this name stood for, it made him think about the notion of personal identity as such. He became more aware of the importance for humans to choose their own destiny, to form their own identity. Identity, he recognized, is always a work in progress, something that must be created and recreated.[11] However this may be, the name stuck. This is how he became known to the general public, and this is how he will be referred to throughout.

Coming from a poor rural background, Adonis at first did not have the opportunity to enroll in a formal, modern school. He attended the traditional *kuttāb*, however, where he learned to read and write. Early on, he became aware that he possessed a sound mind, and realized that he would need to move out of his rural surroundings, which, though idyllic, did not offer him opportunities to exploit his talents.[12] An important event in the life of Adonis took place in 1943, when the then-president of Syria, Shukrī al-Quwwatlī, visited a town close to al-

9 Nadia Wardeh, "From ʿAlī Aḥmad Saʿīd to Adonis: A Study of Adonis's Controversial Position on Arab Cultural Heritage," *Asian Culture and Heritage* 2, no. 2 (2010): 190.

10 Stefan Weidner, *……und sehnen uns nach einem neuen Gott…: Poesie und Religion im Werk von Adonis* (Berlin: Verlag Hans Schiler, 2005), 148–49.

11 Nina Esber, *Conversations avec mon père* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2006), 47; Wardeh, "From ʿAlī Aḥmad Saʿīd to Adonis: A Study of Adonis's Controversial Position on Arab Cultural Heritage," 191.

12 Ṣaqr Abū Fakhr and Adūnīs, *Ḥiwār maʿa Adūnīs: al-Ṭufūla, al-Shiʿr, al-Manfā* (Beirut: al-Muʾassasa al-ʿArabiyya li-l-Dirāsāt wa-l-Nashr, 2000), 22–23. Most of the references to Adonis concern works written originally in Arabic. Translations from these works are my own. Three translations of his works have been used, namely, *Sufism and Surrealism*, *An Introduction to Arab Poetics,* and a collection of *Selected Poems.* Translations from other Arabic sources and from the previously mentioned French book *Conversations avec mon père* are also my own.

Qaṣṣābīn called Jableh. Adonis, then thirteen years old, decided to compose a poem for the occasion and pleaded successfully to be allowed to recite his poem to the president. Impressed by this budding artist, Quwwatlī helped Adonis get an education at the French lycée.[13] This proved to be the opportunity that eventually propelled him to worldwide renown as an artist. He went on from the lycée in Tartus to study for the baccalaureate in Latakia, and later graduated from the university of Damascus with a degree in literature.

5.1.2 Saʿāda, *Shiʿr*, personalism

As a young student, Adonis supported the pan-Arab cause and associated with the Syrian Socialist Nationalist Party (SSNP), led by Antūn Saʿāda. As others have noted, the influence of Saʿāda on Adonis cannot be underestimated.[14] The former presented a powerful voice of nationalist revolutionary fervor, one that combined sociological study with philosophical depth. All of Saʿāda's analyses on topics like national identity, literature, and religion were an instrument of revolution. As Adonis would do later on, Saʿāda sought to "identify society and understand its structures, its potentialities (and so on) through social science only for the purpose of transforming it."[15] He was no determinist, and vehemently opposed the historical-materialist view espoused by Marxists. The intellectual, he thought, must embody a force of societal change. As Adonis understood him, Saʿāda claimed a pivotal role for the literary artist as a renewer of society. The poet is a "lighthouse" (*manāra*) who illuminates life with a new light and "points to the hiding places of beauty and power," envisioning new horizons for society.[16] Saʿāda, moreover, was fiercely secular. Religion should adapt to the historical moment and should never remain in thrall to a "generation of ideal forefathers."[17] Although Adonis later came to re-

13 Samuel Hazo and Mirene Ghossein, "Adonis: A Poet in Lebanon," *Books Abroad* 46, no. 2 (1972): 238; Weidner, *……und sehnen uns nach einem neuen Gott…: Poesie und Religion im Werk von Adonis*, 10. Both 1943 and 1944 are mentioned as the year when this meeting took place.
14 Franck Salameh, "Adonis, the Syrian Crisis, and the Question of Pluralism in the Levant," *Bustan: The Middle East Book Review* 3 (2012): 44; Wardeh, "From ʿAlī Aḥmad Saʿīd to Adonis: A Study of Adonis's Controversial Position on Arab Cultural Heritage," 196 – 98; Creswell, *City of Beginnings*, 58 – 66.
15 Adel Daher, "Some Distinguishing Aspects of Sa'adeh's Thought," in *Antun Sa'adeh, The Man, His Thought: An Anthology*, ed. Adel Beshara (Reading, UK: Ithaca Press, 2007), 268.
16 Adūnīs, *Hā-Anta, Ayyuhā al-Waqt*, 107.
17 Nasri Al-Sayegh, "Saʿadeh's Conception of Religion," in *Antun Sa'adeh, The Man, His Thought: An Anthology*, ed. Adel Beshara (Reading, UK: Ithaca Press, 2007), 399.

ject much of what Saʿāda had preached – for example, his nationalism and his positivistic outlook – this first ideological orientation would echo throughout his life, both in his ideas on religion and heritage and in the activist role he assigns to the artist-cum-intellectual.

One immediate and far-reaching effect of Adonis's association with the SSNP was that his membership landed him in jail in 1955.[18] After his release in 1956 he moved to Lebanon, where he would live for over two decades. His exile heralded a pivotal phase in Adonis's life. Beirut appeared to the young artist as a land of opportunity, "not the land of endings like Damascus but the land of beginnings."[19] Beirut symbolized modernity, innovation, and freedom, compared to which Damascus was mired in tradition. He found like-minded people in the cultural scene of Lebanon's capital, people who also thought that Arab culture required radical overhaul, away from traditionalism. Together with a number of intellectuals and artists who gathered around the journalist Yūsūf al-Khāl, they would channel their efforts in the highly influential avant-garde review *Shiʿr* (Poetry).[20]

Beirut was at the time a center for the free Arab press, particularly after the Free Officers' coup of 1952 and Nasser's swift rise to dictatorial power had introduced new restrictions on the expression of opinion in Egypt, thereby dealing a severe blow to Cairo's formerly dominant intellectual scene.[21] The *Shiʿr* group made full use of these freedoms to advocate a radical reconceptualization of Arabic poetry. Influenced by the ideas of Saʿāda, they argued the necessity of creating a "*ʿaqliyya jadīda*," or "new mentality."[22] Their poetry is characterized by a firm rejection of the Romanticist themes popular one generation earlier. Moreover, they experimented with radically new forms of poetic expression in ways "more extreme than any other revolt modern Arabic poetry had seen so far."[23] They were keen on revising the formal structure of poetry based on the line or *bayt*, which consisted of two hemistiches of equal length or metrical value. This revision allowed for much more flexibility in composition and thus for greater freedom of expression and organic unity in their poetry. *Shiʿr* actively sought to renew the Ara-

18 Jīzāl Khūrī, "Liqāʾ maʿa al-Shāʿir wa-l-Mufakkir al-Sūrī Adonis," interview, *al-Mashhad* (BBC Arabic, 2015), min. 5:18. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FPNSUiFq3G8

19 Adūnīs, *Hā-Anta, Ayyuhā al-Waqt*, 32.

20 It was in fact the Chicago review of the same name, *Poetry*, that partly inspired al-Khāl's conception of his new magazine; see Ed De Moor, "The Rise and Fall of the Review Shiʿr," *Quaderni Di Studi Arabi* 18 (2000): 91.

21 De Moor, "The Rise and Fall of the Review Shiʿr," 90.

22 De Moor, "The Rise and Fall of the Review Shiʿr," 92.

23 M.M. Badawi, *A Critical Introduction to Modern Arabic Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), 225.

bic language, to use poetry to create new words, envision new concepts, and imagine new worlds. In terms of content, it stressed the centrality of the human experience in poetry. Poetry, to the mind of al-Khāl and his circle, had to be based on human experience and express humanity's deepest emotional states. Man, as al-Khāl states, is an infinite source of inspiration, whereas "nature is a temporary and finite phenomenon."[24]

This humanist orientation was due, at least in part, to the influence that the Lebanese philosopher Charles Malik had on al-Khāl and the *Shiʿr* group. Malik had studied philosophy at Harvard under Alfred North Whitehead and at Freiburg with Martin Heidegger. Back in Lebanon as a lecturer at the American University of Beirut, he became something of a mentor to al-Khāl. His philosophical orientation was decidedly humanist, rooted in what Malik himself described as "the Greco-Roman-Christian humane synthesis"[25] and bore the marks of the then-popular school of personalism. There exist, as is generally the case with philosophical schools, different definitions of personalism. The main theme that binds them is that the fundamental value and the fundamental object of study, particularly for the humanities, ought to be the human person. Early strands of personalist thought can be seen as arising from a reaction to the impersonal philosophies of the Enlightenment and Romanticism, and as such tie into the genealogy of authenticity; Hegel's dialectical dissolution of all man in the dialectic of reason is a particularly prominent target of personalist philosophy, as are Comtean positivism and Darwinism. As such, personalism bears a close relationship to existentialist modes of thought, in which the human being is also at the center of attention. A major difference is that existentialist writings are generally characterized by anxiety or a moment of existential crisis in which the author runs up against the inherent meaninglessness of the world, only to then attribute the ultimate source of meaning to man himself. For personalists there is no such crisis; there is no point at which the world becomes meaningless, nor can there be an active choice on the part of the subject to imbue it with meaning. Rather, personalists assume the human person to be the ultimate thing of value, *the* bedrock of moral and scientific concerns. In the Arab world, Malik was not the only philosopher touting this idea, but he was its main proponent in the Mashriq – in the Maghrib this role was reserved for Muḥammad al-Ḥabbābī (Lahbabi). Malik's brand of Jacques Maritain's personalist philosophy, tinged by his studies into Heideggerian existentialism, fitted the Cold War atmosphere, as it posited the human individual as the

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24 De Moor, "The Rise and Fall of the Review Shiʿr," 96.

25 Glenn Mitoma, "Charles H. Malik and Human Rights: Notes on a Biography," *Biography* 33, no. 1 (2010): 232.

ultimate source of value, “a bulwark against both the ‘radical immanentism’ of Marxist thought, which reduced humanity to its economic and social conditions, as well as the atomistic tendencies inherent in liberal capitalism.”[26] The individual and his freedom were also a chief concern for *Shiʿr,* and would remain so for Adonis throughout his later career.

Their zest for innovation and exploration did not imply that the members of *Shiʿr* neglected their shared Arab heritage. Each issue included a section on classical poetry. Their interest was not in *turāth*’s safekeeping, however, but in revising it while also learning from and reacting to other traditions, particularly those of Europe. In doing this, they in effect emulated the modernist poets, who were also in the business of borrowing “literary authority from the tradition [they declare] obsolete.”[27] It is important to stress that the objectives of *Shiʿr*, though phrased in terms of aesthetic criticism, went beyond the realm of the arts. Following Saʿāda, it was their firm belief that, through his art, the poet “shapes reality and creates a new world.” The creative artist can change society by offering a vista of new possibilities, through the innovative use of language. Therefore, the introduction of new poetic forms not only changes the culture, but it opens up new ways of thinking. This in turn will have social and political repercussions, for once new options become available to the Arab reader, he will be able to fight to realize them.

5.1.3 Revisiting the poetic heritage

Besides writing his own poetry and collaborating in *Shiʿr*, during the late 1950s, Adonis immersed himself in the Arabic poetical tradition. This would result in the publication of *Dīwān al-Shiʿr al-ʿArabī* (*Anthology of Arabic poetry.* The importance of this experience cannot be underestimated, as it is his meticulous study of Arab poetry which provided the impetus for his later treatises on the “static” condition of Arab society. We can witness the early stages of this critical appraisal of Arab culture in a lecture he gave in Rome in 1961 titled “Arabic Poetry and the Problems of Innovation.” Muhammad Mustafa Badawi neatly summarizes the three principles of the New Movement in poetry mentioned by Adonis in this lecture:

26 Creswell, *City of Beginnings*, 75.
27 Robyn Creswell, “The Man Who Remade Arabic Poetry,” *New Yorker*, November 12, 2017, accessed May 5 2018. https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2017/12/18/the-man-who-remade-arabic-poetry. In context, this quotation refers to Adonis himself as an exponent of this modernist tendency.

1) “radical rebellion against the traditional mentality”;
2) “a rejection of the old Arab conception of poetry which regards poetry as something static and as no more than emotion and craftsmanship”;
3) “a rejection of the view that ancient Arabic poetry is a model to be imitated by all subsequent poetry, or that it is an autonomous and self-sufficient world independent of all poetic heritage in other languages.”[28]

In a characteristically secular statement, referencing Nietzsche’s pronouncement of the death of God, Adonis links these traditionalist elements of the Arab mindset to the persistent influence of a religious authority on Arab culture. Mentioning one of the poles of the dissertation that he would write over a decade later, he holds the unrelenting reverence for the “static” values enshrined in the Arab heritage responsible for the inability of the individual to stand up to religious authority, as opposed to the “dynamic” force of change pioneered by the creative artist. The only way to get rid of this authority is by revolting against it and establishing a new order of values not based on religious creed, or at least not beholden to a strict orthodox understanding of religion.[29]

Another notable event during this time was that, in 1960, Adonis received a scholarship to study at the Sorbonne for one year. Here, he had the opportunity to immerse himself more fully in Western culture, the figurative arts, French literature, and the European philosophical tradition, particularly the philosophical writings of Nietzsche and the poetry of Mallarmé and Baudelaire. [30] This had a great effect on him and on his poetry, as is evident in his groundbreaking 1961 collection of poems *Aghānī Mihyār al-Dimashqī* (*The songs of Mihyār of Damascus*), the protagonist of which is likened by Adonis to Nietzsche’s Zarathustra.[31] Looking back on this period, he notes that it was not through Arabic sources that he came to recognize the *dynamic* within Arab culture. Instead, he recalls that:

> it was reading Baudelaire which changed my understanding of Abū Nuwās and revealed his particular poetical quality and modernity, and Mallarmé’s work which explained to me the mysteries of Abū Tammām’s poetic language and the modern dimension in it. My reading of Rimbaud, Nerval and Breton led me to discover the poetry of the mystic writers in all

28 Badawi, *A Critical Introduction to Modern Arabic Poetry*, 234.
29 It is not easy to pin down Adonis on whether he considers himself an atheist, or whether he can appreciate religion insofar as it remains a dynamic force. While he often inveighs against religion, Islam in particular, he also marks out the Qur’an as a true work of dynamism.
30 Weidner, *……und sehnen uns nach einem neuen Gott…: Poesie und Religion im Werk von Adonis*, 142.
31 Weidner, *……und sehnen uns nach einem neuen Gott…: Poesie und Religion im Werk von Adonis*, 150.

> its uniqueness and splendor, and the new French criticism gave me an indication of the newness of al-Jurjānī's critical vision.[32]

This background is important. It may be true that, as Adonis claims, he moved beyond this stage of being "captivated by Western culture." Yet the basic conceptual apparatus that he uses to analyze Arab culture, as well as to articulate his own alternative, originates in a very particular group of modern, Western intellectuals and artists. Specifically, these figures whom he looks up to are all, in some way or other, critical of modern Western society. They are wary of the optimistic positivist spirit of the nineteenth century, and their poetry serves both as a medium for modernity critique and as a source of meaning in what is more and more perceived as an alienating modern world. Moreover, what poets like Baudelaire, Rimbaud, and Hölderlin share with a philosopher like Nietzsche is a highly individualistic outlook. In their writings the creative individual – the artist in particular – takes center stage. What Adonis's reading of Western poetry and his association with the *Shiʿr* group also seem to accomplish is to change his conception of a poet. Adonis views the artist as an individual harbinger of change. It is not life which changes literature, but the other way around. The poet changes society by changing its language.

At the end of these formative early years in Beirut, Adonis too is confronted by the disaster that befell the Arab world in 1967. What did 1967 mean for Adonis? As is the case for much of the discourse on *turāth*, Adonis's critical appraisal of the Arab poetic heritage in his 1973 dissertation is often linked to the Arab defeat.[33] Given what we have learned about his early years in Syria and Lebanon, I suggest that we take such dramatic claims with a grain of salt. His criticism of Arab culture had already started to take shape at the end of the 1950s as a result of assembling the anthology of Arab poetry, while his perspective on the dialectic between static and dynamic was further sharpened as he studied the works of "dynamic" Western trailblazers like Nietzsche, Hölderlin, and Baudelaire. Also, his endorsement of

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32 Adonis, *An Introduction to Arab Poetics*, trans. Catherine Cobham (London: Saqi, 1990), 81.

33 It is described by Fouad Ajami, for example, as having radicalized Adonis – Ajami, *The Arab Predicament: Arab Political Thought and Practice Since 1967*, 32. The lauded Egyptian poet Iman Mersal views the "turning point" of 1967 as "the kernel of Adonis's subsequent cultural project" – see Iman Mersal, "Reading the Qurʾān in the Poetry of Adonis," trans. Simon Leese, *Middle Eastern Literatures* 19, no. 1 (January 2, 2016): 3. See also Ṣaqr Abū Fakhr's statement in the recent Al-Jazeera documentary on *The Static:* Abd al-Raḥmān al-Kīlānī, "Adūnīs…al-thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil," *Khārij al-Naṣṣ* (Al-Jazeera, January 13, 2019), min. 1:50. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6QnKHkscon0

the pan-Arab project must have been doubtful at best, given the fact that he was living in exile after having been incarcerated by the pan-Arab Syrian Baath Party.

Instead of taking 1967 as a turning point in Adonis's thinking, it makes more sense to see it as the beginning of a shift in how Adonis positioned himself within the Arab debates. The main event in this regard is his founding of the magazine *Mawāqif* in 1968. Adonis had spent several years without his customary literary outlet, since he had left *Shiʿr* in 1964 after cooperation with al-Khāl turned sour.[34] The post-1967 era offered an opportunity to create a magazine of his own, one that would not focus exclusively on poetry, but would function as a forum for the expression of diverse opinions in any form.[35] While Adonis's express aim was to remain "beyond any political camp," the tone he adopted was in tune with the politically charged times.[36] Using "Marxist and even Maoist tropes" and stressing the need for revolution, *Mawāqif* can justifiably be regarded "as an organ of the Arab New Left."[37] The message that Adonis wanted to put out, however, consisted of the same tropes that made up his Rome speech of 1961. The difference was that following the 1967 defeat, the Arab audience had become more receptive to his critical stance. *Mawāqif* was his way of reaching out to them. Through it, Adonis channeled his longtime mission to change Arab culture. "*Mawāqif*," he writes in the preface to the first edition:

> aims to be a forestallment [*istibāq*]. Each forestallment is [an act of] creativity [*ibdāʿ*]. Creativity is an attack: destruction of what we refute and establishing what we want. Civilization is [an act of] creativity: It is not the use of tools, as much as it is the invention of tools. The same goes for culture: it is not the use of language, as much as it is the continuous renewal and creation of language.
>
> Knowledge, therefore, is an attack. It is what we did not yet know. Hence, freedom is not only the right to move within what is known and regulated. It is, first and foremost, the right to search, create, reject and to go beyond. It is the practice of what we have not yet practiced.[38]

34 Albers, "Relaunching the Arab Intellectual," 138. Ed de Moor mentions 1963 as the year of Adonis's resignation; see De Moor, "The Rise and Fall of the Review Shiʿr," 86–88.
35 Yvonne Albers goes one step further, offering the interesting suggestion that *Mawāqif*'s appropriation of the June War as a founding moment of crisis was itself instrumental in constituting 1967 as a major turning point for Arab intellectuals: Albers, "Relaunching the Arab Intellectual," 148.
36 Yvonne Albers, "Turning the Page: Reading 1979 in and through the Cultural Journal Mawaqif," *TRAFO – Blog for Transregional Research* (blog), May 16, 2018, https://trafo.hypotheses.org/9858.
37 Creswell, *City of Beginnings*, 181.
38 Adūnīs, "Preface," *Mawāqif* 1, no. 1 (1968): 3–4.

Given this revolutionary tone, and the general revolutionary sentiment post-1967, it is understandable that *Mawāqif* would be seen by some as a quasi-Maoist call for rebellion. As is clear from these opening phrases, however, the aim of *Mawāqif* is not primarily the overthrow of the social, but the constant renewal of the cultural order.[39] This is the theme that Adonis had already explored in his 1961 lecture in Rome, and which he would in the next few years work out in systematic fashion as he turned to writing his dissertation. This work, *The Static*, offers a rereading of Arab-Islamic history and its poetic heritage as a means of developing a comprehensive philosophy of culture, art, and society, which would echo through later writings, talks, and interviews. Until this day, Adonis continues to defend this critical reading of *turāth* as a general framework for understanding Arab-Islamic culture, human civilization at large, and the role of the creative artist in particular. While writing his dissertation at the Université Saint-Joseph, Adonis took up a position as a lecturer in Arabic literature at the Lebanese University in 1970. He and his family managed to weather the first ten years of the Lebanese Civil War. However, they too eventually decided to emigrate in 1985 to Paris, where he remains to this day.

5.1.4 Reception

Adonis has been lauded with several prestigious prizes, among them the *Ordre des Arts et des Lettres* (1997), the *Goethepreis* (2011)[40] and, most recently in 2017, the PEN/Nabokov award.[41] Moreover, he is among the handful of authors whose names pop up annually as a candidate for the Nobel Prize in Literature. Like certain other enduring contenders and recent Nobel laureates, Adonis has a knack for stirring up controversy. The most widely publicized and divisive issue in recent years has been the publication of a number of letters at the beginning of the Syrian Civil War. In one particular letter, which was published in the Lebanese newspaper *al-Safīr* on 14 June 2011, he urges the heinous regime to both respect the rights of the protesters who were calling for its downfall and to do everything in its power to protect the nation. In response, "derision and malice were heaped on Adonis," as the article has been widely interpreted as a symbol of recognition for the regime

39 Incidentally, *Mawāqif*'s lack of revolutionary firebrand credentials is attested to by the fact that the first article in the first issue of *Mawāqif* was written by Zakī Najīb Maḥmūd.
40 Maya Jaggi, "Adonis: A Life in Writing," *The Guardian*, January 27, 2012.
41 "2017 PEN/Nabokov Award for Achievement in International Literature," March 27, 2017, https://pen.org/2017-pennabokov-award-achievement-international-literature/.

and evidence that Adonis has become completely out of tune with the struggles and the desperate situation of the Syrian people.[42]

While his standing in the Arab world, in particular among Syrians, has taken a beating over the years, Adonis remains a prominent figure in contemporary Arab culture. This is due mostly to his undeniable poetic talent and his groundbreaking work in Arabic poetics. Something of a cottage industry has arisen in recent years, of academics studying the oeuvre of Adonis and its impact. Scholarly interest tends to be restricted to his literary output, however, discounting the more historical-philosophical background story of *The Static.* Although this dissertation is often mentioned, there is little in-depth study of it that tries to understand his work in the context of the philosophical discourse of the *turāth* debate. Robyn Creswell tentatively relates the work to Arab Left readings of *turāth* pioneered by Ḥusayn Muruwwa.[43] Issa Boullata gives a decent description of the book, which he calls "one of the most daring indictments of Arab culture in modern times." It remains a brief summary, however, and one that presents Adonis rather straightforwardly according to standard narrative parameters – rationalist, modernist, secularist, progressive.[44] Kassab takes a similar course, and adds to this a more incisive critique of what, following al-ʿAẓm, she sees as his orientalist essentialism. Adonis, she argues, rehashes the hoary old binary division between a rational, material, secular West and an irrational, spiritual, religious East.[45] The most detailed discussion of Adonis's reading of *turāth* is found in an article by Nadia Wardeh, which

42 Ṣādiq Jalāl Al-ʿAẓm, "Orientalismus der übelsten Sorte," *FAZ*, September 19, 2015, https://www.faz.net/aktuell/feuilleton/buecher/autoren/sadik-al-azm-kritisiert-friedenspreis-fuer-adonis-13811010.html. While the controversy surrounding Adonis's take on the war has had a great impact on how Adonis is viewed currently, the issue is obviously less relevant for contextualizing the theoretical writings on *turāth*, which date back to the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s. I will therefore refrain from commenting in more detail on this issue. For an assessment of this scandal, see Elizabeth Suzanne Kassab, "Critics and Rebels: Older Arab Intellectuals Reflect on the Uprisings," *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 41, no. 1 (2014): 13–16. Although the most common reaction to Adonis's hesitancy to commit to the struggle against an obviously ruthless regime was one of dismay, he has also received support, in particular from writers anxious about Islamist dominance in the ranks of the opposition – for example, Salameh, "Adonis, the Syrian Crisis, and the Question of Pluralism in the Levant," 61.

43 Creswell, *City of Beginnings*, 150–52.

44 Boullata has also written a useful review essay of Adonis's philosophy of culture and *turāth* in Issa Boullata, "Review Essay. Adonis: Towards a New Arab Culture," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 20, no. 1 (1988): 109–12.

45 Kassab, *Contemporary Arab Thought: Cultural Critique in Comparative Perspective*, 133. This critique is mostly directed at his 1979 "Modernity Manifesto" (*Fātiḥa li-Nihāyat al-Qarn*).

was based on a chapter of her dissertation.[46] The author gives some useful background to Adonis's thought, bringing in his association with Antūn Saʿāda and the effect of surrealism and Nietzsche on his artistic and philosophical orientation.[47] In her dissertation, Wardeh provides the most detailed discussion of *The Static* in the English language. More than Boullata and Kassab, Wardeh stresses the secular streak in Adonis's thinking. His deconstruction of *turāth* is presented as a critique of religion, and Wardeh criticizes him for not being fully aware of how, by replacing the religious with the secular, Adonis may be replacing one static order with another. She also criticizes Adonis for his vague definition of the term *turāth.* Concluding that Adonis, to all intents and purposes, equates *turāth* with religion, she explains this equation as due to "his evident bias towards secularism and atheism." *Turāth*, she argues, provides a cover for critique of religion.[48]

While the poetic work of Adonis is well known among Arab literati, few studies are devoted to the theory of *turāth* that he works out in *The Static* and in later publications. However, a number of short appraisals of his dissertation have appeared in various Arabic magazines in the 1970s and 1980s. An early sample of these is an article by ʿAbd Allāh ʿAbd al-Dāʾim that appeared in *al-Ādāb* in 1973. In his opinion, Adonis presents an overly simplistic and essentialist picture of an Arab civilization mired in traditionalism, a civilization that is "static" almost to a fault. ʿAbd al-Dāʾim, rather, sees a much larger and more intrinsic role for the dynamic in Arab history, as part of a true dialectic with its more static elements.[49] He argues that "reason" has, from the start, been an essential aspect of Islam and not some sort of aberration,[50] that politics has historically been informed by secular and not only by religious principles,[51] and that poetry was never dominated by a conservative mindset.[52] In short, ʿAbd al-Dāʾim, though he

46 Nadia Wardeh, "The Problematic of Turāth in Contemporary Arab Thought: A Study of Adonis and Ḥasan Ḥanafī" (PhD diss., McGill University, 2008), chap. 3. The dissertation was published in 2015, but no editing of any kind was done, and seeing that the original dissertation is still available free of charge, I will reference the original dissertation.

47 Wardeh, "From ʿAlī Aḥmad Saʿīd to Adonis: A Study of Adonis's Controversial Position on Arab Cultural Heritage." This article grew out of Wardeh's dissertation (2008) mentioned in the previous footnote.

48 Wardeh, "From ʿAlī Aḥmad Saʿīd to Adonis: A Study of Adonis's Controversial Position on Arab Cultural Heritage," 177.

49 ʿAbd Allāh ʿAbd al-Dāʾim, "Ḥawl Risālat Adūnīs: al-Turāth al-ʿArabī bayn al-Ittibāʿ wa-l-Ibdāʿ," *al-Ādāb* 21, no. 8 (1973): 11.

50 ʿAbd Allāh ʿAbd al-Dāʾim, "Ḥawl Risālat Adūnīs: al-Turāth al-ʿArabī bayn al-Ittibāʿ wa-l-Ibdāʿ," 12.

51 ʿAbd Allāh ʿAbd al-Dāʾim, "Ḥawl Risālat Adūnīs: al-Turāth al-ʿArabī bayn al-Ittibāʿ wa-l-Ibdāʿ," 75.

52 ʿAbd Allāh ʿAbd al-Dāʾim, "Ḥawl Risālat Adūnīs: al-Turāth al-ʿArabī bayn al-Ittibāʿ wa-l-Ibdāʿ," 76–79.

praises *The Static* as an innovative analysis of *turāth*, finds fault with Adonis on historical grounds. He understands Adonis as rejecting *turāth,* and counters this by arguing that *turāth* is not just historical baggage that Arabs should, for the most part, get rid of, but a source of innovation in the modern age.

A less apologetically critical reading of *The Static* was offered a few years later by Muḥammad Kāmil al-Khatīb. Iterating a recognizably Marxist critique, he takes Adonis to task for analyzing the cultural superstructure of Arab civilization, without giving due weight to the material base.[53] He also criticizes the particular use of metaphor that Adonis makes to ground a radical break between the forces of the static and of the dynamic. Instead of a dialectic between these two that develops through history, al-Khaṭīb sees the metaphorical severance of the realm of metaphor from the realm of the everyday as creating a parallel time, detached from the goings on in the material world that this commentator identifies with the realm of the static.[54] Lastly, he refutes Adonis's essentialist conception of an anti-progressive Arab mind (*dhihn ʿarabī*) and his internal critique of *turāth* as unscientific and detrimental to the project of reform. It is, according to al-Khaṭīb, only by adopting an anti-essentialist perspective from outside the sources offered by a tradition that real change can be made. These and other critiques of the methodology used in *The Static* are critically evaluated by Bashīr Tāwrīrīt.[55]

Another short critique of *The Static* was written by the Egyptian intellectual Naṣr Ḥāmid Abū Zayd. While the author is sympathetic to Adonis's project as a whole, he laments his hostility to *turāth.* In Abū Zayd's opinion, Adonis aims for destruction (*hadm*), rather than renewal (*tajdīd*) of and building a connection (*irtibāṭ*) with the ancient heritage, which he sees as hopelessly stuck in static thinking.[56] Also, Adonis's call for creativity as a form of complete and unfettered aesthetic freedom does not fit with another aspect of his project, namely his call

53 Muḥammad Kāmil al-Khaṭīb, "al-Manhaj fī al-Thabāt wa-l-Taḥawwul li-Adūnīs," *al-Maʿrifa* 175 (1976): 162 – 64.

54 al-Khaṭīb, "al-Manhaj fī al-Thabāt wa-l-Taḥawwul li-Adūnīs," 164 – 67. The rejection of what is, not unjustifiably, seen as Adonis's idealism is a common theme among Marxist critics of Adonis; see for example Ḥusayn Muruwwa's critique as quoted in Bashīr Tāwrīrīt, "Taʾthīr al-Manhaj al-Adūnīsī fī al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil fī al-Shiʿr wa-l-Dīn," *al-Ādāb wa-l-ʿUlūm al-Insāniyya* 4, no. 7 (2006): 183.

55 Tāwrīrīt, "Taʾthīr al-Manhaj al-Adūnīsī fī al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil fī al-Shiʿr wa-l-Dīn. I have not included all the articles discussed by Tāwrīrīt, since some of them are very difficult to access. His discussion of methodology in *The Static* was also included in a monograph that analyzes the broader critique of Adonis's poetics among Arab intellectuals; see Bashīr Tāwrīrīt, *Adūnīs fī Mīzān al-Naqd: Arbaʿ Masāʾil Khilāfiyya bayn Adūnīs wa-Muʿāriḍīh* (ʿĀlam al-Kutub, 2009).

56 Naṣr Ḥāmid Abū Zayd, "al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil fī Ruʾyā Adūnīs li-l-Turāth," *al-Fuṣūl* 1, no. 1 (1980): 243.

for revolution. After all, for a revolution to be successful, the intellectual has to descend from his ivory tower and connect with the general population, something that Adonis's anti-traditional elitism hardly seems capable of, since it considers the population to be in thrall to the static outlook.[57] Moreover, Adonis's conception of creativity as complete freedom, when applied to historical figures, detaches them from their surroundings and the context to which their works reacted, while his generalizing conception of the "static" is applied indiscriminately to various aspects of historical Islamic societies, like religion, culture, and politics.[58] Lastly, Abū Zayd critiques Adonis's mechanical and strictly dualistic treatment of *turāth*, which does not countenance the subtle dialectic in which elements of static and dynamic thinking often went together.[59]

One of the most extensive critiques of Adonis's theory of *turāth* in Arabic was put forward by the Lebanese Marxist author Mahdī ʿĀmil. Given his orientation, it is no surprise that ʿĀmil would repeat the critique, already voiced by al-Khaṭīb, of Adonis as an "idealist" intellectual who does not acknowledge the role of the socioeconomic base in his analysis of culture.[60] Adonis's analysis of the role of religion is, according to ʿĀmil, boxed in by his assumption of the Arab's essentially religious cast of mind, which suffuses Arab history and prevents a more dynamic perspective on Arab history in which religion is analyzed as a phenomenon of an underlying class struggle.[61] Even worse, ʿĀmil charges Adonis with inconsistency on this point, quoting excerpts in *The Static* that indicate consideration of socioeconomic factors, and others that indicate a single-minded attention to cultural phenomena.[62] Additionally, he argues that Adonis does not give his readers any useful analysis of Arab culture. He equates Arab culture with religious (that is, Islamic) culture and, instead of assessing the religious perspective critically, adopts its absolutist credo that a true Islamic society ought to be ruled by religious guidelines. He thus does not offer analysis (*tafsīr*), but only a description (*waṣf*) of the religious point of view.[63] This ʿĀmil sees as part of a more general problem in Adonis's theorizing, namely its methodological instability or going back and

57 Abū Zayd, "al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil fī Ruʾyā Adūnīs li-l-Turāth," 244.
58 Abū Zayd, "al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil fī Ruʾyā Adūnīs li-l-Turāth," 247.
59 Abū Zayd, "al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil fī Ruʾyā Adūnīs li-l-Turāth," 248–49.
60 For a take on this interesting figure of the Arab Left, see Samer Frangie, "Theorizing From The Periphery: The Intellectual Project of Mahdi ʿAmil," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 44, no. 3 (2012): 465–82.
61 Mahdī ʿĀmil, *Naqd al-Fikr al-Yawmī* (Beirut: Dār al-Farābī, 1988), 117–21.
62 ʿĀmil, *Naqd al-Fikr al-Yawmī*, 121–27.
63 ʿĀmil, *Naqd al-Fikr al-Yawmī*, 129.

forth (*taʾarjuḥ*) between various methodologies.[64] The root of this instability ʿĀmil locates in Adonis's dual allegiance to a religious, idealist mode of thinking that comes naturally to a bourgeois intellectual like Adonis, and a materialist perspective that attracts him, but that he does not quite master.[65] This prevents Adonis from giving an insightful and rational analysis of the dialectic in Arab history. All it does is to oppose two equally static and essentialist orders, one that he calls "static" and is reified in institutions like the state, religion, or the family, and another order that he calls "dynamic," but which is no more than the humanist, bourgeois faith in the individual as a potential creative genius. This attribute of "creativity" (*ibdāʿ*) thus takes on a magical quality in Adonis's writings. It is the source of authentic humanity and does not admit further analysis, thereby forestalling a more insightful, rational analysis of the material base structure that ʿĀmil would advocate.[66]

Finally, a common charge against Adonis's theory of *turāth* is that it relies too much on the Western Orientalist tradition, which paints a hostile picture of Islam. This point is made by a number of Arab authors mentioned by Nadia Wardeh – among them are Jihād Fāḍil, Mutāʿ Ṣafaḍī, ʿAbd Allāh Ibrāhīm, and Maḥmūd Amīn al-ʿĀlim.[67] She herself rejects this charge on the grounds that Adonis is not just antagonistic towards Islam, but to any religion. While this is an important observation, it does not completely undercut the charge of anti-Islamic Orientalism. As critics have noted, he does not merely reject Islam, but attributes to Arabs a nature that is essentially religious. This gives his criticism of Islam a particular sting, as it sets Arabs apart from a Western civilization that Adonis would presumably describe as more secular.

This is not the occasion to discuss whether these criticisms of Adonis's theoretical writings on *turāth* hold water. The aim of this study is to move beyond the existing analyses of Adonis's understanding of *turāth* by shedding new light on the binary division between static and dynamic. Instead of trying to understand *The Static* as a structuralist, phenomenological, materialist, or idealist *analysis* of Arab history, we will read it as a discursive *intervention.* We will look at how concepts commonly used in debates about *turāth* and religion like rationalism, authenticity, secularism, or modernity are reinterpreted using a dual schema of static and dynamic. In doing so, I will argue that these two orders are conceptualized using different notions of time, and that this difference plays an essential part

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64 ʿĀmil, *Naqd al-Fikr al-Yawmī*, 130 – 35.
65 ʿĀmil, *Naqd al-Fikr al-Yawmī*, 136.
66 ʿĀmil, *Naqd al-Fikr al-Yawmī*, 152.
67 Wardeh, "The Problematic of Turāth in Contemporary Arab Thought: A Study of Adonis and Ḥasan Ḥanafī," 175.

in the reinterpretation of the *turāth* vocabulary, which in turn creates space for a reconceptualization of the discourse on *turāth* that problematizes the familiar opposition between authenticity and modernity.

5.2 Rereading *turāth: The Static and the Dynamic* (*al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil*)

Adonis's doctoral dissertation (*The Static*) was written in three volumes in the 1970s, to which he later added a fourth.[68] It forms the backbone of his perspective on Arab culture. Later books, some of which were originally published in French or translated into English, summarize and fill in the general view of Arab culture developed in *The Static*, but the structure of the argument remains unchanged. He got the idea for writing this work while compiling *Dīwān al-Shiʿr al-ʿArabī.* Indeed, in his 1961 address to the Rome conference we already see the ideas brewing that would animate his dissertation. As Adonis tells it, while studying the Arabic poetic heritage he was struck by the extent to which traditionalism had oriented the Arab taste (*al-ittibāʿiyya tuwajjih al-dhāʾiqa al-ʿarabiyya*) until the First World War, and how even in modern poetry any attempt at renewal in Arabic poetry was frowned upon, being considered a corruption of the Arabic roots (*al-uṣūl al-ʿarabiyya*).[69] The same critique that is voiced against modern poets who want to explore new forms of expression was also uttered many centuries before against poetic innovators like Abū Tammām. In *The Static,* Adonis wants to uncover the source of this enduring animosity in Arab culture towards individuals (like himself) who champion aesthetic innovation.[70] As he will argue, there is a structural flaw in Arab culture

68 It should be noted that the last volume to come out was in fact sandwiched between Volumes 2 and 3 – that is, what is now called Volume 3 is actually of a later date than Volume 4.
69 Adūnīs, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥth fī al-Ibdāʿ wa-l-Ittibāʿ ʿind al-ʿArab,* vol. 1 (Cairo: al-Hayʾa al-ʿĀma li-Quṣūr al-Thaqāfa, 2016), 48.
70 This pivotal question is connected to a range of other questions central to modern intellectual debates:
- "What is authenticity and how does one define the authentic source (*al-aṣl*)?
- How can one explain the nature of the relationship between what came before, what is now, and what will be?
- Why did Arabic poetry and Arabic culture generally deteriorate (*inḥaṭṭ*) and is it enough to point to political decline or foreign influence in order to explain this deterioration?
- How do we account for the essential link that exists between language, religion, and politics?
- What does modernity mean for the Arab?
- If the structure of the Arab mind (*bunyat al-dhihn al-ʿarabī*) is historical, what does the future mean for it?

or in what he terms the Arab mentality (*al-dhihniyya al-ʿarabiyya*) that runs through all areas of Arab culture and society, from art, to religion, to law, to the very notion of history and time.[71] To understand it, we must acknowledge that society is marked by an ongoing struggle between two forces: the static (*al-thābit*) and the dynamic (*al-mutaḥawwil*). What is peculiar about Arab society is not the presence of the static, for this is a feature of every human society, but its historical dominance. Arab society has always been marked by the dominance of static tendencies.[72] Since poetry is the Arab's means of aesthetic expression *par excellence*, this struggle and the dominance of the static is most evident in the history of Arabic poetry. Adonis therefore uses this as a prism through which to analyze Arab culture as a whole, past and present. By showing the structure of the static and the dynamic in poetry, he will analyze the dialectical structure of Arab society. This, he argues, is the only way to gain a clear understanding of the Arab view of man and the world.[73]

5.2.1 The aims of *The Static*

Notwithstanding Adonis's claim to provide an objective description of how Arab culture presents itself at the surface,[74] *The Static* is very much a normative work. Its aim is to change Arab society. For this he employs two methods. First, he is one among several Arab intellectuals who, around this time, turn to the critical analysis of Arab-Islamic heritage as a means for critiquing the cultural and social status quo. Adonis believes that future progress is only possible if we understand the past.[75] By "understanding" Adonis does not mean mere knowledge of historical facts. If anything, there is too much of that. Instead he proposes a structuralist understanding that uncovers the underlying forces that move Arab culture. Showing these forces at work not only explains how the static has kept Arab society back, but also why a turn towards the dynamic does not imply a move away from traditional, authentic, Arab-Islamic culture. The dynamic, his investigation

– Is man in the Arabic poetic imagination a following heir (*wārith tābiʿ*), or a creative inventor (*khallāq bādīʿ*)?" (Adūnīs, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥth fī al-Ibdāʿ wa-l-Ittibāʿ ʿind al-ʿArab*, vol. 1, 48)

71 Adūnīs, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥth fī al-Ibdāʿ wa-l-Ittibāʿ ʿind al-ʿArab*, vol. 1, 48

72 Adūnīs, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥth fī al-Ibdāʿ wa-l-Ittibāʿ ʿind al-ʿArab,* vol. 1, 116.

73 Adūnīs, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥth fī al-Ibdāʿ wa-l-Ittibāʿ ʿind al-ʿArab,* vol. 1, 50.

74 Adūnīs, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥth fī al-Ibdāʿ wa-l-Ittibāʿ ʿind al-ʿArab,* vol. 1, 55.

75 Adūnīs, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥth fī al-Ibdāʿ wa-l-Ittibāʿ ʿind al-ʿArab,* vol. 1, 56.

shows, is part and parcel of Arab thinking, and it is up to modern-day Arabs to revive it.

The second approach is more intimately related to Adonis's own position as a poet. According to him, the poet ought to continuously engage in a process of linguistic creation and reformation. Through his literary creations, in which he uses figurative speech and metaphorical allusions to subtly change the meaning of words, he paints vistas of new worlds. Such semantic changes can change society. By changing language, the poet opens up new possibilities and alternative futures to his fellow man that can only be pursued by undermining the current order. In short, the poet is a member of the revolutionary cultural vanguard.

The latter approach is put into practice particularly in the fourth volume of *The Static*. Here Adonis not only criticizes more recent poetry for remaining in thrall to the static, but he also takes it upon himself to redefine such notions as modernity and authenticity. Following his redefinitions, these terms come to stand for the kind of creative, avant-garde poetry that he has long advocated. In other words, the author has morphed from an observer of the structural dialectic of Arab thought into someone who actively molds the discursive landscape through poetic intervention. Adonis puts his own theory of the artist into practice, as it were, changing the parameters of the debate by changing its vocabulary. Through associating terms like authenticity, modernity, and even *turāth* with his ideal of the *dynamic*, he attempts to open up new horizons for thinking about these terms, new possibilities for exploring them. The result is that if you buy into Adonis's redefinition, it will become difficult to coherently articulate the kind of problematic of *turāth* envisioned by someone like Maḥmūd, relying as it does on a temporal opposition between authenticity and modernity. What's more, if you buy into Adonis's vision, it will be hard to even conceive of something like the "static" as opposed to the "dynamic." For, as he wants to convince you, authenticity, modernity, and *turāth*, if understood correctly, are in the end all expressions of the dynamic.

5.2.2 Structure and the political origins of the static–dynamic dialectic

In Adonis's conception of the dialectic between static and dynamic there is a clear structuralist undertone. Not only Arab-Islamic society, but *every* society consists of an "order that represents specific values and interests of specific groups."[76] At the same time, there is in every society the kernel of an alternative to the ruling order,

76 Adūnīs, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥth fī al-Ibdāʿ wa-l-Ittibāʿ ʿind al-ʿArab,* vol. 1, 51.

with different values and different interests. Development, on this view, is the outcome of the interaction between these two currents.

While Adonis praises the revolutionary sentiment, and stresses the political-ideological nature of each current and embeds them in a structuralist narrative he should not, as some have suggested, be thought of as a Marxist – not even one of the "humanist" variety.[77] His poetics were, as al-Musawi recalls, "mainly a *challenge* [my emphasis] to leftist poetics, which argued throughout the [1950s and 1960s] for an urgent engagement with present evils, including authoritarianism and exploitation."[78] Adonis does not follow this trend of existentialist literature of engagement (*iltizām*), nor does his reading of *turāth* adopt a historical-materialist tone, according to which cultural expressions are but an expression of the material base and society, albeit in fits and starts, progresses towards a socialist utopia.[79] Quite the opposite. Instead of positing any particular end goal for art, Adonis offers creation and continuous change as the ultimate goal *per se.* Man, according to him, is essentially a free and creative animal, an explorer of new worlds, and we ought to allow him to live according to this nature. While Adonis does not want to deny that social and economic circumstances are important in explaining human action, and he likewise admits that all human activity, including art, is conditioned by cultural and social circumstances, he sees the creative act of the true artist as going beyond these constraints. The creative artist is not a mere product of society, but is himself an active participant in its renewal. That is also why the true artist is, according to Adonis, always a revolutionary. He is never on the side of the powers that be, for being on that side always obliges one to toe the line by remaining "static." He is not, however, a "utopian" revolutionary. The aim is not to move society towards a determinate end. It suffices merely to change it into something different from anything it has ever been; the aesthetic revolution is a goal in its own right and therefore it is never complete.

Admittedly, materialist explanations do occur in *The Static*, but they apply only to the forces of the static, to the ruling classes. These, he argues, have a stake in protecting the status quo. They profit from their hold on power. They want to hold on to it and therefore are averse to change.[80] One of the most formidable weapons at their disposal is tradition. By appealing to the past as the sole measure for the future, they try to convince their subjects that the status quo ought to be

77 The Marxist rejection of *The Static* described above illustrates how his dabbling in Marxist rhetoric was never taken very seriously by the intellectual in-crowd of the Arab left.

78 Muhsin J. al-Musawi, *Arabic Poetry: Trajectories of Modernity and Tradition* (Oxford: Routledge, 2006), 62.

79 Adūnīs, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥth fī al-Ibdāʿ wa-l-Ittibāʿ ʿind al-ʿArab,* vol. 1, 54 – 55.

80 Adūnīs, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥth fī al-Ibdāʿ wa-l-Ittibāʿ ʿind al-ʿArab,* vol. 1, 316.

protected. At least in Arab culture, it is always the ruling power that has advocated the normative value of the original sources (*uṣūl*) and the protection of inherited values (*al-qiyam al-mawrūtha*). It is these values, ingrained in the conservative practice of Islam, that have kept Arab society back. The forces of opposition, without rejecting these cultural roots, have used them in new ways that go against the interpretation given to them by those in power.[81] They have been forced to be creative, to go beyond what is generally accepted, to think what cannot be thought. Forces of opposition are, almost by definition, harbingers of the *dynamic.*

In sum, the ruling structure of Arab culture is static through and through. This structure is supported mainly by the Islamic religion, which is based on a conformist mentality and a refutation of creativity. This has inhibited true progress in Arab society. The goal of Adonis's analysis is therefore to describe this structure and its development in tandem with its dynamic counter-culture in order to change it (*min ajl taghyīrihā*).[82] It should be borne in mind that the intended destruction of the old structure does not imply a dismissal of the Arab-Islamic heritage *tout court.* The aim is not to replace the entire Arab-Islamic heritage, but to change the way Arabs use it. This kind of analysis must break the blind respect that Arabs have for their past, and make them realize that the value of the past does not lie in the past, but in the use they can make of it to shape their future.[83] For this reason, a critique of the static in Arab culture must proceed using Arabic sources. Holding up external examples of the dynamic is not enough. The blind respect for *turāth* can only be broken if Arabs become aware of the static structure of their own thinking.

5.2.3 The history of the static–dynamic dialectic in the Arab world

The origins of the dialectic

The dialectic of static and dynamic is, according to Adonis, a universal one. It did not start with the advent of Islam, as witnessed for example in the daring, rebellious, anti-conventional compositions of the pre-Islamic (*jāhilī*) poet Imruʾ al-Qays, which went against the strict tribal code of the day.[84] Notwithstanding, the struggle between static and dynamic did enter a new stage with the advent of Islam.

In the period following the advent of Islam, Adonis distinguishes three fields in which he sees a clear mentality of conformity (*ittibāʿ*): In politics and the ques-

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81 Adūnīs, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥth fī al-Ibdāʿ wa-l-Ittibāʿ ʿind al-ʿArab,* vol. 1, 20.
82 Adūnīs, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥth fī al-Ibdāʿ wa-l-Ittibāʿ ʿind al-ʿArab,* vol. 1, 64.
83 Adūnīs, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥth fī al-Ibdāʿ wa-l-Ittibāʿ ʿind al-ʿArab,* vol. 1, 65.
84 Adūnīs, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥth fī al-Ibdāʿ wa-l-Ittibāʿ ʿind al-ʿArab,* vol. 1, 260–62.

tion of who ought to be the leader of the Muslim community – the caliph; in jurisprudence and the outsized role of the deeds and sayings of the Prophet (sunna) as an ethical model; and in poetry. In the realm of politics, Islam ushered in a time of unity to replace the heterogeneity of pre-Islamic times. This unity was first monopolized by the leading tribe of Mecca at the time, the Quraysh. They justified their rule on the basis of their blood ties to Muḥammad and the special mention made of them in the Qur'an, but also on account of their strength in numbers.[85] The Qurayshī hold on power was temporarily broken when ʿUthman, the third caliph after Muḥammad, was killed in his house in Medina, an act that gave rise to the first *fitna*, or civil war, in Islam. Its eventual victor, Muʿāwiyya, who was also of Qurayshī stock, saw that he needed more ideological ammunition to keep his people in check, so he and his growing company of exegetes began to stress the importance of obedience (*ṭāʿa*) to the sunna of the Prophet. Moreover, he and his offspring, who ruled the Umayyad Caliphate (661–750) from Damascus, presented their rule as intimately tied to religion. Their rule was bestowed upon them through a direct line of succession from Abū Bakr, the first caliph after Muḥammad. Adonis thus presents the rise of the Umayyads as the breeding ground for a number of political ideas that were meant to favor the ruling class, homogenize the Muslim community *(umma)*, and suppress individual dissent.[86]

This political form of acquiescence is abetted by developments in Qur'anic exegesis and Islamic jurisprudence. In the formulation of a comprehensive system of laws rooted in the message of Islam, scholars came to rely heavily on whatever details they could verify about the life of the Prophet and those who surrounded him. The first generations of Muslims were thus elevated to a position of moral excellence, a model to aspire to for all future generations of believers. As this frame of mind became entrenched, Islam became "a struggle against forgetting."[87] This emulative trend gave rise to various disciplines of Islamic science that concerned themselves with comparing, explaining, and judging the veracity of hadiths, as well as a drive to turn the example of the Prophet and his companions into law.[88] These developments conspired to undergird the acquiescent mentality of Islam and muffle the independent, rational interpretation of Scripture.[89]

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85 Adūnīs, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥth fī al-Ibdāʿ wa-l-Ittibāʿ ʿind al-ʿArab,* vol. 1, 166–69.

86 As Creswell notes, "the idea that politics, in Arabic *al-siyasa,* is essentially an activity of oppression (rather than liberation, solidarity, or negotiation) is consistent throughout Adonis's oeuvre" (Creswell, *City of Beginnings,* 23).

87 Adūnīs, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥth fī al-Ibdāʿ wa-l-Ittibāʿ ʿind al-ʿArab,* vol. 1, 174.

88 Adūnīs, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥth fī al-Ibdāʿ wa-l-Ittibāʿ ʿind al-ʿArab,* vol. 1, 180.

89 Adūnīs, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥth fī al-Ibdāʿ wa-l-Ittibāʿ ʿind al-ʿArab,* vol. 1, 185–87.

Finally, this drive towards conformity and traditionalism is also prominent in the fabric of post-prophetic poetry. Muḥammad himself saw that poetry, which the Qur'an labels as a kind of wizardry, is a most effective tool for spreading ideology. He and his successors managed to turn the tribal poet who sang the praises of his next of kin into a propagandist for the nascent Islamic state and its moral regime. Moreover, since the message of Islam that they wanted to promote was seen as manifest and complete, poets were expected to display the same qualities in their works. Poetry also came to be seen as a kind of scientific endeavor, not in order to understand the natural world, but as an exploration of the self in order to control it. This would be done by rehearsing the message of Islam in poetic language, but without any creative effort to change its meaning, or explore new meanings. The only function left for pre-Islamic poetry was to help understand the language of the Qur'an, not to serve as a model of beauty and artistic ingenuity. As for the critic, his only role was to judge new poetry on whether it followed these principles and did not veer off course or try anything new.[90] The accepted mode of literary criticism only came to judge poetry according to its moral import, its clear, correct use of Arabic – the language of the Qur'an – and the superficial meanings exhibited in poems. This ruled out any appreciation for the kinds of allusions and metaphor that allow poetry to explore deeper aesthetic dimensions of meaning.[91]

As the static, acquiescent streak in Arab culture made headway, it also set the stage for its opposition. An early example are the revolutionary movements, which opposed the vast disparity in wealth between the Arab elite and the rest of the growing Islamic community. These opponents of the regime, whom al-Ṭabarī referred to as "the proponents of creation" (*ahl al-iḥdāth*),[92] pointed to the incongruence between the lavish court life and the egalitarian nature of the Qur'an. In doing so, they effectively undermined the ideological structure of the Umayyads, based as it was on the claim of Arab superiority, but also on the centralized, exclusive interpretation of the Qur'an and the sunna, and obedience to the tribe of the Quraysh to which the Umayyads laid claim. With the political-social struggle thus began a struggle over interpretation, over the meaning of the Qur'an, the Islamic creed, and of the Arabic language more broadly.[93] These revolutionary movements would result in the overthrow of the Umayyads in favor of the Abbasid dynasty,

90 Adūnīs, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥth fī al-Ibdāʿ wa-l-Ittibāʿ ʿind al-ʿArab,* vol. 1, 198–204.
91 Adūnīs, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥth fī al-Ibdāʿ wa-l-Ittibāʿ ʿind al-ʿArab,* vol. 1, 213–14.
92 Adūnīs, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥth fī al-Ibdāʿ wa-l-Ittibāʿ ʿind al-ʿArab,* vol. 1, 229. For Adonis, this term (*iḥdāth*) is particularly relevant, since it relates to the concepts of modernity (*ḥadātha*) and creation (*ihdāth*).
93 Adūnīs, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥth fī al-Ibdāʿ wa-l-Ittibāʿ ʿind al-ʿArab,* vol. 1, 232.

based in Baghdad, in AD 750.[94] These social and political movements were accompanied by calls for intellectual and humanistic freedom, represented by early Muʿtazlilites like al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī, and the proto-Shiite movement.[95]

Of course, this dynamic trend also manifested itself in Arabic poetry, and it did so in two ways. On the one hand, there were poets who, following the lead of the *jāhilī* poet Imruʾ al-Qays, stressed the importance of the inner, personal realm in rejection of the moral code that is imposed on the individual from without.[96] (An example Adonis discusses at length is Jamīl Buthayna, the Romantically inclined love poet.[97]) On the other hand, Adonis also discerns dynamism in what has come to be known as the *suʿluk*, or brigand poetry. Rather than explore the vexed state of their souls, these brigand poets directed their energies against the inequality and poverty that result from a class-based tribal system.[98] Adonis associates this kind of poetry first and foremost with the movement of the Khawārij, whom he portrays as early promoters of individual human freedom and equality.[99] With these various strands of resistance to the norms of the burgeoning Islamic state coalescing, Adonis wants to show how "the Umayyad era was the beginning of the struggle in Islamic society over meanings on different levels,"[100] a struggle that would last into our times.

The "rooting" of the dialectic

During the caliphate of the Abbasids, who succeeded the Umayyads in AD 750, Adonis sees the establishment (*taʾṣīl*) of the core principles of the static and the dynamic. The main agent of this development on the side of the static is the celebrated jurist al-Shāfiʿī. In order to strengthen the rule of the new Abbasid dynasty, he set out to legitimate total obedience (*ṭāʿa*) to the Caliph on the basis of an elaborate system for basing juridical judgments on the Qur'an and the hadith. These sources

94 Adūnīs, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥth fī al-Ibdāʿ wa-l-Ittibāʿ ʿind al-ʿArab,* vol. 1, 243.
95 Adūnīs, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥth fī al-Ibdāʿ wa-l-Ittibāʿ ʿind al-ʿArab,* vol. 1, 248.
96 Adūnīs, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥth fī al-Ibdāʿ wa-l-Ittibāʿ ʿind al-ʿArab,* vol. 1, 258–59.
97 Adonis distinguishes Jamīl Buthayna – whose full name is Jamīl ibn ʿAbd Allāh ibn Maʿmar al-ʿUdhrī – as a Romantic on the basis of two aspects of his poetry: The persistence of contradiction (*tanāquḍ*) and his restlessness (*jazaʿ*) – see Adūnīs, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥth fī al-Ibdāʿ wa-l-Ittibāʿ ʿind al-ʿArab,* vol. 1, 301–3.
98 Adūnīs, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥth fī al-Ibdāʿ wa-l-Ittibāʿ ʿind al-ʿArab,* vol. 1, 304.
99 Adūnīs, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥth fī al-Ibdāʿ wa-l-Ittibāʿ ʿind al-ʿArab,* vol. 1, 308–14. The Khawārij were a movement in early Islamic history that grew out of a number of former followers of Caliph ʿAlī ibn Abī Ṭālib's. They had become disillusioned after ʿAlī's agreement to arbitrate with the pretender Muʿāwiyya at the battle of Siffin, taking his reticence to do battle as a sign that their leader did not have sufficient faith that God would grant victory to the true leader of Islam.
100 Adūnīs, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥth fī al-Ibdāʿ wa-l-Ittibāʿ ʿind al-ʿArab,* vol. 1, 319.

were taken by him to present the final truth, the root (*aṣl*) of whatever comes after, and therefore immune to change.[101] The rules derived from these truths created a similarly static system of moral injunctions, of dos and don'ts, designed to keep the population in check. Since the will of the Caliph was equated with the will of God, to go against his wishes was judged an act of heresy.[102] Al-Shāfiʿī continued the Umayyad practice of linking the legitimacy of the central authority to the fate of Islam, and managed to perfect it.[103] Moreover, his conservative adherence to the text of the Qur'an as the source of all knowledge resulted in a high regard for the Arabic language in which it was revealed. Arabic thus came to be considered "the best of languages,"[104] while the Arabs were assigned special status as having privileged access to the word of God through their native language.

On the cultural side, the development of the static was backed up by the efforts of philologists and authors like al-Aṣmaʿī and al-Jāhiẓ. The former established the *jāhilī* poetry as the model for all subsequent generations of Arab poets on the grounds that it is the purest expression of human nature (*fiṭra*).[105] People like Aṣmaʿī and al-Jāhiẓ in particular presented poetry as the quintessential Arab art. Writing poetry not only comes naturally to the Arabs, it is their window onto the world, their "most correct science" (*ʿilmuhum al-aṣaḥḥ*).[106] In its purest form it demonstrates the Arab virtues of intuition, spontaneity, and improvisation. Poetry in its purest form, however, could only be written by the purest of Arabs. Once non-Arabs started to compose poems in the Arabic language, based on Arab models, Arabic poetry began to deteriorate.[107] For al-Jāhiẓ there is only one solid form of poetry, and that is the kind of metered poetry of the pre-Islamic age. Any change to this style, either by experimenting with its forms, or tampering with the meaning of words, will destroy it. Analogous to how al-Shāfiʿī instated the earliest sources of law as its only sources, al-Jāhiẓ thus turned the earliest known forms of Arabic poetry into a template to be followed by all later poets.

The Abbasid Caliphate was not only a foundational age for the static side of Arab culture. It also saw several movements that reacted to the centralization of power in the hands of the Baghdad regime, forming the dynamic opposition. There were, for instance, the revolutionary movements of the Qarmatians and

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101 Adūnīs, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥth fī al-Ibdāʿ wa-l-Ittibāʿ ʿind al-ʿArab,* vol. 2 (Cairo: al-Hayʾa al-ʿĀma li-Quṣūr al-Thaqāfa, 2016), 23.
102 Adūnīs, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥth fī al-Ibdāʿ wa-l-Ittibāʿ ʿind al-ʿArab,* vol. 2, 30–31.
103 Adūnīs, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥth fī al-Ibdāʿ wa-l-Ittibāʿ ʿind al-ʿArab,* vol. 2, 32.
104 Adūnīs, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥth fī al-Ibdāʿ wa-l-Ittibāʿ ʿind al-ʿArab,* vol. 2, 21.
105 Adūnīs, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥth fī al-Ibdāʿ wa-l-Ittibāʿ ʿind al-ʿArab,* vol. 2, 41.
106 Adūnīs, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥth fī al-Ibdāʿ wa-l-Ittibāʿ ʿind al-ʿArab,* vol. 2, 44.
107 Adūnīs, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥth fī al-Ibdāʿ wa-l-Ittibāʿ ʿind al-ʿArab,* vol. 2, 56.

the black slave revolt, which challenged the economic disparities within the Islamic Empire.[108] There was also a small group of freethinkers who criticized Islamic doctrine on the basis of scientific research and rational thought. These were religious skeptics like Ibn al-Rāwandī and scientists like Jābir Ibn Ḥayyān, who worked out an early conception of the scientific method.[109] It included the "rationalist" current of the Muʿtazlilites who defended the freedom of the individual to think for himself, and a thinker like Muḥammad ibn Zakariyyā al-Rāzī who used this freedom to undermine the most basic principles of organized religion.[110] Most importantly, for Adonis, this dynamic current gave rise to Sufism, as well as to some of the most powerful, creative poetry in the Arabic language, especially in the works of Abū Tammām and Abū Nuwās. These thinkers and artists rebelled against the ruling classes by challenging established notions of truth, beauty, and morality, at least according to Adonis.[111] Among other things, they upheld the principles that the form of the poem ought to reflect its underlying meaning, that meanings of words are liable to interpretation, that these interpretations can change, and that it is the duty of the poet not to conform to old formats, but to discover new means of expression.

The *nahḍa* and the unrelenting rule of the static in modern Arab culture

In the final volume of *The Static,* Adonis turns his attention to the analysis of modern Arab culture in general and its manifestations in poetry in particular. It is here that we find the most clear view of his overall intentions in writing his book. His analysis of Arab cultural history, after all, is not merely a critical view of its static tendencies; it serves a political goal. The paralysis of the Arab world at the social and political levels is rooted in its cultural weakness. Therefore, it needs more than

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108 Adūnīs, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥth fī al-Ibdāʿ wa-l-Ittibāʿ ʿind al-ʿArab,* vol. 2, 65 – 73. The Qarmatians were a Shi'i sect originating in the eastern part of the Arab peninsula. They are infamous in Islamic lore for desecrating the holy sites of Mecca during a raid in 930 CE. The slave rebellion mentioned is also referred to as the *Zanj* Rebellion, after the name of African slaves imported to southern Iraq to cultivate its expansive marshlands. These slaves, together with a number of other discontented groups in the area, rose in revolt in 869 and continued to struggle against the Abbasid powers until 883.

109 Adūnīs, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥth fī al-Ibdāʿ wa-l-Ittibāʿ ʿind al-ʿArab,* vol. 2, 84.

110 Adūnīs, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥth fī al-Ibdāʿ wa-l-Ittibāʿ ʿind al-ʿArab,* vol. 2, 90.

111 It bears reminding, perhaps, that this reading of the role that someone like Abū Nuwās played in court is highly idiosyncratic. It is informed throughout by Adonis's aim to bring out the dynamic in Arab-Islamic culture, not by a historian's interest in the role that subversive poetry might have played in the social *habitus* of the Abbasid court.

mere political change. What is required is "a complete cultural overhaul."[112] To achieve this, Arabs need first to reassess their heritage and criticize it – as Adonis has done in uncovering the dialectic between the static and the dynamic. Only afterwards can they begin to conceive of a new kind of society, one that can only be achieved through a complete revolution.[113]

Yet, before Adonis can tie these ends together – the critical assessment of *turāth* and the articulation of an alternative approach – he needs to fit in one more piece of the puzzle. After all, even if he has convinced his readership of the dominance of the static outlook in an earlier age, this does not mean that it continues to do so to this day. With the introduction of Western modernity to the Arab world, and the efforts at renewal to which this confrontation with the West gave rise, some might argue that the static outlook was interrupted, or at least relegated to a less prominent position. That, after all, is the *nahḍa*-thesis, that the nineteenth century marks a break with centuries of (*inḥiṭāṭ*).[114] Adonis's final task before launching into a more explicit exposition of his own alternative ideal for the Arab world, then, is to show that even the most celebrated reformers of the *nahḍa* did not manage to break entirely with the older spirit of traditionalism.

The analysis we find in the fourth volume of *The Static*[115] focuses more narrowly on the development of Arabic poetry than the previous volumes, which surveyed the development of Islamic society as a whole. In the same manner as before, however, Adonis takes the development of poetry as an illustration of larger, structural developments. As a preface to his criticism of the poets whom the Arab world has brought forth in the last century and a half or so, he recalls his classification of poetic traditionalism presented in the first two volumes of *The Static*, which sees:

1) the meaning of expressions as present before and therefore independent of the use that the poet makes of them;
2) production of poetry as a matter of varying on established themes and forms;
3) criticism as the study of these variations; and

112 Adūnīs, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥth fī al-Ibdāʿ wa-l-Ittibāʿ ʿind al-ʿArab,* vol. 4 (Cairo: al-Hayʾa al-ʿĀma li-Quṣūr al-Thaqāfa, 2016), 199.

113 Adūnīs, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥth fī al-Ibdāʿ wa-l-Ittibāʿ ʿind al-ʿArab,* vol. 4, 206.

114 Here, Adonis follows the mainstream *inḥiṭāṭ* paradigm described in Chapter 1.

115 As noted earlier, the fourth volume was in fact the third book of *The Static* to be published. What is now considered the third volume was inserted into the earlier trilogy.

4) a strict division between the word and its meaning (between form and content), which turns poetry into an art of imitation of earlier forms of expression.[116]

He also mentions his earlier definition of renewal (*tajdīd*), which:

1) views language as both a storehouse of the past and a fountain of the future, as it delivers the means for a poet to come up with new forms of expression;
2) is oriented towards the current situation and not to the past;
3) takes new expressions to come about when what is said is in-sync with the way in which it is said;
4) emphasizes individuality, competition, and revealing (*kashf*); and
5) holds that criticism should shed light on these three elements – individuality, competition, and revealing – and take the new texts themselves as measure, instead of using pre-established standards.[117]

The next task is to show that the *nahḍa* has stuck closely to a traditional conception of poetry. In a way, the *nahḍa* forms a convenient litmus test for the dominance of the static outlook. After all, according to Adonis's conception, cultures should always respond to changing situations by changing their own makeup. Since the *nahḍa* resulted from the confrontation between the Arabs and the modern power of the West, its culture ought to have responded in kind by developing new ways of thinking. Thus, in poetry the first acquaintance with a radically different, modern poetic tradition raised new questions and problems for Arab poets to tackle, new topics about which to write. This in turn required new forms of expression, new standards of criticism, and a different view of what a poet is or ought to be.[118]

According to Adonis, none of these things are truly accomplished by writers of the *nahḍa* period, except in the work of his one great modern example of creativity: Jubrān Khalīl Jubrān. As for the others, they have not managed to make the leap from what Adonis identifies as the age of oratory (*khaṭāba*) to the age of writing (*kitāba*). The latter he views as holistic, scientific, productive, and unsatisfying (because it is never complete). Arab culture, needless to say, represents the opposite of these characteristics. Thus, the first true *nahḍa* poet, Maḥmūd Sāmī al-Barūdī (1839–1904), is considered by Adonis to represent the quintessence of traditional, static thinking. His uncritical nationalistic praise of Arab culture, his em-

116 Adūnīs, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥth fī al-Ibdāʿ wa-l-Ittibāʿ ʿind al-ʿArab,* vol. 4, 14.
117 Adūnīs, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥth fī al-Ibdāʿ wa-l-Ittibāʿ ʿind al-ʿArab,* vol. 4, 14–15.
118 Adūnīs, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥth fī al-Ibdāʿ wa-l-Ittibāʿ ʿind al-ʿArab,* vol. 4, 25–27.

phasis on a pure use of the Arabic language which relies on the imitation of classical and in particular Qur'anic forms of expression and turns of phrase, render al-Barūdī a true follower of the static outlook.[119] Like the tribal poets who touted the glories of their kinsmen or the poets who spread the fame of their master, al-Barūdī's primary interest is not in creating a beautiful work of art, but in pushing a political agenda. In his case, poetry was meant to create an Arab national consciousness.[120] This, al-Barūdī and other neoclassicists thought, could only be done by using earlier poetic means that expressed what they regarded as the ultimate truths (*ḥaqāʾiq muṭlaqa*) of the Arabic language. They therefore did not deepen, but only expanded the depository of Arabic poetry with more of the same. To Adonis's mind, this is the opposite of what a good poet ought to do. Good poetry is never *horizontal*, but always *vertical*, exploring deeper dimensions.[121] A good poet does not expand on what is already there, but tries to discover new worlds that lie below the surface. He may return to his cultural heritage for inspiration, but not in order to copy exactly what others did before him.

The discussion of al-Barūdī serves as a template for the discussion of other *nahḍa* poets. Though not all of them are described in the kind of derogatory style reserved for al-Barūdī, the gist is the same. Maʿrūf al-Ruṣāfī (1875–1945) is praised for his social engagement and his criticism of Western colonialism, but he fails to back this up with a truly personal and innovative style. His work is reminiscent of the earlier static poetry with its emphasis on clarity of expression. He leaves no room for subjective expression and is ultimately not interested in poetry for its own sake, but only as a medium for critiquing the contemporary state of the Arab world. Even the more innovative poetic movements in Arabic poetry, like the Dīwān School and the Apollo Group, do not meet the standards set by Adonis. This is not to say that they did not innovate and change Arab poetry for the better. The Dīwān poets, ʿAbd al-Raḥmān Shukrī (1886–1958) in particular, engaged productively with Romantic English literature and were pioneers in Arabic poetry, championing individual expression, freedom of form, and unity of subject as centrally important aspects of the modern poem. The symbolism of Khalīl Muṭrān (1872–1949), which he uses to capture the relationship between the self and nature, is described admiringly.[122] Lastly, the Apollo Group, which Muṭrān helped found together with Aḥmad Zakī Abū Shādī (1892–1955) by starting a poetry magazine of

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119 Adūnīs, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥth fī al-Ibdāʿ wa-l-Ittibāʿ ʿind al-ʿArab,* vol. 4, 43–44.
120 Adūnīs, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥth fī al-Ibdāʿ wa-l-Ittibāʿ ʿind al-ʿArab,* vol. 4, 49.
121 Adūnīs, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥth fī al-Ibdāʿ wa-l-Ittibāʿ ʿind al-ʿArab,* vol. 4, 53. This opposition between horizontal and vertical will is also expressed in temporal terms – horizontal versus vertical time – as we will discuss in due course.
122 Adūnīs, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥth fī al-Ibdāʿ wa-l-Ittibāʿ ʿind al-ʿArab,* vol. 4, 97.

this name, did much to break open conventions in Arabic poetry, with its focus on the inner conscience (*al-wijdāniyya*), its interest in nature as a source of mystery, and its exploration of new poetic forms like narration.[123] Notwithstanding these attempts at innovation, Adonis does not see any of them as truly breaking free from the ingrained static worldview. They never turned their gaze to the inherited structure of Arabic rhetoric or the inherited forms of poetic expression.[124] They merely benefited from copying Western forms, renewing poetry's forms, not its content.

The fundamental problem is that none of these authors ever managed to break free from the problematic that has suffused the *nahḍa* project. This is the problematic of authenticity (*aṣāla*), which has been so central to modern Arab thought.[125] *Aṣāla*, Adonis reminds us, is related to the Arabic term for trunk (*aṣl*), and is used figuratively to denote whatever originates in the Arab personality. This personal core is made up of Islam, of the Arabic language, and of the various scientific and political institutions that characterize Arab culture. *Aṣāla*, in Arab culture, means nothing more than being rooted (*taʾṣīl*) and proceeding from the root (*fa-l-aṣāla idhan, hiyya al-taʾṣīl fī al-aṣl wa-l-ṣudūr ʿanh*).[126] Taking this credo to heart, Arabs continue to view the relationship between modern and old (*al-ḥadīth wa-l-qadīm*), between authenticity and renewal (*tajdīd*), in terms of a branch's relation to the tree. The clearest modern example of this mindset is found in the reactionary criticism of someone like Muṣṭafā Ṣādiq al-Rāfiʿī (1880–1937), whose incendiary castigation of the aforementioned movements like Dīwān and Apollo provides the *locus classicus* for the persistence of traditionalism in Arab culture. What Adonis stresses again and again, however, is that even the opponents of al-Rāfiʿī, these supposed innovators, did not manage to break free from a traditional mindset. They all remained caught in the typical *nahḍa* problematic which revolves around reconciling one's own heritage with modernity, not the effort to come up with something entirely new.[127]

123 Adūnīs, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥth fī al-Ibdāʿ wa-l-Ittibāʿ ʿind al-ʿArab,* vol. 4, 103–4.
124 Adūnīs, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥth fī al-Ibdāʿ wa-l-Ittibāʿ ʿind al-ʿArab,* vol. 4, 140.
125 Adūnīs, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥth fī al-Ibdāʿ wa-l-Ittibāʿ ʿind al-ʿArab,* vol. 4, 125.
126 Adūnīs, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥth fī al-Ibdāʿ wa-l-Ittibāʿ ʿind al-ʿArab,* vol. 4, 125.
127 Adonis discerns this problematic in the earliest stages of the *nahḍa*, for instance in the works of someone like al-Ṭahṭāwī – see Adūnīs, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥth fī al-Ibdāʿ wa-l-Ittibāʿ ʿind al-ʿArab,* vol. 4, 34.

5.3 Structure of the dialectic of the static and the dynamic

Having reviewed the history of the dialectic between the static and the dynamic in Arab culture, we now turn to its structure. According to Adonis, this dialectic runs throughout Arab-Islamic culture, and its manifestations hang together in myriad ways. There is no clear hierarchy between the different aspects of the static or the dynamic, and therefore there is no obvious starting point for a discussion of what these terms mean. Since the static is considered the dominant force, Adonis spends considerably more time detailing its characteristics. As its dialectical antithesis, the dynamic is quite simply all that which the *static* is not.

That, of course, does not imply that it represents an entirely negative worldview. Far from it! To Adonis, the dynamic means freedom and the creation of the new. To each static concept he opposes a dynamic counterpart. The static is identified with the old, the dynamic with the new. The static provides the foundation for social order, whereas the dynamic calls for revolution. The static is a byword for oppression, while freedom is the slogan of the dynamic. *The Static* is full of such oppositions, and it is never hard to divine with which side of conceptual pairs Adonis feels the most affinity – even though for the dialectic to function one always requires both sides.[128] Some of the most important oppositions will now be described, so as to get a grip on the structure of the dialectic envisioned by Adonis.

5.3.1 Wave model–tree structure

An abstract but nevertheless insightful way to encapsulate the characteristics of the static is to view them as variants of a single structural model, one that Adonis likens to a tree structure.[129] The static takes every field of human endeavor to be ruled by a set of absolute rules. These are essential and immune to change. They form the trunk of the tree, its backbone. This trunk may allow for variations to grow out of it, but the "branches" must never lead to outcomes that run counter to the normative core.

The clearest example of a field dominated by this system Adonis finds in Islamic law. The system Islamic jurists developed was made up of the sources of ju-

128 This point regarding Adonis's poetics is also expressed by Iman Mersal – see Mersal, "Reading the Qurʾān in the Poetry of Adonis," 6.
129 Adūnīs, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥth fī al-Ibdāʿ wa-l-Ittibāʿ ʿind al-ʿArab,* vol. 4, 125.His likening the structure of the static to that of a tree drives home the point that this mode of thinking relates to authenticity (*aṣāla*) as pertaining to "rootedness."

risprudence (*uṣūl al-fiqh*) and of the logical rules for deriving a specific judgment or branch (*farʿ*) from its root (*aṣl*). Although the law exemplifies it most clearly, the tree model made its way into all areas of Arab-Islamic culture. Juridical doctrine was, according to Adonis, shaped in conjunction with theological doctrine in an effort to control the populace. This is why we see a similar all-encompassing view of Islam emerging among mainstream theologians. According to them, God is the only source of knowledge of the hereafter, while Muḥammad is the sole source of knowledge about earthly matters.[130] Any personal opinion, experimentation, or creativity is ruled out. Man's task is to find out what he ought to do by applying a perfect knowledge of Arabic to the study of the Qur'an and the hadith. Science (*ʿilm*[131]) is, as al-Shāfiʿī explains, a matter of conformity (*ittibāʿ*) to the text of the Qur'an and the sayings of the Prophet and his Companions, using analogical reasoning (*qiyās*) to apply these precepts to a particular case.[132]

This tree structure carries over into Arabic poetry as well. In the poetics of this era, the old (*al-qadīm*) is presented as the perfect root (*aṣl kāmil*) of all later poetic expression.[133] The word of God was made into the ultimate measure for the quality of a poet's work. After Islam, then, the practice of poetry became similar to that of the law, namely to use individual judgment (*ijtihād*) to deduce individual branches (*furūʿ*) from the roots (*uṣūl*).[134] Since the meaning of terms and the kinds of subjects a poet ought to write about were set, his task became that of creating variations on these well-known themes.

Adonis wants to do away with the tree model that governs Arab thinking. In its stead he proposes a relationship between old and new in which the latter does not grow out of and depend entirely on the former. He uses the classic Saussurean distinction between language (*lisān*) and speech or discourse (*kalām*) to make his point. Poetry, he argues, is a form of discourse. It is not part of the structure of language, like the foliage that grows out of a tree, but an epiphenomenon, more akin to the waves that ripple on the surface of the ocean.[135] Poetry ought not be an imitation of what came before, but a deeply personal explosion within language itself. Whether old or new, these waves are equal as they continue to ripple across the ocean of the Arabic language and the cultural heritage to which it gave rise.

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130 Adūnīs, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥth fī al-Ibdāʿ wa-l-Ittibāʿ ʿind al-ʿArab,* vol. 1, 187.
131 With this term, al-Shāfiʿī means primarily what would today be termed the Islamic sciences.
132 Adūnīs, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥth fī al-Ibdāʿ wa-l-Ittibāʿ ʿind al-ʿArab,* vol. 2, 19.
133 Adūnīs, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥth fī al-Ibdāʿ wa-l-Ittibāʿ ʿind al-ʿArab,* vol. 1, 62.
134 Adūnīs, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥth fī al-Ibdāʿ wa-l-Ittibāʿ ʿind al-ʿArab,* vol. 1, 100.
135 Adūnīs, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥth fī al-Ibdāʿ wa-l-Ittibāʿ ʿind al-ʿArab,* vol. 4, 133.

5.3.2 Creativity–following

The change of the epistemic structure that rules Arab thought is crucial to the distinction that Adonis refers to in the subtitle of his dissertation "An investigation into creativity (*ibdāʿ*) and conformity (*ittibāʿ*) among the Arabs." Only once the Arabs shed the model of root and branch can they make room for creativity. The theory of creativity (*naẓariyyat al-ibdāʿ*) therefore ought always to question the concept of roots (*al-tasāʾul ḥawl al-aṣl*).[136] The dynamic distinguishes itself from the static by questioning whether the root is indeed complete and perfect. It instead proposes to take from it only what is best, what can be used to create something new. Those belonging to the dynamic movement do not see any external root as necessary for creation. They regard creativity itself as the ultimate root (*fa-l-ibdāʿ, idhan huwwa bi-dhātih al-aṣl*).[137] For them, there is no necessary precedent. Precedence resides only in the creative act itself.

Unfortunately, this creative trend continues to be suppressed in Arab culture. The main culprit for this is religion, or at least the ideological-political use that successive regimes have made of religion. The notion that Islam is the "seal of knowledge and the end of perfection,"[138] has become set in the Arab mind. This has limited his options for further development and progress. After all, if all that is true is contained within religion, nothing a person says that goes beyond or against it can be true. We may expand on what came before and repeat this, but can never diverge from its roots (*usūl*).[139] Thus creativity in all dimensions of life, but particularly poetic creativity (*ibdāʿ*), is stifled by the excessive regard for tradition and imitation (*taqlīd*).[140]

The ingrained Arab contempt for creativity shows up even in the connotation of the word itself. The term *bidʿa*, which is closely related to the word *ibdāʿ* through its triliteral root B-D-ʿ (ع – د – ب), via theological redefinitions came to stand for anything that runs counter to the teachings of Islam.[141] The logic behind this was that *ibdāʿ* was defined as creating something without the use of a model. Since the rules for action were already contained in the shariʿa and because, moreover, God himself is referred to as a creator (*mubdiʿ*), it would be presumptuous for

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136 Adūnīs, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥth fī al-Ibdāʿ wa-l-Ittibāʿ ʿind al-ʿArab,* vol. 1, 144.
137 Adūnīs, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥth fī al-Ibdāʿ wa-l-Ittibāʿ ʿind al-ʿArab,* vol. 1, 144.
138 Adūnīs, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥth fī al-Ibdāʿ wa-l-Ittibāʿ ʿind al-ʿArab,* vol. 1, 68.
139 Adūnīs, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥth fī al-Ibdāʿ wa-l-Ittibāʿ ʿind al-ʿArab,* vol. 1, 75.
140 Adūnīs, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥth fī al-Ibdāʿ wa-l-Ittibāʿ ʿind al-ʿArab,* vol. 1, 80.
141 Adūnīs, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥth fī al-Ibdāʿ wa-l-Ittibāʿ ʿind al-ʿArab,* vol. 1, 109.

man to think that he may himself create anything entirely new.[142] Thus innovation as such was made into a form of heresy.[143]

In later ages, Arabs have not been able to overcome their erstwhile stagnation by looking to the West. Instead of adopting its ways of thinking, they limited themselves to copying its outer forms, importing new styles and products, but not the creative spirit that gave rise to them. This, then, Adonis finds no less a form of conformity than sticking closely to models that one finds in one's own cultural heritage.[144]

The upshot is that Arab culture, under the aegis of Islam, has become a culture of conformity (*ittibāʿ*) and tradition (*taqlīd*).[145] Traditionalism is, according to Adonis, inherently religious.[146] Even where it manifests in politics or in poetry, its foundation is religious (*asāsuh dīnī*).[147] The Arab reality is a religious imagination, not the consequence of human effort.[148] It rather suppresses any attempt by humans to find out new things about the world around them, or to interpret old texts in new ways. The Salafi imagination that Adonis sees as the default Muslim worldview values transmission of knowledge (*naql*) over the individual use of reason (*ʿaql*).[149] It acknowledges only a single *turāth*, where the creative person carves out his own personal *turāth.*[150]

142 Adūnīs, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥth fī al-Ibdāʿ wa-l-Ittibāʿ ʿind al-ʿArab,* vol. 2, 167.

143 Perhaps as consequential in constraining the creative energy of Muslims was the adoption of a particular view of causality. The doctrine of "acquisition" (*kasb*) – a topic that also plays an important role for our other two interlocutors, Zakī Najīb Maḥmūd and ʿAbd al-Raḥmān Ṭaha – entrenched the view that man by himself is incapable (*ʿajz*) of creating or doing anything independently. Man may will an act and serve as its physical cause (*mubāsharat al-ʿaml*), but he can only accomplish it with the help of God. He therefore merely acquires what God has created. There is no such thing as authentic creation (*ibdāʿ*), because everything is ultimately God's doing – see Adonis, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥth fī al-Ibdāʿ wa-l-Ittibāʿ ʿind al-ʿArab,* vol. 1, 79–83.

144 Adonis, *Fātiḥa li-Nihāyat al-Qarn*, 3rd ed. (Beirut: Dar al-Sāqī, 2014), 265.

145 Adūnīs, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥth fī al-Ibdāʿ wa-l-Ittibāʿ ʿind al-ʿArab,* vol. 1, 95.

146 As argued further on, we should be careful not to read this as a blanket rejection of religion. After all, what Adonis rejects is not religion itself, but religion insofar as it suppresses the individual's dynamism. Put differently, what he is against is collective religion, in particular insofar as it is used for political ends to protect the status quo.

147 Adūnīs, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥth fī al-Ibdāʿ wa-l-Ittibāʿ ʿind al-ʿArab,* vol. 1, 96.

148 Adūnīs, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥth fī al-Ibdāʿ wa-l-Ittibāʿ ʿind al-ʿArab,* vol. 2, 25.

149 Adonis ties into a classical debate here on what are considered in the Islamic tradition to be the two sources of truth: revelation (*naql*) and reason (*ʿaql*).

150 Adūnīs, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥth fī al-Ibdāʿ wa-l-Ittibāʿ ʿind al-ʿArab,* vol. 1, 147.

5.3.3 Future–past

A central feature of Arab-Islamic culture and of the Arab mind, according to Adonis, is its historical orientation. The advent of Islam meant a break with the past, both as the end of the heretical period of *jāhiliyya* and the beginning of a new age, a root (*aṣl*) from which the Islamic civilization would grow.[151] From a static perspective, this beginning is by definition better than our current age, since it is closer to the essence of revelation. The passage of time becomes something to battle against, as it leads man away from the truth of revelation. The future becomes a space, not for discovery, but for the endless repetition and rehearsal of knowledge provided by revelation. Revelational time supersedes and annuls historical time; it is of all ages, past, present, and future.[152] Instead of an infinite horizon of possibilities, it imagines a finite endpoint in man returning to the place whence he came, that is God.[153] The only form of progress (*taqaddum*) imaginable within this temporal framework is "the continuous return to the past, to the root."[154]

This "static" valuation of time in terms of a sanctified past versus a future that can only diverge from the straight path is evident, Adonis suggests, in the way the dialectic between the terms *al-qadīm* (old) and *al-muḥdath* (new) played out in Arabic thought and poetry. Essentially, the term "al-qadīm" carries in its semantic root four meanings:

- what came before;
- the passage of a long time;
- that which contradicts *al-ḥudūth*; and
- the intention and what is to come.

In the Arab-Islamic heritage Adonis then distinguishes three different idiomatic uses of the term *qidam* (the old/ancient) or its adjective *al-qadīm:*

- a linguistic meaning according to which anything that precedes is *qadīm*;
- a philosophical-theological meaning, according to which something is *qadīm* when it has no precedent, when it is its own cause (*ʿillat dhātih*); and
- a Qur'anic meaning, according to which *al-qadīm* is what came before *temporally* – usually this implies a negative connotation, since from a Qur'anic

151 Adūnīs, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥth fī al-Ibdāʿ wa-l-Ittibāʿ ʿind al-ʿArab,* vol. 1, 67.
152 Adūnīs, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥth fī al-Ibdāʿ wa-l-Ittibāʿ ʿind al-ʿArab,* vol. 1, 68 – 69.
153 Adūnīs, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥth fī al-Ibdāʿ wa-l-Ittibāʿ ʿind al-ʿArab,* vol. 1, 70. This is captured, for instance, in the Qur'anin phrase: "We belong to God and to Him we shall return" (2:156).
154 Adūnīs, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥth fī al-Ibdāʿ wa-l-Ittibāʿ ʿind al-ʿArab,* vol. 1, 73.

standpoint, whatever preceded it is by definition pre-Islamic and thus is tarnished by ignorance of God's final revelation.

What happened in the first centuries of the Islamic calendar, according to Adonis, is that the dominant interpretation of this term took on three dimensions that derive from the above-mentioned idioms, but that also alter these original meanings in important ways. The linguistic dimension now refers to *al-qidam* as what comes before and is foundational, the philosophical-religious dimension refers to *al-qidam* as whatever lacks precedent or foundation, and the evaluative, Qur'anic dimension, rather than value *al-qidam* as something negative, portrays it as perfection (*kamāl*).[155] According to the champions of this definition of *al-qidam* – the *ahl al-ḥadīth*, that is, the scholars who dedicated their efforts to recording, understanding, and passing on the tradition of the Prophet (the sunna), and who opposed or at least severely restricted the use of logic in interpreting the Qur'an and the sunna – these characteristics came together in one document of divine origin, which has no precedent nor equal, and the ultimate interpretation of which is only known by God: The Holy Qur'an. As such, *al-qidam* had to be revered and protected because it stood for the word of God Himself and for the sayings and acts of its ultimate human interpreter: The Prophet Muḥammad. By implication, its linguistic opposite, the notion of *al-ḥadīth* or *al-muḥdath*, became suspect. Particularly its most extreme form, namely creation from nothing (*ibdāʿ*) came to stand for a rejection of Scripture and the Prophet. To refer to anything other than God as creative was to commit heresy, because any ascription of creativity to something other than the Divine is to "cancel out or deny the creativity of God."[156]

This temporal perspective naturally relates to the tree model mentioned earlier. The past is the immovable trunk on which the branches depend for their sustenance. What Adonis suggests is that a move away from this model, away from the servile attitude of conformity (*ittibāʿ*) and towards an attitude of creativity (*ibdāʿ*) as the ultimate form of creation, not only requires an appreciation of true creativity, but also of the importance of time as a background for human experience. To be creative, one needs to reject identifying with one's past and move "outside of history."[157] Only then can one conceive of a future that is open, a realm of new and endless possibilities different from anything that has come before. To become creative, Arabs will therefore need to reconceptualize time itself. Rather than stick to the familiar opposition of old versus new, he suggests that Arabs need to look

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155 Adūnīs, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥth fī al-Ibdāʿ wa-l-Ittibāʿ ʿind al-ʿArab,* vol. 2, 137–38.
156 Adūnīs, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥth fī al-Ibdāʿ wa-l-Ittibāʿ ʿind al-ʿArab,* vol. 2, 167.
157 ʿĀdil Ḍāhir, *Adūnīs aw al-Ithm al-Hīrāqlīṭī* (Damascus: Dār al-Takwīn, 2011), 58.

again at what these terms mean, how these meanings are contingent and mediated through political wrangling, and how attributing different meanings to these terms can open up space for social, intellectual, and artistic freedom.

5.3.4 Revolution–order

Because the dynamic is always a reaction to the ruling norms and the actions of those who use these norms to protect the status quo, the dynamic is necessarily a revolutionary movement. It is the weapon of the underprivileged, those who have an incentive to blow up, to unleash society.[158] Their interest lies in subverting the ruling culture. Adonis compares living in a repressive, unfree society to being prematurely dead. Chaos, far from being a threat, is a blessing, an opportunity. Under a repressive regime only chaos can open the doors to freedom.[159]

The revolutionary poetry that Adonis deems "dynamic" tries to undermine order, to break entirely with convention. He sees this, for instance, in Abū Nuwās's celebration of all manner of vices. By crossing ethical boundaries, he sets himself free. Instead of following the law, he himself becomes the source of the law (*yuṣbiḥ huwwa nafsah maṣdar al-sharīʿa*). In particular, Adonis directs the wrath of the revolutionary towards the institution that continues to suffocate Arab society with its grip on public morality: religion. He presents Abū Nuwās as a proto-nihilist. In order to become free, man has to kill the harbinger of the religious order. In order to rise to the same level, to become the lawgiver, he has to kill God and His deputy, the caliph. Only the complete destruction of the old religious order will enable the creation of a new world. It is no wonder that Adonis sees a foreshadowing of Nietzsche in Abū Nuwās.[160]

It is worth noting that this opposition also has a temporal character. Revolution, in its current meaning,[161] refers to the start of something entirely new and a radical break with the past. It is not just an event, but a new beginning, an ushering in of a new time. This, of course, dovetails with Adonis's creative ideals and his emphasis on creating new beginnings, and it highlights the centrality of subver-

158 Adūnīs, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥth fī al-Ibdāʿ wa-l-Ittibāʿ ʿind al-ʿArab,* vol. 1, 62.
159 Adūnīs, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥth fī al-Ibdāʿ wa-l-Ittibāʿ ʿind al-ʿArab,* vol. 2, 124.
160 Adūnīs, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥth fī al-Ibdāʿ wa-l-Ittibāʿ ʿind al-ʿArab,* vol. 2, 122–23.
161 Interestingly, as Koselleck points out in his seminal historical study of the concept of revolution, the metamorphosis of revolution from a concept referring to the constant return of the same – for example, the revolutions of the planets – to its polar opposite as an all-shattering event of complete renewal, is tied to the changing temporal conceptions that accompanied modernization – see Reinhart Koselleck, *Vergangene Zukunft* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1989), 64–86.

sive conceptions of time for his philosophical and poetic outlook. It is, moreover, connected to his conception of modernity. For him, modernity (*ḥadātha*) is a "revolutionary ethos" that aims at "'unlocking of the creative, and therefore the critical, energies of the Arab individual, affirming that the human person is a creation (*ṣāni*ʿ), who innovates and transmutes."[162]

5.3.5 Religion–atheism

The revolutionary character of the dynamic ties in with Adonis's avowed atheism. Organized religion as such, and Islam in particular, according to him, are anti-revolutionary institutions.[163] They take a single moment of revelation or doctrine to be the final word on everything, and use its authority to silence anyone who has the courage and creativity to think differently. This, according to Adonis, estranges man from himself. The original state of man is to trust in his own capacities, to use his reason to understand the world and his creativity to make new ones. This is what the "logic of atheism" preaches. It wants to return man to his original state and to a belief in himself as a human being.[164]

This is also why all truly creative art is atheist. Art ought to explore new territory, attempt new things. It is inherently revolutionary and therefore anti-religious. All great poets, as he exclaims in one recent interview, were non-religious or even anti-religious.[165] By contrast, Arabic poetry for the most part resembles religion, or at least abides by its precepts in trying to be as clear as possible, using no other material than what is given in the Qur'an, the sunna, or the *jahilī* tradition, preferring the old to the new, allowing true creativity only to God, and ruling out the possibility of exploring new meanings and vocabulary.[166]

Adonis's atheist streak brings us to another aspect that runs through his work, namely his stance on ethics. Ethics, as it is understood in the ruling static interpretation, is a set of eternal rules based on revelation, used to defend the status quo. This he most emphatically rejects. A moral code should not be imposed on the peo-

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162 Adonis as quoted in Linda Istanbulli, "Mihyar's Precarious Journey: Imagining the Intellectual in Modern Syrian Literature," *Contemporary Levant* 7, no. 1 (2022): 8.

163 Needless to say, Adonis here presupposes a very specific conception of religion, as well as of the function of orthodoxy within religion.

164 Adūnīs, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥth fī al-Ibdāʿ wa-l-Ittibāʿ ʿind al-ʿArab,* vol. 1, 129–30.

165 Adonis, "Adonis Interview: I Was Born for Poetry," YouTube video, min. 29:40, posted by Louisiana Channel (website based at the Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, Humlebæk, Denmark), 2015, https://youtu.be/ldLr4M1cP28

166 Adūnīs, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥth fī al-Ibdāʿ wa-l-Ittibāʿ ʿind al-ʿArab,* vol. 1, 107–9.

ple, but arise from man's capacity to reason. As such it can never spring from any religious creed. In recognizably Nietzschean terms, Adonis describes atheism as opening a space for a humanist ethics:

> If atheism (*ilḥād*[167]) is the end of revelation, it is the beginning of the "death" of God, that is, the beginning of nihilism, which is itself the beginning of the overcoming of nihilism. Instead of "Do!" and "Don't!" we get "Reason!" and "Respond!" Hence there is no antecedent command (*amr*) or prohibition (*nahī*): Reason alone commands and prohibits.[168]

While commentators on Adonis are not mistaken in attributing an uncompromising secular sensibility to him, we should understand his secular streak in the Adonisian idiolect. What Adonis is against is not religion *per se*, but religion insofar as it quells dynamism. The collectivist impulse of organized religion keeps undermining the value of the individual and his ability to explore. The goal of *The Static*, as he points out in a 2006 lecture that reflects on this work, is to free religion and open up its dynamic potential, not to attack or critique it.[169] Hence, Adonis's stance on religion is not adequately captured by labeling him secular in the liberal sense, namely as someone who believes that state and religion should be separate in order to safeguard personal liberty, the rights of minorities, and the stability of the state. Nor is he a rationalist who believes that religious belief is ultimately false insofar as it contradicts reason. And, even though he acknowledges the role that religion has played in defending class privilege, he does not dread religion solely as an opium of the people. Adonis is anti-religious in a very particular sense: religion should be overcome insofar as it limits the aesthetic horizon. However, to the extent that it helps human creative power unfold, it should be cherished. In another echo of a Nietzschean streak, we hear Adonis exclaim in his groundbreaking volume of poems *Songs of Mihyār of Damascus* (*Aghānī Mihyār al-Dimashqī*) the longing for a new God to replace the God of worn-out tradition:

167 Adonis makes this comment in the context of referring to the *ilḥād* movement of the Umayyad and early Abbasid ages. This term is currently used to refer to atheism. It bears reminding, however, that a hard "atheist" denial of God was likely not what those associated with this movement had in mind. Rather, they appear to have aspired to a "rationalist rejection of prophecy and revelation" – see Samuli Schielke, "Ch 40: The Islamic World," in *The Oxford Handbook of Atheism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 639. Naturally, such elision between modern concepts of "hard" atheism and older articulations of doubt about the divine that, though certainly radical, were less abrasive than any flat-out denial of God's existence, is not shunned by Adonis.

168 Adūnīs, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥth fī al-Ibdāʿ wa-l-Ittibāʿ ʿind al-ʿArab,* vol. 1, 130.

169 Adūnīs, *Muḥāḍarāt al-Iskandariyya*, 2nd ed. (Damascus: Dār al-Takwīn, 2018), 9.

We pass on without paying heed to this god
And we long for another, for a new Lord.[170]

5.3.6 Ethics–aesthetics

Laws, moral codes, and customs, particularly those of a religious sort, are, in Adonis's view, mere instruments to control the behavior of people. This is particularly clear in Islamic law, which he regards as essentially a collection of duties, of dos and don'ts, with a measure of divine endorsement, rather than an effort to investigate the truth.[171]

The emphasis in Islam on obedience and on following its moral code also affected poetic practice. Since pre-Islamic times, poetry has been used not merely as a means for expression, but as an instrument of power.[172] Poets were considered essential warriors in a war of words between the various Arab tribes. They would defame other tribes or praise the exploits of their own. With the coming of Islam, this role was retained, only now it came to serve the interest of the ruling elite. Hence, under Islam, literature (*adab*) was assigned the role of instructing people on good behavior (*sulūk*).[173] The value of poetry now lay in the extent to which it expressed the moral tenets of Islam. Poetry became a form of ethics.

This instrumental use of poetry for the inculcation of morals greatly affected poetic standards and practice. Since the goal was to instruct, no ambiguity would be allowed, nor any sense that moral demands may differ in time or according to one's particular situation.[174] Poetry ought to be truthful; it ought to relate directly to what it refers to. Term and referent ought to be united.[175] Here, too, the influence of jurisprudence carried over into literary criticism. Once the poet's role be-

170 The centrality of this perspective on religion is underscored by Stefan Weidner's adoption of this sentence as the title of his book on religions and poetry in the work of Adonis. For his analysis of this line, see Weidner, *……und sehnen uns nach einem neuen Gott…: Poesie und Religion im Werk von Adonis*, 34. I should note here that, whereas Weidner in his German translation translates both "ilāh" in the first line and "rabb" in the second as "God" (*Gott*), I prefer to use the term "Lord," as it is not only closer to the Arabic meaning, but it also conveys the notable difference between the two lines in the original.

171 Adūnīs, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥth fī al-Ibdāʿ wa-l-Ittibāʿ ʿind al-ʿArab,* vol. 1, 77–79.

172 Adonis points out that the meaning of the verbal root K-L-M (ك – ل – م) from which the word for "speech"/"discourse" (*kalam*) is derived is related to injury – see Adūnīs, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥth fī al-Ibdāʿ wa-l-Ittibāʿ ʿind al-ʿArab,* vol. 2 45.

173 Adūnīs, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥth fī al-Ibdāʿ wa-l-Ittibāʿ ʿind al-ʿArab,* vol. 1, 91. In modern Arabic, the term *adab* retains this double meaning of both "good manners" and "literature."

174 Adūnīs, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥth fī al-Ibdāʿ wa-l-Ittibāʿ ʿind al-ʿArab,* vol. 1, 101–2.

175 Adūnīs, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥth fī al-Ibdāʿ wa-l-Ittibāʿ ʿind al-ʿArab,* vol. 1, 103.

comes that of an instructor, his language ought to be clear and unambiguous. Like the jurists who try to determine the meaning of an expression in order to extract a specific ruling, the poet's role was to give a precise description of the world, to write poetry that is unambiguous in its meaning.[176]

This instrumental use is, for Adonis, an egregious subversion of poetry. Poetic creation should never be about anything other than the creative act itself. Poetry should concern itself with the aesthetic, not with the ethical. More importantly, the emphasis on ethics obscures a higher value: truth. No law, according to Adonis, is above the truth. Where the two collide, the latter should always prevail. This is a central credo of the dynamic that Adonis finds among its earliest proponents, the Qarmatians,[177] as well as many centuries later in the modernist poetry of Jubrān Khalīl Jubrān's.[178] The law is by definition linked to the ruling interests, and therefore it cannot represent the truth. But if so, then what, according to Adonis, is truth? Where do we find it? Clearly, Adonis thinks that truth can be found in art. The beautiful is the true. This, however, only defers the question. For what is it that links aestheticism to truth?

5.3.7 Inner truth–outer appearance

Adonis does not think of truth as a single, stable entity. He does not want to replace the current truth of the static in Arab society with another, equally static one. Like all good things in life, truth is dynamic. Truth is the daughter of change (*inna al-ḥaqīqa hiyya bint al-mutaghayyir*).[179] But if that is the case, how does one find it?

It hardly needs mentioning that what the static regime presents as the truth does not have Adonis's blessing. The truth of the static is "given *a priori* in a text-source which is perfect and definitive," and as such it merely serves to protect the regime by quashing any form of criticism.[180] This would seem to imply that Adonis thinks that truth can only be gained through free and independent thought. To an extent this is true. For example, he admires the rationalist Muʿtazilites for having founded the first rationalist current in Arab thought, one firmly committed to the credo that knowledge based on reason (*ʿaql*) trumps knowledge known

176 Adūnīs, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥth fī al-Ibdāʿ wa-l-Ittibāʿ ʿind al-ʿArab,* vol. 1, 87–88.
177 Adūnīs, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥth fī al-Ibdāʿ wa-l-Ittibāʿ ʿind al-ʿArab,* vol. 1, 125.
178 Adūnīs, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥth fī al-Ibdāʿ wa-l-Ittibāʿ ʿind al-ʿArab,* vol. 4,, 141.
179 Adūnīs, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥth fī al-Ibdāʿ wa-l-Ittibāʿ ʿind al-ʿArab,* vol. 2,, 72.
180 Adonis, *An Introduction to Arab Poetics*, 84.

merely through transmission (*naql*). There is, according to them, no truth without reason (*lā ḥaqīqa ilā bi-l-ʿaql*).[181]

Clearly, however, Adonis is no ordinary rationalist. After all, the thoroughbred rationalist holds that there is one objective truth about the way the world is, and that this truth can be cognized through the undistorted use of reason. This flies in the face of Adonis's aesthetic conception of knowledge, which is heteronomous, infinite in scope, and irrational. What he respects in the rationalist standpoint is its independence, its foundation on rational criticism, its focus on contextual interpretation rather than blind following. All of these aspects fit with a view of man as an independent being, distinguished by his ability to ask questions.[182] Adonis does not, however, view this critical stance instrumentally, as the necessary requirement for uncovering the true state of the universe.

There is another movement that Adonis identifies with the search for truth. This group, however, did not look for truth in compliance with the Revealed Law, but in dimensions beyond the law that set the rules for our material world of outward appearances. As Adonis's modern-day idol Jubrān Khalīl Jubrān already recognized, the thinkers and artists who most embody this tendency are the Sufis.[183] Why Sufism in particular? According to the Sufis, or at least Adonis's interpretation of Sufism, truth can only be found in what remains hidden below the surface (*al-bāṭin*). The surface level (*al-ẓāhir*) is the realm of law (sharīʿa), whereas *al-bāṭin* is equated with the truth (*al-ḥaqīqa*).[184] What Sufis saw correctly was that "truth does not come from books, or revelation, or laws, or ideas, or science, but from an interior world."[185] It is not that Adonis denies scientific truths. These, however, are not the only truths, nor the most important ones. In his book *Sufism and Surrealism*, a work that largely follows the conclusions reached in *The Static* and uses these two traditions to illustrate his conception of the dynamic, he captures this distinction nicely:

> What we call truth does not exist in the world of phenomena apart from in its scientific-conventional form. The truth, on the contrary, is mystery, hidden inside things, in their concealed world. Man is able to reach it only with specific knowledge, which is neither conventional nor 'scientific'. Opposite the visible in the world arises the invisible and opposite the objective in the world arises the subjective.[186]

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181 Adūnīs, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥth fī al-Ibdāʿ wa-l-Ittibāʿ ʿind al-ʿArab,* vol. 1, 125.
182 Adūnīs, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥth fī al-Ibdāʿ wa-l-Ittibāʿ ʿind al-ʿArab,* vol. 1, 311–12.
183 Adūnīs, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥth fī al-Ibdāʿ wa-l-Ittibāʿ ʿind al-ʿArab,* vol. 4, 163.
184 Adūnīs, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥth fī al-Ibdāʿ wa-l-Ittibāʿ ʿind al-ʿArab,* vol. 1, 320.
185 Adonis, *Sufism and Surrealism*, trans. Judith Cumberbatch (Beirut: Saqi, 2013), 12.
186 Adonis, *Sufism and Surrealism* , 130.

The kind of truths that Adonis is interested in are not the conventional ones that concern the world of appearances, but the internal ones, the truths of the soul and the imagination. God, according to Sufi teaching, manifests himself in two distinct ways: the outer world of appearances and the inner, which is concealed. "The apparent is clear, rational. The concealed is hidden, heartfelt." Because the latter kind of truth is found in the heart, it requires a different, subjective approach. Thus, Adonis quotes Aḥmad Ibn ʿAjība's "seek after the truth closer to yourself, inside yourself." Instead of asking "How shall I act so that my conduct and my thinking comply with the law?" Adonis lets the poet al-Niffārī ask "Who am I? How shall I know myself and know the truth?"[187]

As is the case with the critical stance Adonis finds attractive in the Muʿtazilite doctrine, the goal here is to create space for individual freedom. What renders Sufism even more appealing, is that it goes beyond the bounds of the rational and thereby creates space for free expression and discovery. The Sufi idea of knowledge is the opposite of rational knowledge.[188] Contrary to rationalism, it countenances the infinity of Creation. Because reason cannot do this, it is bound to distort the true nature of reality. Reason puts a veil over experience.[189] It renders everything in a similar light. Sufis, on the contrary, recognize that what we cognize is but a reflection of the truth that reason covers up. In order to get past this veil "one must go beyond reason, suspend its activity and free the activity of the heart" (*la budd min tajāwuz al-ʿaql wa-taʿṭīl fāʿiliyyatih, wa-iṭlāq fāʿiliyyat al-qalb*).[190] It is through the heart that one can access truth. Truth arises in a particular relationship between the self and the object.[191] Once man learns to listen to his heart, "he sees the truth (God, meaning) in all that is revealed and worships it in every image." Moreover, what this requires is not logical thinking, but imagination, "because Truth is the first and the last, the manifest and the concealed, and imagination is its supreme image." Through his imagination, the Sufi becomes not the passive recipient, but the source of knowledge.[192]

Typical of this mystical worldview is a preference for poetic expression over philosophical treatise. The truths that mystical poets want to express do not suit ordinary language. They require complete freedom, innovation, a break with tradition. It is no coincidence that Sufi poets did a lot of experimenting with new poetic forms, including early forms of the kind of prose poetry championed by Ado-

187 Adonis, *An Introduction to Arab Poetics*, 63.
188 Adūnīs, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥth fī al-Ibdāʿ wa-l-Ittibāʿ ʿind al-ʿArab,* vol. 2, 100.
189 Adūnīs, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥth fī al-Ibdāʿ wa-l-Ittibāʿ ʿind al-ʿArab,* vol. 2, 103.
190 Adūnīs, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥth fī al-Ibdāʿ wa-l-Ittibāʿ ʿind al-ʿArab,* vol. 2, 103.
191 Adūnīs, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥth fī al-Ibdāʿ wa-l-Ittibāʿ ʿind al-ʿArab,* vol. 2, 140.
192 Adūnīs, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥth fī al-Ibdāʿ wa-l-Ittibāʿ ʿind al-ʿArab,* vol. 2, 108.

nis and his fellow members of the Shiʿr group. Their poetry achieves a unity between form and content that is absent from "static" poetry, which concentrates on molding the formal appearance of a poem in accordance with traditional standards. Sufi poets reject the "static" idea that words have a set meaning, fixed for eternity. They instead try to uncover new meanings in an infinite search for truth in an everchanging world. Where the role of the static poet is that of an instructor, someone who inculcates morals, the Sufi poet is a discoverer, a creator of a new morality.[193]

5.3.8 Individual–group

At this point, having discussed a number of antitheses, we can start to see how they feed into each other. The search for truth leads dynamic poets to look for new meanings, because they conceive of truth as infinite and changing. This requires a stance of absolute freedom. Dynamic poets therefore go against laws, against morality. As part of this quest for freedom they adopt a different temporal perspective, one that does not sanctify the past, but rather looks to the present moment or to the future. In short, the dynamic presented by Adonis gives us an entire worldview in which epistemological, ontological, and ethical notions are woven together and mutually support each other. The central element in this complex structure is the individual.

In Adonis's view, the aim of the *static* and its focus on collective identity is to rein in and control the individual. In order to preserve the unity of the community, the individual is kept from going against its customs. He is expected to protect his own culture, not to criticize it.[194] Adonis reiterates the centrality of this characteristic communal sentiment in Arab culture throughout his life. For example, in his presentation of early Islamic history, pre-Islamic society was turned from a heterogenous society into one that is religiously, racially, and politically homogenous, and one in which the individual dissenting opinion was silenced by force. The result, as Adonis phrases it in a conversation with his daughter Nina, is that "the essential in Islam, on the level of the social and of thought, is the *Umma* and not the individid-

193 In light of this, it is not surprising that Sufi elements are rife in Adonis's poetry. His turn away from the more secular idea of myth and "towards Islamic and Sufi symbolism" in his poetic project is placed by one critic around 1968, with the publication of *al-Masraḥ wa-l-Marāyā* ("Stage and Mirrors") – see Jabrā Ibrāhīm Jabrā, as quoted in Mersal, "Reading the Qurʾān in the Poetry of Adonis," 2.

194 Adūnīs, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥth fī al-Ibdāʿ wa-l-Ittibāʿ ʿind al-ʿArab,* vol. 4, 126.

ual."[195] The individual in Islamic society only comes into his own within the community. His problems are solved through the community. Freedom is achieved for the community, not for the individual.[196]

This early communal bias soon became entrenched in authoritative interpretations of Islam. For instance, the emphasis in Islam on performing one's religious duties – obligatory for every Muslim (*farḍ ʿaynī*) – over one's political and social duties – one ought to do them insofar as one is able to (*farḍ kafāʾī*) – forms the basis for a society in which individuals do not engage in politics. They rather leave this to the community as a whole, in particular to its leaders. This ultimately divides Muslim society into a class of religious leaders and the rabble they command. The leader becomes the safeguard of religious laws and hence of the well-being of the community.[197]

The obedience to the leader is strengthened by intellectual developments in all fields of Arab-Islamic culture that stifle individual expression. In theology, the idea of complete subservience to the ruler (*ṭāʿa*) was pushed by noted early scholars like Ibn Ḥanbal and al-Muḥāsibī,[198] and by influential scholars like al-Ṭabarī.[199] They would argue that the sunna – that is, the deeds and sayings of Muḥammad – is so much entwined with the need to keep together the *umma* – that is, the Muslim community – that in order to follow the sunna, as every good Muslim should, he ought also to follow the customs of the community. "This," Adonis notes, "is how the concept of obedience (*ṭāʿa*) is produced."[200] This notion was in turn supported by the ontological concept of acquisition (*kasb*), which attributed all actions to God. In such a world, as noted by al-Ghazālī, the effect of one's actions are not relevant, since that is ultimately decided by God anyway. What is important is one's own comportment and whether you uphold His laws. Human action can, in this view, only be a measure for rewarding the individual's obedience to God and punishing

195 Esber, *Conversations avec mon père*, 179 (the translation from French is my own).

196 Adūnīs, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥth fī al-Ibdāʿ wa-l-Ittibāʿ ʿind al-ʿArab,* vol. 1, 137.

197 Adūnīs, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥth fī al-Ibdāʿ wa-l-Ittibāʿ ʿind al-ʿArab,* vol. 1, 78. This situation is nicely illustrated by a line from his volume *A Time Between Ashes and Roses* (*Waqt bayn al-Rumād wa-l-Ward*), in which the power and agency on the part of the religious leader is contrasted with the weakness of the people:

His Majesty, the Caliph issues a law made of water his people are broth, mud, and wan, wilted swords. His majesty's word is a crown studded with human eyes.

Adūnīs, *Adonis: Selected Poems*, trans. Khaled Mattawa [New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010], 116.)

198 Adūnīs, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥth fī al-Ibdāʿ wa-l-Ittibāʿ ʿind al-ʿArab,* vol. 2, 28–29.

199 Adūnīs, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥth fī al-Ibdāʿ wa-l-Ittibāʿ ʿind al-ʿArab,* vol. 2, 146.

200 Adūnīs, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥth fī al-Ibdāʿ wa-l-Ittibāʿ ʿind al-ʿArab,* vol. 2, 146.

his recalcitrance.[201] In Islamic law, the independence of the individual was further marginalized by scholars like al-Shāfiʿī, when he pronounced the consensus (*ijmāʿ*) of the community one of the four sources of Islamic law.[202] Al-Shāfiʿī concludes, moreover, that since the first and most important knowledge is contained in revelation, and revelation is addressed to the community, the opinion of the group cannot ever be overruled by that of the individual.[203]

Likewise, in poetry, the importance of the individual was reduced, as poetry became a tool of political power.[204] Following the example of pre-Islamic poetry, later poets would use their art to praise their own tribe and criticize the other.[205] In this war of words, the individual feelings of the artist or his particular view of the world are of no importance. In addition, poetry is used to instruct the populace in their mores. Ethics and aesthetics were merged into a single discipline,[206] while poetry, under the sway of religious and political interests, became a vehicle for expressing religious truths and keeping people in line. This political exploitation required a form of poetry that was clear, unambiguous, and committed to repeating the same truths *ad nauseam.* Poets were expected to stay true to customary rules of aesthetic expression and describe things as they are objectively, not as they are perceived by the poet individually. Again, the inner life of the poet is relegated to a peripheral status.[207] The upshot is that in Islam the poet gives expression only to the tastes and views of the majority.[208] “In Islam,” Adonis writes,

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201 Adūnīs, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥth fī al-Ibdāʿ wa-l-Ittibāʿ ʿind al-ʿArab,* vol. 1,, 79.

202 This principle was acknowledged as one of the four sources of jurisprudence. It states that, if there is consensus among the members of the Islamic community on a particular legal judgment, it has the force of law. It is partly rooted in a hadith that states that the community would never agree on what is false (*ḍalāla*). In practice, this principle has been used to establish the force of rules within a particular school of law. Although the principle has little practical relevance for creating new legal rules, the consensus of the scholars who belong to each of the schools of Islamic law does serve as a means for giving particular rulings that are authoritative within these schools a stamp of approval – see Knut Vikør, *Between God and the Sultan: A History of Islamic Law* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 88. Adonis’s criticism of this principle appears to be somewhat harsh, considering the wide range of ambiguity and doubt that is central to the Islamic law tradition – see Intisar A. Rabb, *Doubt in Islamic Law: A History of Legal Maxims, Interpretation, and Islamic Criminal Law,* Cambridge Studies in Islamic Civilization (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), and Thomas Bauer, *A Culture of Ambiguity: An Alternative History of Islam*, trans. Hinrich Biesterfeldt and Tricia Tunstall (New York: Columbia University Press, 2021), 94 – 121.

203 Adūnīs, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥth fī al-Ibdāʿ wa-l-Ittibāʿ ʿind al-ʿArab,* vol. 2, 24.

204 Adūnīs, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥth fī al-Ibdāʿ wa-l-Ittibāʿ ʿind al-ʿArab,* vol. 1, 258.

205 Adūnīs, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥth fī al-Ibdāʿ wa-l-Ittibāʿ ʿind al-ʿArab,* vol. 2, 45.

206 Adūnīs, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥth fī al-Ibdāʿ wa-l-Ittibāʿ ʿind al-ʿArab,* vol. 1, 102.

207 Adūnīs, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥth fī al-Ibdāʿ wa-l-Ittibāʿ ʿind al-ʿArab,* vol. 1, 88 – 89.

208 Adūnīs, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥth fī al-Ibdāʿ wa-l-Ittibāʿ ʿind al-ʿArab,* vol. 1, 102.

"the poet is not an individual, but part of the Islamic group. It is not he who thinks, but the group, not he who writes, but the form-language."[209]

The *dynamic* offers an antidote to oppression of the majority. In Sufism, in the revolutionary movements, in Muʿtazilism, Adonis finds a kernel of resistance based on the conviction that the individual should be protected. The celebration of reason (*ʿaql*) that he finds in this theological school, the injunction to think for yourself instead of copying what has been passed down (*naql*), represents a refutation of the equalizing power of society. Equally, the Sufi disposition to look for meaning inside oneself, to consider the individual the source of truth, is founded on a rejection of the generalizing norms of society. Sufism offers an antidote to Salafi communalism.[210] What's more, the Sufi adds to a mystical dimension that appeals to Adonis's aestheticism. The Sufi presents the self, not merely as a free individual, but as the conduit for human contact with the ineffable, the infinite, and therefore with the only true source of artistic creativity.

This preference reveals something crucial about Adonis's worldview. Due to his advocacy for secularism and freedom of expression, Adonis is often presented as a run-of-the-mill liberal, "an outspoken champion of secular democracy"[211] whose work is "suffused by the worlds of freedom, the division of powers, the rights of women, and the dialogue between East and West."[212] Although it would be a mistake to deny his liberal proclivities altogether, they take on a different significance in the context of his overall philosophy of the static and the dynamic. What truly matters to Adonis, the kind of intrinsically valuable end that moves his philosophical project, is not an ideal of liberal democracy, of moving "within what is known and regulated."[213] Freedom, for him, remains subservient to the interests of the *dynamic.* More than a social democrat, Adonis is something of a Romantic revolutionary. He puts much stock in the Bohemian credo that great art is born out of struggle and hardship, while it languishes in the arid plains of bourgeois comfort. The fight for freedom is meaningful because it leads to the creation of great works of art. Freedom is "'the essence of man,' because it enables him to pursue the deepest [parts] of the human self."[214]

209 Adūnīs, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥth fī al-Ibdāʿ wa-l-Ittibāʿ ʿind al-ʿArab,* vol. 4, 212.

210 Adūnīs, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥth fī al-Ibdāʿ wa-l-Ittibāʿ ʿind al-ʿArab,* vol. 1, 137.

211 Adam Shatz, "An Arab Poet Who Dares to Differ," *New York Times*, July 13, 2002, https://www.nytimes.com/2002/07/1 3/books/an-arab-poet-who-dares-to- differ.html.

212 "Adonis mit Goethe-Preis ausgezeichnet," *Frankfurter Rundschau*, August 28, 2011, https://www.fr.de/frankfurt/cdu-org26591/adonis-goethe-preis-ausgezeichnet-11424346.html.

213 Adūnīs, "Preface," *Mawāqif* 1, no. 1 (1968): 4.

214 Adūnīs, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥth fī al-Ibdāʿ wa-l-Ittibāʿ ʿind al-ʿArab,* vol. 1, 311.

5.4 Progress, time, and authenticity in Adonis's *The Static and the Dynamic*

In light of the many conceptual pairs, like past–present, authenticity–modernity, or East–West, that make up the structure of Adonis's argument in *The Static*, it is appealing to understand him as an exponent of the standard narrative. This impression is strengthened upon reading the introduction to the first edition of *The Static*, in which Adonis rehearses a number of familiar tropes from the *turāth* debate with regard to time: Islam has no historical awareness, or "historical time"; in Islam the passage of time is conceptualized as the falling away from the original root (*aṣl*); the orientation is towards the past, rather than to the future, leading to a conception of science as regurgitation of revealed knowledge without ingenuity (*ibtikār*); time is not continuous, but carved up into moments without any necessary causal connections between them, thus leaving the creation of each moment in God's hands; in short, the static portrays man in a constant state of falling away from God, and "the only thing that bestows on him plenty of value or meaning is his waiting to return to the root (*aṣl*) and the bridge that takes him there."[215] The concept of modernity (*ḥadātha*) entails a move away from the root,[216] and the only acceptable poetic modernity would be of the kind that conforms to the standards of yore.[217] There can be no progress (*taqaddum*), because the message of Islam, being the final revelation, is the most perfect religion, making the Islamic *umma* the most perfect society imaginable.[218] "Religion is the domain of progress, there is no progress after it."[219] As a result, Islamic society is marked by acquiescence and traditionalism, by an idea of time as something to be overcome or cancel out, because it threatens man with moral-religious decline.[220]

By contrast, the dynamic embraces time as a necessary condition for progress. Whereas religion is ahistorical in the sense that it opposes any notion of progress or regression, the dynamic celebrates it. Its critical frame of mind presents an atheist challenge to religion, and opens up a worldview that does not abide by what went before, but imagines man as a free, rational, creative being whose original nature (*ṭabīʿatih al-aṣliyya*) is to believe in his own capabilities. Atheism is therefore the first condition, not just for critical thought, but for all progress (*al-*

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215 Adūnīs, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥth fī al-Ibdāʿ wa-l-Ittibāʿ ʿind al-ʿArab,* vol. 1, 72.
216 Adūnīs, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥth fī al-Ibdāʿ wa-l-Ittibāʿ ʿind al-ʿArab,* vol. 1, 73.
217 Adūnīs, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥth fī al-Ibdāʿ wa-l-Ittibāʿ ʿind al-ʿArab,* vol. 1, 100.
218 Adūnīs, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥth fī al-Ibdāʿ wa-l-Ittibāʿ ʿind al-ʿArab,* vol. 1, 95.
219 Adūnīs, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥth fī al-Ibdāʿ wa-l-Ittibāʿ ʿind al-ʿArab,* vol. 1, 134.
220 Adūnīs, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥth fī al-Ibdāʿ wa-l-Ittibāʿ ʿind al-ʿArab,* vol. 1, 157.

sharṭ al-awwal li-kull taqaddum),[221] because it lays the groundwork for a society ruled by freedom and reason under the aegis of mankind itself.[222] From the perspective of the dynamic, mankind becomes the goal of history and the end that is always in the future.[223] The dynamic future is always qualitatively different from the past.[224]

Up to this point, it is still possible to read Adonis as an adherent to the strictures of the standard narrative. He perhaps strikes a somewhat rebellious figure compared to the professional academics who dominate much of the debate, but as someone who nonetheless respects the division of the *turāth* discourse into factions of traditionalists, modernists and, sometimes, of compatibilists. His advocacy for progress, secularism, rationalism, etc. would land him squarely on the side of those who reject *turāth* as mere deadweight holding Arab society down. Indeed, when he comes to speak directly about *turāth* he appears to say as much. Creativity, according to him, is its own root (*aṣl*), and therefore does not need anything other than itself.[225] *Turāth*, it seems, is redundant. The artist may use it to create something new, but he does not need it. A nation (*umma*) may have the most magnificent heritage without being able to change (*yuḥawwil*) and avert its decline (*inḥiṭāṭ*), whereas another society may have no heritage at all and quickly develop it to the level of superior nations (*umam*).[226]

With terms like heritage (*turāth*), progress (*taqaddum*), ingenuity (*ibtikār*), modernity (*ḥadātha*), decadence (*inḥiṭāṭ*), root (*aṣl*), nation (*umma*), and many more tropes familiar from contemporary Arab thought, Adonis takes his position in the *turāth* debate. According to the parameters commonly applied to this debate, Adonis may be portrayed as someone who agitates “against *turāth*.” In this concluding analysis, however, I want to suggest a different reading. This reading is based on two related aspects of his thinking: His ideal of time as being “creative” and “vertical,” and his ideal of the authentic artist as an individual creative genius. In a nutshell, Adonis conceives of the poet as someone who explores new ground through language, by redefining meanings through subtle references, metaphor, and experimental poetic constructions. This enables the poet to change the way his audience looks at the world.

Interestingly, we may read Adonis’s theoretical treatment as just such a poetic act. In his portrayal of *turāth*, he redefines time and moves away from a temporal

221 Adūnīs, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥth fī al-Ibdāʿ wa-l-Ittibāʿ ʿind al-ʿArab,* vol. 1, 129–30.
222 Adūnīs, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥth fī al-Ibdāʿ wa-l-Ittibāʿ ʿind al-ʿArab,* vol. 1, 133.
223 Adūnīs, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥth fī al-Ibdāʿ wa-l-Ittibāʿ ʿind al-ʿArab,* vol. 1, 157.
224 Adūnīs, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥth fī al-Ibdāʿ wa-l-Ittibāʿ ʿind al-ʿArab,* vol. 1, 158.
225 Adūnīs, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥth fī al-Ibdāʿ wa-l-Ittibāʿ ʿind al-ʿArab,* vol. 1, 144.
226 Adūnīs, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥth fī al-Ibdāʿ wa-l-Ittibāʿ ʿind al-ʿArab,* vol. 1, 146.

perspective that looks to the past, or one that annuls time in order to preserve the actuality of revelation, or even one that depicts time chronologically – as is the case in progressivist conceptions of time. Instead, Adonis adopts the role of the poet who changes the manner in which the pivotal diachronic opposition between modernity (*ḥadātha*) and authenticity (*aṣāla*) is understood. If we approach Adonis in this way, it upsets standard readings of *The Static* according to which Adonis should be understood as an anti-traditional radical socialist or a liberal firebrand. These labels assume that Adonis abides by the rules laid down by the dominant understanding of the *turāth* debate. They do not fit with someone who wants to do away with these parameters.

This is not to say that Adonis is not radical in some of his critique, or that he does not display some liberal tendencies. The point is that the ontology that underlies it, his view of the individual, of society, of time, of what is true and beautiful and how man can attain it, is not that of a Marxist revolutionary or of a run-of-the-mill liberal like Zakī Najīb Maḥmūd. He may champion freedom and individualism, but he does not do so for the same reasons. His goal is creation. His ethics are Nietzschean rather than liberal. They foreground the positive freedom of the individual genius to express himself, instead of the negative freedom from intrusion. Adonis's ethics are, ultimately, a radical ethics of personal authenticity.

5.4.1 Redefining time

The introduction to the first publication of *The Static* starts out with a discussion of time. Islam, Adonis states, represents both a beginning and an end. It is the end of the *jāhilī* era and the beginning of a new Islamic order. As such, "revelation is, at one moment, the founding of time and of history."[227] What this means, from a static, Islamic perspective, is not that with Muhammad's prophecy we have the beginning of temporal progression as such. Rather, because this revelation presents itself as the final word of God, harboring all truth, it is valid for all time "yesterday, today, and tomorrow." From this temporal perspective, the value of the present and the future lies in remembering and harking back to the past in which the Truth was revealed. Revelation annuls historical time, it does not have any use for it, because it claims to be eternally present (*abadiyyat al-ḥuḍūr*). It thus contradicts the ancient Greek conception of time as "Chronos," the mythical figure who represents time as a change, as the constant making

227 Adūnīs, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥth fī al-Ibdāʿ wa-l-Ittibāʿ ʿind al-ʿArab,* vol. 1, 68.

and unmaking of things in the world.[228] From the perspective of the individual, the static time of revelation represents degeneration, as man falls away from the pure origin of God's Word. The time of revelation robs man of his self and his life (*yaslub al-insān dhātah wa-ḥayātah*).[229] The dynamic view of time, as recalled earlier, is oriented towards the future and acknowledges the possibility of change and progress.

This orientation to the future should not, however, be thought of in positivistic terms as a teleological progression. What is meant is not the kind of materialistic scientific development of society advocated by someone like Zakī Najīb Maḥmūd or by Adonis's erstwhile inspiration Antūn Saʿāda. When these reformers talk about time they refer to everyday "chronological time," the field of historical change that forms the backdrop for articulating their ideals of national progress. Even though Adonis may have been more receptive to this positivistic progressivist idea when he was young, he assures us that at a later age came to reject it. Looking back on his younger self he writes that:

> I gradually became aware that the essence of progress is human, that it is qualitative not quantitative and that the Westerner who lives surrounded by computers and exposed to the latest in space travel is not necessarily more advanced in any profound sense than the Arab peasant living among trees and cattle.[230]

Instead of a "quantitative" notion, Adonis espouses "qualitative" progress, focused on man himself, as "both the pivot and the goal."[231] This understanding of progress requires a different conception of time, one that is not chronological, but rather "dynamic," or as Adonis at one point refers to it, "the time of creativity."[232] Chronological time may be conceptualized along a horizontal axis on which successive events are plotted, a container in which man moves from past to future, through the present. Dynamic time, in contrast, is like a vertical axis that intersects with chronological time. It represents not the progression of time, but its deepening; a kind of metaphysical nexus beyond time that harbors the free play of human creativity and artistic development.[233] In an interview given in 1987, he connects this

228 Adūnīs, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥth fī al-Ibdāʿ wa-l-Ittibāʿ ʿind al-ʿArab,* vol. 1, 69.
229 Adūnīs, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥth fī al-Ibdāʿ wa-l-Ittibāʿ ʿind al-ʿArab,* vol. 1, 72.
230 Adonis, *An Introduction to Arab Poetics*, 96.
231 Adonis, *An Introduction to Arab Poetics*, 96. The connection between dynamism and qualitative temporal difference is already mentioned in *The Static:* see Adūnīs, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥth fī al-Ibdāʿ wa-l-Ittibāʿ ʿind al-ʿArab,* vol. 1, 158.
232 Adūnīs, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥth fī al-Ibdāʿ wa-l-Ittibāʿ ʿind al-ʿArab,* vol. 1, 147.
233 In the first volume of *The Static,* Adonis illustrates the difference between chronological, quantitative time and qualitative time, in an interpretation of the diwan of Jamīl Buthayna. Adonis

point about vertical time with yet another conception, namely circular time. Here, creative time is portrayed as "vertical time and therefore it is circular."[234] It is circular in the sense that it constantly renews without working towards a fixed end, "it is an explosive time that comes and goes and changes and renews."[235]

Although Adonis often mentions the importance of looking to the future, his orientation is not meant in any utopian sense. The future is an infinite horizon for the exploration of new possibilities through art and creative thinking. Poetry, according to Adonis, is always changing. It knows no definite end, only a constant becoming.[236] Visions of utopia may prove their worth as tools to move the masses. They are never fully realizable, however, as each era will see a different class rise to power and adopt a tendency to promote the static. What's more, were a utopian state to be realized it would, following Adonis's conception, effectively end the need for artistic creation. After all, true art is the product of the dialectic between the static and the dynamic. It flows from an attempt to change an imperfect world. When everything is hunky-dory there is no impetus for creativity.

In the introduction to *The Static,* Adonis describes the static temporal perspective not just in terms of a longing for the past, but also as an absence of temporal progression. In terms of revelational or prophetic time, past, present, and future are the same, as they are guarded over by the unchanging principles set down at the time of revelation. The sense of timelessness also returns in the dynamic antithesis, but with a different intention. Creativity, Adonis says, is without time.[237] Just as the waves move across the sea independently, the works that constitute the highlights of Arabic poetic culture are singular acts of creation, the beauty of which resides in this creative act itself, not in how they relate to what came before them. This is not to say, of course, that poetry ought not refer to anything outside itself. That would render it entirely meaningless. Rather, a poet uses the resources found in his own culture and in the culture of others to create things that are entirely new. This act is always an independent feat, a development without precedent, linked to other historical outbursts of creativity only in the degree

differentiates between the regular, everyday, chronological time of Jamīl. Buthayna, on the other hand, represents a timeless future promise, an infinitely radiating presence. As Adonis puts it: "The value of time is not in its horizontal-quantitative extension, but in its depth and verticality. Therefore the moment may be more valuable and precious than the total extent of time, if it is spent in the presence of the loved one, while it lasts longer than months if it is spent in her absence" (Adūnīs, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥth fī al-Ibdāʿ wa-l-Ittibāʿ ʿind al-ʿArab,* vol. 1, 290 – 91).

234 As quoted in Maryam Jabr Farīḥāt, "al-Zaman fī Shiʿr Adūnīs Qaṣīdat 'al-Waqt' Namūdhaj," *al-Majalla al-ʿArabiyya li-l-Ādāb* 3, no. 1 (2006): 55.

235 Jabr i, "al-Zaman fī Shiʿr Adūnīs Qaṣīdat 'al-Waqt' Namūdhaj," 55.

236 Adūnīs, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥth fī al-Ibdāʿ wa-l-Ittibāʿ ʿind al-ʿArab,* vol. 1, 96.

237 Adūnīs, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥth fī al-Ibdāʿ wa-l-Ittibāʿ ʿind al-ʿArab,* vol. 1, 145.

of its uniqueness. Creativity punctures time. It is a constant presence.[238] Poets like Imrūʾ al-Qays, Abū Nuwās, and Abū Tammām may be judged ancient in comparison to Jubrān Khalīl Jubrān "when judged in terms of chronological time," but judged in terms of the temporal perspective put forward by Adonis, they are contemporaneous.[239]

This conception of time shares some features with Sufi mystical writings on the concept of a now-time, or "*al-waqt.*" Non-linear and in particular a point-like experience of time is a common theme in mystical writings, and Sufis are sometimes referred to as "the son of the 'now-time'" (*ibn al-waqt*). The idea is that the experience of the Divine that overwhelms the mystic brings him into a state beyond the spatio-temporal confines of everyday experience, putting him alone before God.[240] Interestingly, this understanding of time has also been brought up in interpretations of Adonis's poetry. Stefan Weidner, for instance, proposes it as one way of understanding the title of one of Adonis's most celebrated poems titled "al-Waqt." With the recurring opening lines "Embracing the ear of (now-)time as my head is a tower of fire" (*Ḥādinan sunbulat al-waqti wa raʾsī burju nārin*), the secularized Sufi poet commits himself to the moment without any care for past, present, and future, allowing the Divine to talk through him.[241]

Another temporal aspect that Weidner finds in this poem is that of the Apocalypse, in the sense of a radical event, a revolution of sorts in which something radically new begins and there is a complete break with the old order. This apocalyptic vision is conjured up through the images of death and destruction, which recall the time and place in which Adonis wrote this poem – in Beirut at the height of the Lebanese Civil War in 1982.[242] It is a vision that is strengthened, moreover, with the presentation of the poet as the harbinger of a new time – for example, in having the narrator exclaim that he is the alpha and omega of creation (line 203).[243] Such a revolutionary or apocalyptic tendency is of course also found in

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238 Adūnīs, *Fātiḥa li-Nihāyat al-Qarn*, 264.

239 Adonis, *An Introduction to Arab Poetics*, 98.

240 Giorgio Agamben refers to this as the Gnostic idea of time; see Giorgio Agamben, *Infancy and History: Essays on The Destruction of Experience*, trans. Liz Heron (London/New York, 1993), 100–1.

241 Weidner, *……und sehnen uns nach einem neuen Gott…: Poesie und Religion im Werk von Adonis*, 105. The English translation of this line is my own. Mona Takieddine Amyuni's English translation offers the following alternative: "Carrying the seeds of time my head a tower of fire" – see Mona Takieddine Amyuni, "Adonis's 'Time' Poem: Translation and Analysis," *Journal of Arabic Literature* 21, no. 2 (1990): 173. My translation of "waqt" as "(now-)time" is meant to stress Weidner's interpretation of this particular term as referring to the current moment.

242 For Weidner's analysis of "al-Waqt" as an apocalyptic text, see Weidner, *……und sehnen uns nach einem neuen Gott…: Poesie und Religion im Werk von Adonis*, 107–10.

243 See section 5.4.4. for an elaboration on this theme.

Adonis's theoretical texts, that is, the opposition between (static) order and (dynamic) revolution. Moreover, it is intimately related to Adonis's focus on creating new beginnings as a counterweight to the "static" stress on sticking to tradition.[244]

Connecting to both the now-time and the revolutionary conception of time, Adonis also discusses time in terms of the individual. Writing about Abū Nuwās, he says that this revolutionary poet "rid himself of the burden of inherited time by creating his own personal time, the new."[245] In a more general (and practical) sense, Adonis appears to view the possibility of creating one's private time (*zamānuh al-khāṣṣ*) as a precondition for living one's own life. The kind of chronological, objective time outside of us he associates with rigid determinism (*al-zaman al-qadar/al-khārijī*). By disconnecting from this impersonal time and creating his own time frame, man can create a space of freedom and a choice to overcome hardship, and fight for a better existence. Personal time is a prerequisite for the human will (*irādat al-insān*).[246]

This deeply personal conception of time is also reflected in Adonis's poetry. As Sūzān ʿAbd al-Majīd al-Muḥammad concludes in her analysis of time in the poetry of Adonis, one of the central features of his time conception is its connection to the human.[247] It is part of man's creative power that he is able to shape time according to his own judgment. A good example of this is a collection of four poems (not discussed by ʿAbd al-Majīd al-Muḥammad) titled *Mufrad bi-Ṣīghat al-Jamʿ* (*Singular in the Plural Tense*). These poems were written around the time that Adonis was working on *The Static,* and contain an abundance of temporal references. Adonis starts the first poem titled "Creation" ("Takwīn") by painting a picture of an almost divine act of creation, not by God, but by a figure called ʿAlī (Adonis's given name). Accompanied by the voices that will recur throughout these poems, namely of Shams the court jester (*Shams al-bahlūl*), a notebook of messages (*daftar akhbār*), and a secret history of death (*tārīkh sirrī li-l-mawt*), the ʿAlī figure is presented as giving "time to what comes before time (*al-waqt*)/to what is without time."[248] What follows is a description of a beginning in which the "accident becomes substance"

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244 The centrality of the idea of a beginning to Adonis's outlook is also underscored by Robyn Creswell's use of a line from Adonis as the title of his book on modernism in the Beirut literary scene (in which Adonis plays the pivotal role); see *Creswell, City of Beginnings.* For an interesting discussion by Adonis of the relationship between the concepts of "beginning" (*bidāya*) and "tradition" (*taqlīd*), as well as the need for Arabs to critically reconceptualize them, see Adūnīs, *Mūsīqā al-Ḥūt al-Azraq: al-Huwiyya, al-Kitāba, al-ʿUnf* (Damascus: Dār al-Takwīn, 2018), 13–19.

245 Adūnīs, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥth fī al-Ibdāʿ wa-l-Ittibāʿ ʿind al-ʿArab,* vol. 2, 122.

246 Adūnīs, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥth fī al-Ibdāʿ wa-l-Ittibāʿ ʿind al-ʿArab,* vol. 4, 240.

247 Sūzān ʿAbd al-Majīd al-Muḥammad, *Mafhūm al-Zaman fī Shiʿr Adūnīs* (Beirut: Dār al-Farābī, 2019), 229.

248 Adūnīs, *Mufrad bi-Ṣīghat al-Jamʿ*, Final edition (Beirut: Dār al-Ādāb, 1988), 9.

(*yujawhiru al-ʿāriḍ*) and of the fine dust that was there at the beginning (of time?) in which forms and images open up. In a true poetic whirlwind, this act of creation is then woven into a story that links two central themes in Adonis's poetry: The abstract concept of writing and language, and the concrete presence and interactions of human bodies.[249]

These various perspectives on time obviously relate to Adonis's personal preoccupations – creativity, discovery, individualism. They are also linked, however, in their rejection of the accepted, chronological notion of time. Adonis wants to move away from a positivistic perspective on time as an empty vessel in which events are neatly ordered according to what happened earlier or later. This view of time may be helpful in some cases, but it would be a mistake to apply it to all spheres of human experience. Chronological time stays within the realm of the finite and rational; it is the time of the collective, not of the individual; it kills man's ability to think in new ways, to explore new dimensions. In other words, the chronological view of time prepares the way for the kind of historical, traditional mindset that he associates with the static.

This rejection of chronological time is significant within the context of the *turāth* debate, precisely because its discursive structure has been determined by the two poles of chronological time. I argued at the outset that since the structure of the standard narrative depends on a particular conception of time, any attempt to challenge this status quo would likely involve a reappraisal of its temporal underpinnings. This is effectively what Adonis does. Rather than take for granted that one can either look to the past for authenticity or to the future in order to be(come) modern, Adonis explores the possibility of changing the meaning of these opposite poles by looking at time in a different light. This structural change is indeed evident in his redefinition of these two extremes, authenticity and modernity, so that they eventually come to refer to the same thing: the *dynamic*.

249 The centrality of these themes is noted by Iman Mersal – see Mersal, "Reading the Qurʾān in the Poetry of Adonis," 6. Examples of different Arabic terms used in *Mufrad bi-Ṣighat al-Jamʿ* to designate conceptions of time besides *al-waqt* (perhaps best translated as "now-time") are: beginning (*badʾ*, p. 10), the time of fate (dahr, p. 15), historical time (*zaman*, p. 25), history (*tārīkh* – the title of the second poem, p. 39), ages (*ʿuṣūr*, p. 47), times (*azmina*, p. 47), and hours (*sāʿāt*, p. 56). Most of these are also mentioned in the poem "al-Waqt." For a description of their precise meaning, see Weidner, *……und sehnen uns nach einem neuen Gott…: Poesie und Religion im Werk von Adonis*, 101–3. While a detailed analysis of *Singular in the Plural Tense*, with its many references to time using a variety of Arabic terms, would certainly be a worthwhile project, this is not the occasion for it. It suffices here to point to how Adonis's theoretical writings are reflected in his poetry, in particular his use of time as a dimension for personal human creation.

5.4.2 Redefining modernity

In the *turāth* debate, modernity is ordinarily linked to concepts like renewal (*tajdīd*) and contemporaneity (*muʿāsara*). Modernity tends to be geographically and culturally located in the West, which is seen as the fount of modern thought, institutions, and technologies. Opposed to this conception of modernity we find authenticity (*aṣāla*) and tradition (*taqlīd*), both of which are usually associated with the East, without further ado. Adonis wants to convince his readers that this opposition is mistaken, that modernity is an integral part of Arab culture from even before the advent of Islam, that it is part of this tradition, rather than being opposed to it. First of all, he notes that the word for modernity, *ḥadātha*, is derived from the triliteral root Ḥ-D-TH (ح – د – ث). In classical Arabic this word came to be associated with things that are new or innovative. Analogous to the notion of *bidʿa* – a term used to refer to heretical innovation – the predominantly static Arab culture came to associate words derived from this root negatively with whatever is inconsistent with Muslim doctrine as contained in the sunna and the Qur'an.[250] In contrast to its low opinion of whatever was newly created (*al-muḥdath*), that which had precedent – the old (*al-qadīm*) – became a term of praise, equal to the religious term *maḥmūd.*[251] The old, moreover, was associated with the root (*wa-l-qadīm idhan huwwa al-aṣl*), along the lines of the tree model developed earlier by the Islamic jurists.[252] Adonis illustrates this contrast by describing at length debates between proponents and critics of *muḥdath* poetry. In short, for Adonis the antithesis of *qadīm–muḥdath* represents one instantiation of the general and ongoing dialectical opposition between conformity (ittibāʿ) and creativity (*ibdāʿ*) mentioned in the subtitle of *The Static.*[253]

By positioning the debate over *al-muḥdath* in the past, Adonis is able to draw the discussions over the new and the old out of the dominant chronological perspective. *Iḥdāth* (the act of creating *al-muḥdath*) now comes to stand for the timeless act of creation. Consequently, the more general notion of modernity takes on atemporal, universal meanings, such as saying what has never been said before, accepting the unlimited nature of knowledge,[254] or any radical break with conven-

250 Adūnīs, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥth fī al-Ibdāʿ wa-l-Ittibāʿ ʿind al-ʿArab,* vol. 2, 145.
251 Adūnīs, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥth fī al-Ibdāʿ wa-l-Ittibāʿ ʿind al-ʿArab,* vol. 1, 109.
252 Adūnīs, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥth fī al-Ibdāʿ wa-l-Ittibāʿ ʿind al-ʿArab,* vol. 2, 141.
253 This is obviously from the title of the section in which these debates are discussed: "The Dialectic between *Ittibāʿ* and *Ibdāʿ* or *Qadīm* and *Muḥdath*" – see Adūnīs, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥth fī al-Ibdāʿ wa-l-Ittibāʿ ʿind al-ʿArab,* vol. 1, 137.
254 Adūnīs, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥth fī al-Ibdāʿ wa-l-Ittibāʿ ʿind al-ʿArab,* vol. 1, 17.

tion.[255] Modern is whatever expresses something that has not been said before, what is unknown (*majhūl*).[256] Adonis even goes so far as to present the Qur'an, with its innovative style and revolutionary content, as the embodiment of modernity.[257]

Not only does this redefinition of modernity infuse the Arab past with modernity, it also undermines the superficial claims that modernists have laid on modernity. Modernist poets like to claim that "modern" is what is different from what came before, that it is contemporary, Western, written in a modern style, or referring to modern content.[258] All of these criteria are, in the end, rooted in a chronological conception of time. They judge modernity in terms of something that happened before or after. Yet, to grasp the essence of modernity, we need to get rid of precisely this temporal framework and think of modernity as being of a different temporal kind. As Adonis phrases it:

> It became clear to me that modernity was both of time and outside of time: of time because it is rooted in the movement of history, in the creativity of humanity, coexisting with man's striving to go beyond the limitations which surround him; and outside time because it is a vision which includes in it all times and cannot only be recorded as a chronological event: it cuts vertically through time and its horizontal progress is no more than the surface representation of a deep internal movement.[259]

The claims about modernity that Adonis views as mistaken point to another salient feature of contemporary *turāth* discourse. There, the temporal opposition between authentic and modern has become entwined with the geographical division between East and West. The East is portrayed as traditional and authentic, whereas the West represents the modern. As a result, ever since the early days of the *nahḍa,* the Arabs have been under the impression that the modern (*al-ḥadīth*) was by definition something particular to non-Arabs that they needed to import. They thus came to regard themselves as conflicted between the images of the West and the foundations of their own culture.

If, as Adonis argues, modernity is assimilated to the dynamic, if it is "a climate of universal forms and ideas and not a state specific to one people,"[260] then this entire problematic rests on a mistake, for in that case, there is nothing inherently Western about it. This is not to say that the West plays no role in Adonis's concep-

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255 Adūnīs, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥth fī al-Ibdāʿ wa-l-Ittibāʿ ʿind al-ʿArab,* vol. 4, 141.
256 Adūnīs, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥth fī al-Ibdāʿ wa-l-Ittibāʿ ʿind al-ʿArab,* vol. 1, 17.
257 Adonis, *An Introduction to Arab Poetics*, 49.
258 Adūnīs, *Fātiḥa li-Nihāyat al-Qarn*, 263–66.
259 Adonis, *An Introduction to Arab Poetics*, 99–100.
260 Adonis, *An Introduction to Arab Poetics*, 92.

tion of what is modern. As he himself admits, "I find no paradox in declaring that it was recent Western modernity which led me to discover our own older modernity."[261] Yet, he is convinced that Western modernity was only a midwife. These authors helped him see the modernity contained in his own culture, they did not put it there.

In sum, Adonis's redefinition of modernity shows us how he tries to destabilize the entire *turāth* problematic by focusing on the temporal perspective underlying it. The debates between proponents of authenticity and of modernity essentially turn on the question of whether we ought to move forward or claw our way backwards within a successive chronologically ordered time frame. By taking modernity out of the sphere of chronological time, he prevents it from being conceptually opposed to authenticity or tradition. Moreover, this intervention in the temporal perspective on *turāth* allows him to challenge the geographical divide that separates an authentic East from a modern West.

5.4.3 Redefining authenticity

The redefinition of *ḥadātha* naturally influences Adonis's understanding of its supposed opposite: authenticity (*aṣāla*). In taking up the latter's redefinition, he proceeds much in the same manner as with modernity. As noted earlier, the word for authenticity, *aṣāla*, is derived from the word for root, *aṣl*. This semantic link to a tree's root, of course, jibes with Adonis's depiction of the static structure of Arab thought in the form of a tree. The quest for authenticity is central to modern Arab discourse, because it mirrors the quest to relate every part of culture back to the trunk of the Arab-Islamic tree. When Adonis finds that the *nahḍa* defined its central problematic as the quest for *aṣāla*, he presents this as nothing more than the logical extension of an age-old trope. The root, for the early *nahḍa* thinkers, was to be found in what stems originally (*aṣliyyan*) from the Arab personality (*al-shakhṣiyya al-ʿarabiyya*). To be authentic therefore meant a return to one's roots. The *nahḍa* project's fundamental aim was that of "being rooted in and issuing from the root."[262] Therefore, their efforts were focused on rehearsing and reaffirming old ideas and forms of expression.

Significantly, this meaning is merely the one assigned to authenticity *by those in power.* Adonis's reply to this ideological use of authenticity is to articulate an alternative meaning of this term (*fa-min al-mumkin an nustakhdim hadhih al-lafẓa,*

261 Adonis, *An Introduction to Arab Poetics*, 81.
262 Adūnīs, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥth fī al-Ibdāʿ wa-l-Ittibāʿ ʿind al-ʿArab,* vol. 2, 125.

wa-nuʿṭīha dalāla jadīda). Instead of referring to cultural roots, authenticity ought to refer to the uniqueness and individuality of the creative experience (*fudhūdhiyyat al-tajriba al-ibdāʿiyya wa-farādatih*).[263] When Adonis calls a poem *authentic*, he does not mean that it conforms to historical standards, but that it breaks with the past, that it is oriented towards the future, that it is its own root (*annahā aṣl dhātihā*). With this, he does not mean to imply that the poem in question is entirely free from any cultural influence, but only that it does not follow this model dutifully, that it "has its own particular aesthetic structure, its own particular perspective, and its own particular world."[264]

When Adonis talks about authenticity in later interviews, books, and articles, this redefinition of authenticity is a recurring feature. "Authenticity," he tells us in *An Introduction to Arab Poetics:*

> is not a fixed point in the past to which we must return in order to establish our identity. It is rather a constant capacity for movement and for going beyond existing limits towards a world which, while assimilating the past and its knowledge looks ahead to a better future. What we should take hold of and imitate is the flame of questioning which animated our ancestors.[265]

Such ideals as "constant capacity for movement" or "going beyond existing limits" are not unfamiliar to the reader of *The Static.* What Adonis describes here under the rubric of "authenticity" is essentially the ideal that he has been defending throughout, namely *the dynamic.* As he has done with modernity, Adonis wants to redefine authenticity in terms of his own ideals, and then use this dynamic definition to spur others on to be more dynamic themselves.

This comes out clearly in a conversation that took place during a workshop in Beirut in 1980. In discussing the notion of a golden age, Adonis retorts that he does not believe in any such thing, nor in cultural particularity or authenticity, insofar as they are defined in terms of a return to a purported golden age. Any golden age, and with it any form of authenticity, must lie in the future.[266] He repeats this position later on in talking about the role of Islam in modern society. According to Adonis, "authenticity lies in the future and particularity (*khuṣūṣiyya*) lies in change," and he goes on to say that therefore "Islam needs to be dynamic, not static." In other words, he takes it for granted that Muslims nowadays long for authenticity and a feeling of having a particular identity, but he implies that in order to

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263 Adūnīs, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥth fī al-Ibdāʿ wa-l-Ittibāʿ ʿind al-ʿArab,* vol. 2, 129.
264 Adūnīs, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥth fī al-Ibdāʿ wa-l-Ittibāʿ ʿind al-ʿArab,* vol. 2, 130.
265 Adonis, *An Introduction to Arab Poetics*, 90.
266 Adūnīs, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥth fī al-Ibdāʿ wa-l-Ittibāʿ ʿind al-ʿArab,* vol. 3, 149.

pursue these aims Muslims need to adopt a dynamic point of view which lies beyond time.

What is the effect of these redefinitions of modernity and authenticity on contemporary Arab thought? To understand this, we need to return to its central problematic, the *turāth* debate, and the way in which the problem of *turāth* is commonly posed. In it, modernity and authenticity are conceived of as two poles that make for an impossible choice. You are either true to your heritage at the expense of modernization, or you embrace modernity at the expense of an authentic identity. One way to approach this problem is to stay within the bounds of the problematic. This is the route chosen by someone like Zakī Najīb Maḥmūd, who proposes a golden mean between authenticity and modernity. Adonis suggests an alternative. Instead of following the rules of the game, he subverts them. In his reading of the *turāth* debate, both sides really want the same thing: the constant search for renewal. Both authenticity and modernity, on Adonis's terms, are synonymous with the *dynamic*. If one accepts this, if one accepts his worldview, his ideals, and ignores the question of whether his peregrinations in the Arab-Islamic heritage withstand historical scrutiny, then the project of *The Static* amounts not so much to an adjustment of the *turāth* debate, but to its destruction. Once modernity and authenticity and the entire semantical networks attached to them are understood to refer to the same thing, it becomes impossible think of, let alone articulate, the binary opposition on which so much of Arab thought has rested.[267]

267 One might respond that, instead of trying to get rid of a binary way of thinking, Adonis is merely replacing one binary with another, that is, that he advocates a division between static and dynamic as a stand-in for the familiar temporal opposition between old and new. It must be remembered, however, that in our reading of *The Static*, Adonis does not aim to do away with binary thinking as such. Rather, he changes the way these binaries function, and thereby changes their meaning. By accentuating the creative force created by these oppositions, an opposition like "the old" versus "the new" no longer refers to two static, monolithic ideals of a traditional past versus a modern present (as it does in the standard narrative). Instead, the binaries themselves become an expression of an inescapable dialectic of human meaning making. It is also true that this perspective relativizes the negative assessment of the static side of this binary. Iman Mersal articulates this point cogently in reference to Adonis's alter-ego Mihyār the Damascene: "What is the point of Mihyār creating a new language if there is not an old language to oppose? What meaning does the poetic persona's embodiment of the image of the Sufi, historical revolutionary or mad poet have if it is not battling other images such as the Caliph or jurist?" – see Mersal, "Reading the Qur'ān in the Poetry of Adonis," 6.

5.4.4 The dynamic, the modern, and the authentic individual

Although the goal of Adonis's redefinitions of authenticity and modernity may be the same, there is a notable difference between the two. A definition of modernity in terms of the timeless, universal creative act will likely strike us as somewhat far-fetched. Modernity is referred to in various ways, using different yardsticks like rationality, capitalism, colonialism, secularism, liberalism, individualism, industrialization, bureaucratization, nationalism, and many others in various combinations, but to equate this with "the act of creativity" stretches the hermeneutic limits considerably.[268]

However, when we consider the redefinition of authenticity (*aṣāla*) in terms of the individual creative experience, this peculiar definition appears much more natural. Indeed, one of the things emphasized in our discussion of authenticity was that the ideal of an original, creative self can be seen as constitutive of a modern sensibility. We found this particularly on the side of the more artistically minded, constructivist thinkers; writers like Nietzsche who conceived of an authentic identity, not as something that is found within, but something that is created in a way similar to creating a work of art. This connection is not altogether surprising, given the fact that Adonis himself tells us that he became aware of the dynamic through reading Baudelaire, Rimbaud, Nietzsche, and others. The vocabulary he uses to describe the *dynamic*, including ideas like man's killing of God, the idea of the creative poetic genius, and a whole host of Surrealist positions, are taken over from modern Western culture.

Although it would be unjustified to read *The Static* and later books in which Adonis expresses his philosophy of culture as a mere copy of this Romantic, anti-modern, Counter-Enlightenment discourse, it is also hard to understand Adonis without taking into account the profound impact that this vocabulary has had

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268 It could be argued that this incongruence is merely due to a mistranslation of Adonis's use of *ḥadātha*. Since he writes mostly about poetry, *ḥadātha* may be read here as referring to "modernism" in its literary sense rather than to the broader category of "modernity" – this is done, for example, by Nadia Wardeh – see Wardeh, "From ʿAlī Aḥmad Saʿīd to Adonis: A Study of Adonis's Controversial Position on Arab Cultural Heritage," 198–99. What speaks against this is that, while Adonis focuses on the poetic tradition, his intention is to critique Arab society as a whole, not just its poets. If Adonis wants to address the larger questions associated with the *turāth* debate – and it is clear that he does – then his target *ought* to be modernity, not literary modernism. This ambiguity perhaps issues from the poetic methods applied by Adonis to make his point. The link between the terms "creation" (*muḥdath*) and "modernity" (*ḥadātha*) is one of allusion. The author uses the shared root to establish an associative link between the two terms that can then be used to universalize the "modern." Such poetic allusions necessarily cause a degree of ambiguity, precisely because they break with conventional definitions.

on his conception of the problem. Contemporaries like Charles Malik and Antūn Saʿāda, but also Western voices like Nietzsche and Baudelaire, had a real effect on Adonis's early intellectual formation. Through them, ideas about freedom, individualism, artistic creativity, religion, and atheism became part of Adonis's early formation, as he himself recounts in his biography. Now there is of course always an element of personal ingenuity involved in what an intellectual like Adonis does with these and the many other influences in his life, the people he meets, the environment that he lives in. We should not discount the effect that his exile has had on his formation, or the impression that the civil war in Lebanon had on him. Moreover, we should not forget that these ideas associated with modern Western genealogy were refracted in various ways as they were taken up in discussions amongst Arab intellectuals. But we also need not doubt that in Adonis's worldview we find a meaningful continuation of this genealogy. Notions of freedom, individualism, and aestheticism that characterize his intellectual position are embedded in a modern discursive landscape that makes certain things stand out at the expense of others, that allows an intellectual like Adonis to pose particular questions, to feel that certain problems are salient. With ideals of individual freedom, creativity, and authenticity comes a very specific conception of what is at stake in human culture, a specific idea of what kinds of problems modern societies are faced with, and what is needed to overcome them in order to make this world a better place.

One thing that the aforementioned influences on Adonis share is a reaction to a certain conception of modernity. Modern society is seen as having changed man, as having taken something away from him, denaturalized him in some way. Society, in their eyes, exerted an overbearing force on people to conform, thereby alienating man from his true self. These intellectuals of a Romantic, Bohemian, or existentialist bent reacted against a utilitarian bourgeois ethic focused on comfort and negligent of higher pleasures, an ethic of greed that results in pettiness of mind and "cowardice of imagination."[269] The modern world they encountered had, in their eyes, become predictable, manageable, and was gradually shedding its mystical, enchanted garb. The authentic individual put on a pedestal by these philosophers and, in particular, by artists was meant to serve as a bulwark against modern culture. The authentic power of the individual is bolstered to withstand these charges, either by exploring the depths of human creativity in poetry, or by taking down the vestiges of a corrupt, repressive, hypocritical moral system, in the philosophical writings of Nietzsche.

269 César Graña, *Bohemian versus Bourgeois: French Society and the French Man of Letters in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Basic Books, 1964), 65.

Such faith in the power of the individual to create meaning in response to an age in which immanent sources of meaning are lacking comes to the fore most powerfully in Adonis's poetry; one that also contains a temporal orientation. His poetry is a response to the present, or what he refers to in "al-Waqt" as "my age" (*ʿaṣrī*). The entire paragraph, which forms the climax of the poem, reads as follows:

196. My skin is not a cavern of thoughts, nor
197. my passion memory's woodcutter—
198. my lineage is refusal, my weddings the grafting
199. of two poles; this epoch is mine
200. the dead god, the blind machine—my epoch
201. is that I dwell in the pool of yearnings
202. my remains are my flowers, I am
203. the *Alif* of water and the *Yā'* of fire—the mad lover of life
204. Revealing to time the secrets of his love
205. thus he confesses
206. he is the dissenter, the rebel, the prodigal.[270]

Coming just after a paragraph in which the poet forcefully embraces the age that is to come (*al-ʿaṣr al-ladhī yaʾtī*, line 188), here we find a reference to the current, modern age, one in which God has been declared dead and machines, the fruits of technological innovation and progress, operate without an aesthetic vision or a moral compass. The individual is thrown into this life with nothing to go by in finding direction other than his yearnings, yet rather than being occasion for existential crisis, this fact is celebrated. The poet declares himself the alpha and omega of creation, master of the elements. His love for life, which he professes by confessing its secrets, marks him out as a revolutionary who creates meanings that are his legacy, a dream-space that he conquers for his successors.[271]

This context sheds more light on Adonis's redefinition of modernity and how he relates it to an ideal of authenticity. When he speaks of modernity, he is not thinking of modernity as utopian project of societal change, nor does he have in mind an ordinary conception of a technologically advanced age of "the dead god, the blind machine." What he refers to, rather, are modernity's critics. He finds in their works a particular outlook on life that appeals to him as an individual and, in particular, as an artist. When he speaks of being authentic, he has in mind a quasi-existentialist view of a strong individual who creates his own

270 Amyuni, "Adonis's 'Time' Poem: Translation and Analysis," 179.

271 Compare the section just preceding this one (lines 188 – 195), which starts by invoking an age to come and ends with the statement that "I pass on to my successors the conquest of this space."

rules and values and does not live by those laid down for him by others. In a way, the position that Adonis adopts in *The Static* with regard to the cowardly, unimaginative nature of *static* Islamic society is easily adapted to a critique of bourgeois society, which equally constrains the power of the individual in the name of law, order, and conformity. It is true that many of the examples of the static are more directly targeted against Arab societies: the autocratic ruler who suppresses different opinions, the state apparatus which limits man's freedom and turns him into a mere cog within a bureaucratic regime, an absolutist religion that forbids any criticism of its creed. These criticisms fit easily within broader Arab liberal discourse. But they are not the only examples Adonis gives of the static. For instance, he describes modern market capitalism as a system that turns man into an object that has only use-value, not a value intrinsic to him as a human being. Market forces compel a person to make herself appear different from who she is. She is turned into a liar, and thereby loses her humanity.[272] Adonis derides modern consumerism for its superficiality and for undermining the human search for higher values and deeper layers of meaning.[273] Rather than cheerfully embracing modern Western liberal culture, his critique, though superficially directed at contemporary Arab society, marks him as a scion of the Counter-Enlightenment, denouncing the conventional value system of the bourgeois. Adonis is not a liberal like Zakī Najīb Maḥmūd. His ideal person is not the hard-working scientist, but the creative artist, the poet, who "finds his profound creative core inside, not outside of himself – whether this 'outside' be 'heritage,' or 'the group,' or 'the regime.'"[274] Adonis is a champion of the ideal of individual authenticity. Man continually creates himself, or in his own words: "he becomes himself with the life that he has created for himself."[275]

Harking back to the discussion earlier, we can see how time and authenticity hang together, not just when authenticity is understood in a cultural sense, but also when it is read as a personal expressivist ideal. The redefinition of time as something other than ordinary chronological time is, for Adonis, part and parcel of a vision for the creative individual. Creativity needs a temporal dimension that goes beyond the relentless march of history and reaches into new depths of the

272 Adūnīs, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥth fī al-Ibdāʿ wa-l-Ittibāʿ ʿind al-ʿArab,* vol. 4, 199.
273 Adūnīs, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥth fī al-Ibdāʿ wa-l-Ittibāʿ ʿind al-ʿArab,* vol. 4, 194.
274 Adūnīs, *al-Thābit wa-l-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥth fī al-Ibdāʿ wa-l-Ittibāʿ ʿind al-ʿArab,* vol. 4, 261.
275 "Il devient lui-même avec la vie qu'il s'est créée" (Esber, *Conversations avec mon père,* 47). This outlook has been taken by Sūzān ʿAbd al-Majīd al-Muḥammad as a clear indication of Adonis's existentialist leanings. Thus, she emphasizes that, for him, time is a personal human creation – see ʿAbd al-Majīd al-Muḥammad, *Mafhūm al-Zaman fī Shiʿr Adūnīs*, 228.

human imagination. This is what gives meaning to life in a modern, disenchanted society.

Iris Murdoch, in writing about the modern condition, has remarked that twentieth-century literature gave rise to two kinds of novel that try to deal with the question of disenchantment and the falling away of traditional structures of meaning and morals. On the one hand, there is the existentialist's recognition that he lives in an age that is religiously and metaphysically impoverished to the extent that "he is in some danger of being left with nothing of inherent value except will-power itself."[276] The existentialist novel "shows us freedom and virtue as the assertion of will." It presents the reader with the figure of the "lonely brave man," someone who is deeply critical of society, a godless adventurer.[277] On the other hand, there is what Murdoch calls the mystical novel. Here, modern anxiety is not tackled by asserting the individual's ability to act. Instead, the existentialist tries to invent a new religious imagery, more often than not through art.

Adonis exhibits both tendencies. He combines praise for the ultimate freedom of the individual with a Sufi-inspired mystical attitude that seeks new realms of meaning. The dynamic presents an answer to meaninglessness. Meaning is something that must not be taken for granted. It needs to be constantly constructed and discovered through an unceasing creative process. The static refers to whatever kills this meaning-making process, whatever constrains the powers of the authentic individual to imagine himself beyond the grasp of chronological time.

5.5 Conclusion

Despite the immense interest in Adonis's poetry or even his position as a public intellectual in the Arab world, there has not been a comprehensive study of his reading of *turāth.* Our study addresses this lack in the scholarship, but it does so with an ulterior motive. The argument underlying this chapter is that, once we are aware of the temporal dialectic of the standard narrative, we can start to appreciate how particular Arab authors have sought alternative avenues for Arab thought by challenging the temporal structure that underlies this narrative. Adonis, I have argued, is one such intellectual who can be read as trying to go beyond the strictures of the standard narrative in Arab thought. His notion of vertical time makes possible a reconceptualization of authenticity and modernity, pre-

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276 Iris Murdoch, *Existentialists and Mystics: Writings on Philosophy and Literature*, ed. P. Conradi (London: Chatto & Windus, 1997).

277 Murdoch, *Existentialists and Mystics: Writings on Philosophy and Literature*, 225.

cisely because the ordinary way in which these central concepts in Arab thought are understood is based on a common chronological, horizontal idea of historical time. This puts Adonis outside the purview of the standard narrative of Arab thought, and makes it hard to characterize him as either a modernist or a traditionalist, because he no longer buys into this paradigm.

Whether you accept this reconceptualization is another matter. The foregoing analysis should not be understood as an endorsement of Adonis's outlook, which is based on an idiosyncratic reading of Arab and Islamic history, a highly contentious view of religion and religious orthodoxy, a very particular aesthetic outlook, and an almost religious regard for the meaning-making capabilities of the individual. One does not need to endorse these things to find something of interest in Adonis's overall project. Regardless of whether it withstands critical scrutiny, his vision sheds new light on Arab thought, and shows a different direction in which Arab thought could have gone and might even still go. It breaks with the dominance of a singular model for reading *turāth* by disputing, rather than abiding by, the accepted meanings of what is at stake in the problematic of authenticity and modernity.

6 ʿAbd al-Raḥmān Ṭāhā: Authentic creativity and the path to modernity

With ʿAbd al-Raḥmān Ṭāhā, we arrive at the last of our three interlocutors. We began with an in-depth look at Zakī Najīb Maḥmūd's writings on *turāth* as a way of illustrating the standard narrative of contemporary Arab thought, according to which intellectual debate in the Arab world revolves around the topic of *turāth* and the question of whether and how to hold on to the authentic elements of Arab-Islamic culture in the face of modernity. This way of dividing Arab discourse into a camp of authenticity and one that tends towards the ideals of a Western modernity, I argued, is rooted in a linear conception of progressive historical change, a temporal orientation clearly evident in Maḥmūd's work. At the same time, this temporal framework formed the basis for making other binary distinctions, not just between traditionalists and modernists, but also between East and West, religious and secular, acquiescent and critical, subjugated and free, female and male. Not only do these binaries rely on the narrative of historical progress that underlies Maḥmūd's use of time, but the particular form in which these binaries were expressed clearly points to the moral implications of his temporal perspective.

In contrast, the other two interlocutors have been chosen to compromise this way of looking at Arab thought. The reason for choosing these figures, other than that they are widely recognized as important voices in the debates on *turāth*, is that they belie the straightforward categorization on which the standard narrative relies. Adonis is widely known as a staunchly secular figure, someone who has opposed Islamist traditionalism since even before its rhetoric gained traction in the 1970s. Following the standard narrative, this surely would have put Adonis in the Western-modern-secular bracket and, indeed, this is how his views on *turāth* are generally understood. As argued in the previous chapter, however, this does not do justice to his theoretical writings on *turāth*. True enough, he too offers a binary that looks like it follows the authenticity–modernity paradigm, but on closer inspection, the dialectic between the static and the dynamic forces is not on a par with the standard narrative's opposition of traditionalism to modernity. Adonis's metric is creative energy and imagination, not material, societal progress. He puts forward ideas like "vertical time" and an equivalence of authenticity and modernity precisely to get away from the common understanding of Arab thought in terms of a party that supports progress and one that rejects it. For him, the binary is the driving force behind renewal, not a symptom of cultural stasis that needs to be overcome.

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In a way, our treatment of Ṭāhā will apply the same template, but on the other side of the supposed divide between traditional and modern. Here, we find a thinker who, because of his opposition to the rationalist strand in Arab thought, his deeply religious orientation, his puritanical morals, and conservative stance on social issues, is often classified as a traditionalist. Yet, as we will see, this way of categorizing him is more based on the binary metric inherent to the standard narrative than on what he actually wrote. This is not to say that his convictions and values are in line with the secular-liberal trend. In many ways, Ṭāhā is diametrically opposed to a consciously secular bohemian like Adonis. This, however, is not the kind of comparison that we are after. Instead of adjudicating the level of "conservativeness" in Ṭāhā's writings by distilling what his values and convictions are, and using this to categorize him according to a conservative–progressive scale, our aim in this chapter is to look at the philosophical system that *justifies* them. Once we look at how this system works, I argue, this customary division breaks down. Instead, we can read Ṭāhā as someone who, like Adonis, does not abide by the simple dyadic problematic of authenticity and modernity, but tries to go beyond it by exploring new formulations of what these terms, and the temporal structure in which they are embedded, mean.

To do justice to what I will present as Ṭāhā's departure from the standard narrative, we need to acquaint ourselves with his philosophical project. Because this project forms a coherent whole consisting of many different branches that all feed into each other, it is virtually impossible to understand his conceptions of *turāth*, authenticity, and time without a comprehensive introduction. For this we will return to his years as a graduate student in Paris, where he formulated some of the core ideas of his later philosophy. First, however, we will briefly take stock of how he got to Paris, what some of the main influences on his thinking were, and how, in recent years, he has grown to be perhaps the pre-eminent philosopher in the Arab world today.

6.1 ʿAbd al-Raḥmān Ṭāhā: Some background

6.1.1 A biographical sketch

ʿAbd al-Raḥmān Ṭāhā[1] was born on 28 May 1944 in the Moroccan coastal town of al-Jadīda. His father was a *faqīh* (an expert on Islamic law) who, in the tradition of

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1 There has been some confusion of late about how to refer to ʿAbd al-Raḥmān Ṭāhā. While he has for decades been referred to by what was considered to be his family name (ʿAbd al-Raḥmān), in a

the *kuttāb* – Qur'anic schools – instructed young boys at his home in the Islamic sciences. It was from him that the young Ṭāhā received his first training in the fields of jurisprudence, theology, and rhetoric.[2] These early teachings, as he would later recall, proved important to his intellectual development, as they emphasized the inherent connection between the matters of the spirit (*rūḥiyyāt*) and those of law (*fiqhiyyāt*) that was to become a hallmark of his mature philosophy.[3] During these years, Ṭāhā's father also introduced him to Sufism, at one point taking him to meet a Sufi sheikh who cured him of his early problems in learning the alphabet.[4] Having finished elementary school in al-Jadīda, Ṭāhā moved to Casablanca, where he continued his studies in secondary school, after which he moved to the capital city of Rabat where he enrolled in the philosophy department at Muḥammad V University. The contrast between this secular education and his early religious surroundings effected an estrangement that he would recall many years later as a "solitude in faith" (*ʿuzla imāniyya*).[5]

correspondence with Wael Hallaq, he explained that this is really a mistake, and that his actual family name is Ṭāhā – see Hallaq, *Reforming Modernity: Ethics and the New Human in the Philosophy of Abdurrahman Taha*, 277. I will refer to him using his proper family name, but it should be noted that most of the books written by him and about him make reference to ʿAbd al-Raḥmān or latinized versions of this name – Abderrahman, Abdurrahman, etc.

2 Ibrāhīm Mashrūḥ, *Ṭāhā ʿAbd al-Raḥmān: Qirāʾa fī Mashrūʿihi al-Fikrī* (Beirut: Markaz al-Ḥaḍāra li-Tanmiyat al-Fikr al-Islāmī, 2009), 27–28. In addition to some secondary sources in Arabic used in this chapter, most of the texts by Ṭāhā were originally written in Arabic, and the English translations are my own. Exceptions to this are two works quoted in Section 6.2, namely *Langage et Philosophie* and "Essai sur les logiques des raisonnements argumentatifs et naturels," both of which were written in French, and the translations from these works are also my own.

3 ʿAbd al-Raḥmān, Ṭāhā, *Ṭāhā ʿAbd al-Raḥmān…al-Faylasūf al-Mujaddid* (Al Jazeera Documentary, 2017), min. 6:40. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0MF_mN7oQ3Q&t=440s

4 ʿAbd al-Raḥmān, *Ṭāhā ʿAbd al-Raḥmān…al-Faylasūf al-Mujaddid*, min. 9:00.

5 ʿAbd al-Raḥmān Ṭāhā, "Bayn Yaday al-Tajriba al-Dīniyya al-Ḥayya," in *al-ʿAmal al-Dīnī wa-Tajdīd al-ʿAql*, 1989, 23. This is quoted from a preface to the first edition of *al-ʿAmal al-Dīnī wa-Tajdīd al-ʿAql* (Religious Praxis and the Renewal of Reason). The book was originally published in 1989, but in later editions the preface, which describes Ṭāhā's spiritual journey and is titled *Bayn Yaday al-Tajriba al-Ḥayya* (In the hands of living practice), was left out. This preface is mentioned by Ibrāhīm Mashrūḥ in his informative introduction to Ṭāhā's philosophical project – see Mashrūḥ, *Ṭāhā ʿAbd al-Raḥmān: Qirāʾa fī Mashrūʿihi al-Fikrī*, 33. Although I have found a copy of it, getting access to an original of the book has proven exceedingly hard. In light of Mashrūḥ's mention of this text, and recognizing the style of writing employed throughout the copy that I have used is recognizably Ṭāhā's, I do not doubt the authenticity of this personal life story. However, I have not been able to check the page numbers versus those of the first edition of the above-mentioned title, leaving open the possibility that the numbering I use here differs from that in the original.

The image that Ṭāhā paints of his younger self is of a quiet, sensitive, and intellectual boy. We see an imaginative youngster, deeply religious, an aspiring poet[6] who views lyricism as the original means for human expression.[7] While his poetic penchant will remain with him throughout his life, it is as a philosopher that Ṭāhā has won acclaim. As the initial reason for his philosophical turn, he points to the Arab defeat in 1967. Retrospectively, he sees this traumatic experience as having impressed on him the need to reflect philosophically on the causes of defeat, and on what he calls the defect or disorder (*khalal*) in the minds of Arabs.[8] Convinced that the source of Western power lies in its peculiar form of "reason," Ṭāhā decides that in order to resist Western influence on an equal basis the Arabs need to understand the fundamental principles of Western reason. Because, according to him, the principles of reason are contained in logic, he resolves to study the West's logic in order to resist its reason.[9] This leads him to move yet again, this time to Paris, where he studies philosophy at the Sorbonne. Two books result from his time at the Sorbonne, both in French. The first of these was finished in 1972 as a thesis to attain the third level of a French doctoral degree, and was published in 1979.[10] The second, titled "Essai sur les logiques des raisonnements argumentatifs et naturels," was written to attain a full doctorate in 1985, and has not yet been published. Both theses form part of a larger project.[11] The ideas developed in this doctoral work would provide the groundwork for much of his

6 Ṭāhā was one of the first members of the Association of the Writers of Morocco (*Ittiḥād Kuttāb al-Maghrib*) – see Ṭāhā, *Ṭāhā ʿAbd al-Raḥmān…al-Faylasūf al-Mujaddid,* min. 12:00.

7 ʿAbd al-Raḥmān Ṭāhā, *al-Ḥiwār Ufuqan li-l-Fikr* (Beirut: al-Shabka al-ʿArabiyya li-l-Abḥāth wa-l-Nashr, 2013). Notwithstanding the serious self-image, we should take care not to portray Ṭāhā as an ascetic, aloof from everyday life. His most recent book attests to an ongoing interest in current affairs – see ʿAbd al-Raḥmān Ṭāhā, *Thughūr al-Murābiṭa: Muqāraba Iʾtimāniyya li-Ṣirāʿāt al-Umma al-Ḥāliyya* (Beirut: Muntadā al-Maʿārif, 2019). At a personal level too, he has been described as cheery and having good sense of humor – see Frans van Eemeren, "Personal correspondence," March 10, 2020.

8 Ṭāhā, *al-Ḥiwār Ufuqan li-l-Fikr*, 17.

9 Ṭāhā, *Ṭāhā ʿAbd al-Raḥmān…al-Faylasūf al-Mujaddid,* min. 17:00.

10 ʿAbderrahmane Taha, *Langage et philosophie: essai sur les structures linguistiques de l'ontologie* (Rabat: Publications de la faculté des lettres et des sciences humaines, 1979), 3.

11 In his second dissertation he links this work to the first, telling his readers that:
"The present work completes this one [that is, *Langage et philosophie*] and positions itself in its sequel: after the previous reflection on the diversity of the philosophical potentialities of languages now follows the reflection on the diversity of their logical powers; its legitimacy is all the more assured because, henceforth, it integrates the linguistic conditioning of natural thought with pragmatic considerations. (Abderrahmane Taha, "Essai sur les logiques des raisonnements argumentatifs et naturels" [PhD diss., Paris, Université de Paris-Sorbonne, Paris IV, 1985], 15–16)"

later philosophy, and set him apart as one of the few Arab philosophers specializing in modern logic and philosophy of language.

After his academic sojourn in France, in the early 1970s Ṭāhā returns to Morocco, where he is asked to teach logic at the university of Rabat, at the invitation of the historian of philosophy Najīb Baladī.[12] Confronted with an old-fashioned curriculum that did not include modern theories of philosophy of language and logical analysis, he takes it upon himself to "move the instruction of Arab logic at the Moroccan university from its traditional, constrained form to one that is modern and comprehensive."[13] These attempts at renewal encounter serious resistance. In the first place, they are opposed by a group of academics whom Ṭāhā refers to as the "Easterners" (*al-mashriqiyyūn*), who oppose modern logic because they equate it with logical positivism.[14] This misunderstanding he attributes to the fact that Zakī Najīb Maḥmūd's well-known introduction into modern logic was titled "Logical-Positivism," leading many to assume that modern logic was merely the upshot of logical-positivism. It reportedly took many years and a lot of effort to disabuse people of this idea.[15] The other source of resistance during this time is the Marxist faction who, equally under the impression that modern logic and logical-positivism are practically the same thing, call for greater emphasis on teaching dialectical logic.[16] A third bed of opposition mentioned by Ṭāhā were the old-fashioned philosophers who do not see any merit in studying post-Aristotelian logic.

Besides having to deal with these specific qualms that various groups had about the introduction of modern logic, Ṭāhā's efforts at renewing the curriculum also run counter to the historical orientation of the philosophy faculty. Moroccan philosophy at the time was caught up in the *turāth* debate, which reached its peak around the time when Ṭāhā was developing his method of teaching modern logic

12 Ṭāhā, *al-Lisān wa-l-Mīzān aw al-Takawthur al-ʿAqlī*, 13.

13 Ṭāhā, *al-Lisān wa-l-Mīzān aw al-Takawthur al-ʿAqlī*, 13.

14 The "Easterners" to whom Ṭāhā refers appear to be Moroccan intellectuals like Muḥammad ʿAzīz al-Habābī, al-Ṭāhir Wāʿzīz, and Muḥammad ʿĀbid al-Jābirī, who continued the project of the Arabization of the philosophical curriculum in Morocco, which was started by the Egyptian philosopher ʿAlī Sāmī Nashār – see Mashrūḥ, *Ṭāhā ʿAbd al-Raḥmān: Qirāʾa fī Mashrūʿihi al-Fikrī*, 35. It should be noted that the designation of "Easterner" may be meant as a jab at al-Jābirī, the most well known of these rationalist reformers. One of the main points that al-Jābirī wants to push is that Maghrib thought is quite different from that of the Mashriq, in virtue of its being founded on rationalist principles. There may be a sense of intended irony in ascribing the term "Easterner" to the one figure who is most of all associated with propagating the "Western" Arab school of philosophy.

15 Ṭāhā, *al-Lisān wa-l-Mīzān aw al-Takawthur al-ʿAqlī*, 14.

16 Ṭāhā, *al-Lisān wa-l-Mīzān aw al-Takawthur al-ʿAqlī* , 14.

to an Arab audience in the 1970s and 1980s. Thinkers like Abdallah Laroui, Muḥammad ʿĀbid al-Jābirī, and ʿAlī Umlīl were formulating their critiques of *turāth* using Western theoretical frameworks adopted mainly from French intellectuals, at first mainly Althusser and later also Foucault, Derrida, Lyotard, and others. Ṭāhā's philosophy presents a conscious rejection of this Western methodological dominance, as we will see in due course.

Being something of an outsider who does not shy away from adopting contrarian positions, it is understandable that Ṭāhā would want to get away from the politicized environment of Moroccan academia every once in a while. He did so by becoming something of a traveling academic, teaching in Amman, Tunis, and Algiers.[17] These journeys had the added benefit of spreading his ideas through the students he taught in different parts of the Arab world. Some of these have themselves entered professional academia, and are now commenting on and spreading Ṭāhā's ideas.[18] During this time, Ṭāhā has also lectured in the West on at least one occasion, namely at a conference in Amsterdam in 1986.[19] Although he retired from

17 Mashrūḥ, *Ṭāhā ʿAbd al-Raḥmān: Qirāʾa fī Mashrūʿihi al-Fikrī*, 30–31.

18 A wave of recent publications by admirers of Ṭāhā, many of whom are from the Maghrib, has been published by Ebdaa, or as the organization translates its full title: "The Arabian Establishment for Thought and Innovation" (al-Muʾassasa al-ʿArabiyya li-l-Fikr wa-l-Ibdāʿ). These publications are part of a series that engages with the thought of ʿAbd al-Raḥmān Ṭāhā called *Mafāhīm min Falsafat Ṭāhā ʿAbd al-Raḥmān* (*Concepts from the Philosophy of Ṭāhā ʿAbd al-Raḥmān*). This publishing house has until recently been particularly active in stimulating the reception of Ṭāhā's work, having already published a number of works about or inspired by him. Among these are: ʿAbd al-Jalīl al-Kūr, *Mafhūm "al-Fiṭra" fī Falsafat Ṭāhā ʿAbd al-Raḥmān* (Beirut: al-Muʾassasa al-ʿArabiyya li-l-Fikr wa-l-Ibdāʿ, 2017); ʿAbd al-Malik Būminjil, *al-Ibdāʿ fī Muwājahat al-Ittibāʿ* (Beirut: al-Muʾassasa al-ʿArabiyya li-l-fikr wa-l-Ibdāʿ, 2017); ʿAbd al-Razzāq Bilʿaqrūz, *Jawānib min Ijtihādāt Ṭāhā ʿAbd al-Raḥmān: al-Ḥadātha wa-l-ʿAwlama wa-l-ʿAqlāniyya wa-l-Tajdīd al-Thaqāfī* (Beirut: al-Muʾassasa al-ʿArabiyya li-l-Fikr wa-l-Ibdāʿ, 2017); ʿAbd al-Razzāq Bilʿaqrūz, *Rūḥ al-Qiyam wa-Ḥurriyyat al-Mafāhīm: naḥw al-Sayr li-Iʿādat al-Tarābuṭ wa-l-Takāmul bayn Manẓūmat al-Qiyam wa-l-ʿUlūm al-Ijtimāʿiyya* (Beirut: al-Muʾassasa al-ʿArabiyya li-l-Fikr wa-l-Ibdāʿ, 2017); Rabīʿ Ḥammū, *Madkhal ilā Fikr Ṭāhā ʿAbd al-Raḥmān* (Beirut: al-Muʾassasa al-ʿArabiyya li-l-Fikr wa-l-Ibdāʿ, 2019); and Aḥmad Karrūm, *al-Turāth ʿind Ṭāhā ʿAbd al-Raḥmān* (Beirut: al-Muʾassasa al-ʿArabiyya li-l-Fikr wa-l-Ibdāʿ, 2018). It should be noted, however, that Ṭāhā himself has published his most recent books with a different publisher, namely the Kuwaiti Markaz al-Nuhūḍ. It is unclear whether this switch also spells the end of the series dedicated to his work. A supporter of Ṭāhā's project who is not directly involved in writing articles, but rather uses social media like Twitter and appearances on podcasts to get his Ṭāhā-inspired message out, is the Saudi intellectual Sulaymān al-Nāṣir – see, for example, ʿAbd al-Raḥmān Abū Māliḥ, "Mā Hiyya al-Rujūla?," *Finjān* (podcast), Thmanyah, accessed July 25, 2023, https://thmanyah.com/podcasts/fnjan/298/.

19 For his contribution to this conference, see Abderrahmane Taha, "Arab Dialecticians on Rational Discussion," in *Argumentation across the Lines of Disciplines: Proceedings of the Conference on Argumentation 1986*, ed. Frans H. Van Eemeren et al. (Dordrecht: Foris Publications, 1987), 73–77.

his professorship at Mohammed V University in Rabat in 2005, he continues to publish books to this day, working out and expanding the scope of his philosophical project.

6.1.2 Ṭāhā's influence in the Arab world and beyond

Ṭāhā is a contemporary philosopher whose influence in the Arab world is substantial and growing, yet he remains virtually unknown in the West. For this reason, it pays to look in detail at the influence he has in the Arab world, and to index what has been written on his philosophy in Western languages. Ṭāhā is, first of all, a leading intellectual in his native country. He has won the Moroccan Award for the Humanities for two of his books,[20] as well as the Islamic Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (ISESCO) book prize in Islamic thought and philosophy. An annual conference is organized in Ṭāhā's honor, which is attended by researchers from the Arab world and beyond. His relative fame as an Arab philosopher has merited a documentary about his life by *Al-Jazeera,* and he is starting to be read in other Islamic countries as well.[21] Although he generally shies away from public appearances, he has accepted the offer to lecture before heads of state, addressing King Muḥammad VI of Morocco in 2003, and President Munṣif al-Marzūqī of Tunisia in 2013.[22] In recent years, there has also arisen a burgeoning industry of Ṭāhā exegesis, as well as publications that build on his fundamental ideas.

Being a somewhat idiosyncratic figure – a religiously minded, logically trained mystic with a fondness for coining neologisms and using a perplexing style to express his fierce criticism of secular-liberal values – it is no more than natural that Ṭāhā has also drawn a fair amount of criticism from Arab intellectuals, and a number of books are specifically dedicated to comparing Ṭāhā with his Arab adversaries. Some contrast him with Muḥammad ʿĀbid al-Jābirī, whose structuralist reading of *turāth*, anti-Sufi stance, and championing of Averroës as the most important

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According to Frans van Eemeren, Ṭāhā attended several conferences during these years, including a number in France and a conference held in Venice, organized by Wake Forest University. Unfortunately, I have not been able to procure the proceedings of these conferences.

20 ʿAbd al-Raḥmān Ṭāhā, *Tajdīd al-Manhaj fī Taqwīm al-Turāth*, 4th ed. (Beirut: al-Markaz al-Thaqāfī al-ʿArabī, 2012); ʿAbd al-Raḥmān Ṭāhā, *Fī Uṣūl al-Ḥiwār wa Tajdīd ʿIlm al-Kalām* (Beirut: al-Markaz al-Thaqāfī al-ʿArabī, 2014).

21 Purely anecdotally, booksellers in Cairo have assured me that Ṭāhā is among the best-selling authors in his field.

22 Mohammed Hashas, "Taha Abderrahmane's Trusteeship Paradigm: Spiritual Modernity and the Islamic Contribution to the Formation of a Renewed Universal Civilization of Ethos," *Oriente Moderno* 95 (2015): 72.

rationalist philosophy in the Arab-Islamic tradition, render him the polar opposite of Ṭāhā.[23] Other peers whose ideas are contrasted to and compared with Ṭāhā's are the Moroccan intellectual and historian Abdallah Laroui (ʿAbd Allah al-ʿArwī), whose historicist reading of *turāth* runs counter to Ṭāhā's,[24] and the Lebanese philosopher Nāṣīf Naṣṣār, who has criticized Ṭāhā for his cultural, nationalist, and religious essentialism.[25] is also taken to task by ʿAlī Ḥarb and Fethi Meskini in response to Ṭāhā's linguistic-epistemological project, which he works out in the two volumes entitled *Fiqh al-Falsafa* (*The Science of Philosophy*). Both criticize Ṭāhā's idiosyncratic use of terms. Ḥarb argues that his use of the notion of *fiqh*, which is generally used to refer to Islamic jurisprudence, hinders any free philosophical thinking.[26] Meskini, meanwhile, deconstructs Ṭāhā's translation of the Cartesian cogito into something resembling more a Sufi aphorism than a philosophical proposition.[27]

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23 A more detailed discussion of Ṭāhā's stance on these issues and how they differ from al-Jābirī's will follow in the course of this chapter. For comparisons of these two thinkers, see Samuel Kigar, "Arguing the Archive: Ṭāhā ʿAbd al-Raḥmān, Muḥammad ʿĀbid al-Jābirī, and the Future of Islamic Thought," *Comparative Islamic Studies* 11, no. 1 (2015): 5–33; Muḥammad Humām, *Jadal al-Falsafa al-ʿArabiyya: bayn Muḥammad ʿĀbid al-Jābirī wa-Ṭāhā ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Baḥth al-Lughawī Namūdhaj* (Casablanca/Beirut: al-Markaz al-Thaqāfī al-ʿArabī, 2013); and ʿAbd al-Nabī al-Ḥurrī, *Ṭāhā ʿAbd al-Raḥmān wa-Muḥammad ʿĀbid al-Jābirī: Ṣirāʿ al-Mashrūʿayn ʿalā Arḍ al-Ḥikma al-Rushdiyya* (Beirut: al-Shabaka al-ʿArabiyya li-l-Abḥāth wa-l-Nashr, 2014).

24 ʿAbbās Aḥmad Arḥīla, *Bayn al-Iʾtimāniyya wa-l-Dahraniyya: bayn Ṭāhā ʿAbd al-Raḥmān wa-ʿAbd Allāh al-ʿArwī* (Beirut: al-Muʾassasa al-ʿArabiyya li-l-Fikr wa-l-Ibdāʿ, 2016).

25 Jalūl Maqūra, *Falsafat al-Tawāṣul fī al-Fikr al-ʿArabī al-Muʿāsir: Ṭāhā ʿabd al-Raḥmān wa-Nāsīf Naṣṣār bayn al-Qawmiyya wa-l-Kawniyya* (Beirut: Markaz Dirāsāt al-Waḥda al-ʿArabiyya, 2015), especially pages 221–25; Moser, *Akademische Philosophie in der arabischen Welt: Inhalte—Insititutionen—Periodika*, 40–42. Naṣṣār directly critiques Ṭāhā's call for "nationalism of philosophy" (*qawmiyyat al-falsafa*), seeing in it a reflection of the nationalist thought of the Syrian *nahḍawī* Zakī al-Arsūzī – see Nāṣīf Naṣṣār, *al-Ishārāt wa-l-Masālik: min Iwān Ibn Rushd ilā Riḥāb al-ʿAlmāniyya* (Beirut: Dār al-Ṭalīʿa, 2011), 127–28. He points out that Ṭāhā's picture of a world containing different philosophies according to different national, religious, or linguistic groups, is nonsense. Different countries, cultures, or creeds contain various philosophies (p. 130). Instead of countering the equalization of world cultures by modernization with a project to recognize many incommensurable philosophies, Naṣṣār proposes a universal openness of philosophical thinking that recognizes national differences, without taking these to be either essential or absolute (p. 131).

26 ʿAlī Ḥarb, "Ṭāhā ʿAbd al-Raḥmān wa-Mashrūʿuh al-ʿIlmī: Fiqh al-Falsafa li-Maḥw al-Falsafa," *Dirāsāt ʿArabiyya* 32, no. 7–8 (1996): 8–20.

27 Fethi Meskini, "Discussion herméneutique d'une traduction arabe récente du "cogito" cartésien "unẓur tağid"," *Revue Tunisienne des Études Philosophiques* 20–21 (1998): 117–25. The translation of the *cogito* ("I think therefore I am") proposed by Ṭāhā in a discussion that covers almost one-hundred pages is: "Look, you find" (*unẓur tajid*). A fuller discussion of how Ṭāhā arrives at this translation requires a deeper understanding of his views on language and thought, and we will leave

Notwithstanding his membership of a couple of Western academic societies, namely the *Gesellschaft für interkulturelle Philosophie* and the *International Society for The Study of Argumentation*,[28] Ṭāhā's has not yet attracted much attention in the West. One obvious reason for this is that very few of his writings are available in Western languages. Among them are his first thesis written at the Sorbonne, a few essays and a book translated from Arabic into English, a very short contribution to a conference on Argumentation from 1986, and a contribution to a volume on the Turkish theologian Said Nursi.[29] His style, moreover, is rather poetic and saturated with idiosyncratic expressions. It thus requires dedicated effort for a practiced Arabist and even for a native speaker to tackle Ṭāhā's writings. Translating them into any Western language is surely a daunting task for even the most experienced translator.

Translation, however, may not be the only barrier to reception in the West. The prominent scholar of Islamic law Wael Hallaq and admirer of Ṭāhā has admitted that, even if there were adequate translations available, he is not certain that Western intellectuals would want to engage with this "Moroccan philosopher and his likes." The deep moral challenge posed to the West by Ṭāhā's radical critique of the immorality of Western modernity is, according to Hallaq, "simply indigestible by the current Western mainstream."[30] However this may be, Ṭāhā has started to generate some interest in the West of late.[31] Wael Hallaq mentions him in the

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this for another day. It should be mentioned, however, that the phrase is indeed of Sufi provenance, dating back at least as far as a poem by the Andalusian mystic Abū al-ʿAbbās al-Mursī – see Harald Viersen, "The Modern Mysticism of Taha Abderrahmane," in *Islamic Ethics and the Trusteeship Paradigm: Taha Abderrahmane's Philosophy in Comparative Perspectives*, ed. Mohammed Hashas and Mutaz al-Khatib, Studies in Islamic Ethics (Leiden: Brill, 2020), 172n2.

28 Mashrūḥ, *Ṭāhā ʿAbd al-Raḥmān: Qirāʾa fī Mashrūʿihi al-Fikrī*, 31.

29 Taha ʿAbdel Rahman, "The Separation of Human Philosophy from the Wisdom of the Qurʾān in Said Nursi's Work," in *Islam at the Crossroads: On the Life and Thought of Bediuzzaman Said Nursi*, ed. Ibrahim M. Abu-Rabi' (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003), 199–214. Translations of his work into English include: Taha Abderrahman, "Renewing Religious Thought in Islam: Prerequisites and Impediments," *Islam Today: Journal of the Islamic Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization -ISESCO-* 25 (2008): 87–100; Taha Abderrahmane, "On the Trusteeship Critique of Modernism," *Islam Today: Journal of the Islamic Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization -ISESCO-* 32 (2016): 57–70; Taha Abderrahman, "A Global Ethic: Its Scope and Limits," *Tabah Papers Series*, no. 1 (2008); and Taha Abderrahmane, *Dialogues for the Future*, trans. Abdellah El Boubekri (Leiden: Brill, 2023).

30 Hasan Azad, "Knowledge as Politics by Other Means: An Interview with Wael Hallaq (Part One)," 2014, http://www.jadaliyya.com/Details/30650.

31 The only early reference to him is found in a scathing review of his thesis. See Dominique Mallet, "Abderrahmane, Taha: Langage et Philosophie. Essai sur les structures linguistiques de l'ontologie," *Bulletin critique des annales Islamologiques* XXII 3 (1986): 74–79.

aforementioned interview as well as in a couple of his books as an outstanding example of creative contemporary Muslim thought. His recent publication of a monograph dedicated to Ṭāhā suggests, moreover, that he is willing to at least test the digestibility of the philosophy of Ṭāhā, whom he describes in the preface as "one of the most significant philosophers that the world of Islam has produced since colonialism set foot in Afro-Asia."[32]

Another major spokesperson for Ṭāhā in Western academia is his compatriot Mohammed Hashas, who has published several articles on the former's religious-ethical project in English and is one of the editors of a volume on Ṭāhā.[33] Another effort to disseminate his ideas in the English-speaking world was undertaken by editors of the *Global Media Journal*, who dedicated an issue to Ṭāhā's work containing a number of reviews and an article by Chokri Mimouni.[34] Among those who contributed to this issue is Michael Bevers, an American scholar who recently wrote a PhD thesis on the ethical project of Ṭāhā ʿAbd al-Raḥmān.[35] Bevers, like Hashas, sees in Ṭāhā's work a promising project for articulating a new moral and philosophical future. A more reserved, but very knowledgeable assessment of a particular aspect of Ṭāhā's thought is found in an article by Monir Birouk on the Heideggerian strand in his writings.[36] Finally, three recent additions to the secondary literature on Ṭāhā are Abdessamad Belhaj's article on Ṭāhā's perspective on the ethics of the family,[37] Azelarabe Lahkim Bennabi's well-founded reflection on civil disobedience in light of Ṭāhā's ethics,[38] and an informed and bal-

32 Hallaq, *Reforming Modernity: Ethics and the New Human in the Philosophy of Abdurrahman Taha*, xiii.

33 Hashas, "Taha Abderrahmane's Trusteeship Paradigm: Spiritual Modernity and the Islamic Contribution to the Formation of a Renewed Universal Civilization of Ethos"; Mohammed Hashas, "The Arab Right to Difference: Taha Abderrahmane's Concept of the Awakened Youth and the Formation of Modern Arab Nationhood," in *Islam in International Relations: Politics and Paradigms*, ed. Nassef Manabilang Adiong, Raffaele Mauriello, and Deina Abdelkader (Oxford/New York: Routledge, 2019); Mohammed Hashas and Mutaz al-Khatib, eds., *Islamic Ethics and the Trusteeship Paradigm: Taha Abderrahmane's Philosophy in Comparative Perspectives*, Studies in Islamic Ethics (Leiden: Brill, 2020).

34 Chokri Mimouni, "Taha Abderrahman Dans La Ligné Des Philosophes de l'Occident Musulman," *Global Media Journal—Édition canadienne* 9, no. 2 (2016): 27–39.

35 Michael Bevers, "Islam, Globalization and Modernity: Approaching Global Ethics Through the Works of Taha Abderrahmane" (Indiana University, 2018).

36 Monir Birouk, "Taha Abderrahmane: Applying Heidegger as a Heuristic for Conceptual Authenticity," in *Heidegger in the Islamicate World* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2019), 113–31.

37 Abdessamad Belhaj, "'The Fall of The Western Family': Ṭāhā 'Abd al-Raḥmān's Critical Islamic Ethics," *Reorient* 4, no. 1 (2018): 24–43.

38 Azelarabe Lahkim Bennani, "Der Protest und die Verpflichtung zur Einhaltung der Gesetze bei dem marokkanischen Philosophen Ṭāhā ʿAbd ar-Raḥmān," in *Historizität und Transzendenz im*

anced, but also critical assessment of his project by Farid Suleiman.[39] A very recent addition to this literature is the comprehensive overview of Ṭāhā's philosophy in the Grundriss der Geschichte der Philosophie.[40]

Apart from these publications which are wholly dedicated to Ṭāhā's work, his name surfaces in a number of English books, and in at least two written in German. He makes a brief appearance in a book by Tarik Sabry in articulating the idea of an alternative, ethical modernity.[41] Ebrahim Moosa, in an article published in 2014, takes a closer look at Ṭāhā's reading of the fourteenth-century Andalusian scholar Abū Isḥāq al-Shāṭibī, and compares it to that of Ṭāhā's foremost intellectual rival, Muḥammad ʿĀbid al-Jābirī.[42] As is the case in discussions in Arabic, the comparison of these two Moroccan intellectuals is popular. It dominates the first chapter of Hallaq's monograph on Ṭāhā, and surfaces again in two recent articles, one by Samuel Kigar, in which he looks at their respective use of the "archive," and another by Mohamed Wajdi Ben Hammed that compares a Sufi temporality that he finds in Ṭāhā with the disenchanted, anti-mystical temporal orientation of al-Jābirī.[43] Ṭāhā's critique of al-Jābirī's four-volume *Critique of Arab Reason* is briefly discussed by Abdelkader al Ghouz in his overview of this landmark in contemporary Arab thought.[44] An early discussion of Ṭāhā is also found in another German

Islam: Offenbarung, Geschichte und Recht, ed. Jameleddine Ben Abdeljelil, vol. 4, *Islam im Diskurs* (Berlin: EB Verlag, 2017), 193–210.

39 Farid Suleiman, "The Philosophy of Taha Abderrahman: A Critical Study," *Die Welt des Islams* 66, no. 1 (2020): 1–33.

40 Sarhan Dhouib and Harald Viersen, "§ 8.10 ʿAbdarraḥmān Ṭāhā (Ṭāhā ʿAbdarraḥmān)," in *Bd. IV "Geschichte der Philosophie in der islamischen Welt des 19. und 20. Jahrhunderts,"* ed. Anke von Kügelgen and Ulrich Rudolph, vol. 1, *Grundriss der Geschichte der Philosophie 4* (Basel: Schwabe Verlag, 2021), 484–96. Another recent publication in which some of the points discussed in this chapter appear in review is Harald Viersen, "Rethinking Reform: ʿAbd al-Raḥmān Ṭāhā and the Temporal Reconceptualization of the Authenticity–Modernity Paradigm," *Religions* 14, no. 2 (February 8, 2023): 225.

41 Sabry, *Cultural Encounters in the Arab World: On Media, the Modern and the Everyday*, 37.

42 Ebrahim Moosa, "On Reading Shāṭibī in Rabat and Tunis," in *Maqasid Al Shari'a and Contemporary Reformist Muslim Thought: An Examination* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 177–92.

43 Kigar, "Arguing the Archive: Ṭāhā ʿAbd al-Raḥmān, Muḥammad ʿĀbid al-Jābirī, and the Future of Islamic Thought"; Mohamed Wajdi Ben Hammed, "(Dis)Enchanting Modernity: Sufism and Its Temporality in the Thought of Mohammed Abed al-Jabri and Taha Abdurrahman," *The Journal of North African Studies* 26, no. 3 (2019): 1–20.

44 Al Ghouz, *Vernunft und Kanon in der zeitgenössischen arabisch-islamischen Philosophie. Zu Muḥammad ʿĀbed al-Ǧābirīs (1936–2010) rationalistischer Lesart des Kulturerbes in seinem Werk "Kritik der arabischen Vernunft,"* 283–84.

publication, namely Geert Hendrich's *Islam und Aufklārung*.[45] Lastly, a recent addition to Western scholarship by Ahmad Obiedat considers Ṭāhā's thought in a global perspective, comparing it to the Argentinian-Canadian philosopher Mario Bunge.[46]

It is noteworthy that Ṭāhā's reception has not been universally favorable. Nelly Lahoud in her book on political thought in the Arab world dismisses Ṭāhā's work as a "conspiracy-philosophy theory that is meant to appeal to popular political lines."[47] Given her particular focus on one title, *al-Ḥaqq al-ʿArabī fī al-Ikhtilāf al-Falsafī* (*The Arab Right to Philosophical Difference*), her disparaging view is understandable. The book was written during the Second Intifada, and the author's resentment against Western and Zionist oppression of the Palestinians in particular and of Arabs more generally is obvious and, at times, gives way to anti-Semitic conspiracy theorizing.[48] This aspect of Ṭāhā's philosophy deserves more attention (and

45 Geert Hendrich devotes several pages to his philosophy, but his treatment of him does not evince a deep engagement with his work. Basing himself solely on the rather technical philosophy of language in *Fiqh al-Falsafa*, he is correct in distinguishing the relativist tenor of Ṭāhā's philosophy of language. However, although he notes the latter's religious worldview, he is too hasty in drawing the conclusion that Ṭāhā abides by his linguistic relativism. His argument for the heterogeneity of reason that results from the singular relation between language and thought is surely influenced by Western ideas that may have abetted relativism in late twentieth-century philosophy, but if we go beyond this work and look at this entire project, we find anything but a post-modern relativist inclination. Rather, from very early on it is clear that Ṭāhā argues for the superiority of Islamic reason, precisely because it counters the perfidious relativism that abounds in modern Western thought. Hence, Hendrich's assessment that Ṭāhā's philosophy "can hardly be described other than as 'mystical-Islamic secularism'" should cause some raised eyebrows among those familiar with this philosophy – see Hendrich, *Islam und Aufklärung: Der Modernediskurs in der arabischen Philosophie*, 346.

46 A. Z. Obiedat, *Modernity and the Ideals of Arab-Islamic and Western-Scientific Philosophy: The Worldviews of Mario Bunge and Taha Abd al-Rahman* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, Springer Nature Switzerland, 2022).

47 Nelly Lahoud, *Political Thought in Islam* (London and New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 2005), 39.

48 ʿAbd al-Raḥmān Ṭāhā, *al-Ḥaqq al-ʿArabī fī al-Ikhtilāf al-Falsafī*, 2nd ed. (Beirut: al-Markaz al-Thaqāfī al-ʿArabī, 2009). A brief summary of this part of Ṭāhā's book is in order here. According to him, philosophy is premised on opposition, on questioning the status quo and looking for ways to improve our lot in a world that is constantly changing (p. 19). Moreover, this kind of critique requires creativity and an open exchange of radically different opinions and ideas that arise in different cultures and languages. Fruitful philosophical discussion is founded on critical engagement with difference. Each people ought therefore to be entitled to a philosophy on the basis of its own cultural and linguistic specificities (p. 21). This heterogeneous picture is radically opposed to the ruling Western philosophical paradigm which, he says, aspires to establish universal philosophical truths that transcend national boundaries. It is a conception of philosophy that is rooted deep in the Western tradition, starting with the ancient Greeks who believed that philosophical

it is bound to be discussed more as Ṭāhā gains readers in the West).[49] However, it would be unfair to use it as the sole measure for Ṭāhā's oeuvre. The anti-Semitism is there, but it is not obviously a structural element of his philosophy in the way that, for instance, his critique of the West is. Lahoud's commentary is therefore not incorrect, but neither is it even-handed.[50] What we need, if we want to go beyond such fragmentary analysis of Ṭāhā – whether positive like Hendrich's or negative like Lahoud's – is a comprehensive overview of Ṭāhā's philosophy as a whole. This,

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arguments have a universal claim, because they appeal to the force of reason which is universally shared by each human being. This model of reason was taken over wholesale by Arab philosophers, who passed it on to the nascent Aristotelian movement in Europe through Muslim thinkers like Averroës, but also through Jewish philosophers. At this point, his critique of classical universalism morphs into a critique of the universal pretense of modern philosophy. Behind the façade of its lofty Enlightenment ideals and proclamation of the self-evident truth of human equality, lurks a very local and politicized philosophical perspective. First of all, he argues that European thinkers limited the concept of philosophy to apply only to "European" thought. Next, German intellectual dominance in the modern age has rendered this supposedly European tradition a German one. Lastly, because German thought is suffused with Jewish influences, it is effectively a pendant of Jewish thought, engaging in debates and using ideas that stem from the Torah under the influence of an abstracted Greek rationalism passed on by Jewish thinkers (p. 60).

It is at this point that Ṭāhā strays into the conspiracy theory territory noted by Nelly Lahoud. Not only does he regard modern universalist claims as essentially Jewish, he also connects them to a political agenda. European Jewry, he claims, used the freedoms afforded to them following the French Revolution to become economically powerful. This development took place during the rise of nationalism, which offered Jewish intellectuals an opportunity to lay claim to their own biblical "homeland" in Palestine. With the emigration of German Jews to America, their economic and intellectual influence moved stateside as well, allowing them to cement their domination over modern intellectual discourse and use it for political ends, namely to taint anyone who confronts Jewish power with the brush of anti-Semitism – as he says happened with Martin Heidegger, amongst others (p. 65). Ṭāhā laments that "in the realm of modern thought we witness the construction of a universal, Jewish, philosophical cosmos, in which the Gentile assimilates the (earlier) Jewish assimilation, intentionally or unintentionally" (p. 63). Universalism in philosophy, then, is "nothing more than nationalist philosophy founded on political Judaism" (p. 72).

49 To my knowledge, there have been, until now, only two instances of someone clearly calling out Ṭāhā on this position; see Anke von Kügelgen, "Vorrede zur Buchreihe," in *Wissenschaft, Philosophie und Religion: Religionskritische Positionen um 1900,* ed. Anke von Kügelgen, Philosophie in der nahöstlichen Moderne (Berlin: Klaus Schwarz Verlag, 2017), 25–26, and Moser, *Akademische Philosophie in der arabischen Welt: Inhalte—Insititutionen—Periodika*, 41.

50 Another instance of anti-semitic sentiment can be found in Ṭāhā's *Modernity and Resistance*, in which he voices his support for the militant formation of Hezbollah as a model of resistance – see ʿAbd al-Raḥmān Ṭāhā, *al-Ḥadātha wa-l-Muqāwama* (Beirut: Maʿhad al-Maʿārif al-Ḥikmiyya li-l-Dirāsāt al-Dīniyya wa-l-Falsafiyya, 2008). It must be added that this contrasts with a vehement rejection of violence in *The Question of Violence* – see ʿAbd al-Raḥmān Ṭāhā, *Suʾāl al-ʿUnf: bayn al-Iʾtimāniyya wa-l-Ḥiwāriyya* (Beirut: al-Muʾassasa al-ʿArabiyya li-l-Fikr wa-l-Ibdāʿ, 2017).

I believe, will prove to be a sounder basis for judging the merits of his philosophy, the role that it plays in contemporary Arab intellectual culture, and the extent to which it can or cannot be severed from his political convictions.[51]

6.1.3 Influences on Ṭāhā

References to his immediate intellectual background and orientation in Ṭāhā's writings are scant. He often uses sources from Islamic *turāth,* and uses established Sufi vocabulary. He even refers by name (though not always) to the people against whom he reacts, like al-Jābirī.[52] He does not often, however, cite a modern figure as a source of inspiration. Nevertheless, it is possible to pinpoint some direct influences woven into his philosophical project. This project combines several facets, among them a turn to the authentic sources of *turāth*, an emphasis on uncovering the traditional epistemological methods at the core of this *turāth*, and the need to use this heritage to ground a creative, contemporary philosophical tradition. According to Ibrāhīm Mashrūḥ, these aspects evince the influence of three influential figures in the post-war Moroccan intellectual scene. The first is ʿAlāl al-Fāsī, the Islamist philosopher who became the primary voice of the Islamic reform movement in the Maghrib during middle of the twentieth century (who was the main target of Laroui's critique of Salafism in his book *L'ideologie arabe contemporaine*). His call for a combination between the authentic sources of Islamic learning and the modern is clearly visible in Ṭāhā's work, as well as in the Moroccan school of philosophy as a whole.[53]

A second major influence on both Ṭāhā and other Moroccan intellectuals appears to have been the Egyptian philosopher ʿAlī Sāmī al-Nashshār, whose legacy is a continuation of the project to rediscover Islamic philosophy started by Muṣṭafā ʿAbd al-Rāziq, his teacher in Cairo. Al-Nashshār taught Ṭāhā when the latter was a student of philosophy at the Muḥammad V University in Rabat. One thing that he is chiefly known for is his emphasis on methodology. In his history of Islamic philosophy, al-Nashshār wanted to bring to light not just the ideas of important Muslim thinkers, but their ways of thinking. One of the claims he makes is that the authentic Arab way of philosophizing is not found among the works classified as philos-

51 The list of Arabic publications on Ṭāhā's philosophy is already quite extensive and growing. A number of them are mentioned in a footnote to Riḍwān Marḥūm's introduction of Ṭāhā's book *Su'āl al-Manhaj.* See Ṭāhā, *Su'āl al-Manhaj: fī Ufuq lt-Ta'sīs l-Unmūdaj Fikrī Jadīd*, 13–16n3.

52 For example, see Ṭāhā, *Tajdīd al-Manhaj fī Taqwīm al-Turāth*, 29–71.

53 Mashrūḥ, *Ṭāhā ʿAbd al-Raḥmān: Qirā'a fī Mashrūʿihi al-Fikrī*, 37.

ophy, but rather in the rich tradition of *kalām.*[54] This idea, in particular, would be taken up by Ṭāhā and elaborated by comparing and combining *kalām* methodologies with modern Western ideas about logic, semantics, and pragmatics.

A third influence mentioned by Mashrūḥ is the Moroccan philosopher whose name became associated with the personalist school of thought: Muḥammad ʿAzīz al-Ḥabbābī (Lahbabi). What seems to have attracted Ṭāhā in al-Ḥabbābī is his creative style of writing. His writings are filled with linguistic innovations and imaginations that, Ṭāhā admits, impressed him mightily.[55] Indeed, one of the things that makes Ṭāhā's writings so challenging to read is his own experimentation with language, his use of idiosyncratic vocabulary, and the fact that he makes full use of the triliteral structure of the Arabic language to construct sets of interrelated concepts.[56]

Greater than the influence of any of these individual thinkers on the philosophical project of Ṭāhā has been his deep engagement with Sufism, both as a student of Sufi doctrine and as a member of the Būdshīshī order – an offshoot of the Qādirī order. Sufi concepts, vocabulary, and references pervade his writings. From the invocation of a multi-stage conception of reason and the capability of human reason to come in contact with the Real that lies behind the appearances, to the use of Sufi terminology in explaining how this process of gradual familiarization with the Unseen (*al-ghayb*) is entered into, Ṭāhā clearly positions himself within the Sufi tradition. At the same time, since his entry into the *ṭarīqa*, he has become perhaps the most esteemed spokesperson of his own order, the flourishing Būdshīshī *ṭarīqa*, formerly under the aegis of the esteemed Sīdī Ḥamzā (1922–2017) and currently headed by his son, al-Sayyid Jamāl al-Dīn al-Būdshīshī al-Qādirī (b. 1942).[57]As such, Ṭāhā's philosophical project may not only be read as a modern Sufi-inspired evaluative and normative framework; it also represents the systematic articulation of the program of a specific Sufi order whose previous leader aspired to renew

54 Mashrūḥ, *Ṭāhā ʿAbd al-Raḥmān: Qirā'a fī Mashrūʿihi al-Fikrī*, 38.

55 Mashrūḥ, *Ṭāhā ʿAbd al-Raḥmān: Qirā'a fī Mashrūʿihi al-Fikrī*, 38.

56 We met al-Ḥabbābī earlier as a contributor to the 1984 conference (ch. 2) and in discussing personalism as an influence on Adonis and the Beirut circle of intellectuals around al-Khāl (ch. 5).

57 These are some of the publications on contemporary Moroccan Sufism in which Ṭāhā is mentioned as a leading intellectual of the Būdshīshī: Khalid Bekkaoui and Ricardo René Larémont, "Moroccan Youth Go Sufi," *The Journal of the Middle East and Africa* 2, no. 1 (2011): 36–37, and Patrick Haenni and Raphael Voix, "God By All Means…Eclectic Faith and Sufi Resurgence Among Moroccan Bourgeoisie," in *Sufism And The "Modern" World*, ed. Martin Van Bruinessen and Julia Day Howell (London: Tauris, 2007), 247. As a measure of Ṭāhā's (lack of) recognition among Western scholars, in the latter publication his name is rendered as "Taha Abdelrehim."

Islam in the modern age.[58] From the moment that he became leader of the order, Sheikh Sīdī Ḥamza explicitly promoted a form of Sufism that gives direction in modern life. He advocated a form of Sufism that is quite easygoing. It does not demand any form of reclusion, and one can easily fit membership of the order with a modern lifestyle. Sīdī Ḥamza also positioned Sufism squarely in the modern context, as a response to what he viewed as the imbalance typical of modern life between the material and the spiritual. Modern man lives in a disenchanted society, of which the moral-religious fabric has been destroyed due to the "advances" of post-Renaissance Western culture. Sīdī Ḥamza believed that a renewed Sufism should strive to counteract this tendency through a renewal of Sufi teaching.[59] Interestingly, the justification for this project of renewal is found in the heart of the Islamic tradition, specifically in the notion, elaborated by al-Ghazālī, that Islamic history is defined in terms of periods of decline and renewal (*tajdīd*). As Rachida Chih notes:

> The decline of Islam (*fasād al-zamān*) with the passage of time, as predicted by Muhammad, is interpreted by the Būdshīshīs, and by Sufis in general, as a decline in the spiritual influx (*sirr*) of God's Messenger. This influx had permeated his community while he was alive and was preserved after his death only by a small circle of pious men, elected by God, to whom fell the task of revivifying this legacy.[60]

While it is surely the case that Ṭāhā's notion of renewal, like that of Sīdī Ḥamza, is rooted in the Sufi tradition, from this it does not follow that their views are not in tune with current times. They both react to a modern context in which an anti-spiritual, rationalist, and materialist image of the West features as a counterpoint to the "spiritual influx of God's Messenger." The Sufi order may justify its model for renewal with reference to tradition, but that does not mean that the meaning of

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58 Several researchers have noted the rise of this order since the 1960s. Much of the order's success has been attributed to its leader Sīdī Ḥamzā. Apart from his allegedly mesmerizing charisma, his pragmatic stance on Sufi and Islamic rules and practices – for example, not being too adamant on veiling and not advocating shrine worship – has made membership attractive for a Moroccan elite, who would likely be put off by practices they judge as being overly "strict" or "irrational." The Būdshīshīyya order first broke into Morocco's Francophone elite when in the 1960s the "prominent socialist intellectual" ʿAbd al-Salām al-Walī visited the order's lodge with the aim of confronting it, and instead became convinced of the truth of the Sufi path – see Mark Sedgwick, "In Search of a Counter-Reformation: Anti-Sufi Stereotypes and the Būdshīshīyya's Response," in *An Islamic Reformation?*, ed. Michelle Browers and Charles Kurzman (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2004), 134.
59 Karim Ben Driss, *Sidi Hamza Al-Qâdiri Boudchich: Le renouveau du soufisme (au Maroc)* (Paris: Albouraq-Archè, 2002), 141–44.
60 Rachida Chih, "Sufism, Education and Politics in Contemporary Morocco," *Journal for Islamic Studies* 32 (2012): 38.

these older elements remains the same in a modern context. There is of course nothing remarkable about this. It is precisely how a healthy tradition functions, namely by innovating in response to new contexts. It is, however, something that we need to stay aware of when reading Ṭāhā. For even while he invokes the tradition continuously to buttress his project for renewal, this does not mean that he is merely sticking to the past.

A useful model for taking together the traditional, Sufi elements and their use in response to the modern context is that of the early twentieth-century French intellectual and convert to Islam René Guénon. Although the underpinnings of Sīdī Ḥamza's critical stance towards Western modernity are somewhat murky, it has been noted that the anti-modern positions that percolate among members of the order are marked by the influence of Guénon.[61] Although it is not certain that Ṭāhā has read Guénon, he must surely be familiar with his work. In any case, the way in which he frames his critique of the West is remarkably reminiscent of the philosophical trend associated with Guénon known as "traditionalism." Regardless of the degree to which Ṭāhā was directly "influenced" by Guénon, the traditionalist teachings serve as a handy heuristic in understanding Ṭāhā's modernity critique, and as an introduction to his philosophy it is therefore useful to recall some of its main tenets.

Briefly, traditionalism claims that truth is reached, not through the use of reason and breaking with one's past, but through the preservation of tradition, by which he means the spiritual principle that suffuses creation. Guénon's conception of civilizational development is cyclical, and revolves around man's awareness of tradition as the spiritual principle. The highpoint of civilization is the point at which the spiritual principle is disclosed to man. As society progresses, it becomes more focused on the material side of life and forgetful of the spiritual principle.[62] The only way to reinvigorate our lives is to return to the truth found in tradition. Clearly, this theory entails a rejection of the gospel of progress – Comtean positivism remained one of the leading philosophical orientations in France during the 1920s when Guénon developed his theories. Instead of seeing the Renaissance as a rebirth, as an awakening of human reason, he portrays it as the beginning of human degradation and "the death of many things."[63] This inversive line of reasoning is characteristic of Guénon (and Ṭāhā). Time and again we find him arguing that what looks to be a triumph of human ingenuity or the vindication of his free-

61 Sedgwick, "In Search of a Counter-Reformation: Anti-Sufi Stereotypes and the Budshishiyya's Response," 136.
62 René Guénon, *The Crisis of the Modern World*, trans. Marco Pallis, Arthur Osborne, and Richard C. Nicholson (Hillsdale, NY: Sophia Perennis, 2001), 7–8.
63 Guénon, *The Crisis of the Modern World*, 50.

dom is, in fact, the very opposite. In a similar vein, he rails against the empirical sciences, which, according to him, have only succeeded in divorcing the study of individual facts from their overarching principles, leading to a fragmented worldview.[64] At the theoretical level, the modern scientific endeavor has resulted in chaos and relativism.[65] Its only relevance to modern man is in supplying new practical applications.[66]

In short, the Western conception of knowledge is imperfect, since it can only get at the objects indirectly so as to serve immediate practical ends, not in order to contemplate the ultimate truth. The modern worldview is disintegrated, lacking a unifying spiritual principle.[67] Modern man, under the influence of humanism, has exalted the individual, and now only acknowledges the motivating force of satisfying his material desires.[68] In a further instance of "inversion," Guénon argues that modern man, in his quest to control the material world so as to satisfy his wants, has instead become the slave of his own desires.[69] Equally central to Guénon's worldview is "the unmistakable gulf between East and West."[70] Where the East has preserved the spiritual principle of tradition, the West has forfeited it by descending into materialism. The divide therefore is not essential to these cultural macrospheres. Rather, it is the result of the West's forgetfulness of the moral essence of mankind. Were the West to be put into contact with the living traditional spirit of the East, this division would quickly dissolve.[71] This, in a nutshell, is the goal of Guénon's and equally of Ṭāhā's project, to bring humanity back to its authentic ethical origins, to renew the spiritual bond between man and the cosmos by renewing the individual.

6.1.4 Style

Before finally discussing the content of Ṭāhā's philosophy, it is necessary to remark on one last distinctive aspect of Ṭāhā's writings, which is his peculiar style and his rigid structuring of his argument. His books are meticulously structured. Each works out a central question by dealing in turn with its constituent elements

64 Guénon, *The Crisis of the Modern World*, 16.
65 Guénon, *The Crisis of the Modern World*, 39.
66 Guénon, *The Crisis of the Modern World*, 46.
67 Guénon, *The Crisis of the Modern World*, 38.
68 Guénon, *The Crisis of the Modern World*, 55.
69 Guénon, *The Crisis of the Modern World*, 19.
70 Guénon, *The Crisis of the Modern World*, 21.
71 Guénon, *The Crisis of the Modern World*, 29.

and breaking them up into ever smaller sub-questions. All the while, he helpfully reminds his reader of the big picture by summarizing the findings of each section and connecting them to the overall narrative. In the way he structures his books, we may discern a Sufi predilection for using tripartite divisions. Again and again we see him summoning conceptual triplets.[72] His arguments, moreover, follow the classic argumentative precepts of *munāẓara*, an Islamic mode of argumentation that he has detailed in his first book in Arabic *Fī Uṣūl al-Ḥiwār wa Tajdīd ʿIlm al-Kalām* (*On the Origins of Conversation and the Renewal of the Science of Theological Discourse.*)[73]

Ṭāhā strives to write in a way reminiscent of classical Arabic while sprinkling it with his own neologisms that draw on juridical, theological, Qur'anic, and especially Sufi vocabulary. Often, these neologisms result from different constructions using the same triliteral Arabic root. To take one example, in *al-Ḥaqq al-ʿArabī fī al-Ikhtilāf al-Falsafī* (*The Arab Right to Philosophical Difference*), Ṭāhā uses different nouns derived from the root Q-W-M (ق – و – م) – the semantic core of which relates to standing up – to distinguish between different ways of standing up to an opponent. Using this particular root, moreover, adds an allusive dimension to his analysis. Not only is it related to standing up (in revolt), but it equally refers to evaluation (*taqwīm*) and values (*qiyam*). This intricate way of systematizing his thought through the use of the peculiarities of Arabic morphology helps him to construct allusions that connect terms and thereby broaden their meaning. Ṭāhā adds to his arsenal of allusion by often juxtaposing terms that, though not strictly relating to the same root, are sufficiently close to suggest resemblance – for instance *istiqlāl* (independence) and *istiqāla* (resignation).[74] Furthermore, he is fond of using words of different roots, but of the same morphological pattern, to point to structural similarities. An obvious example is his division of forms of reason into *tajrīd* (abstraction), *tasdīd* (guidance), and *taʾyīd* (support). Opinions differ on whether this attention to allusive language amounts to genius or pedantic abstruseness. What is not in doubt, is that this aspect of his writing makes it extremely difficult to render Ṭāhā's writings in translation.

A final point of style, and one that is simultaneously central to the content of his philosophy, is his idiosyncratic vocabulary. Ṭāhā is very particular about the nuances of different terms in Arabic. His reasons for this are not stylistic but phil-

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72 Annemarie Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1975), 13.

73 Abd al-Raḥmān Ṭāhā, *Fī Uṣūl al-Ḥiwār wa Tajdīd ʿIlm al-Kalām* (Beirut: al-Markaz al-Thaqāfī al-ʿArabī, 2014).

74 ʿAbd al-Raḥmān Ṭāhā, *al-ʿAmal al-Dīnī wa-Tajdīd al-ʿAql*, 4th ed. (Casablanca: al-Markaz al-Thaqāfī al-ʿArabī, 2009), 67.

osophical, and will be discussed later on. For now, it suffices to note that, according to him, the use of foreign loanwords corrupts the Arab's ability to think creatively in a way that is only possible in his pure mother tongue. Therefore, Ṭāhā resorts to creating Arabic equivalents for terms that are normally simply Arabized versions of foreign concepts – for example, *fikrāniyya* for *aydiyūlūjiyya* (ideology).[75] He also takes issue with particular Arabizations of European terms that do not respect the specific cultural-linguistic context of the Arabic language – for example, his rejection of the term *ʿalmānī* for the French *laïc* and the English *secular.*[76] Also, Ṭāhā likes to make distinctions that bring out certain traits in modern culture that to him appear salient. An example of this is his differentiation between the terms

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75 ʿAbd al-Raḥmān Ṭāhā, *Rūḥ al-Dīn: min Ḍayq al-ʿAlmāniyya īlā Saʿat al-Iʾtimāniyya* (Beirut: al-Markaz al-Thaqāfī al-ʿArabī, 2017), 17.

76 ʿAbd al-Raḥmān Ṭāhā, *Ḥiwārāt min Ajl al-Mustaqbal* (Beirut: Manshūrāt al-Zaman, 2000), 121n1. Whereas the term *ʿalmānī* is usually rendered as *secular* in English, or *laïc* in French, Ṭāhā uses a footnote of considerable length to show that this is incorrect, and that the more appropriate Arabic equivalent of "*laïc*" is, in fact, *dahrī.* This term may be translated as "temporal," and as such it carries both connotations of the term that we also find in English – that is, of "secular/worldly" and "denoting time." The noun *dahr*, moreover, is used in Qur'anic verse 45:24, which challenges those who deny the afterworld: "And they say: 'This worldly life of ours is all there is – we die and we live, and nothing but time (*dahr*) destroys us.' But they have no knowledge of it; they are only speculating." The term *dahriyat*, as Samuli Schielke mentions, carries a more ontological reference tracing back to this verse. On the transformation of this Qur'anic term into a modern notion of atheism he comments that:

> In the following centuries the Qur'anic reference to dahr, the impersonal power of time/fate, became the template for dahriyya, a polemic catch-all term in Muslim scholarly literature for any non-creationist ontology, including pre-Islamic Arabian beliefs and Aristotelian metaphysics alike. What once may have been a sort of fatalist historicism, has thus eventually come to denote materialism and atheism in modern usage. (Samuli Schielke, "Ch 40: The Islamic World," in The Oxford Handbook of Atheism, ed. Stephen Bullivant and Michael Ruse [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013], 639)

Lastly, it bears mentioning that the term *dahriyyūn* was used, amongst others, by Muḥammad ʿAbduh and Jamāl al-Dīn al-Afghānī to refer to materialist or naturalist thinkers who claim "that nothing exists but blind nature" – see Jamāl al-Dīn al-Afghānī, "The Materialists in India," in *An Islamic Response to Imperialism: Political and Religious Writings of Sayyid Jamāl Ad-Dīn "al-Afghānī,"* trans. Nikki R. Keddie (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), 177. This term gained wide recognition when ʿAbduh translated al-Afghānī's polemic against the naturalist (*neicheri*) sect of Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan as *al-Radd ʿalā al-Dahriyyīn* (The refutation of the materialists) – see Jamāl ad-Dīn al-Afghānī, "The Truth about the Neicheri Sect and an Explanation of the Neicheris," in *An Islamic Response to Imperialism: Political and Religious Writings of Sayyid Jamāl Ad-Dīn "al-Afghānī,"* trans. Nikki R. Keddie and Hamid Algar (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), 131–74.

ʿilāqa zawjiyya and *ʿilāqa zawwājiyya.* The former would normally be used to refer to a marital relationship. However, since many couples in the West now live together as a family without being officially married, Ṭāhā feels he needs to make a distinction between this and the official marital relationship, reserving the term *zawājiyya* for the relationship not involving an official marriage.[77] (Needless to say, there is often a moral judgment involved in making these distinctions.)

6.2 The Paris project

6.2.1 *Langage et philosophie*

Ṭāhā molded his philosophical project over decades. It contains diverse strands that interlock and support each other, and that have been further developed and redefined as their author gave shape to his worldview. Many ideas that form the bedrock of Ṭāhā's later philosophy arose out of his PhD thesis, finished in 1972 and published in 1979 under the title *Langage et philosophie: Essai sur les structures linguistiques de l'ontologie.*[78] The main point of this work is to argue for an inherent link between language and metaphysics. This thesis, that language determines how we think and thus how we "carve up" the world, traces back to the Romantics – in particular Wilhelm von Humboldt's thesis of the relation between the spirit of a people and its language – and was again embraced in the twentieth century, notably by anthropologically inclined linguists like Edward Sapir and Benjamin Whorf, whose Sapir-Whorf thesis was only clearly stated posthumously and gained academic traction from the 1950s. It can also be seen in postwar philosophy, such as the ontological relativism espoused by the Duhem-Quine thesis.

Ṭāhā's way of making a similar point is to say that language is essentially a form of transposing Being – that is, the world "out there" – into thought.[79]

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77 ʿAbd al-Raḥmān Ṭāhā, *Rūḥ al-Ḥadātha: al-Madkhal ilā Taʾsīs al-Ḥadātha al-Islāmiyya*, 3rd ed. (Beirut: al-Markaz al-Thaqāfī al-ʿArabī, 2013), 99–100.

78 This early part of Ṭāhā's development has been largely overlooked in the literature, both in Arabic and in other languages. One attempt to remedy this is the entry about ʿAbd al-Raḥmān Ṭāhā by Sarhan Dhouib and myself in the volume on Islamic philosophy in the past two centuries that will be published as part of the *Überweg*-series – see Dhouib and Viersen, "§ 8.10 ʿAbdarraḥmān Ṭāhā (Ṭāhā ʿAbdarraḥmān)."

79 Taha, *Langage et philosophie: essai sur les structures linguistiques de l'ontologie*, 155–57. (Taha, Langage et philosophie: essai sur les structures linguistiques de l'ontologie, 153).

Human language is of a fundamentally different order than existence.[80] It is not a mere copy of what is out there; it functions according to its own rules. This autonomy is precisely what enables language to capture "what there is," that is, Being. The world, Ṭāhā implies, is ever-changing in indefinitely many ways that are all related to each other in one holistic universe.[81] If you try to get a hold of it in a finite rigid system that purports to give an exact representation of what exists "out there," you lose out on this richness and distort the original. Instead, we require a flexible and diverse natural language with its infinitely many ambiguous ways of relating to the world, to capture its bounty of meaning. That is why, Ṭāhā concludes, "despite the break between Being and language, the latter remains the only instrument adequate for translating the former, and this it does by substituting for the order of Being another order that is as perfect."[82]

Since, in this view, language is not a representation but a transposition of Being, it is possible to have different transpositions that are equally truthful; if languages are structured differently, "every language must have its own categories through which it analyzes Being and communicates thought."[83] In other words, each language proposes a different way of making sense of the world, a different metaphysics. This Ṭāhā sees as a boon for human creativity, because, when adequately translated, these different perspectives may work together to gain a fuller understanding of the world.[84] On the flipside, we have to be careful not to privilege any framework linked to a particular language as somehow giving insight into the only "real" structure of Being. The picture painted by Ṭāhā appears similar to that of the famous Indian parable of the blind men and the elephant. Each of these men may have partial knowledge of the elephant by touching its tail, its skin, or its

80 "What we claim is that language is an order that is radically different from that of Being"
81 The metaphysical picture underlying Ṭāhā's project tends in the direction of what in Western tradition has been dubbed process philosophy. As with Ṭāhā, the foundational premise of process philosophy is a rejection of substance, that is, the idea that reality is made up of discrete objects. The long heritage of process philosophy in Western philosophy – an argument can be made for it stretching all the way back to Heraclitus – would appear to undermine Ṭāhā's essentialist depiction of Western thought. In addition, the fact that a currently burgeoning trend in metaphysics dubbed "speculative realism" is able to coalesce around the claim that Western metaphysics is not sufficiently "object-oriented," to use Graham Harman's term, would add to this criticism of Ṭāhā – see Graham Harman, *Speculative Realism: An Introduction* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2018), in particular the third chapter on Object-Oriented Ontology. (This is not to say that Ṭāhā does not have a point. Instead, I believe that this is one area where a more detailed discussion that fleshes out the metaphysical underpinnings of Ṭāhā's work in relation to Western and other traditions is worthwhile.)
82 Taha, *Langage et philosophie: essai sur les structures linguistiques de l'ontologie*, 155.
83 Taha, *Langage et philosophie: essai sur les structures linguistiques de l'ontologie*, 48.
84 Taha, *Langage et philosophie: essai sur les structures linguistiques de l'ontologie*, 157–58.

trunk, but they can only construct a complete picture by relating, comparing, and collating their individual perceptions. None of these is truer than the other, but together they make up a more complete picture of reality.[85]

Ṭāhā takes this argument one step further. Seeing that language (together with its associated metaphysics) is implicated in how the mind works, he concludes that every language is associated with a particular type of thought.[86] What's more, he states that even within the same language there is no single way of relating to the world. Discourse has different levels that are structured according to different intuitive, extralinguistic ways of thinking, and it is the task of the philosopher "to retrieve the movement of thought that internally animates the development of different levels of discourse. For this, we need to trace the foundation of the uses of language, the habits, and the linguistic traditions, and to grasp the expressive impulse and *noétique* that sustain them."[87] Ṭāhā uses the term *noétique* – derived from the Greek *noesis*, which roughly refers to intuitive cognition – in contradistinction to "ontology" to indicate "reality itself ... actively and naturally transposed in its equivalent."[88] Rather than look at Being itself, he wants to investigate how reality is shaped by the various ways in which man intuitively understands the world that surrounds him.

The upshot of this view would seem to be a thoroughgoing relativism. Yet Ṭāhā does not want to draw this conclusion. Again, as per the Indian parable, different *noétiques* may suggest different frameworks for conceptualizing reality, but these viewpoints are complimentary. They inform each other, as long as they are translated in ways that respect their noetic differences. At the same time, Ṭāhā does not treat every *noétique* as equivalent. While different ways of conceptualizing the world are not wrong per se, some are better than others. In particular, the ontological mode of thinking characteristic of Western thought is a source of scorn that will become more pronounced in his later writings. Ṭāhā attributes the onto-

85 This parable has been much appreciated in the Sufi tradition, for example, finding its way into Jalāl al-Dīn al-Rūmī's *Masnavi:* see Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī, *The Masnavi: Book 3*, trans. J. A. Mojaddedi (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), lines 1259–1362.

86 "If to every language corresponds a specific structuring of Being and if thought is Being that is modalized and transposed with the help of language, then it is proven that every discourse is accompanied by a specific type of thought" (Taha, *Langage et philosophie: essai sur les structures linguistiques de l'ontologie*, 159).

87 Taha, *Langage et philosophie: essai sur les structures linguistiques de l'ontologie*, 160.The argument for there being different levels within discourse remains rather scant in this book. It is more fully worked out in *al-ʿAmal al-Dīnī wa Tajdīd al-ʿAql* and in *al-Lisān wa-l-Mizān aw al-Takawthur al-ʿAqlī.* See Ṭāhā, *al-ʿAmal al-Dīnī wa-Tajdīd al-ʿAql*, 4th ed., and *al-Lisān wa-l-Mīzān aw al-Takawthur al-ʿAqlī*, 3rd ed. (Beirut: al-Markaz al-Thaqāfī al-ʿArabī, 2012).

88 Taha, *Langage et philosophie: essai sur les structures linguistiques de l'ontologie,* 159.

logization of Western thought to an odd quirk common to Western languages. Most of these include some equivalent of the verb “to be” as an important but peculiar structuring element. It is peculiar, because “is” can serve both syntactically as the copula in a predicative sentence, and semantically as a way of expressing existence in a verbal sentence.[89] This linguistic ambiguity has, so the argument goes, fundamentally shaped Western thought. The reason is that Greek philosophers took “being” as the starting point for philosophizing about the fundamental structure of the world, the Greek philosophical tradition as well as its modern Western successors thus committing themselves to a whole field of inquiry – the study of being, that is, ontology – on the basis of a linguistic contingency. They took an arbitrary syntactic construction for an indication of the deep structure of reality.[90]

The effects of this tendency are fully manifest in Aristotle’s logic. When we look at his logical categories, he makes a distinction between existence and essence that would later become highly influential in philosophy.[91] This distinction, far from being ontological, can be understood as the ontological transposition of the distinction between the absolute and the relative use of the Greek verb *εἶναι*.[92] In this manner, and on various occasions, Ṭāhā faults Western philosophy for having mixed up the syntactic and the semantic functions of the verb “to be.”[93] This “multivocité” of the copula, he argues, has engendered “the most absurd confusions and illusions.”[94] For example, it led philosophers to attribute existence to anything of which something has been predicated, as well as to a pervasive tenden-

89 Taha, *Langage et philosophie: essai sur les structures linguistiques de l’ontologie*, 13.

90 Taha, *Langage et philosophie: essai sur les structures linguistiques de l’ontologie*, 31–35.It should be noted that Ṭāhā was not the first to discuss the link between pre-philosophical aspects of Greek and the ontological vocabulary that came to undergird Greek philosophy; see Charles Kahn, “The Greek Verb ‘To Be’ and the Concept of Being,” *Foundations of Language* 2, no. 3 (1966): 245–65.

91 The most influential use of this distinction in the Islamic tradition is found in the philosophy of Avicenna (Ibn Sīnā), whose metaphysics (and in particular his proof for the existence of God) is founded on the differentiation between essence and existence. In the context of twentieth-century philosophy, the salience of this differentiation takes on a different character with the existentialist emphasis on existence as preceding essence. Seen from this perspective, it is perhaps no coincidence that Ṭāhā stresses precisely this distinction as he singles out Sartre as well as ʿAbd al-Raḥmān Badawī for criticism, the latter being the most famous Arab exponent of existentialism.

92 Taha, *Langage et philosophie: essai sur les structures linguistiques de l’ontologie*, 52.

93 Taha, *Langage et philosophie: essai sur les structures linguistiques de l’ontologie*, 143.

94 Taha, *Langage et philosophie: essai sur les structures linguistiques de l’ontologie*, 75.We should recall here Kant’s discussion of the copula.

cy to substantivize, that is, to assume a stable essence to which predicates can attach.[95]

More generally, Western philosophy's penchant for substantivization is partly to be blamed for its representationalism and its universalist claims. Because the centrality of Being suggests an ontology based on subsisting entities, it invites philosophers to think of language and thought as copies of this stable reality, not as a transposition of an always changing world. This causes them to assert that, if there is only one distinct reality out there, there can only be one ultimate correct way of capturing this reality in language. This has led philosophers, logicians, and linguists to envisage the possibility of a single universal logic and a single universal language that would make natural language as we know it largely obsolete. As we have seen, Ṭāhā is opposed to this idea. Although he does not deny that logical and linguistic models can serve a useful purpose, their finite means for expression make it impossible to capture the infinite dimensions of meaning contained in the world.[96]

Ṭāhā's thesis about the link between thought, language, and reality has particular relevance for him as a native speaker of Arabic. Because Arabic is structurally so very different from Western European languages, it offers different options for conceiving of what the world is like, and hence it offers a radically different philosophical imaginary. The fact that a language like Arabic does not include this concept of "being" leads to a radically different metaphysics and, at least in theory, to an incomparably different tradition of thought. Specifically, Arabic is less prone to abstraction, because Arabic does not use an equivalent of the Greek *εἶναι* or the English "to be," and therefore cannot easily translate this form of abstraction and objectification. Arabic attributes a more central role to the verb, which is related to an action, instead of noumenally subsisting entities.[97] Moreover, Arabic verbs tend to carry opposed meanings. This was deemed an essential trait by Arab grammarians, and it has led to a dialectically structured language, which formed the basis for an essentially dialectical *noétique* in which two opposites are constantly opposed to each other in order to reach synthesis.[98] In short, Arabic

95 Taha, *Langage et philosophie: essai sur les structures linguistiques de l'ontologie*, 148. Ṭāhā critiques Heidegger in particular for making extensive use of substantivization to form the vocabulary for his analysis of Being (p. 150).

96 "Si le sens est absolument relatif à son contexte qui implique d'une part que le locutteur est particulier et d'autre part que la situation dans laquelle il s'exprime est particulière, il s'avère difficile de concevoir la possibilité du sens général, pourtant seul garant de la communication humaine" (Taha, *Langage et philosophie: essai sur les structures linguistiques de l'ontologie*, 128).

97 The Arabic term for "verb" (*fiʿl*) in fact also means action.

98 Taha, *Langage et philosophie: essai sur les structures linguistiques de l'ontologie*, 164–65.

is inherently dialectical and practical, rather than static and theoretical. This is the "principle of its development and its creativity."[99]

The fact that Arabic is so very far removed from the ontologically structured Greek, makes it all the more remarkable that it has been a main language for the transmission of Greek philosophy. In fact, Ṭāhā judges that this transmission was only possible at the cost of corrupting Arabic philosophical discourse.[100] This process of corruption is carried on by contemporary Arab philosophers who remain under the sway of ontology and try to read into *turāth* Western ideas rooted in the ontological way of thinking, such as existentialism, neo-Thomism, or personalism.[101] The effect of this corruption has been to debilitate the ability of Arab philosophers to think creatively. Since original creativity is the effect of using the noetic possibilities offered to you by a particular language, the distortion of this noetic structure hampers the creative use of reason. This leads Ṭāhā to assert certain responsibilities for speakers of Arabic and of other languages. From the latter it demands respect for the unique linguistic and philosophical potential of Arabic. From the former it requires a greater attention to translations from foreign languages into Arabic. Translations that do not respect the Arabic *noétique* will likely corrupt it by introducing vocabulary and phrasings that distort its deep structure.

6.2.2 Ṭāhā after Paris: A brief overview

From his doctoral research we can extract the following basic ideas that Ṭāhā develops further in his Arabic writings starting in the 1980s.

– Basic to his worldview is the *holistic, fluidly changing metaphysical picture.* Although it is not fleshed out in detail, it provides the background for much of

99 Taha, *Langage et philosophie: essai sur les structures linguistiques de l'ontologie*, 164.

100 Taha, *Langage et philosophie: essai sur les structures linguistiques de l'ontologie*, 170. As a reviewer of his book put it somewhat derisively, Ṭāhā "lacks expressions for describing the perversity of "this philosophical jargon"" – see Mallet, "Abderrahmane, Taha: Langage et Philosophie. Essai sur les structures linguistiques de l'ontologie," 75. It is also clear that Ṭāhā thinks this corruption of Arab thought is not only of a linguistic nature. In a paper presented at a conference in 1978, he argues that, besides lacking a solid knowledge of Arabic, the first Arab translators of Greek philosophy did not have the specialist knowledge necessary to translate these texts correctly. Moreover, he holds against them the fact that they were not Muslim. Hence, we already see here an articulation of a combination of religious, cultural, and linguistic essentialism that will inform his later discussions of *turāth* – see ʿAbd al-Raḥmān Ṭāhā, "Lughat Ibn Rushd al-Falsafiyya min Khilāl ʿArḍih li-Naẓariyyat al-Maqūlāt," in *Ibn Rushd wa-Madrasatuh fī al-Gharb al-Islāmī* (Rabat: Kulliyat al-Ādāb wa-l-ʿUlūm al-Insāniyya bi-l-Ribāṭ, 2013), 193.

101 Taha, *Langage et philosophie: essai sur les structures linguistiques de l'ontologie*, 172–73.

his later work on language and the structure of reason, which centers on the need for a flexible, dynamic metaphysical perspective that allows for deeper layers of meaning to be discovered through mystical practice.[102]

– This holistic conception of a changing reality, combined with his conception of *noétiques*, forms the background for the pronounced anti-universalism of his later philosophy. This is evident in the way he develops the claim to the philosophical specificity of each language and culture, as well as in the opposition to the universalist claims of the Enlightenment.[103]
– The anti-universalist streak also links up with Ṭāhā's interest in creating a *new model of philosophical translation.* If you accept that different languages give rise to different metaphysical frameworks, it follows that it is impossible to capture the core of most philosophical ideas in a different language without taking into account metaphysical difference. This naturally adds to the importance and the difficulty of translating between different languages. Translations that do not heed these structural linguistic differences are likely to distort the original ideas themselves and the language into which these foreign ideas are translated, because they introduce concepts that do not fit the fundamental structure of the language and its reason.[104]

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102 This view comes to the fore most clearly in what Ṭāhā rejects – that is, the kind of rigid, singular, universalistic ontological worldview that he finds in the Occident. Although a full exposition of how Ṭāhā's metaphysics relates to the Sufi tradition lies beyond the scope of this research, it is worthwhile to note a remarkable resemblance, particularly to Muḥyī al-Dīn ibn ʿArabī's discussions on the relation between God's oneness (*tawḥīd*) and the multiplicity that results from temporal change. In Islamic teaching, one of the many names of God is that of *dahr,* which may be translated as "eon" – see William C. Chittick, *Ibn ʿArabi: Heir to the Prophets* (London: Oneworld, 2005), 160. Eon refers to God in His capacity as the One who sets in motion the change in the universe that we refer to as time (*zaman*). Eon is characterized by constant change (*taḥawwul*). As William Chittick explains, "At each moment, every sign of God – every creature in its momentary reality – is unique, because it manifests God's own uniqueness. Nothing is ever the same as anything else, and no moment of anything can ever be repeated" (ibid., p.163). Very roughly, the goal of Sufi practices like ritually mentioning the names of God – known as *dhikr* – is to get in touch with the particular truth (*ḥaqq*) in order to get closer to God. As we will see, this relationship between God and the world, as well as man's ability to become aware of the infinite ways in which He manifests himself by engaging in *dhikr,* are central to Ṭāhā's philosophy.

103 The claim to specificity is made most clearly in ʿAbd al-Raḥmān Ṭāhā, *al-Ḥaqq al-Islāmī fī al-Ikhtilāf al-Fikrī (Beirut: al-markaz al-Thaqāfī al-ʿArabī, 2005), and ʿAbd al-Raḥmān Ṭāhā, al-Ḥaqq al-ʿArabī fī al-Ikhtilāf al-Falsafī.* The anti-universalism that this implies is basic to his critique of modernity in ʿAbd al-Raḥmān Ṭāhā, *Suʾāl al-Akhlāq: Musāhama fī al-Naqd al-Akhlāqi li-l-Ḥadātha al-Gharbiyya, 5th ed. (Beirut: al-Markaz al-Thaqāfī al-ʿArabī, 2013), and Ṭāhā, Rūḥ al-Ḥadātha: al-Madkhal ilā Taʾsīs al-Ḥadātha al-Islāmiyya.*

104 In two hefty volumes published in the course of the 1990s titled *Fiqh al-Falsafa*, Ṭāhā deals with this problem, and purports to show how to translate in imaginative ways that capture the

- It is also this particular conception of language and thought that helps explain his idiosyncratic use of Arabic described earlier. It now appears that Ṭāhā does not delight in connecting different concepts by using the same triliteral root, or coining highly theorized Arabic synonyms for Western concepts out of sheer pedantry. This way of writing flows out of his contention that Arabs can only sustain and invigorate the creativity of the Arabic language and its culture if they actively make use of the structures and resources that it affords them to create and express meaning.[105]
- In turn, the concern with translation and the (philosophical) use of Arabic is bound up with Ṭāhā's critical stance towards most of what is written under the rubric of the *turāth* debate. In his thesis, he already chastises the entire Arab philosophical tradition for corrupting Arab thought by uncritically adopting Greek ideas. This would provide the background for his reading of *turāth.*[106] While he concurs that a correct understanding of *turāth* is vital, he maintains that the debate about *turāth* is conducted by people – for example, Muḥammad ʿĀbid al-Jābirī – who do not have the required understanding of Arabic or of the Islamic tradition to fully comprehend the original source material. Coupled with their use of Western methodologies, their readings of *turāth* corrupt its original values. What's more, Ṭāhā emphasizes that the imitative inclination of Moroccan intellectuals smothers the very core of what philosophy ought to be about, namely to think critically and creatively. An Arab philosophy that only dwells on its past is a dead philosophy. Rather than elaborate on previous achievements of the Arabic philosophical tradition, modern philosophers ought to engage creatively with thought, and articulate their own innovative ideas. For this they need to be familiar with a modern toolbox, of which modern forms of logic form an essential element.[107] At the same time, they need to recognize that these tools cannot be applied willy-

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core of foreign philosophical concepts without distorting the Arabic language – see ʿAbd al-Raḥmān Ṭāhā, *Fiqh al-Falsafa II: al-Qawl al-Falsafī: Kitāb al-Mafhūm wa-l-Ta'thīl* (Beirut: al-Markaz al-Thaqāfī al-ʿArabī, 1999), and ʿAbd al-Raḥmān Ṭāhā, *Fiqh al-Falsafa I: al-Falsafa wa-l-Tarjama*, 4th ed. (Beirut: al-Markaz al-Thaqāfī al-ʿArabī, 2013).

105 This theoretical underpinning of Ṭāhā's stylistic choices is not likely to convince critics who may argue that what we have here is merely theory in support of linguistic pedantry. Regardless, I believe that this relationship between form and content has been overlooked in most discussions of Ṭāhā's work by both supporters and critics, and it merits greater attention since it is a theme that runs through and connects his entire oeuvre.

106 Ṭāhā's understanding of *turāth* finds its full expression in his book *Tajdīd al-Manhaj fī Taqwīm al-Turāth* (*The Renewal of Method in the Evaluation of Heritage*), originally published in 1994.

107 Ṭāhā, *al-Lisān wa-l-Mīzān aw al-Takawthur al-ʿAqlī*, 17.

nilly. They have to be adapted to the Arabic context and combined with methodologies found in the Arab-Islamic heritage.[108]

– Turning again to language and reason, Ṭāhā in his Arabic writings gives us a more worked out theory of how both *language and reason operate on different levels.* Languages have different registers. At its most basic level, language can give a superficial description of the world. In the metaphorical register, where language is at its most profound and perfect, it can bring man into contact with the underlying dynamic reality. Given the inherent link between language and reason, the latter too operates on different levels. The objectified language of empirical science is related to what he calls "abstracted reason," which only acknowledges the reality of the phenomenal world and tries to capture it in terms bereft of allusion and moral import.[109] One grade above abstracted reason is "guided reason," so called because it is grounded in divine revelation and thus guides man according to Islamic law. At the apex of human reason, we find "supported reason," a form of reason that can only be reached by engaging in Sufi practice. This last form of reason allows man to see he world in

108 Relatedly, Ṭāhā became one of the leading opponents of the Rushdian revival" in contemporary Arab thought. As discussed in detail by Anke von Kügelgen, the twelfth-century Andalusian philosopher Averroës is a favorite of contemporary intellectuals, who see in him an Arab precursor of rationalism and native example of the kind of enlightened thinking fundamental to Western modernity. The modern Averroïsts aim to appropriate his ideas, or at least his rational style of thought, in order to ground an authentic Arab modernity – see *von Kügelgen, Averroes und die arabische Moderne – Ansätze zu einer Neubegründung des Rationalismus.* According to Ṭāhā, the entire neo-Averroïsian discourse is misguided. The main reason for this is that, to Ṭāhā's mind, Averros himself was an inauthentic philosopher. He presents his legacy as consisting largely of interpretations of Aristotle, a thinker who does not fit the paradigm of Arab thought and whose literal translations into Arabic did much to corrupt Arabic philosophical vocabulary and means of expressions – as Ṭāhā argued in his first doctoral dissertation. Averroës is therefore, in Ṭāhā's estimation, not himself an original philosopher and one who, moreover, relies on a foreign heritage without recognizing the difficulties engendered by philosophical translation between different linguistic traditions. For a concise statement of his anti-Averroïst stance see Ṭāhā, *Ḥiwārāt min Ajl al-Mustaqbal*, 117–35.

109 Hallaq translates *tajrīd* and its adjective *mujarrad* as "denuded". While this is an equally acceptable translation that captures the dismissive connotation somewhat better, I prefer to use "abstracted," because it fits more neatly with accepted philosophical terminology and, more importantly, *tajrīd* is defined by Ṭāhā specifically as the kind of reason that does not consider the practical dimension. This quality is, I believe, more adequately expressed by "abstracted." The choice for "abstracted" instead of "abstract" is also informed by this consideration, namely to emphasize that this reason has been abstracted from practical and therefore ethical considerations. Hence, it is not simply meant by Ṭāhā in the more common sense of being abstract in the theoretical sense. Moreover, the use of the passive adjectival "abstracted" fits better with the other two kinds of reason identified by Ṭāhā: "Guided reason" and "supported reason."

a different light. He recognizes the divine essences that abound in the world's ever-changing hurly-burly around him.

– This idea of a return to our ethical nature through mystical practice is central to Ṭāhā's critique of Western modernity. Using the aforementioned threefold structure of reason, he aligns Western reason with what I have referred to as "abstracted reason." Because this reason limits itself to the description of appearances, it leaves no room for prescriptive moral guidance and leads to secularism and a hard rejection of religion. This, Ṭāhā argues in *Suʾāl al-Akhlāq* (*The question of ethics*), explains the corrupted nature of Western modernity, and demands an ethical, responsible, Islamic response, which he would develop starting in the 2000s.[110]
– One crucial difference between Western languages and Arabic (and thus between their respective forms of reason), is that in Arabic the verb is more central to its internal structure. This will become a dominant theme in Ṭāhā's critique of the West and his project for moral renewal. Rehearsing a thesis that interestingly, had already been expressed by Zakī Najīb Maḥmūd,[111] Ṭāhā argues that this linguistic difference implies that Arabs are naturally more focused on action and thus are in a better position to offer a philosophy that prescribes norms for action.[112] Arabic is an inherently *ethical language.*

6.2.3 Time and authenticity in Ṭāhā: A preview

These are some of main important strands in Ṭāhā's thought that emerge from his early work on philosophy and language.[113] All of them can, in one way or another,

110 Obviously, this position feeds into Ṭāhā's anti-universalism and his propagating an alternative intellectual framework rooted in Arab-Islamic thought. The universalist intent, which he views as essential to Western modernity, is not only mistaken; it is also detrimental to humanity as a whole. Since the problems associated with modernity are the result of Western reason, which is in turn linked to Western language, the task of articulating an alternative philosophical framework based on a different linguistic structure becomes a way of stopping the corrupting impact that the West currently has on large swathes of this planet. See Abd al-Raḥmān Ṭāhā, *Suʾāl al-Akhlāq: Musāhama fī al-Naqd al-Akhlāqi li-l-Ḥadātha al-Gharbiyya.*

111 Zakī Najīb Maḥmūd, *tajdīd al-fikr al-ʿarabī*, 9th ed. (Cairo: Dār al-Shurūq, 1993), 256; Zakī Najīb Maḥmūd, *Thaqāfatunā fī Muwājahat al-ʿAsr* (Cairo: Dar al-Shurūq, 1979), 63.

112 It is no coincidence that one of Ṭāhā's books is titled *Suʾāl al-ʿAmal* – The question of praxis – see ʿAbd al-Raḥmān Ṭāhā, *Suʾāl al-ʿAmal: Baḥth ʿan al-Uṣūl al-ʿAmaliyya fī al-Fikr wa-l-ʿIlm* (Beirut: al-Markaz al-Thaqāfī al-ʿArabī, 2012).

113 A major theme for which Ṭāhā is most well known among students of Islamic law and theology, is his discussion of the renewal of theology on the basis of a modern version of the dialectical

be traced to the Paris period. The idea that language, thought, and metaphysics are inextricably linked comes up in his later anti-universalism, his philosophy of language, and his reading of *turāth.* The emphasis on ethics, though less pronounced, is already sensed in his critique of the Western, ontological, descriptive reason versus a more action-oriented Arab-Islamic form of it. It is important to realize how these elements are interlinked. Ṭāhā's project is entirely holistic. Each part feeds into another, and it is hard to do justice to it, or even make sense of it, without going into these different aspects of his philosophy. At the same time, we have to take care not to lose sight of the bigger picture that is our own argument about authenticity, time, and the standard narrative of the *turāth* debate. It may not be quite clear how these topics fit with the topics summarized above. Let us therefore go over some of the ways in which time and authenticity will turn out to be topics at the core of his philosophy, before we deal with his Arabic writings in more detail.

I mentioned at the beginning of this chapter that, were we to look simply at whether Ṭāhā advocates a return to *turāth*, whether he is overtly religious, or whether he espouses social mores that can be classed as "conservative," he would be straightforwardly classified as a traditionalist. He is an adamant defender of *turāth.* All his writings show a heartfelt religious sentiment, and he firmly rejects secularism. He is explicit in his rejection of all forms of Western "deviance" – including homosexuality and the alleged destruction of the bonds that tie together the nuclear family.[114] He severely criticizes modernist Arab intellectuals who corrupt *turāth* through their appropriation of Western vocabulary and methodologies. Moreover, Ṭāhā himself calls for a return to the authentic roots of Islamic culture. Hence, it is not hard to see how he would ordinarily be categorized.

As was the case with Adonis, the picture becomes murkier once we consider, not just what Ṭāhā says, but how he says it, how he articulates his ideas, how he argues for them, or what the conceptual framework is within which such terms as authenticity and modernity even make sense. It is clear, for one, that he himself does not observe the standards set by the standard narrative. He says as much when he calls the opposition of authenticity and modernity a "hoary old problematic" (*ishkāliyya mustahlaka istihlākan*), a symptom of "circumstantial rashness and a lack of true understanding of what is at stake in Arab thought.[115] Given such a harsh rejection of the authenticity–modernity problematic, the question re-

Islamic model for rational discussion known as *munāẓara*, in his early Arabic work *Fī Uṣūl al-Ḥiwār wa-Tajdīd ʿIlm al-Kalām.* Since this aspect of his philosophy is less connected to our concerns, I will leave it undiscussed.

114 Belhaj, "'The Fall of The Western Family': Ṭāhā 'Abd al-Raḥmān's Critical Islamic Ethics."

115 Ṭāhā, *Su'āl al-Manhaj: fī Ufuq al-Ta'sīs l-Unmūdaj Fikrī Jadīd*, 55.

mains what to make of Ṭāhā's apparent nostalgia for an uncorrupted Arab-Islamic past in the face of universalistic pretensions of a Western Enlightenment. How is this not a simple attack on modernity, one that would fit neatly in the standard narrative? This, I have been arguing, is not the most productive way to look at the question of authenticity and modernity. The question should not be about who is for modernity and who is against. Rather, it should be about how Arab intellectuals articulate their criticisms of the existing situation in their societies, and how they put forward alternatives. In doing this, we should be attentive to how they use the reigning discursive paradigms, both how they incorporate them in their own thinking and how they challenge them. Doing this requires that we ourselves, as readers of and commentators on "Arab thought," also sometimes bracket paradigmatic readings. Once we let go of the parameters of the standard narrative, we may recognize different ways to argue against Western modernity and the Enlightenment ideals on which it rests; that instead of simply rejecting them, one can also try to subvert them.

The latter is Ṭāhā's mission. Rather than argue simply for everything that Western modernity is not – the kind of opposition between rational and spiritual envisaged by Zakī Najīb Maḥmūd – he wants to change the way in which authenticity and the temporal framework within which it is opposed to modernity is understood. Like Adonis, Ṭāhā argues that authenticity and modernity are essentially the same thing. But he does this for completely different reasons and for a completely different purpose. Roughly, where Adonis wants artistic creation, Ṭāhā is interested in asserting a cultural-religious-linguistic identity and linking this to a project of ethical reformation. He follows a similar line to Adonis when he argues that true authenticity does not lie in blindly following the past, but in using its precepts to ground a creative impulse. But he parts ways with him when he calls for the creation of a specifically Arab and Islamic philosophy. This, it should be stressed, is not simply a call for greater self-assertion on the part of Arabs and Muslims. It goes deeper. We saw hints of that already during his Parisian period, when Ṭāhā wrote of the Arab language as containing a privileged access to being, due to its verbal structure. In his Arabic writings, he adds to this the idea that the Islamic creed contains the core of the moral truth that lies behind the hurly-burly of nature. Hence, only a combination of a commitment to a pure Arabic language and adherence to the Islamic creed can ensure a return to the moral essence of mankind, a return to man's original, authentic state of rectitude at the beginning of time.[116]

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116 An ambiguity appears here which was already present in his Parisian work, and will plague Ṭāhā's argument throughout. It results from his rather essentialist conception of culture, and hing-

We start to glimpse here how, again, the story of authenticity interacts with that of time. For behind the story of a return to the authentic spiritual and ethical nature of the first man, lies a particular conception of how history progresses. For Ṭāhā, the horizontal arrow of chronological time is less important than the vertical dimension of what he will call "ethical time" (*zaman akhlāqī*). Ethical time is not measured in temporal units, but in spirituality, in the degree to which life in a certain society has descended into materialism and turned away from the divine spiritual precepts. To be modern, for him, does not mean to "get with the times," as it did for Maḥmūd, but instead to renew the bond that one has with the original creative spirit of man, as would be argued by a Guénonian traditionalist. Modern societies are those that find their creative impulse in the specificities of their language and their cultural heritage, and use it effectively to gain a deeper spiritual insight into the world that helps people to stay on the straight path. (And, Ṭāhā would add, Arab-Islamic *turāth* is particularly well suited to being creative and spiritual.)

This is a bit too much to comprehend in one go. We will need to piece together the different parts of this edifice by going through several of Ṭāhā's writings in Arabic. Our point of entry will be one of the first works published in his native tongue: *al-ʿAmal al-Dīnī wa-Tajdīd al-ʿAql* (*Religious Praxis and the Renewal of Reason).* This book is fundamental to understanding his project, because it is here that he develops his theory of reason that runs throughout his works. This will be followed by a brief overview of his view on the authentic and creative use of *turāth.* After this, we turn our attention to Ṭāhā's ethical criticism of Western modernity, which really becomes explicit in *Su'āl al-Akhlāq* (*The Question of Ethics*), followed by his program for an alternative ethical modernity described in *Rūḥ al-Ḥadātha* (*The Spirit of Modernity*).[117]

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es on whether one reads his espousal of a specifically Arab-Islamic philosophy as a call for a more relativistic model in which each culture has a different complementary view on the truth, or whether Ṭāhā really sees the Arab-Islamic culture as providing the key to the ultimate connection with what is real. Is the right to an Islamic modernity, for which he will argue later on, advocated as a way to give Muslims space for self-expression alongside others? Or is it a way to allow the ultimate truth of Islam to come out, and form the basis for a global modernity rooted in the precepts of the Islamic creed? And what would this mean for Muslims who are not Arab? Or Arabs who are not Muslim? I will not pronounce on this issue here, but it is worth taking note of this recurrent ambivalence in Ṭāhā's writings.

117 For reasons of space, later works are only sometimes mentioned in passing. It is specifically these earlier works that link up with the *turāth* discourse, and thus with the broader debates of Arab intellectuals that are central to our study.

6.3 The threefold analysis of reason: *Religious Praxis and the Renewal of Reason*

As much as ʿAbd al-Raḥmān Ṭāhā is a philosophical outlier in contemporary Arab thought, he does not remain aloof from it. He engages with debates about *turāth*, authenticity, and modernity precisely because he does not agree with the way these topics are discussed by figures like Zakī Najīb Maḥmūd, Adonis and, especially, someone like his compatriot Muḥammad ʿĀbid al-Jābirī. Two topics in particular have dominated contemporary Arab thought, and both are at the center of his attention: reason (*ʿaql*) and *turāth.* The former was probed in his dissertation, which, after all, was an attempt "to grasp the expressive impulse and *noétique*" of linguistic traditions.[118] He supplies a complete exposition of reason for the first time in a book published in 1989 entitled *al-ʿAmal al-Dīnī wa-Tajdīd al-ʿAql* (*Religious Praxis and the Renewal of Reason, henceforth Religious Praxis*) In this work, Ṭāhā spells out a division of reason into three kinds – abstracted reason, guided reason, and supported reason – that will be a cornerstone of his thinking in years to come.

Religious Praxis is an intervention in the Arab intellectual debates of the late twentieth century. It is, the author announces in the introduction, a reaction to the recent "religious awakening" (*al-yaqẓa al-dīniyya*) in the Muslim world.[119] This awakening had thus far lacked the serious intellectual elaboration necessary to unify it and give it direction. Instead, the reform movement is characterized by factional strife and intellectual barrenness. To remedy this, Muslims who want to reform their society need to observe two conditions. First, reform needs to be focused on practical experience (*tajriba*), meaning that the Muslim who wants to renew his society must not just talk about renewal, but be oriented towards moral action and development of the self. Second, this reform must be based on the principle of reasoning (*taʿaqqul*). Muslims must show themselves more rational than others, rather than anti-rational – as is often held against them by their (secular) opponents.[120]

It will turn out in the course of this work that by experience (*tajriba*), Ṭāhā specifically refers to Sufi experience. It is the kind of reformed, modern Sufism advocated by the Būdshīshī order that offers a middle path between the intellectually blind Islamist orientation and the pull of an encroaching Western culture, barren

118 Taha, *Langage et philosophie: essai sur les structures linguistiques de l'ontologie*, 160.
119 Ṭāhā, *al-ʿAmal al-Dīnī wa-Tajdīd al-ʿAql*, 9. The term *yaqẓa* is used, though less often than *ṣaḥwa* (lit. "awakening"), to refer to the rise in power of Islamic movements in politics and in society generally starting in the 1970s.
120 Ṭāhā, *al-ʿAmal al-Dīnī wa-Tajdīd al-ʿAql*, 10.

of moral guidance.[121] This book details how these three strands – Westernism, reformist Islamism, and Sufism – are associated with a particular level of reason, and why Sufi reason is superior to the others. Before describing each of these reasons, two things need to be noted about Ṭāhā's overall conception of reason. First, reiterating one of the conclusions of his dissertation, he dismisses the Western conception of reason as a stable essence. Instead, Ṭāhā presents reason as an *action* (*fiʿl*).[122] It functions like our regular senses: hearing (*samʿ*), taste (*dhawq*), sight (*baṣr*), and smell (*shamm*). Reason is a power that only manifests itself in action, and hence it cannot be a stable unchanging entity, but must always be changing and adapting to new circumstances. Similar to the senses, the act of reasoning is related to one of our organs. The site – if one may call it that – of reason is not

121 Indeed, the three-fold division of reason is a central element in Būdshīshī teaching, which Ṭāhā himself has helped to formulate; see Ben Driss, *Sidi Hamza al-Qâdiri Boudchich: Le renouveau du soufisme (au Maroc)*, 40–41. It should be added that Ben Driss does not use the same ranking that Ṭāhā uses. He relates these three kinds of reason to the three elements of religion (*dīn*) mentioned in the hadith of Gabriel. First, guided reason is equated to the element of *islām*, by which is meant the observance of the five pillars of Islam. The next element is that of *imān*, which refers to the belief in the six articles of faith. The final element mentioned is that of *ihsān*, which concerns a direct contemplative vision of God that can only be attained through supported reason. This tripartite division, it should be noted, is often used in the Sufi tradition to distinguish the level of mystical practice from other levels of Islamic practice; see William C. Chittick, *Sufism: A Beginner's Guide* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2008), 4–6.

It has been argued that this division of reason into three kinds is an inversion of a similar tripartite division of *Arab* reason into three epistemological systems by Ṭāhā's adversary Muḥammad ʿĀbid al-Jābirī; see, for example, Hallaq, *Reforming Modernity: Ethics and the New Human in the Philosophy of Abdurrahman Taha*, 258–60. Given how the division of reason is anchored in the order to which Ṭāhā belongs and in the Sufi tradition more widely, it is hard to determine to what extent this inversion is intended. However, the parallels are striking, and for someone familiar with the writings of al-Jābirī it may be convenient to think of Ṭāhā's division of reason into an abstracted, a guided, and a supported reason, as the inversion of al-Jābirī's division of epistemological systems that are active in *turāth* into the demonstrative system (*burhān*), the explicatory system (*bayān*), and the mystical system (*ʿirfān*) described in Chapter 2 (footnote 92). Al-Jābirī's intention in distinguishing between these systems was to break the hold that the latter two systems have historically held over Arab reason (particularly in the eastern part of the Arab world, known as the Mashriq), and to direct Arab society to a full embrace of demonstrative reason, which lies closest to the modern Western conception of reason and is, according to al-Jābirī, the only road to adopting a truly modern society. Moreover, by looking for the origins of this system of thought, al-Jābirī intended to root such a modern way of thinking in Arab-Islamic heritage, thereby deflecting claims of being inauthentic in the sense of foregoing the Arab identity associated with this heritage. Given al-Jābirī's particular disdain for mystical thinking, which he terms irrational, it is understandable why Ṭāhā's thoroughly mystical approach to reason would invert al-Jābirī's influential categorization.

122 Ṭāhā, *al-ʿAmal al-Dīnī wa-Tajdīd al-ʿAql*, 17–18.

the brain, but the heart (*qalb*). [123] Second, in accordance with the Sufi notion of a spiritual path (*ṭarīqa*), Ṭāhā presents reason as having different stages. Man can climb up the ladder of reason and thus get closer to God, but his reason can also degenerate as he turns away from the Lord. Moreover, reason is not unquestionably a good thing. It can both benefit us and bring us great harm.[124]

6.3.1 Abstracted reason

The first form of reason discussed is also the lowest, most basic form: *abstracted reason.*[125] It is defined as follows:

> Abstracted reason is the *act* through which the reasoner becomes acquainted with one aspect of a thing (*wajh min wujūh al-shay'*), being convinced of the truthfulness of this act and supported in this conviction by a particular piece of evidence (*dalīl muʿayyan*).[126]

In short, abstracted reason denotes an empirical orientation that aims for objective description. It is akin to what in Western philosophical terminology is referred to as "theoretical reason," which also aims to be entirely descriptive, eschewing claims about how to act. Moral normativity is left to what in the Western tradition has come to be called "practical reason."[127] To be sure, theoretical reason has a role to play in practical deliberation. After all, we rely on our assessment of what is the case to judge how we can achieve our ends. However, the function of theoretical reason remains purely instrumental. It cannot furnish you with a reason to do one thing over another.[128]

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123 Ṭāhā, *al-Ḥiwār Ufuqan li-l-Fikr*, 41. Associating the power of reason with the heart is a common feature in the Islamic tradition, one that is particularly popular among Sufis. The association between reason and heart is underwritten by such Qur'anic verses as "they have hearts with which they reason" (*lahum qulūbun yaʿqilūna bihā*) (22:46)

124 Ṭāhā, *al-ʿAmal al-Dīnī wa-Tajdīd al-ʿAql*, 21.

125 For a discussion of this term and the reasons for translating it as "abstracted reason" rather than "abstract reason," see footnote 109 in this chapter.

126 Ṭāhā, *al-ʿAmal al-Dīnī wa-Tajdīd al-ʿAql*, 17.

127 Theoretical reason is not entirely devoid of normativity. It includes rules for reasoning and – following Kant – rules that structure the foundation of cognition. However, this normativity remains in the service of presenting an objective description of reality. It does not guide action.

128 See also the Humean distinction between reason and passion discussed in Chapter 4.

This normative deficit is precisely what Ṭāhā wants to underline with the term *abstracted* reason; it is abstracted or stripped of any metaphysical and ethical potential. Its rejection of allegorical language inhibits those who stick to abstracted reason in speaking about God. At the same time, abstracted reason is confronted with (but still finds it hard to acknowledge) its own epistemic limitations, in a field like (Western) logic, where it has been proven that it is principally unable to answer all problems.[129] More generally, abstracted reason constrains our perspective on the world in which we live and breathe. It leads to a relativistic (*nisbiyya*) conception of the world; the technological world order that accompanies it leads to enslavement (*istirqāqiyya*) of both the world and of man himself; and the modern view of the development of science as a sequence of ruptures leads to chaos (*fawḍawiyya*).[130] Lastly, in philosophy, the materialist worldview that accompanies abstracted reason privileges what is phenomenally present (*taẓhīr*) – that is, what is presented to our senses – versus what is not present in this way, such things as feelings or intentions. It requires that every object of knowledge be assigned a spatio-temporal location (*taḥyīz*), which implies that one can never gain knowledge of the things in themselves, since all knowledge is mediated (*tawsīṭ*) through material causes (*asbāb mādiyya*). These constraints of abstracted reason will be discussed in more detail in Ṭāhā's critique of Western modernity, which only becomes full-fledged with the publication of *Suʾāl al-Akhlāq* (*The Question of Ethics*) over a decade later. The most important takeaway at this point is that Islamic practice of reason is able to remedy these faults by offering a worldview that is certain (*yaqīn*) in its transcendental principles, and focused on implementing these truths in the real world through moral action.[131] A first step in doing this is to acknowledge the guidance of the Revealed Law (*al-sharʿ*) in using reason.

6.3.2 Guided reason

The second form of reason is defined as follows:

129 Ṭāhā, *al-ʿAmal al-Dīnī wa-Tajdīd al-ʿAql*, 41–43.Ṭāhā bases his claim on the proven undecidability of many logical problems, as well as Kurt Gödel's proof of the incompleteness of any consistent axiomatic system.
130 Ṭāhā, *al-ʿAmal al-Dīnī wa-Tajdīd al-ʿAql*, 43–46.
131 Ṭāhā, *al-ʿAmal al-Dīnī wa-Tajdīd al-ʿAql*, 51.

> Guided reason is the act through which the reasoner aspires to acquire benefit or fend off harm by acting according to what was prescribed by the Revealed Law (*al-sharʿ*).[132]

The guided reasoner distinguishes himself from the abstracted reasoner because he is guided by a set of values. Of course, what is meant here is not just *any* set of values, but the specific values revealed to the Prophet Muḥammad through the Qur'an and his own divinely inspired actions, collectively known as the *sunna* of the Prophet. Following *this* law correctly will benefit man and keep him safe from harm. In addition, it should be clear that what Ṭāhā means here by benefit (*manfaʿa*) is not to be understood as mere utility. Benefit achieved through guided action is different in kind, because it is rooted in values that cleanse it of sheer materialism, superficial short-term thinking, and mere individualistic interest.[133] It is the kind of benefit that will accrue to man's soul for eternity.

Because guided reason is different from abstracted reason in having a normative, practical dimension, it can only be activated through practice (*mumārasa*).[134] Guided practice ultimately has consequences for cognition, but these can only become manifest through action. If implemented correctly, praxis guided by *al-sharʿ* changes our experience of the world and helps man to live virtuously. First of all, when a person is oriented towards virtuous action, the objects of experience are made present to his senses in a different, meaningful, normative way. They appear to him not just as things that can be described theoretically and used for one's personal benefit, but as signs that guide his behavior.[135] Second, adopting guided reason changes the position of science. It subordinates science to action, ruling that its goals and applications should always be weighed in light of the values of the Revealed Law. Third, guided practice leads to a broadening of one's horizons. Specifically, it broadens one's ethical horizons, beyond the common concern with social and political issues to a more complete ethical worldview centered on worship (*ʿibāda*) as a way of getting closer to God.[136] Lastly, guided praxis assists man in correcting his behavior, ensuring that it is rooted in original values, oriented towards the goals of the shariʿa (*maqāṣīd al-shariʿa*), and using the correct means (*wasāʾil*) to reach these goals.[137]

132 Ṭāhā, *al-ʿAmal al-Dīnī wa-Tajdīd al-ʿAql*, 58.
133 Ṭāhā, *al-ʿAmal al-Dīnī wa-Tajdīd al-ʿAql*, 60–61.
134 Ṭāhā, *al-ʿAmal al-Dīnī wa-Tajdīd al-ʿAql*, 61.
135 Ṭāhā, *al-ʿAmal al-Dīnī wa-Tajdīd al-ʿAql*, 61.
136 Ṭāhā, *al-ʿAmal al-Dīnī wa-Tajdīd al-ʿAql*, 64.
137 Ṭāhā, *al-ʿAmal al-Dīnī wa-Tajdīd al-ʿAql*,, 65–66. It deserves mention that in later works these two aspects, knowledge of the goals and of the means, will each be assigned to a different form of

One thing Ṭāhā wants you to keep in mind is that guided reason is not opposed to abstracted reason. To be guided by the Revealed Law does not mean that you are automatically barred from engaging in theoretical speculations about what is the case. On the contrary, Ṭāhā claims that guided reason acknowledges the benefits of theory, while adding to it a practical dimension. Guided reason does not negate the independence of the purely theoretical mind (*istiqlāluhu*), but instead remedies its resignation (*istiqālatuhu*) to the fact that it cannot acknowledge the kind of normative value implied by the fundamental Islamic command to do what is favored and to refrain from what is reprehensible – referred to in Arabic as the principle of "Commanding what is right and forbidding what is wrong" (*al-amr bi-l-maʿrūf wa-l-nahī ʿan al-munkar*).[138] The guided person willingly submits and obeys God's commands in order to infuse his life with value.

6.3.3 The defects of guided reason

Having sketched a rough outline of guided reason, Ṭāhā mentions two groups who, in his eyes, represent the practice of guided reason: the scholars of Islamic law and the majority of Muslims who follow their rulings, and the Salafists who find guidance in a direct reading of the Qur'an and hadith. The problem with guided reason is that the guidance that it gives is incomplete, exposing *fiqhī* and Salafi practice to particular sets of defects (*āfāt*); the former runs the risk of character defects (*āfāt khuluqiyya*), whereas the latter is prone to epistemic defects (*āfāt ʿilmiyya*).[139]

One character defect mentioned is that of hypocrisy (*taẓāhur*). This relates generally to a situation in which there is a discrepancy between involvement in praxis

reason. In *Suʾāl al-Akhlāq* Ṭāhā will charge supported reason with the task of revealing the *maqāṣīd*, while reserving knowledge of the *wasāʾil* for those who engage in Sufi practice, thus entering the realm of supported reason.

138 Ṭāhā, *al-ʿAmal al-Dīnī wa-Tajdīd al-ʿAql*, 67. The widely acclaimed study by Michael Cook presents the most detailed discussion of this topic in English – see Michael Cook, *Commanding Right and Forbidding Wrong in Islamic Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2001).

139 This term is used by, among others, al-Ghazālī in the *Revival of the Islamic Sciences*, and it recurs later, in particular in Sufi texts, to describe the moral defects that arise when one practices Islam in ways that are defective and detrimental to the individual practitioner. By way of example, Ṭāhā's description of insincerity (*riyāʾ*), which he uses to describe one form of the defect of pretense (*āfat al-takalluf*), is remarkably similar to the one presented Najm al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d. 1256) in *The Book of the Beacons of Those Who Are En Route and of the Stations of Those Who Ascend* – see Abū Bakr ʿAbd Allāh bin Shāhāwar al-Rāzī, *Kitāb Manārāt al-Sāʾirīn wa-Maqāmāt al-Ṭāʾirīn* (Kuwait: Dar Suʿād al-Ṣabāḥ, 1993), 537.

(*ishtighāl*) and the goals (*maqāṣid*) of this praxis.[140] The second category of character defects caused by *fiqhī* practice is conventionalism or imitation (*taqlīd*). When *taqlīd* is used in Arabic it usually refers to the blind imitation of religious authorities. Alternatively, it has the related meaning of following precedent and the lack of genuine renewal (*tajdīd*). Indeed, this is how many of the secular interpreters of *turāth*, including Zakī Najīb Maḥmūd and Adonis, use the term. Because the temporal framework within which the meaning of terms like *turāth* and *taqlīd* is to a large extent determined, *taqlīd* is usually seen as the opposite of modernity (*ḥadātha*), as belonging to an undynamic, conservative past.[141] However, according to

140 Ṭāhā, *al-ʿAmal al-Dīnī wa-Tajdīd al-ʿAql*, 79. Ṭāhā mentions three different forms of hypocrisy. First, it may be that the Muslim engaged in praxis in a manner that is unnatural and studied, or that he takes credit for more than he has actually done in order to show off – what Ṭāhā terms "pretence" (*takalluf*). A second and closely related way in which *fiqhī* practice can go awry is when the believer engages in praxis correctly, but he (again) does so with the intention of cementing his relations with the people, rather than the true goal of getting closer to God – here Ṭāhā uses the term "flattery" (*tazalluf*). A third kind of hypocrisy mentioned by Ṭāhā is that which is oriented not to God, nor to other people, but towards the self. If someone performs acts, but attributes them to himself and not as those acts incumbent on him in performing his duties to God, then this person is likely to think highly of his own piety, while trivializing the acts of others. His virtuous behavior thereby damages his character, rather than lifting it up – this is referred to as *taṣarruf,* or "acting on one's own account" (pp. 79 – 83).

141 This is precisely the diachronic antinomy which Reinhard Schulze notices emerging in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and which was a crucial condition for the creation of a coherent body that later generations of Arab scholars would recognize as *turāth* – see Schulze, "The Birth of Tradition and Modernity in 18th and 19th Century Islamic Culture – The Case of Printing," 32 – 33. It is also no coincidence that the bad reputation of the term *taqlīd* dates back to the nineteenth century. In contrast to *ijtihād,* the term denoting individual and even creative engagement with the sources of Islamic law, *taqlīd* was portrayed as a kind of "servile imitation of other jurisconsults" – see George Makdisi, *The Rise of Colleges: Institutions of Learning in Islam and the West* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1981), 199. As such, *taqlīd* was one of the aspects of Islamic societies blamed by modernizers for their stagnation and lack of intellectual vigor. In recent decades, we have seen a revaluation of this understanding of *taqlīd* among scholars of Islamic law. They argue that, rather than mere imitation, *taqlīd* may also refer to a developed and living tradition of understanding and using Islamic law, one that acts as a counterweight to an *ijtihād* that would otherwise remain unrooted and solipsistic in its legal reasoning. It is clear, however, that Ṭāhā uses the term *taqlīd* here in its established pejorative meaning. For examples of the recent drive for a recalibrated understanding of *taqlīd*, see Mohammad Fadel, "The Social Logic of Taqlīd and the Rise of the Mukhataṣar," *Islamic Law and Society* 3, no. 2 (1996): 193 – 233; Sherman Jackson, "Taqlīd, Legal Scaffolding and the Scope of Legal Injunctions in Post-Formative Theory: *Muṭlaq* and *ʿĀmm* in the Jurisprudince of Shihāb al-Dīn al-Qarāfī," *Islamic Law and Society* 3, no. 2 (1996): 165 – 92; Norman Calder, "Al-Nawawī's Typology of Muftīs and Its Significance for a General Theory of Islamic Law," *Islamic Law and Society* 3, no. 2 (1996): 137– 64; Wael Hallaq, *Authority, Continuity, and Change in Islamic Law* (Cambridge: Cam-

Ṭāhā, this is not the only way in which someone can be *taqlīdī.* The term equally applies to someone who only uses abstracted reason in finding a theoretical basis for the lawfulness of his actions, and does not test the practical side of it. Someone can even be *taqlīdī* if he only tests the practical significance of his actions superficially and performs what is demanded unwillingly or automatically, without dedication.[142] In sum, *taqlīd* refers to any form of unthinking, unreflective practice of reason. By contrast, he proposes that an enlivened and renewed society can only come about when people engage in creative praxis.

As we will see later on, this redefinition of *taqlīd* as referring to a lack of creativity has profound consequences. It allows Ṭāhā to reconceptualize the role that *turāth* plays in constructing an alternative Arab-Islamic modernity that rejects the Western conception of modernity. This Arab-Islamic modernity connects rather than breaks with the past. In other words, Ṭāhā continues the practice of opposing *taqlīd* to modernity, but because *taqlīd* now no longer refers to a historical past and instead indicates an uncreative way of thinking, he can use it to chastise Arab intellectuals who follow (Western) precedent unthinkingly; who do not display the essential modern characteristic of *creativity.* In effect, Ṭāhā resets the parameters of the *turāth* debate by moving the discussion away from a fixation on the chronological opposition between past and future and towards an antinomy that relies on a timeless characteristic of creativity.[143]

Broadly speaking, the two forms of reason discussed thus far – abstracted and guided – represent two aspects of human experience: the theoretical and the practical. Abstracted reason is concerned first and foremost with achieving theoretical knowledge about the world and using it for our own personal interests. Guided reason includes this lower form of reason and adds to it an ethical dimension in which man is shown how to use his knowledge to bring about good in the world by following God's commands.

However, Islamic praxis is not founded on the principle of merely acting in accordance with a set of rules. It reaches for perfection by joining reason with conscience, and urging man to not simply act according to the rules laid down by the shariʿa, but to do so in the best way possible according to the specific context of each individual situation. There are infinitely many ways to react to a certain situation. There are even infinitely many ways to perform the same action. Depending on the spiritual stage that a person has reached, and the specifics of each sit-

bridge University Press, 2001), chap. 4; and Ahmed El Shamsy, "Rethinking 'Taqlīd' in the Early Shāfiʿī School," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 128, no. 1 (2008): 1–23.

142 Ṭāhā, *al-ʿAmal al-Dīnī wa-Tajdīd al-ʿAql*, 83–89.

143 At this point Ṭāhā launches into a critique of Salafism, which, though interesting, is less relevant to our overall argument.

uation in a world that, as we saw earlier, is constantly changing, it is possible to perform or refrain from performing a certain action in a way that suits the specific stage of the individual's spiritual development. Moreover, through training, each individual can aspire to more perfect ways of coping with new situations. By worshipping God, recalling His Divine names in *dhikr*, performing what He commands, and striving for perfection in doing each one of these things, one is able to ascend the scale of religious practice and reach ever closer to God. By embarking on this Sufi path, one enters the realm of supported reason.

6.3.4 Supported reason

The third form of reason is defined as follows:

> Supported reason means the act through which its agent inquires after knowledge of the Divine essences [*aʿyān*] of things, by engaging in an effort to put God's law into practice [*al-nuzūl fī marātib al-ishtighāl al-sharʿī*], performing the supererogatory acts of worship [*nawāfil*], in addition to performing the religious duties in the most perfect way.[144]

The crucial distinction between supported reason and the other two forms is that it reaches for the inner attributes (*awṣāf bāṭina*) and the inner workings (*afʿāl dākhiliyya*) of things, or what Ṭāhā calls their essence (*dhāt/huwwiyya*), that which makes the thing what it is.[145] This human connection to the essence is called *ʿayniyya.* To arrive at this true essence, it is not enough to know a thing's outer appearance or to understand the way it acts. Essence, at the level of supported reason, relates to a combination of both these aspects, a complete awareness of the world that Ṭāhā calls "animate, practical cognitive experience" (*naẓar ʿamalī ḥayy*[146]) or an intricate relationship with the thing (*mulābasa*[147]).

The foremost means of attaining *mulābasa* is by performing acts of worship that go beyond those minimally required in Islam – the *nawāfil* referred to in the definition. The point of performing both the necessary and supererogatory acts of worship is that it effects internal change. The outer acts become reflected

144 Ṭāhā, *al-ʿAmal al-Dīnī wa-Tajdīd al-ʿAql*, 121.

145 Ṭāhā, *al-ʿAmal al-Dīnī wa-Tajdīd al-ʿAql*, 121.

146 Ṭāhā is explicit in using the term *ḥayy* meaning experiential (*tajribī*). This has been accommodated in the translation, by adding "experience."

147 The term *mulābasa* is contrasted by Ṭāhā with the term *mulāmasa*, by which he refers to the kind of superficial experience of the world that is countenanced by empirical science – see Ṭāhā, *al-ʿAmal al-Dīnī wa-Tajdīd al-ʿAql*, 123–25.

in the bosom of the worshipper, inducing a sense of intimacy (*uns*) and serenity (*sakīna*). In turn, this inner effect of engaging in mystical practice takes over his experience of the world, providing him with a sense of security (*ṭamaʾnīna*) and love for one's fellow man (*maḥabba*).[148] What Ṭāhā tries to capture is the process and the central point of Sufi experience (*tajriba*). Engaging in this experience is more than simply going the extra mile in your worship of God. It is a method for working on and changing the self. The *nawāfil* are part of a process that transforms the inner; by repeating rites of worship that relate to the ethical meanings of the Qur'an, one comes to inhabit them. The values of the Qur'an become embodied, the worshipper wears them like a spiritual cloak.[149] Moreover, by changing the inner soul, one indirectly changes the way in which one looks at the world. The connection to the essences can only be accomplished by changing the self through Sufi practice.

Together with an awareness of the essences (*ʿayniyya*), the person functioning at the level of supported reason submits completely to the will of God, what Ṭāhā calls *ʿabdiyya*, or "servanthood."[150] In Ṭāhā's treatment of *ʿabdiyya*, the emphasis

148 Ṭāhā, *al-ʿAmal al-Dīnī wa-Tajdīd al-ʿAql*, 125–27.

149 The term *mulābasa* is derived from the root L-B-S (ل – ب – س), meaning "to dress/wear." It is noteworthy in this regard that the supererogatory acts of worship, or *nawāfil*, that lead to *mulābasa* are also mentioned in a famous "sacred hadith" (*hadith qudsi*) – that is, a hadith that is purported to relay a message directly from God. This particular hadith, which is often quoted in Sufi texts, implies a connection between engaging in supererogatory acts and God's acting through the believer's body similar to the one described by Ṭāhā in terms of *mulābasa.* The full text of this hadith, which is included in al-Bukhārī's collection, is:

> Whosoever shows enmity to someone devoted to Me, I shall be at war with him. My servant draws not near to Me with anything more loved by Me than the religious duties I have enjoined upon him, and My servant continues to draw near to Me with supererogatory works [*nawāfil*] so that I shall love him. When I love him I am his hearing with which he hears, his seeing with which he sees, his hand with which he strikes and his foot with which he walks. Were he to ask [something] of Me, I would surely give it to him, and were he to ask Me for refuge, I would surely grant him it. I do not hesitate about anything as much as I hesitate about [seizing] the soul of My faithful servant: he hates death and I hate hurting him. (Ezzedin Ibrahim and Denys Johnson-Davies, trans., *Forty Hadith Qudsi*, n.d., 104, https://archive.org/details/forty-hadith-qudsi/mode/2up)

150 The latter term appears closely related to that of *ʿubūdiyya*, which is familiar from the Sufi tradition. Ibn ʿArabī, for example, presents *ʿubūdiyya* as man's awareness of his status as a creature created by God and thus bound to worship Him in the appropriate way – see Chittick, *Ibn ʿArabi: Heir to the Prophets*, 40–41.

lies on renunciation.[151] In a state of *ʿabdiyya* the believer is aware that his greatest reward lies in following God. This awareness implies renouncing any attachment to things other than Him, whether this be the attachment to material things characteristic of abstracted reason, or the attachment to one's own actions that leads to the aforementioned defects of the guided reasoner. The basic underlying realization is that all attributes (*awṣāf*) and all actions (*afʿāl*) are in the end emanations from God.[152] By renouncing worldly gain of any sort, the supported reasoner acquires a natural feeling of poverty (*iftiqār*) with regard to objects and their attributes, as well as an instinctive compulsion (*iḍṭirār*) to do what is required of him by God.[153]

What is interesting about this presentation of *ʿabdiyya* is that it brings out a deeper connection between reason and freedom. In this, Ṭāhā in a way follows Sufi precedent. "The True Reality of freedom," al-Qushayrī reminds his readers, "lies in the perfection of one's servitude (*ʿubūdiyya*)."[154] The idea is that any attachment to the transitory things of this world or to one's desires leads to dependence on these and on these desires. The only secure way to get rid of these dependencies is through *ʿubūdiyya*, that is, through the process of renouncing worldly attachments and realizing that everything ultimately is dependent on God.[155] Freedom is attained through subservience, albeit to the Highest Power. Even if it is true that, as Bob Dylan prophesied, "you gotta serve somebody," it is up to you to choose who your master will be.

This idea is reflected in Ṭāhā's "supported" conception of freedom. He admits that it may seem as if the servant (*ʿabd*) of God, in committing himself to His will, divests himself of his own freedom. This is true in the sense that he loses the freedom to set his own path independently. In a word, he loses worldly (*kawnī*) freedom. But in its stead he receives a more perfect freedom, the kind of freedom that

151 An explanation of *ʿubudiyya* that resembles Ṭāhā's formulation of *ʿabdiyya* can be found in al-Qushayri's *Epistle on Sufism.* It is attributed to an anonymous Sufi who reportedly said that "There are only two things [that prevent you from achieving servanthood]: when you find repose in things that you like, and when you rely on your own actions. Once you have shed these two things, you have given servanthood its due." See Abū 'l-Qāsim Al-Qushayrī, *Al-Qushayri's Epistle on Sufism*, trans. Alexander D. Knysh (Reading, UK: Garnet, 2007), 212.

152 Ṭāhā, *al-ʿAmal al-Dīnī wa-Tajdīd al-ʿAql*, 144.

153 Ṭāhā, *al-ʿAmal al-Dīnī wa-Tajdīd al-ʿAql*, 140 – 44.

154 Al-Qushayrī, *Al-Qushayri's Epistle on Sufism*, 230. The elongated second "u" is not in Knysh's translation, since it unfortunately does not distinguish between the short and the long vowels in the Arabic original. I have added it, since the diacritics are a crucial divergence of Ṭāhā from the original term.

155 A comparable realization is aptly captured by these two lines from Tennyson's *In Memoriam:* "our wills are ours, we know not how/our wills are ours, to make them thine."

belongs to the Creator (*ḥurriyya mukawwiniyya*) or Divine freedom (*ḥurriyya rabbāniyya*).[156] Complete freedom, Ṭāhā wants to say, should not be sought in ownership, in property, or in rights, but in poverty, in being owned and considering yourself the constant recipient of divine favor.

For the sake of clarity, it is helpful to think of *ʿayniyya* and *ʿabdiyya* as each offering a correction to the forms of reason discussed previously. Whereas the former allows the practitioner of supported reason to see the essences of things and go beyond the mere superficial worldview propagated by abstracted reason (*al-ʿaql al-mujarrad*), the latter prevents the practitioner from claiming any honor or ownership for himself, which is the root of the defects that can set in if one remains at the level of guided reason (*al-ʿaql al-musaddad*). Both these aspects of supported reason are characteristic of the mystical path and, clearly, the Sufi tradition has been a great source of inspiration for Ṭāhā's conception of freedom and reason. But we should be careful not to read him as merely a contemporary Sufi appendage. One thing in which Ṭāhā's invocation of this idea differs from its use in Ibn ʿArabī and al-Qushayrī is the modern context. In making historical comparisons, one necessarily treads a fine line between admitting a certain kinship between people living in different ages, and giving due weight to the temporal and conceptual distance that divides them. Freedom is one concept where this balance is especially delicate. It would be silly to deny that in a bygone age people did not entertain something that we can recognize as a conception of freedom. We can admit this much, while also acknowledging that the liberty of the ancients is different compared to that of the moderns. Contemporary individualized forms of freedom, either the negative conception of freedom epitomized in the libertarian ideal of maximal absence of constraint, or the more substantive, positive notion of liberty are in a real sense peculiar to the modern era. They tend to emphasize personal consent, free choice, and the requirement that your choices reflect your "true self." This is something that we need to keep in mind when reading Ṭāhā. He may reference Sufi tradition on the topic of freedom, but he does so in the context of refuting abstracted reason, Western modernity, and ultimately its conceptions of freedom. We will need to return to this point when we get to Ṭāhā's explicit critiques of modern Western society, if only because it is here that we find Ṭāhā speaking out against the ideal of personal authenticity, while also embracing what Hallaq describes as an "individuated concept of positive liberty."[157]

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156 Ṭāhā, *al-ʿAmal al-Dīnī wa-Tajdīd al-ʿAql*, 144.

157 Hallaq, *Reforming Modernity: Ethics and the New Human in the Philosophy of Abdurrahman Taha*, 260–61. For a more detailed study of how Ṭāhā may be read in a modern context, see Viersen, "The Modern Mysticism of Taha Abderrahmane."

6.3.5 Sufi practice and supported reason

Having established the superiority of supported reason, Ṭāhā goes on to argue that this level of rationality is best reached through Sufi practice. The specifics of this argument are beyond the scope of this study, but there are two things from this section that deserve mention. First, Ṭāhā gives a clear illustration of his epistemological model and how it differs radically from that of empirical sciences, or as Ṭāhā calls it, "abstracted reason," by making correct knowledge depend on the training of the individual. According to his view, the Sufi gains deeper understanding of the world, achieving "the vision of God in every thing" (*ruʾiyyat Allah fī kull shayʾ*). By contemplating God's creatures, he is continuously led back to the Creator, only to again become aware of the manifold of Creation. Deep and truthful knowledge of the world is not the outcome of a process that reaches for increasingly truthful representations of a mind-independent reality. Rather, it grows out of a cultivation of the individual's relationship with his Creator. As Ṭāhā phrases it:

> The Sufi does not relate his knowledge of the thing to his knowledge of God as if he were connecting between two independent things and producing extrinsic connections that tie one thing to another according to the methods of abstracted reason. Rather, his knowledge of the thing is not separate from his knowledge of himself, and his knowledge of himself is not separate from his knowledge of his Lord, and his knowledge of his Lord is nothing other than his complete realization through subordination to Him.[158]

A second aspect that deserves our attention is the peculiar place that Ṭāhā attributes to the supererogatory acts of worship (*nawāfil*) in training the individual Sufi.[159] As with many other concepts and practices that he refers to, *nawāfil* have been a mainstay of Sufism for some time. They are essential to what Ṭāhā calls the "cleansing of the soul" (*taṭhīr al-nafs*) necessary to reach the loving attachment to God that brings forth *ʿayniyya* and *ʿabdiyya.*[160] What is novel and particularly interesting for our purposes is the justification that he gives for assigning the *nawāfil* a crucial role in modern society, and how this reveals something about his conception of historical time. Ṭāhā starts by arguing that if one only follows the Revealed Law, this is not enough to stave off degeneration. Knowledge of God and of what He demands of man is most fresh at the moment when it is sent down, and it becomes weaker as time progresses. It follows that, for those who want to remain on the straight path, the need to do more than is minimally re-

158 Ṭāhā, *al-ʿAmal al-Dīnī wa-Tajdīd al-ʿAql*, 153.
159 He literally refers to this as *"al-taqarrub bi-l-nawāfil"* – "getting closer [to God] through supererogatory acts of worship" (Ṭāhā, *al-ʿAmal al-Dīnī wa-Tajdīd al-ʿAql*,, 153).
160 Ṭāhā, *al-ʿAmal al-Dīnī wa-Tajdīd al-ʿAql*, 158.

quired grows with the passing of the ages (*yatazāyad ʿalā marr al-ʿuṣūr*).[161] This is particularly true for our age in which the practice of abstracted reason has become deep-rooted. In the name of abstracted reason, Revealed Law is trumped by "scientism" (*al-ʿilmiyya*) and "objectivism" (*al-mawḍūʿiyya*). The only way to counter this deleterious tendency is to emphasize the need for *nawāfil.* What this implies is that Sufism nowadays is no longer optional, it is now necessary for every Muslim to make Sufi practices part of his ritual worship, and perform *nawāfil* if he wants to remain true to the word of God. This is a clear departure from the Sufi tradition. Although contemporary scholars increasingly acknowledge the key role that Sufism has played throughout the history of Islam, Sufi practice has not historically been considered a *necessary* aspect of being a devout Muslim. Moreover, it gives us an indication of how Ṭāhā views history. Historical change is marked by degeneration. As one generation follows the next, the initial spiritual impulse is weakened, obliging us to do more to maintain a similar level of spiritual and moral rectitude. This reveals a historical imaginary opposed to the narrative of progress, and it is one that will become more prominent as Ṭāhā launches into his later critiques of (Western) modernity.

6.3.6 Clearing up misunderstandings about Sufism

To make his case, Ṭāhā needs to clear up some common misunderstandings regarding Sufism. Sufis are often referred to with the sobriquet "people of the hidden/inner" (*ahl al-dhawq*) or "people of taste" (*ahl-al-dhawq*). Ṭāhā does not reject these descriptions, but he does feel that they are prone to misinterpretation. Sufis are properly associated with what is hidden insofar as their knowledge of essences is based on their knowledge of the self. Likewise, they may be associated with taste to the extent that their knowledge of the self is based on acquaintance with authentic submission.

This, however, is not how these terms are commonly understood. The focus on the "inner" is interpreted as an exaggerated form of subjectivism (*dhātiyya*) that leads to a fondness for abstruseness (*kalaf al-ghumūḍ*), whereas the emphasis on "taste" is often understood as being in opposition to reason (*muʿāradat al-ʿaql*).[162] These suppositions about the nature of Sufism are mistaken. They stem

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161 Ṭāhā, *al-ʿAmal al-Dīnī wa-Tajdīd al-ʿAql*, 154. This conviction mirrors the legal theory that with the degeneration of morals over time, Islamic law should adapt by becoming more restrictive. For a helpful discussion of this theory, see Marion Holmes Katz, "The 'Corruption of The Times' And The Mutability of the Shari'a," *Cardozo Law Review* 28, no. 1 (2006): 171–86.
162 Ṭāhā, *al-ʿAmal al-Dīnī wa-Tajdīd al-ʿAql*, 160–61.

from a (Western) caricature of mystical experience as irrational and lacking objective truth, whereas in Ṭāhā's view it simply allows human cognition to probe expanses that lie beyond the confines of abstracted reason.[163] With regard to the allegation of abstruseness, Ṭāhā attributes this to the different approach to language favored by Sufis. Their indirect, metaphorical, and allegorical understanding of language is interpreted by others as mere vagueness or, in the case of Qur'anic interpretation, as heterodoxy. But this does not give due weight to the epistemic potential of allegorical language, a potential that Ṭāhā already pointed to in his dissertation as being exceptionally broad in Arabic. What others take to be vagueness is merely a reflection of their own imperfect grasp of Arabic.[164]

It is also not the case that Sufis are anti-rational, a claim often heard coming from intellectuals of a rationalist bent like Zakī Najīb Maḥmūd or Muḥammad ʿĀbid al-Jābirī. What these critics do not understand, according to Ṭāhā, is that the supported reason that is characteristic of Sufism does not oppose, but *includes* the lower forms of reason. Supported reason, he reminds us, "is the reason that is based on praxis that for its part draws on animate experience (*bi-l-tajriba al-ḥayya*)."[165] Following the Revealed Law enlivens one's cognition – it gives the practitioner a view of God in all things – and this, in turn, helps one to discern more detailed and profound ways of improving one's conduct. Put differently, Ṭāhā's philosophical project essentially aims for nothing less than to provide a model of ethical self-formation, or *takhalluq*.[166] By engaging with the world through *takhalluq*, the Sufi "strives to tame this reality through his practical values" (*yajtahid fī tahdhīb hadhā al-wāqiʿ bi-wāsiṭat qiyamihi al-ʿamaliyya*), which leads him to see reality in a different light.[167] The result of engaging in this spiritual experience (*taj-*

163 Ṭāhā, *al-ʿAmal al-Dīnī wa-Tajdīd al-ʿAql*, 161–62.
164 Ṭāhā, *al-ʿAmal al-Dīnī wa-Tajdīd al-ʿAql*, 162–63.
165 Ṭāhā, *al-ʿAmal al-Dīnī wa-Tajdīd al-ʿAql*, 166.
166 *Takhalluq* carries the meaning of shaping oneself and is a cognate of character (*khuluq*), creation (*khalq*), and ethics (*akhlāq*). In particular, since the form of this word is reflexive, *takhalluq* may be interpreted as referring to an ethical shaping of the self, or ethical self-formation. See Ṭāhā, *al-ʿAmal al-Dīnī wa-Tajdīd al-ʿAql*, 167. Like many of the terms used to describe supported reason, *takhalluq* has a Sufi provenance, and is rooted in the sunna. The term is used in a hadith that reads: "characterizing oneself by the character traits of God" (*al-takhalluq bi-akhlāq illāh*). Although the hadith itself is considered weak, the general idea that one ought to form oneself according to God's example finds much resonance in the tradition, and the term was therefore taken up by pivotal scholars like al-Qushayrī and al-Ghazālī. For a discussion of the meaning of *takhalluq*, see Yousef Casewit, "Al-Ghazālī's Virtue Ethical Theory of the Divine Names: The Theological Underpinnings of the Doctrine of Takhalluq in al-Maqṣad al-Asnā," *Journal of Islamic Ethics* 4, no. 1–2 (2020): 155–200.
167 Ṭāhā, *al-ʿAmal al-Dīnī wa-Tajdīd al-ʿAql*, 172.

riba rūḥiyya) is that the world reveals itself as God's creation. It is at this point that what is sensed becomes meaningful (*al-maḥsūs yaṣīr ʿindaʾidh maʿnā*).[168] The world, insofar as it has been rid of its "enchantment" through the dominance of abstracted reason, becomes re-enchanted by the ethically formed individual.

In the process of *takhalluq*, an important role is reserved for the practice of *dhikr*, or mentioning the divine names of God. Recalling the divine names is important because it enlivens the experience of God. It leads the believer beyond abstract theological ideas and teaches him about the practical values that allow a "taming of the world through spiritual practice." It would be wrong to suppose, as some people do, that *dhikr* implies a tendency towards quietism (*tark al-ʿamal*).[169] On the one hand, if by quietism it is meant that the Sufi is unproductive, this likely rests on the misunderstanding that productivity should be measured in terms of material gain.[170] The Sufi *is* productive, but his kind work is in prayer, and his profit (*kasb*) is spiritual, not material. On the other hand, if quietism is interpreted as having no interest in reform (*iṣlāḥ*), this only holds water if one takes this to refer to *political* reform. Indeed, the Sufi is not a political activist. But that does not mean that he is uninterested in reform as such. Sufism advocates humanizing and ethicizing reform (*al-iṣlāḥ al-taʾnīsī al-takhlīqī*).[171] What this means, amongst other things, is that "human nature" (*al-fiṭra al-insāniyya*) is placed at the center of attention, and that man is seen as a creature that universally strives for perfect virtue (*kamāl al-istiqāma*).

6.3.7 Supported reform

Ṭāhā began *Religious Praxis* by positioning it as an intervention in the Islamic reform, or *iṣlāḥ* movement. The problem with *islāḥ* is that it has commonly been understood in political terms devoid of moral guidance. Politicization (*tasyīs*) is based on two principles derived from abstracted reason: the historical principle (*al-mabdaʾ al-tārīkhī*) and the evaluative principle (*al-mabdaʾ al-taqwīmī*). The former implies that history proceeds according to a historical-dialectical progression in which later stages refute those that came before it. In line with this notion of continuous progress, the latter principle implies an orientation towards the future, stating that new ideas and principles cannot be based on previous ones. Taken to-

168 Ṭāhā, *al-ʿAmal al-Dīnī wa-Tajdīd al-ʿAql*, 173.
169 Ṭāhā, *al-ʿAmal al-Dīnī wa-Tajdīd al-ʿAql*, 175.
170 Ṭāhā, *al-ʿAmal al-Dīnī wa-Tajdīd al-ʿAql*, 175–78.
171 Ṭāhā, *al-ʿAmal al-Dīnī wa-Tajdīd al-ʿAql*, 180.

gether, they present the familiar linear-progressive temporal basis for thinking about questions of authenticity and modernity.

Ṭāhā's argument turns on taking these two principles and inverting their meaning. Since supported reason rejects politicization in favor of ethicization (*takhlīq*) or humanization (*ta'nīs*), it must adopt principles that are the complete opposite. Hence, where politicization is opposed to borrowing from previous times (*tasalluf*) and taking the past as a model (*tanmadhuj*), ethicization ought on the contrary to adopt these understandings of the historical and the evaluative principles. This means that ethicization must return to the original sources and articulate a method for ethicization that follows historical examples of virtuousness.[172] By following the divine example of Muḥammad, one retains a spiritual link to the time of revelation (*zaman al-waḥī*).[173] Together with *dhikr*, following a role model helps to preserve the spirituality in this world, the strength of which was sapped by the onslaught of abstracted reason. We must realize, moreover, that since the goal is not to instigate immediate political action, but to change the ethical comportment of people, the way to communicate this message cannot be in terms of direct expression (*ʿibāra*), but must rather use analogy (*ishāra*). The only way to achieve this kind of reform completely is by developing a kind of practical *tasalluf*, by which is meant a way of reading classical texts and extracting cleansed nuggets of knowledge from them, and using them to imbibe the soul with religious and spiritual meanings (*al-maʿānī al-dīniyya al-rūḥiyya*). Again, this is more necessary now than ever before, because of the residue of spiritual divergence from the original source that has built up over the centuries.[174]

What we have here is a neat illustration of how Ṭāhā weaves together ideas about time, authenticity, and *turāth* in pursuit of a thoroughly ethical reform project. He follows the Salafi course up to a point when he argues, against historicist and progressivist conceptions of history, that time effects a deterioration in the spiritual link to the Prophet. and that Islamic reform should aim to reconnect to this "time of revelation" and maintain the link to the Prophet himself. In this sense, Ṭāhā does appear to align with the authentic side of the standard narrative. The goal and the means of doing this, however, are utterly alien to how the traditionalists are commonly perceived. First, the goal is not to return to the past for the sake of being true to one's cultural and religious ancestry per se. Rather, the return to authenticity is the only way to be creative and to renew society spiritually in ways compatible with the current age. Second, the way to accomplish this is not

172 Ṭāhā, *al-ʿAmal al-Dīnī wa-Tajdīd al-ʿAql*, 184–85.
173 Ṭāhā, *al-ʿAmal al-Dīnī wa-Tajdīd al-ʿAql*, 197.
174 Ṭāhā, *al-ʿAmal al-Dīnī wa-Tajdīd al-ʿAql*, 188–89.

to stick rigorously to the apparent meaning of the Qur'an, but to nourish a direct spiritual bond with this earliest time through Sufi means – like *dhikr* and use of analogy. The contemporary Muslim needs to learn how to get in contact with the time of revelation by getting acquainted, not with the letter, but with the spirit of his cultural heritage.

What this means in practice is a novel, innovative form of religious education that makes the student adequately sensitive to grasp the meanings hidden in the classical Islamic texts that make up *turāth* in a way that makes him a virtual contemporary of these texts. This must not be done, however, by anxiously trying to return to a world resembling the earliest time of the Islamic era – the common Salafi stereotype – but instead by "letting the texts come to us" and shaping the reason and experience of the modern Muslim.[175] This will ideally result in a complete merging of theory and practice, so that the person in question "looks with the models of praxis in the same way that he acts with the concepts of theory" (*fa-yanẓur bi-qawālib al-ʿamal kama yaʿmal bi-maqūlāt al-naẓar*).[176] Only this complete union and acquaintance with *turāth,* together with the elucidation of these sources through following the correct model (*namūdhaj*) of moral virtue,[177] enables the modern Muslim to be truly creative and renew and adapt to current circumstances, and to fulfill his ultimate purpose, which is to draw near to God.[178]

As mentioned at the outset, the analysis of reason is central to Ṭāhā's philosophical project. It forges a link between his metaphysical picture of a dynamic whole that is Creation, and the epistemic framework that man has at his disposal to enter into contact with it. This framework is, as was the case in his dissertation, shaped by language, since it is through language that man can receive the signs

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175 Ṭāhā, *al-ʿAmal al-Dīnī wa-Tajdīd al-ʿAql,* 190.

176 Ṭāhā, *al-ʿAmal al-Dīnī wa-Tajdīd al-ʿAql*, 190.

177 As two models of Islamic virtue, Ṭāhā mentions here Muḥammad and Mālik ibn Anas, or Imam Malik, the eponym of the Maliki school of Islamic law, which is dominant in the Maghrib and which Ṭāhā presents as inherently Sufi – see Ṭāhā, *al-ʿAmal al-Dīnī wa-Tajdīd al-ʿAql*, 192. In the final part of the book, Ṭāhā very much emphasizes the role of the model, particularly in our day and age, when man is likely to be led astray – see ibid., 196–99. Only when abstract rules and abstruse vocabulary are seen embodied in the doings of a role model can someone who has ventured on the Sufi path implement these teachings correctly. This is what distinguishes the Sufi framework from one that is solely rooted in moral law: it is practical and dynamic because it can adapt to individual circumstances.

178 Ṭāhā also refers to man as "a being that draws near" (*kāʾin mutaqarrib*). In the final part of this book, Ṭāhā describes how the three forms of reason give rise to three modes of approaching God, using different terms derived from the triliteral root that relates to "being close" (Q – R – B/ق – ر – ب): The abstracted reasoner "approaches [God]" (*muqārib*), the guided reasoner "offers himself up [to God]" (*qurbānī*), and the supported reasoner "has been brought close [to God]" (*muqarrab*) – see Ṭāhā, *al-ʿAmal al-Dīnī wa-Tajdīd al-ʿAql*, 221.

that contain a glimpse of the nature of reality. Of course, Ṭāhā is thinking in particular of the boundless allegorical depth that Sufis have found in the Qur'an. The emphasis in *Religious Praxis*, however, is not so much on language as it is on what is done, on *praxis* (*ʿamal*). The idea that reality can be cognized in many different ways remains. What we now learn is that this difference is not simply due to a different language, but to a different formation of the self through guided and supported engagement with the world. Reason is not, as Ṭāhā points out at the start of his book, a stable essence, but an ability that can be trained. Just as the ear of a musician picks up on sounds, harmonies, and rhythms that the layman does not hear, and the trained olfactory sense of an expert wine taster allows him to pick out tones and tastes that others do not, the training of the mind allows the seeker of wisdom to cognize the world in more detail, and discover meaning in it that is not available to someone whose mind has not been attuned to the essences that lie behind the world as it appears.

Of course, the kind of praxis that Ṭāhā says is required for training the mind is indicative of his Islamic and specifically his Sufi background. The entire system hinges on an Islamic worldview, in which God has created a world inhabited by His creatures, one of which is assigned a special role due to his entering into a covenant with Him. The revelations sent down by the Almighty serve as signs as to how the world functions, what its deeper meaning is, and what this demands of man in his role as trustee. Although this Qur'anic worldview is not evident in his French dissertation, Ṭāhā does appear to acknowledge that it was at the back of his mind when he took to researching reason qua *noétique.* As he says in an interview many years later, speaking about his earliest investigations into language, his study of logic convinced him that logic does not and cannot encompass truth in its entirety, and "that the reason that defeated the Muslims is a limited reason and that the Islamic community is acquainted with a reason that is broader than the one that defeated us."[179] Ṭāhā goes on to say that this realization made him turn to a different kind of project "to reveal what is behind the bounds of logic." This path, he argues, cannot be the language of direct statements (*ʿibāra*), which is the language of bounded reason (*al-ʿaql al-maḥdūd*), but must instead turn to allegorical expression (*ishāra*) that is both "authentic" (*aṣīla*) and eloquent (*balīgha*), so as to penetrate the bounds of abstracted reason (*al-ʿaql al-mujarrad*). While Ṭāhā presents this realization as one that overtook him after or during the course of his studies into logic at the Sorbonne, it is hard to deny that what he presents here as his new philosophical project is in fact already part of his dissertation. After all, it is precisely the allegorical potential of Arabic's *noétique* that

179 Ṭāhā, *al-Ḥiwār Ufuqan li-l-Fikr*, 18.

opens to its speakers a different view of reality, unconstrained by the confines of ontological metaphysics. The later project, even though it may reject the tenets of his training as a logician, is foreshadowed in his earliest publication. Moreover, in this interview Ṭāhā adds an interesting dimension, one that may also have been in the background during his years as a graduate student. Continuing his reflections on what motivated his forays into language and logic, he writes that "undoubtedly, the first man spoke 'the language of the individual nature' [*fiṭra*], or rather 'the language of being,' or 'the language of spirit.' This is the language that I was researching, inquiring after the things that would enable me [to use it]."[180] In other words, his project may, from a very early stage, be understood not simply as venturing into the relationship between language and reason, but as an attempt to get closer to the primordial language of Being.[181] This naturally sheds a different light on Ṭāhā's early analysis of language and reason, and the ability of people to approach truth through translations that are sensitive to linguistic, cultural, and metaphysical difference. More than simply a secular call for intercultural understanding, it now takes the shape of a reconstruction of the language of the first man, the language spoken by Adam.

Naturally, one who does not acknowledge the truth of revelation and at the same time acts it out in practice, will likely not rise above the stage of abstracted reason. The practice (and not simply the theoretical acquaintance) of what God requires of you is the starting point for developing your reason, first as guided reason, then as supported reason. The latter is a process of fleshing out the Islamic worldview. You do not merely acknowledge the truth of the Qur'an and what it decrees, but use it as a guide for a lifelong trajectory of training in coming to grips with the world as it presents itself to you, and how it presents itself differently in different situations and different stages along this trajectory.

This book, *Religious Praxis and the Renewal of Reason,* is crucial because it spells out the goal of Ṭāhā's philosophy and the method for accomplishing it, namely to evaluate religion and the way it functions in society and to steer the religious awakening in a different direction. Rather than orient towards what he portrays as "mainstream" Sunni Islam, blindly performing obligatory rituals and assenting to the Islamic creed, Ṭāhā envisions a modern form of Islam that is inherently ethical and puts creed into practice. Where it claims to differ most

180 Ṭāhā, *al-Ḥiwār Ufuqan li-l-Fikr*, 19.

181 This does not mean that we should see the early Ṭāhā as secretly convinced of the superiority of the mystical path while he was conducting his research into logic. This, he tells us, he became convinced of only gradually, as he learned more about logic and how it is restricted in relating to the world.

markedly from the traditional, Salafist, and often politicized groups that have claimed the awakening as their own, is in its method. It focuses entirely on remaking the individual. As Wael Hallaq remarks, Ṭāhā's philosophy calls for "a new concept of the human."[182] Sufi practice presents a program for working on the self, a way of changing how we cognize the world by reshaping reason. One might even argue that Ṭāhā proposes a project of re-enchantment for a modern, disenchanted world. The ethicization of the individual allows him to see meaning in the world, and this meaning can guide him towards the right comportment, towards himself, towards others, and towards God. In this sense, Ṭāhā is not far off from the Adonis's presentation of the authentic individual artist, who creates meaning in the world through his unbounded imagination. Both are concerned about the modern problematic of a disenchanted world, devoid of inherent meaning. In reaction, both turn to the individual as the source of meaning, one by imputing to him the power to create new meanings, the other by retrieving his ability to get in touch with the Divine meanings embedded in His Creation.[183] In the course of making their arguments for a kind of individual authenticity, both think it necessary to reject common, chronological conceptions of time that erase the individual and his meaning-making capacities.

While this work gives us the goal and method, it is less clear about the problem that gives rise to this philosophical project in the first place. In *Religious Praxis* as well as in his dissertation, we get a glimpse of the issues that animate his thinking. In the dissertation we see him argue against the Western ontological view of the world, and chastise fellow Arabs for not respecting the noetic differences between languages and the cultures associated with them. In *Religious Praxis* we get

182 Hallaq, *Reforming Modernity: Ethics and the New Human in the Philosophy of Abdurrahman Taha*, 261. Ṭāhā in fact assents to this interpretation – see ibid. p. 273.

183 The responsibility of mankind as steward of Creation is important to the overall project that Ṭāhā pursues. This so-called "Trusteeship Paradigm" was first coined in English by Muḥammad Hashas, and has been taken up in discussions of Ṭāhā in English. For these discussions, see Hashas, "Taha Abderrahmane's Trusteeship Paradigm: Spiritual Modernity and the Islamic Contribution to the Formation of a Renewed Universal Civilization of Ethos"; Hallaq, *Reforming Modernity: Ethics and the New Human in the Philosophy of Abdurrahman Taha*, 253; and Suleiman, "The Philosophy of Taha Abderrahman: A Critical Study," 15–21. The articulation of this ideal of trusteeship has become a pivotal feature of Ṭāhā's more recent works, where he deploys it in contradistinction to the merely formal application of Islamic law that he calls *iʾtimārī* – see ʿAbd al-Raḥmān Ṭāhā, *Dīn al-Ḥayāʾ: min al-Fiqh al-Iʾtimārī ilā al-Fiqh al-Iʾtimānī*, vol. 2, 3 vols. (Beirut: al-Muʾassasa al-ʿArabiyya li-l-Fikr wa-l-Ibdāʿ, 2017). In a recent work, Ṭāhā contrasts trusteeship with secularism: see ʿAbd al-Raḥmān Ṭāhā, *al-Mafāhīm al-Akhlāqiyya bayn al-Iʾtimāniyya wa-l-ʿAlmāniyya: al-Mafāhīm al-Iʾtimāniyya*, vol. 1, 2 vols. (Kuwait/Lebanon: Markaz al-Nuhūḍ, 2021), and ʿAbd al-Raḥmān Ṭāhā, *al-Mafāhīm al-Akhlāqiyya bayn al-Iʾtimāniyya wa-l-ʿAlmāniyya: al-Mafāhīm al-ʿAlmāniyya*, vol. 2, 2 vols. (Kuwait/Lebanon: Markaz al-Nuhūḍ, 2021).

a vague sense that he associates the lowest form of abstracted reason with the West. Moreover, he mentions the gradual decline of the original message of God with the passage as time as a reason for the current generation to do more than strictly required by Islamic law in order to maintain an ethical standard. What these things imply is of course a much larger problematic that lurks in the background: Western modernity.

When Ṭāhā chastises his peers for importing foreign ideas, vocabulary, and methods unreflectively, he has in mind a particular group of Western-oriented reformers like Mohammed Arkoun, Muḥammad ʿĀbid al-Jābirī, Abdallah Laroui, Sādiq Jalāl al-ʿAẓm, Jūrj Ṭarābīshī, Zakī Najīb Maḥmūd, and many others. These prominent contemporary thinkers are, according to Ṭāhā, so thoroughly in awe of modern Western culture that they trip over each other trying to introduce the latest Western theories to an Arab and Islamic audience. Ideas about secularism, democracy, and scientific reason are introduced without translating them to the Arab context in a way that leaves its structure and its institutions intact. Particularly jarring in this respect is the idea of an epistemic break, central to the work, for instance, of al-Jābirī and Arkoun, that is, the idea that it is possible and worthwhile to have a clean break with one's tradition, with one's *turāth*, in the interest of civilizational progress. What these thinkers do not understand is that it is precisely in one's own language – the Arabic language in particular – and the *turāth* that was built with it that Arab thinkers can find their unique source of creativity. Moreover, insofar as they are knowledgeable about *turāth*, their knowledge is defective in several ways.

Also, when Ṭāhā alludes to the lowly nature of abstracted reason and the demise of morality, he in fact echoes a traditionalist refrain of a modern world that has increasingly become mired in materialism and requires an ethical renewal in order to revive its spirit. The creation of a new concept of the human is not merely a self-standing project of ethical renewal; it is rather a necessary antidote to the destructive, unethical drive of a modernity that threatens to destroy the bonds between God and man. This renewal is not just praiseworthy, but *necessary* in our day and age, because it is the only way that we can avoid the disasters that accompany our detachment from spirit: war, famine, disease, ecological destruction, etc.

This context does not emerge clearly from the early writings. The critique of the *turāth* debate and of unreflective modes of translation are first fully treated in his *Tajdīd al-Manhaj fī Taqwīm al-Turāth* (1994) and in the two volumes of *Fiqh al-Falsafa* (1995 and 1999, respectively). Only after having provided this methodological background, it seems, does Ṭāhā feel prepared to tackle the question of modernity, which he does for the first time in *The Question of Ethics* (2000). Both these aspects of his writings are of interest to us. Obviously, the work on translation and his interpretation of the intellectual heritage links Ṭāhā to the discourse

on *turāth.* It is this part of his project that most directly ties together intellectuals of such wildly different orientations as Maḥmūd, Adonis, and Ṭāhā. But there is a more profound sense in which these two themes, *turāth* and modernity, are vital to understanding Ṭāhā's temporal orientation and his interpretation of and reaction to authenticity. On the one hand, relying on his theory of language, Ṭāhā turns the debate about *turāth* on its head, arguing that the true creativity that is the hallmark of modernity can only come about when one's own language and its heritage are kept in high standing and free from outside corruption. In other words, the only way to be modern and creative is to be authentic in the sense of relying on *turāth*, but to do so in a way that aids creativity. On the other hand, in the course of criticizing Western modernity and developing an Islamic alternative to it, Ṭāhā presents a new conception of vertical, ethical time to rival that of Adonis.

6.4 Ṭāhā and *turāth*

Turāth permeates the writings of ʿAbd al-Raḥmān Ṭāhā, both as a topic and as a source of inspiration for his philosophy. There is not a single book in his oeuvre that does not refer to it "either explicitly or implicitly."[184] When reading Ṭāhā, we must remind ourselves, however, that his treatment of *turāth* is markedly different from that of the two thinkers we have discussed previously: Maḥmūd and Adonis. Each of them in his own way approaches *turāth* historically. They give a genealogical analysis of how *turāth* has been formed, how it shapes the bedrock for understanding contemporary Arab society, and how Arabs in modern times should read, interpret, and use their heritage. In contrast, Ṭāhā prefers a systematic approach. He wants to show why the way in which most of his contemporaries work with *turāth* is both mistaken and destructive of the Arab spirit. As with every aspect of his philosophical project, his fierce criticism of contemporary *turāth* discourse grows out of his foundational analysis of language and reason. This is something that will likely elude readers who are new to his philosophy, and who come to his works with only some knowledge of the *turāth* debate. To illustrate this connection, let us briefly turn to a couple of articles that contain the gist of his main work on this subject, *Tajdīd al-Manhaj fī Taqwīm al-Turāth (The Renewal of Method in the Evaluation of Turāth).*[185]

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184 Karrūm, *al-Turāth ʿind Ṭāhā ʿAbd al-Raḥmān*, 11.

185 Both of these are included in the collection of articles and essays entitled *Suʾāl al-Manhaj: fī Ufuq al-Taʾsīs l-Unmūdaj Fikrī Jadīd* (Beirut: al-Muʾassasa al-ʿArabiyya li-l-Fikr wa-l-Ibdāʿ, 2015).

6.4.1 Renewing the perspective on *turāth*

We start with the article "How Do We Renew the Perspective on *Turāth?*" ("Kayf Nujaddid al-Naẓar fī al-Turāth?"), which came out in 1996. In the introduction, Ṭāhā sets out a clear logical schema for dealing with the question at hand. Discussing each element in turn, and starting with the one that does not rely for its semantic content on any of the others, Ṭāhā first gives a definition of *turāth,* then of perspective (*naẓar*), then renewal (*tajdīd*), and finally the "how" (*kayfiyya*) of this renewal.[186] As for the definition of *turāth*, he starts by doing two things. First, he contrasts *turāth* with culture (*thaqāfa*) and civilization (*ḥaḍāra*), telling us that the former is related to national (*waṭaniyya*) values that remain relevant, whereas the latter refers to universal (*kawniyya*) values that have equally remained relevant in this day and age. *Turāth*, Ṭāhā tells us, is more encompassing than either. It includes national and universal values – the latter being a subsection of the former, according to him – and it includes values that have become irrelevant (*mulghā*).[187]

Two things should be noted about this definition-by-distinction. First, Ṭāhā focuses strictly on definitions of culture, civilization, and *turāth* in terms of values (*qiyam*). For the formation of values and their orientation he uses the related term *taqwīm*, which is best translated as "evaluation," since this captures both the allusion to values and its more direct meaning of "assessment." Accordingly, Ṭāhā discusses *turāth* from a *moral* perspective as essentially made up of values. Second, by distinguishing *turāth* as encompassing the realm of the "irrelevant" he opens up space for retrieving those values that appear to have sunk into the oblivion of irrelevance. This move is vital. It allows him to argue against his peers who

186 Ironically, this logical way of proceeding may open Ṭāhā up to his own criticism, central to *Langage et philosophie* that one should take care to distinguish between syntax and semantics, because syntactical peculiarities of a language may give rise to highly idiosyncratic philosophical analyses. While Arabic does not use a separate term to denote "we" – it being included in the verb "*nujaddid*" (we renew), the English term does refer to an actor. Coming from an English perspective, if one were to similarly analyze this sentence, one would be necessarily led to ask: "Who is this 'we' that is referred to?" In other words, who is the circle of those interested in and justified in renewing *turāth?* This question does not appear to be philosophically trivial, but it is left undiscussed due to a formal feature of the Arabic language.

187 Ṭāhā remains rather vague on what he means by either national or universal values. It is unlikely that with universal values he would mean anything like the values expressed in the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which he considers an empty claim to universality of a set of values associated with Western society. In light of his earlier work, it may be that national values refers to any set of values associated with a language, whereas universal values are associated with the primordial language of being, which he would like to retrieve – see Ṭāhā, *al-Ḥiwār Ufuqan li-l-Fikr*, 18–19.

study *turāth* as a way to break free from its clutches, of escaping the values that it embodies. Ṭāhā, instead, wants to return to *turāth* as a source of inspiration for the current age.

It is instructive at this point to compare Ṭāhā's approach with that of Maḥmūd. The latter also principally associates *turāth* with values. His approach to these values, however, remains rather dismissive and sterile. The kinds of values that someone living in the modern age ought to esteem are set by the current circumstances and by the need for progress. Those traditional values that hamper progress or that are not up to date should be discarded. Ṭāhā, while he goes along with this in stressing the normative character of *turāth*, makes different use of these values. He acknowledges what Hallaq calls the "transhistorical thrust of tradition."[188] *Turāth*, for Ṭāhā, offers a framework for moral renewal. One way to conceptualize the difference between Ṭāhā and Maḥmūd is that, though both connect values to *turāth*, they differ as to what "value" actually means. For Maḥmūd, values are something to defend, unless they run counter to an independently set goal of progress. You may profit from them, but they are not the *sine qua non* of personal or societal development. For Ṭāhā, values are the ultimate *source* of progress, because only by returning to these values is one able to think creatively, which in turn is a condition for human progress, conceived of as spiritual rather than material growth. This dimension is clearly evident in his definition of *turāth* as "the totality of specific contents and means [*wasāʾil*] of discourse as well as comportment that define the acquired (or productive) being of the Arab-Muslim person."[189] The crucial, morally charged concept here, as Hallaq notes, is that of acquisition (*kasb*).[190] This concept is the cornerstone of the Ashʿarī doctrine on freedom and moral responsibility, and to include this in the definition of *turāth* is an obvious reference to the fundamental ethical nature of Ṭāhā's perspective on the Arab-Islamic heritage. Also, he adds that *turāth* determines not only the acquired being of the Arab-Muslim person, but also his productive (*intājī*) being. It is only through *turāth* that you can produce or create something that is wholly your own, not something taken over from elsewhere. *Turāth* is the source of morals, of creativity, and of cultural identity.

As an aside, we again see how, though superficially on a par with the traditionalist side in the standard narrative, Ṭāhā diverges from this framework by giving a different spin on what *turāth* is and how it functions. The return to *turāth* is not a

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188 Hallaq, *Reforming Modernity: Ethics and the New Human in the Philosophy of Abdurrahman Taha*, 34.
189 Ṭāhā, *Suʾāl al-Manhaj: fī Ufuq al-Taʾsīs l-Unmūdaj Fikrī Jadīd*, 43.
190 Hallaq, *Reforming Modernity: Ethics and the New Human in the Philosophy of Abdurrahman Taha*, 35.

retreat. Nor is it a kind of following of past examples. Instead, *turāth* is productive. It is the ultimate source of creativity and innovation. What Ṭāhā does, in essence, is to take the vocabulary that is often straightforwardly linked to "the modernists" – words like production, creativity, and innovation – and attribute them to the "other side." Authenticity is creative, authenticity is innovative. Whereas this may appear strange to someone who is only familiar with the standard narrative of Arab thought, it becomes a lot less so if we hark back to our discussion of the ideal of authenticity, where we saw that authenticity is historically bound to creativity and innovation.[191]

After identifying *turāth*, Ṭāhā moves to a definition of perspective or view (*naẓar*). He prefers this to the commonly used term "reading" (*qirāʾa*),[192] because the latter, he argues, is an imported (*manqūl*) concept that privileges the subjective interpretation of a text over obtaining knowledge through reading it. *Naẓar*, on the contrary, is a concept rooted (*maʾṣūl*) in Arab-Islamic heritage that refers to "seeking knowledge of something."[193] What we witness here is another aspect of Ṭāhā that we saw in a more rudimentary form in his early work. The terms "imported" (*manqūl*) and "rooted" (*maʾsūl*) are meant to mark the boundary of the linguistic and practical sphere associated with *turāth* – what in other places he refers to as *al-majāl al-tadāwulī*, or "the prevalent intercommunicative-and-interactive sphere"; a concept that will be discussed in more detail further on. As he already argued in his Parisian period, creative reasoning can only occur if reason is allowed to develop according to the specific rules associated with a language and its heritage. If you take over concepts from other heritages without submitting them to thorough scrutiny, you corrupt language, *turāth,* and eventually, reason. Therefore, he makes it clear that different rules apply for using concepts, depending on where they originated. On the one hand, "everything imported is to be opposed, until its usefulness is established on an evidentiary basis," while on the other hand, "everything rooted is permitted, until its lack of usefulness is established on an evidentiary basis."[194]

Proceeding to the concept of "renewal" (*tajdīd*), Ṭāhā again sets himself apart from his peers. Instead of stressing the novelty contained in this concept, he lays particular emphasis on the fact that, in order to renew anything, there needs to be

191 As was demonstrated by Shukrī ʿAyyād and Fuʾād Zakariyyā, this broader meaning of authenticity applied equally to the Arabic case of *aṣāla.*

192 For instance, al-Jābirī's book *We and the Heritage*, which put the author on the Arab intellectual map, carries the subtitle *Qirāʾāt Muʿāsira fī Turāthinā al-Falsafī* (*Contemporary Readings in our Philosophical Heritage*).

193 Ṭāhā, *Suʾāl al-Manhaj: fī Ufuq al-Taʾsīs l-Unmūdaj Fikrī Jadīd*, 45–46.

194 Ṭāhā, *Suʾāl al-Manhaj: fī Ufuq al-Taʾsīs l-Unmūdaj Fikrī Jadīd,* 45.

something old that requires changing. Renewal of perspective (*tajdīd al-naẓar*) implies that you look at something afresh, in a way that has not been previously proposed – *iʿādat al-naẓar min ghayr tikrār.*[195] In Arabic, this refers to a process of turning around; not a creation *ex nihilo*, but an inversion of a previously held conception (*taqlīb*). This inversion should not be undertaken willy-nilly. It requires a specific aim and needs to be based on evidence.[196] This use of inversion, it must be said, is common in Ṭāhā's work. He uses it in particular to turn what seems to be something valuable in abstracted reason or in Western modernity into its opposite. Thus, personal freedom is revealed as man being a mere slave of his passions. Unconstrained critique, which was portrayed as the only route to truth, is shown to lead to radicalism and the truth's demise. This particular use of inversion is most clearly reminiscent of René Guénon's traditionalist critique of modernity in which "inversion is seen as an all-pervasive characteristic of modernity,"[197] effecting the exact same kinds of turnarounds: modern progress turns out to be spiritual decline, religious superstitions are replaced by the superstitions of reason, the pursuit of spiritual values is exchanged for the momentary gratification provided by consumer goods.

Returning to Ṭāhā and the specifically Arab/Moroccan context in which he writes, perhaps the best example is the inversion of al-Jābirī's threefold distinction of reason. Instead of taking demonstrative reason to be the highest form of reason, Ṭāhā assigns its cognate, abstracted reason, the lowest rung on the ladder. Instead of presenting Sufism and the epistemological order that al-Jābirī dubbed "illumination (*ʿirfān*)" as irrational, he argues that it is instead the most complete form of supported rationality. Hence, I tend to agree with Wael Hallaq when he presents this as a clear dig at al-Jābirī's *Critique of Arab Reason*, one that demands "a radical reversal of Jābrī's triadic narrative" (even if I am not entirely convinced that Ṭāhā also fully "achieves" this reversal).[198]

195 Ṭāhā, *Suʾāl al-Manhaj: fī Ufuq al-Taʾsīs l-Unmūdaj Fikrī Jadīd*, 47.

196 The reference to the word *qalb* (heart), and its cognates *taqlīb* (inversion) and *inqilāb* (overturning), are likely not spurious. *Qalb* refers not just to turning around, but also to the heart. Since the heart is also presented as the seat of reason – see the discussion of *Religious Praxis* – the implication seems to be that reasoning as such should involve this act of turning around. We should also be mindful that the *qalb* plays a central role in Sufi epistemological literature. A discussion of this theme in relation to Ṭāhā, however, would take us beyond the bounds of this study.

197 Mark Sedgwick, *Against the Modern World: Traditionalism and the Secret Intellectual History of the Twentieth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 24–25.

198 Hallaq, *Reforming Modernity: Ethics and the New Human in the Philosophy of Abdurrahman Taha*, 259. The full quotation reads: "Looked at from a bird's-eye view, the totality of Taha's project

Lastly, Ṭāhā deals with the notion of the manner (*kayfiyya* – literally "how-ness") in which this renewal may be accomplished. Because renewal implies inversion, any method for renewal needs to explain why one would want to get rid of the old perspective and articulate opposing principles.[199] The rejection of the old method for using of *turāth* comes down to a list of four grievances, which together he labels "the fragmenting perspective" (*al-naẓar al-tajzīʾī*). By this, Ṭāhā means a critique of the following four methods for understanding *turāth.*

1. Methods that focus on the content, while neglecting the methods that are distinctive of *turāth.* These methods serve to connect different parts of *turāth*, while also creating an interpretative framework for understanding its individual elements. The inattentiveness of those who "fragment" *turāth* to how the methods of *turāth* function as its connective tissue is clear in how they pass over the practical aspect of *turāth.* According to Ṭāhā, *turāth* cannot be properly understood if you do not practice it.
2. Methods that use imported methods, that is, methods for analyzing and using *turāth* that stem from "non-Arab, non-Islamic" traditions without fully understanding them and adapting them to *turāth.* Here, Ṭāhā of course has in mind the use of Western hermeneutical, structuralist, Marxist, and other methods of interpretation that have been applied to *turāth* lock, stock, and barrel.[200]
3. Methods that brandish rationality as a key condition for any successful understanding of *turāth.* Without exception, proponents of these methods portray their own approach as the most rational, while each one of them has a different conception of reason, and none of them has a firm grasp on what rationality actually means. Here, Ṭāhā implicitly refers to his own exposition of reason in *Religious Praxis*, arguing that these supposedly rational theories reject anything as irrational which does not abide by their abstracted standards of rationality. Thus they ban the supra-rational and the non-rational from the purview of reason, whereas Ṭāhā holds that these are the higher, praxis-oriented forms of rationality that he refers to as "guided" and "supported."
4. Methods that call for fragmentation. By this, Ṭāhā means that these theories break up *turāth* according to different methods that are used in it, and then start cherry picking whatever methods align with their preconceived, Western ideals of rationality, morality, and progress. The obvious target here is al-Jābirī,

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demands and achieves a radical reversal of Jābrī's triadic narrative. And there is no better place to witness this reversal than in Taha's central concept of rationality."

199 Ṭāhā, *Suʾāl al-Manhaj: fī Ufuq al-Taʾsīs l-Unmūdaj Fikrī Jadīd*, 49.

200 Examples are al-Jābirī's use of Althusser and Bachelard, Tayyib Tīzīnī's Marxist reading of *turāth*, Ḥasan Ḥanafī's phenomenological project for renewing *turāth*, and Abdallah Laroui's historicist approach.

whose analysis of *turāth* relies on discerning different epistemological orders and picking out the one that aligns most closely with abstracted Western reason as the only path forward for Arab society.

Before we move on to what Ṭāhā proposes is a better way of understanding *turāth*, I would like to point out how these four points relate to Ṭāhā's overall philosophical project. Reading this text out of context, the aforementioned grievances may appear somewhat haphazard. Sure enough, you should know something about the methodologies used in forming *turāth.* But why does praxis play such an outsized role? And why can one not simply use imported methods if they yield interesting results? Moreover, what argument does Ṭāhā have for refuting certain narrow conceptions of rationality? And lastly, what is wrong with breaking up *turāth* into smaller, more manageable chunks?

6.4.2 Linking *turāth* to reason

These claims only start to make sense within Ṭāhā's larger project and his analyses of language and reason – granted of course that you accept the premises of this project. Praxis, he showed in *Religious Praxis*, is not just a nice add-on to your theoretical knowledge of the world, but the starting point for a full development of reason. The mind is not a stable entity, but a flexible organ that can be trained to get in touch with the world and arrive at truth through moral praxis that is guided by divine revelation. This also explains why Ṭāhā rejects the claims to rationality of his Western-oriented peers, because *their* idea of reason does not countenance the practical aspect that, according to him, is crucial to understanding how reason can cross the narrow confines of abstracted reason. His emphasis on keeping *turāth* free of imported methods and concepts, moreover, must be read in light of his earlier investigations into language as possessing a particular creative thrust. Importing whole parts of an outside heritage without regard for how they fit with the existing structures that underlie the creative potential of the Arab-Islamic heritage is bound to corrupt it. This has happened in the past and continues to happen to this day, as is seen most clearly in the theories of the neo-Averroïst movement, of which al-Jābirī is one of the intellectual leaders. As Ṭāhā sees it, Al-Jābirī and others import ideas to break up *turāth* and choose only the parts that conform to their modern, Western outlook, thereby destroying the holistic unity of theory and praxis fostered by a heritage that includes and combines demonstrative methods for gaining theoretical knowledge, and juridical and mystical methods for guiding man to what is right and good.

Obviously, Ṭāhā's perspective on what is wrong with contemporary readings of *turāth* is wholly informed by his previous philosophy. And the same goes for his theory of how heritage *should* be understood and put to use. Since, according to the earlier definition, renewal implies an inversion, and Ṭāhā has described the current, faulty readings of *turāth* as fragmenting, what he will argue for instead is a holistic, unified perspective (*al-naẓar al-takāmulī*). Dealing a blow to the standard narrative of *turāth*, he explicitly presents this perspective as an antidote to the common view of what Ṭāhā calls the "hoary old problematic" (*ishkāliyya mustahlaka istihkākan*) of "authenticity and contemporaneity," "authenticity and modernity," or "tradition and renewal."[201] While he acknowledges that there may be some truth to this way of conceiving of the problematic central to Arab thought, these calls are marked by "circumstantial rashness." They are tied to a particular time period, and the investigations that proceed within this schema are not based on a sound, practical engagement with *turāth*, but rather on an abstracted (*mujarrada*) understanding of it that is not attuned to what is good or bad, beneficial or detrimental in it – the target here is obviously the kind of rationalist approach to *turāth* that has characterized much of *nahḍa* engagement with the Islamic heritage, and culminates in the elaborate readings of *turāth* of the 1970s and 1980s relying heavily on Western methodologies like structuralist Marxism (al-Jābirī, Ṭayyib Tīzīnī) or phenomenology (Ḥasan Ḥanafī). The correct approach will need to rely on indigenous methods that have made *turāth* into what it is; it will require authentic guided (*musaddad*) methods instead of imported ones that are rooted in abstracted reason. Only this can lead to true, holistic perfection (*takāmul*).

Again, we must understand what Ṭāhā is doing here in light of his earlier writings. It is no coincidence that he uses the terms abstracted (*mujarrad*) and guided (*musaddad*), to drive home the point that we need a unified understanding of *turāth* that encompasses theory and practice. These, after all, are the exact terms he used to differentiate between two forms of reason, one abstracted from revelation and the other guided by it. Ṭāhā thus links the development of reason outlined in *Religious Praxis* with the proper reading of *turāth.* Since true knowledge must contain both theory and praxis, both abstracted and guided reason, it is only through a holistic approach to *turāth* that one can achieve true knowledge and moral uprightness.

This approach also requires a complete reassessment of what Ṭāhā calls "the hoary old problematic" of authenticity and modernity. That binary understanding of Arabic discourse, though not entirely mistaken, remains one-sided. It acknowl-

201 Ṭāhā, *Su'āl al-Manhaj: fī Ufuq al-Ta'sīs l-Unmūdaj Fikrī Jadīd*, 55.

edges the need to preserve a link to *turāth* as source of identity, but it neglects the role of a unified *turāth* as a source of creative energy. It is for this reason, I take it, that Ṭāhā starts out another, related article on *turāth* by reiterating this distinction.[202] He says that contemporary interest in *turāth* has two causes. He first repeats the often-heard claim that "the self has no identity without relying on its *turāth*."[203] This claim, obviously, is central to the *turāth* debate, as it revolves around the question of how to retain this identity while also moving with the times. However, he quickly moves on to a second proposition that is not obviously part of the standard narrative of Arab thought, stating that there is "no creativity in the intellectual content without independence in the method that is employed."[204] Moreover, you can only attain such independence if you are able to establish your own method.

In this article, Ṭāhā spells out more clearly what he means by a method that is not imported but has come about through authentication (*taʾṣīl*). An authenticated method or concept should conform to the standards of what Ṭāhā calls the "prevalent intercommunicative-and-interactive sphere" (*al-majāl al-tadāwulī*). As he explains in more detail in *The Renewal of Method in the Evaluation of Turāth*,[205] the concept of *tadāwul* combines both the notions of intercommunication (*tawāṣul*) and interaction (*tafāʿul*).[206] It captures, in other words, the basis for theoretical and practical interactions between members of a particular group.[207] The Arab-Islamic *majāl tadāwulī* is, according to Ṭāhā, based on three things with which the Arab-Islamic community has been blessed: creed, language, and reason. As Ṭāhā phrases it in the most general principle of *tadāwul*, the principle of privilege (*mabdaʾ al-tafḍīl*): "Amongst all peoples (*jamīʿ al-umam*) there is not one that has

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202 The title of the article in question is "Uṣūl al-Naẓariyya al-Takāmuliyya fī-l-Ishtighāl bi-l-Turāth" ("The Origins of the Holistic Theory on Working with *Turāth*"). This article was printed in a single volume entitled *Suʾāl al-Manhaj: fī Ufuq al-Taʾsīs l-Unmūdaj Fikrī Jadīd* (*The Question of Method: On the Prospect of Founding a New Intellectual Model*) together with the article we have discussed thus far – that is, "Kayf Nujaddid al-Naẓar fī-l-Turāth?" ("How Do We Renew the Perspective on *Turāth?*")

203 Ṭāhā, *Suʾāl al-Manhaj: fī Ufuq al-Taʾsīs l-Unmūdaj Fikrī Jadīd*, 59.

204 Ṭāhā, *Suʾāl al-Manhaj: fī Ufuq al-Taʾsīs l-Unmūdaj Fikrī Jadīd*, 60.

205 Specifically, Ṭāhā, *Tajdīd al-Manhaj fī Taqwīm al-Turāth*, 243–72.

206 Ṭāhā, *Tajdīd al-Manhaj fī Taqwīm al-Turāth*, 244.

207 In linguistics, *tadāwul* is more often translated as "pragmatics," that is, the study of how context contributes to meaning. This field includes investigation into things like speech act theory and the interaction between actions and conversational implicature. I have opted for a more elaborate translation based on Ṭāhā's own explanation of this concept in terms of "intercommunication" and "interaction," since a more straightforward translation like "pragmatic field" might mislead readers into thinking that Ṭāhā is simply referring to this particular field of linguistics.

been given a creed so true, a language so eloquent, and a reason so sound as has been bestowed upon the Arab people, as a Divine privilege."[208] The three elements contained in this principle are then used to derive a number of methodological rules that constrain and guide the adoption and rejection of elements foreign to the *majāl tadāwulī*, as well as the creation of new ones. They are rules for changing this sphere. This, after all, is what Ṭāhā is after. He does not want an approach that keeps *turāth* as it is, but one that uses it dynamically while retaining its authentic creative power. Speaking of the *majāl tadāwulī* makes it easier to frame this approach, because it emphasizes the general principles of *turāth* that are timeless, instead of the specific contents, rules, and methods that are set in a particular temporal context. The generality of the three core components gives a lot of leeway, but it also ensures that change happens gradually and within bounds.[209]

The critique of the fragmenting approach to *turāth* is precisely that it does not respect these bounds. It demands rapid change and, if need be, the transgression of the limits of the *majāl tadāwulī* that distinguishes the Arab-Islamic tradition. This approach to *turāth* is obviously linked to his early theses on the link between reason, language, and tradition. But it is also linked to another aspect of his philosophy that we have not yet discussed in detail: Western modernity. Ṭāhā presents this fragmenting approach as particular to the West, and as something that is only practiced by Arabs beholden to Western ideas and ideologies. It is this foreign tradition, with a different history, that urges Arabs to either get rid of *turāth* or reserve some cordoned-off place for it in a modern society. What they do not realize is that the Western path to modernity is not the only one possible, that the key to modernity lies not in doing particular things the Western way, but rather in being creative and finding your own modern way of doing things. Since true creativity is only found in and through *turāth*, Arabs should recognize, according to Ṭāhā, that it is only by respecting *turāth* that they can build a productive, creative society. A distinct Arab-Islamic modernity is possible, and the only way to reach it is through the shared past.

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208 Ṭāhā, *Tajdīd al-Manhaj fī Taqwīm al-Turāth*, 252. Although I do not want to diverge too much into a critical assessment of this claim, it must be said that his arguments for this remain rather underwhelming, resting mostly on unsubstantiated, self-glorifying quotations by luminaries of the Islamic tradition like Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī and Ibn Taymiyya. Ṭāhā also argues in a single paragraph, that the superiority of Arab-Islamic reason is due to a combination of the other two factors – creed and language – since both of these together ensure the surest grasp of knowledge. It is clear that this kind of argument requires the reader to have already accepted some very substantial premises.

209 Ṭāhā, *Tajdīd al-Manhaj fī Taqwīm al-Turāth*, 250.

6.5 Ethics and modernity

To understand why Ṭāhā wants to argue for an alternative Arab-Islamic modernity, we need to understand what he finds wrong with the dominant Western form of modernity. His critical stance vis-à-vis the West is palpable early on, in his rejections of Western ontology and the constrained worldview of abstracted reason, but it is not articulated in full until the publication of *The Question of Ethics* in 2000. Whereas in *Religious Praxis* he only touched upon abstracted reason, and focused his energies on explaining Sufi practice and showing it to be an improvement over what he considered to be mainstream, non-Sufi Islam, in this work, the emphasis is squarely on that more basic form of abstracted reason and the nefarious effects that it has on this world, serving as the rational basis for Western modernity.

6.5.1 The question of ethics

At root, the problem with today's Western culture is that it neglects the essential nature of mankind. According to Ṭāhā, man is essentially an ethical being. He distinguishes himself from other animals not by the relative superiority of his reason, but because he is able to act according to moral principles. Western reason, with its emphasis on "Logos," a term referring to both rationality and mere talk (as opposed to ethical practice),[210] has covered up this essential truth about humankind. It excludes any appeal to holistic, transcendent, and infinite notions fundamental to ethics. This only allows for the kind of superficial, conceptually confused, abstract and non-practical ethical discourse Ṭāhā finds in the West. He directs his ire in particular at the moral philosophy of David Hume, who, by making a sharp distinction between fact and value, not only severs ethics from religion, but also does precisely the opposite of what religion and Sufi praxis is all about, namely to join theory and practice.[211]

If modern man wants to reclaim his essence, he needs to find his way back to an ethical worldview, and the only way to do so is by turning to religion. The reason for this is that, according to Ṭāhā, ethics and religion are not just historically related to each other, they are the same thing: *ethics is religion.* If this is so, the search for an alternative to this non-ethical worldview must, he argues, consist in retrieving a religious normative framework. If the essence of man is to live an ethical life, his life must be guided by religious principles. These principles

210 Ṭāhā, *Su'āl al-Akhlāq: Musāhama fī al-Naqd al-Akhlāqi li-l-Ḥadātha al-Gharbiyya*, 59–60.
211 Ṭāhā, *Su'āl al-Akhlāq: Musāhama fī al-Naqd al-Akhlāqi li-l-Ḥadātha al-Gharbiyya*, 40–42.

are found in their most perfect and final form in Islam, the last of the revealed religions.[212]

Modern culture therefore needs a full moral-religious revival. As we have seen in *Religious Praxis* however, the kind of religious revival envisioned by Ṭāhā is of a specific kind. It cannot consist in a superficial adherence to religious law, but must involve a deep reformation of the modern self. For this we need to understand the meaning of God's law by becoming attuned to the hidden meaning in all the things that make up His creation. True Muslim practice thus requires a constant awareness of God in everything one does, says, or perceives. This self-formation can only be the result of achieving the highest form of reason, *supported reason.* And since only those who engage in spiritual practice can hope to achieve this level of reason, it is ultimately in Sufism that Ṭāhā sees the antidote to the ills that plague modern society.

6.5.2 The malaise of modernity

Still, one may ask: Why Sufism? What makes Sufism the cure for the malaise of modernity? Why can this not be solved through policy, raising awareness, through raising the standards of general education, combating racial and other forms of harmful discrimination, or eradicating poverty? The answer is that, for Ṭāhā, the root of the problem is not material, but spiritual. Poverty, prejudice, and violence are the result of a spiritual deficiency that, according to Ṭāhā, is inherent to the abstracted reason of Western modernity. Such a spiritual crisis requires a spiritual solution. Partial and superficial measures that treat such symptoms of this crisis as poverty, war, and environmental devastation will never tackle the root of the problem, which, to Ṭāhā's mind, is the fact that modern man has lost the ability to be guided by the divine-ethical spirit that suffuses creation. Modern life has, as Weber reminds us, become disenchanted.[213] Everything has, in principle, become explicable in terms of abstracted reason, leaving nothing that is inherently of value. The way to remedy this, according to Ṭāhā, is not to focus on changing society, but to start with the individual. The individuals who make up modern society need refashioning. Only by educating man, and allowing him to follow the general rules laid down by God according to the specific circumstances in which he finds himself – that is, the project of *Religious Praxis* – can meaning and value reappear

212 Ṭāhā, *Suʾāl al-Akhlāq: Musāhama fī al-Naqd al-Akhlāqi li-l-Ḥadātha al-Gharbiyya*, 26.
213 Max Weber, *Readings and Commentary on Modernity*, ed. Stephen Kahlberg (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), 340.

as fundamental to human cognition, and only thus can the malaise of modernity be addressed. This, Ṭāhā thinks, is what it means to return to man's authentic, ethical nature.

Since our interest lies not so much with ʿAbd al-Raḥmān Ṭāhā's entire moral scheme, but with his view on time and authenticity that underpin his ethics, I will not give a detailed account of the different ills (*āfāt*) that he sees afflicting modern society. Instead, we will look at a brief account of his modernity critique as a jump-off point for discussing his proposal for an alternative, Arab-Islamic modernity that is central to his views on time and authenticity. Western modernity is described by Ṭāhā as determined by two aspects (*wijhān*) and two components (*shiqqān*). The two aspects he mentions, reason (*ʿaql*) and discourse (*qawl*), are obviously related to the story told in *Religious Praxis* about the constraints of modern Western reason. As to reason, Ṭāhā has in mind the idea of *abstracted* reason. Western reason has cut itself of from any means of making ethical progress, because it focuses on the material side of reality and does not acknowledge the Divine, which is the only source of certain knowledge.[214] As for the discursive (*qawlī*) nature of Western reason, here Ṭāhā stresses the theoretical orientation of Western reason. Echoing the conclusion of his studies in Paris, Ṭāhā marks out Western civilization as favoring talk (*qawl*) over action (*fiʿl*).[215] This onesidedness results in three main defects. First, it results in a narrowing (*taḍyīq*) of the scope of language and knowledge to the descriptive. Second, it leads to juridification of ethics and the ossification (*tajmīd*) of existing behavior. Third, the fissure between talk and action engenders a lack of moral values, politicization, and

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214 Ṭāhā, *Suʾāl al-Akhlāq: Musāhama fī al-Naqd al-Akhlāqi li-l-Ḥadātha al-Gharbiyya*, 76. This section (59–76) rehashes the analysis of reason presented in *Religious Praxis*. The main difference is that Ṭāhā presents the difference between guided and supported reason more clearly in terms of a difference between knowing the beneficial ends (*al-maqāṣid al-nāfiʿa*) towards which man ought to strive, and the wholesome means (*al-wasāʾil al-nājiʿa*) that he uses to reach these ends. That is, guided reason shows you the rules according to which you ought to live and worship God – the term "beneficial" (*nāfiʿa*) has historically been used to indicate the kind of knowledge (*ʿilm*) that keeps one on the straight path of Islam, that is, knowledge of God; see Ibn Rajab al-Ḥanbalī, *Bayān Faḍl ʿIlm al-Salaf ʿalā ʿIlm al-Khalaf* (Riyadh: al-Ṣamīʿī, 1985), 19. Supported reason, meanwhile, gives you the detailed knowledge of how to interpret these rules and put them to use in the best way possible. Since these are only rough outlines, and do not cover the way in which you ought to act in any specific situation in a world that is in constant flux, you also need to attune yourself to what is demanded of you personally at every fleeting moment. This attunement, as we have seen, is the outcome of a process of working on the self – what he calls "supported ethical molding" (*al-takhalluq al-muʾayyad*) – to create a soul that stands in direct cognitive relation to the essences of the things that he experiences, and through them to God as he manifests Himself in His Creation.
215 Ṭāhā, *Suʾāl al-Akhlāq: Musāhama fī al-Naqd al-Akhlāqi li-l-Ḥadātha al-Gharbiyya*, 77.

rule by force.[216] These defects can be overcome by engaging in the kind of ethical self-formation (*takhalluq*) associated with Sufi practice (and already described in *Religious Praxis*). This practice broadens the ethical field horizontally to encompass any possible action, and vertically by simultaneously presenting each action as performable at different levels. An action performed by the supported reasoner, after all, is never describable in terms that abstracted reason would recognize as "objective" – that is, answers to questions about when, where, and by whom an action is performed that only allow for one single description. Supported action is analyzable into mystical states (*aḥwāl*), stations along the spiritual path that affect the carnal soul (*maqāmāt*) and moments (*awqāt*). For each action, there is not a single mystical state (*ḥāl*) that may be applied to it but many, not a single station of spiritual development (*maqām*) but many, not a single moment (*waqt*) but many different moments (*awqāt*). Which state, station, or moment is applied will depend on the individual and the particulars of the situation. Moreover, each state, each station, and each moment has a different moral characteristic (*khuluq*).[217] Supported reason thus provides the believer with an infinite horizon for moral self-improvement, rather than a constrained, minimalist conception of inalienable rights that ought not be infringed upon. It prompts people to enliven their moral life by engaging in good works, and to follow the right examples and to work constantly towards perfecting their comportment. Finally, this enlivened action results in feelings of true happiness, a humane perspective on the world, and an experience of the world through aesthetic taste (*al-dhawq al-jamālī*) corresponding to the direct experience of the essences referred to in his earlier work as *al-ʿayniyya.*[218]

Besides these two aspects already discussed by and large in *Religious Praxis*, Ṭāhā also distinguishes two sides (*shiqqān*) of modernity, both of which are contained in his attack on what he calls the techno-scientific order (*al-niẓām al-ʿilmī-al-taqanī*). The current world order has, according to Ṭāhā, emerged out of particular way of conceptualizing reason developed by early mechanistic scientist-philosophers like Galileo and Bacon, which was later systematized by Descartes and Newton. This provided the basis for the Enlightenment, which developed into nineteenth-century positivism and scientism. The guiding principles of this intellectual strand are twofold: empirification (*tajrīb*) and mathematization (*tarwīḍ*). The conviction that the world is entirely open to human understanding through empirical measurement in combination with mathematical analysis, and the absence of any awareness of and respect for what lies behind the mere

216 Ṭāhā, *Suʾāl al-Akhlāq: Musāhama fī al-Naqd al-Akhlāqi li-l-Ḥadātha al-Gharbiyya*, 78–79.
217 Ṭāhā, *Suʾāl al-Akhlāq: Musāhama fī al-Naqd al-Akhlāqi li-l-Ḥadātha al-Gharbiyya*, 81–82.
218 See section 6.3.4. for the discussion of *ʿayniyya.*

appearances that are the basis for the empirical method, gives man the impression that he is the sole master over Creation; that he is beholden to nobody. The modern powers of prediction (*tanabbuʾ*), manipulation (*taḥakkum*), and complete mastery, even over things that should not be under human control (*taṣarruf*) have led to a clean break between a completely value-neutral scientific enterprise and the normative realms of ethics and religion.[219] What's more, the techno-scientific order undermines the source of human spiritual and moral values, which are the meanings implanted in human nature (*maʿanī al-fiṭra al-insāniyya*).[220] It changes the self in order to root out man's natural religious-ethical sensibility and replace it with a materialist and entirely secular outlook.

The dangers of the modern techno-scientific order have not gone unnoticed in the West. Ṭāhā mentions several German and French authors –Hans Jonas, Karl Otto Apel, and Dominique Janicaud – who expressed similar fears about the dehumanizing effect of modernity. But, he argues, their analyses fail because they do not recognize the true root of the problem, which is the form of abstracted reason that underlies the modern order. They try to remedy the situation by formulating answers within the secular and abstracted rational paradigm with which they are familiar. This neglects the structural deficiency in the Western paradigm, which is that without recognition of the Divine, there is no way to rein in man's pretensions to world-domination. Only God can put man in his rightful place as a servant to God, his viceregent on earth whose task it is to take responsibility for His Creation. Realizing this, man can gain the wisdom he needs for inventing and investing responsibly, as well as the peculiar kind of enchanted experience of the world that gives access to a world filled with meaning and moral values – referred to here as "acquaintance" (*taʿarruf*). [221]

What this means in practice is that the most detrimental effects of the techno-scientific order are reined in by making man aware of the supreme power of God. Such humility reins in the free use of statistical methods (*tanabbuʾ*) that lead man to deny any space for the Unknown (*al-ghayb*) in his quest for domination over nature. It reins in the constant drive to expand one's capabilities for control (*taḥakkum*) over nature, by setting moral limits on research and by connecting scientific knowledge (*ʿilm*) with practice (*ʿamal*). Lastly, it reins in man's inner wants and desires; it impresses on him the fact that he ought not allow himself to do everything

219 Ṭāhā, *Suʾāl al-Akhlāq: Musāhama fī al-Naqd al-Akhlāqi li-l-Ḥadātha al-Gharbiyya*, 119–21.
220 Ṭāhā, *Suʾāl al-Akhlāq: Musāhama fī al-Naqd al-Akhlāqi li-l-Ḥadātha al-Gharbiyya*, 122.
221 Ṭāhā, *Suʾāl al-Akhlāq: Musāhama fī al-Naqd al-Akhlāqi li-l-Ḥadātha al-Gharbiyya*, 133.

that he is capable of, to pursue any desire that he has using any means at his disposal. Man, in the end, is a servant of God and not a freely acting individual who sets his own moral agenda. In short, religious guidance of the kind proposed by Ṭāhā is intended to limit the excesses of the techno-scientific order.[222]

Summing up the conclusions of his four-part critique of Western modernity, Ṭāhā states that Western civilization is "rationally defective, discursively tyrannical, epistemically in crisis, and technologically hegemonic."[223] To remedy this, modern man needs to realize three things. First, superficial changes in ethics or policy to solve the problems caused by a structural lack of ethicality will not do. What is required is a complete moral overhaul, a metamorphosis from a civilization of "Logos" into one of "Ethos." Second, given the momentous changes that are taking place at the individual and the social level nowadays, we will soon witness the formation of a "new, global moral order" (*niẓām akhlāqī ʿālamī jadīd*). Third, Ṭāhā states that:

> Efforts that work towards renewing the perspective on Islamic ethics (*tajdīd al-naẓar fī al-akhlāq al-islāmiyya*) are completely lacking, so that this perspective is made to resemble modern, Western moral philosophies and not, *a fortiori*, made to confront the impending ethical challenge.[224]

I have quoted this point in full, because it indicates a clear connection with Ṭāhā's view of *turāth.* First of all, note that he uses the exact same phrasing used previously with regard to *turāth* – "How do we renew the perspective on *turāth?*" At first glance, the similarity would appear to be only formal, substituting "ethics" for "*turāth.*" This would imply that Ṭāhā will again use the method of inversion (*taqlīb*) as a means for renewal – as is indeed the case. But, the similarity runs deeper. As we saw earlier, his treatment of *turāth* has a clear ethical thrust. The goal of formulating a new perspective on *turāth* was to sensitize the modern reader to the values contained in the language and the creed of the Arab-Islamic *majāl tadāwulī.* To understand *turāth*, one has to practice it, together with others, and on the basis of a set of moral injunctions contained in the creed. *Turāth* can only be grasped in praxis, and since praxis is the domain of ethics, there is an intrinsic relationship between ethics and *turāth.* This is why, in the same paragraph of *The Question of Ethics*, Ṭāhā emphasizes that Muslims "only have, so it appears

222 We can draw a comparison here with the effect of *ʿabdiyya* (servanthood), which is discussed in *Religious Praxis.* This concept was equally used to rein in man's pretensions, by making him aware of his subservience to God.

223 Ṭāhā, *Su'āl al-Akhlāq: Musāhama fī-l-Naqd al-Akhlāqi li-l-Ḥadātha al-Gharbiyya*, 145.

224 Ṭāhā, *Su'āl al-Akhlāq: Musāhama fī-l-Naqd al-Akhlāqi li-l-Ḥadātha al-Gharbiyya*, 146.

in the short term, that which is entailed by Islam in terms of ethical values and spiritual meanings with which to confirm their being and say their piece in the foreseen global civilization." In other words, if the world is soon to witness an ethical revolution and Muslims want to stake a claim in how the new, global moral order is formed, they need to fall back on their own sources, on their *turāth*. The renewal of *turāth* and the project for renewing ethics are thus two sides of the same coin, both part of project of renewal that, in Guénonian traditionalist fashion, aims for the renewal of man's spiritual bond.

6.5.3 Time and turāth in The Question of Ethics

The precise outline of what this ethical order will look like does not, at present, concern us. What interests us at this point are the conceptual underpinnings of his moral outlook: His views on *turāth*, modernity, authenticity, and time. With regard to the theme of time, a recent article by Mohamed Wajdi Ben Hammed tries to flesh out Ṭāhā's conception by comparing it to that of al-Jābirī. For this, Ben Hammed homes in on the Sufi conception of time that he finds in Ṭāhā's use of the Sufi concept of "*waqt*." According to Ben Hammed, Ṭāhā's notion of "*al-waqt* as the temporal frame for the mystical state of *al-tawājud* [presence] represents a rich temporality that unites the internal time of the moral subject with her historical temporality. As such, it is a key cultural coordinate of the renewed ethical subject in Islamic modernity."[225]

In trying to get at Ṭāhā's temporal imaginary, it makes sense to start with a mystical notion like *waqt*. As Ben Hammed points out, the point-like conception of time as "the renewed moment of the now" has a rich genealogy in the Sufi tradition.[226] Ben Hammed is correct in arguing that this now-time is at odds with al-Jābirī's historical concept of time, and he might have added that it is a distinctive feature not just of Islamic, but also of the Western mystical tradition. Both of these draw inspiration from what Agamben identifies as the Gnostic view of time, a conception that is radically opposed to the idea of time as *duration* and instead portrays it as point-like, as a "broken line" rather than a straight or a circular one.[227] Potentially at least, this notion of time cuts through the chronological order that undergirds the kind of progressive historicism at the heart of al-Jābirī's reading

225 Ben Hammed, "(Dis)Enchanting Modernity: Sufism and Its Temporality in the Thought of Mohammed Abed al-Jabri and Taha Abdurrahman," 11.
226 See also the discussion on the concept of "*waqt*" in the Chapter 5.
227 Agamben, *Infancy and History: Essays on The Destruction of Experience*, 100–1.

of *turāth.* Indeed, this is precisely why al-Jābirī rejects *waqt*, because it "epitomises the Sufi tendency to annul the vitality of time and its progressive flow."[228]

Ben Hammed is also correct when he identifies *waqt* as a concept full of moral implications. In *The Question of Ethics,* the concept of *waqt* is mentioned as a way of illustrating the rich moral horizons that open up to anyone who uses the highest form of reason. Following Ṭāhā's presentation of supported reason in *Religious Praxis*, it provides an infinite spectrum of moral classification based on the infinitely many ways in which man relates to the welter of experience that, because it is ultimately the manifestation of Divine Will, contains infinitely many ways of relating and getting closer to Him.[229] This mystical perspective affects all aspects of life, but it is most evident in human acts. These acts, as we saw in *The Question of Ethics*, can be judged according to state (*ḥāl*), station (*maqām*), and moment (*waqt*). Based on the objectless metaphysical picture that underlies Ṭāhā's thinking, we may interpret this as meaning that, since the moment is fleeting, unique, and specific to each individual, the ethical character of the act will also be unique to each moment. Supported reason, in showing man the essences of things in their nowness, helps him to adjust his way of acting to the demands placed on him in that moment.

This way of approaching the concept of time in Ṭāhā should be pursued further. It shows a clear connection to the Sufi tradition, and it potentially ties into the *turāth* discourse by way of al-Jābirī's rejection of it. Moreover, it allows us to read Ṭāhā against a broader background of contemporary writers who are influenced by the anti-chronological, mystical perspective, as a way of creating a space for articulating new aesthetic and ethical vistas – Adonis's use of the Sufi idea of time comes to mind here.

The main problem with Ben Hammed's analysis is that he does not present us with much evidence for taking this concept of now-time as a basis for Ṭāhā's overall temporal imaginary. In *The Question of Ethics*, Ṭāhā only mentions *waqt* in passing as one of three parameters of action. The only other passage mentioned by Ben Hammed that supposedly explains something about Ṭāhā's use of the Sufi concept of time is in the latter's book *The Spirit of Religion,* where he refers to the concept of existing in the present moment, but turning there we find that time is not discussed, nor is *waqt* at all mentioned.[230] My point here is not to discredit the angle studied by Ben Hammed, but to insist that it would require a much more detailed

228 Ben Hammed, "(Dis)Enchanting Modernity: Sufism and Its Temporality in the Thought of Mohammed Abed al-Jabri and Taha Abdurrahman," 12.

229 A fuller picture of this multiplication of meaning is presented in *Ṭāhā, al-Lisān wa-l-Mīzān aw al-Takawthur al-ʿAqlī.*

230 Ben Hammed refers us to Ṭāhā, *Rūḥ al-Dīn: min Ḍayq al-ʿAlmāniyya īlā Saʿat al-Iʾtimāniyya*, 36.

study of Ṭāhā's use of the Sufi conceptual apparatus, including not just the notion of *waqt*, but also of concepts with temporal connotations – for example, *dahr* (temporality), *tawājud* (presence), and *zaman* (time).

A different direction of inquiry into Ṭāhā and time is offered by his discussions of *turāth* and his take on the "hoary old problematic" of authenticity and modernity. Ṭāhā obviously relies on *turāth.* It furnishes him with both methods and values that are fundamental to his project. This reliance on *turāth* would, in the standard narrative, imply a conservative, or even a reactionary sentiment, a longing for a superior past. In a sense this is correct; Ṭāhā does want to return to the past. Yet he does not want to do so in any straightforward, reactionary sense. His conception of what this past is and the role that it can play in modern society is vastly different from that of the paradigmatic traditionalist. By abstracting from the temporal aspect of *turāth* and speaking instead of the *majāl tadāwulī*, that is, a sphere that combines the theoretical with the practical, he creates space to use the principles that (used to) govern Arab-Islamic society without having to literally return to the ways of yore. *Turāth*, for him, is not confined to some chronological period, but lives on in an eternal, spiritual one. Ṭāhā, by reconceptualizing the temporal parameters of *turāth*, effectively turns the past into a dynamic field full of meaning that ought to be used to move contemporary society forward, to foster *spiritual* progress. What's more, he makes the stronger claim that *turāth* offers *the only way* forward. It contains the principles associated with the Arabic language, which, as we saw in his earliest work, is the source for true creativity, and because modernity is, as he will later argue in more detail, built on creativity, only a reliance on *turāth* can usher in modernity.

This point about time and *turāth* naturally links up with the theme of authenticity. We saw before that authenticity has various meanings, even ones that seemingly contradict each other. Here, Tāḥā's take is very interesting indeed, for what he does is to run the two basic interpretations of authenticity – cultural identity versus creativity – together. He wants Arabs to hold on to their identity, but not in an effort to defend their identity come what may. Rather, he redefines the respect for and defense of *turāth* as the only way to achieve authenticity in its second sense, as the creative impulse necessary for innovation. This redefinition can also be seen in how Ṭāhā links *turāth* to ethics. If we compare for a moment his approach with that of Maḥmūd, for the latter it was obvious that ethics was bound up with *turāth,* and therefore separate from modernity. Ṭāhā turns this around: Because *turāth* is associated with ethics, modernity must be ethical. The explicit goal becomes to formulate a new moral order that offers a spiritual basis for future material progress – as opposed to the current situation in which Arabs emulate the materialist culture of the West without being "armed

with the degree of spiritual power and moral strength necessary" to withstand the harmful effects of a civilization built on abstracted reason.[231]

This idea of building a reservoir of spiritual power and moral strength relates to another, more millenarian strand in Ṭāhā's conception of time. In *Religious Praxis,* he already argued for *nawāfil* as being obligatory in our times, due to the growing influence of abstracted reason and the resulting lack of spiritual awareness that people nowadays have. This view of an ebb and flow of spirituality appears more clearly in *The Question of Ethics.* There we see Ṭāhā confidently predicting that, "without a doubt" (*bi-lā shakk*), current developments point to a complete moral overhaul. The world is descending into chaos and Muslims should prepare themselves for this change and be ready to shape the world that is upon us (*al-ʿālam al-muntaẓar*) by forming the man that is upon us (*al-insān al-muntaẓar*).[232]

When it comes to how this future, this world to come, should be shaped, Ṭāhā remains somewhat vague. He repeats his claim that the true nature of man is religious and ethical – since both, as he pointed out in the first chapter, mean the same thing.[233] He then refutes the non-Islamic theories of ethics – that is, Western ethics – for breaking up the essential relation between reason and revelation (*bayn al-ʿaql wa-l-sharʿ*), between reason and the heart (*bayn al-ʿaql wa-l-qalb*), and between reason and sensation (*bayn al-ʿaql wa-l-ḥiss*).[234] Finally, he presents his readers with what he considers the pillars of Islamic ethical theory (*arkān al-naẓariyya al-akhlāqiyya al-islāmiyya*). This ethics should not be a mere list of dos and don'ts, but a collection of meanings and values that man deduces of his own accord on the basis of the acts that he observes and the words that he hears. This way of approaching ethics is more practical, because future man is averse to being ordered around, and wants to find out for himself why he ought to do or refrain from certain things. Moreover, this approach leaves more space for a holistic, narrative conception of the human self, one that conceives of the person as someone embedded in and therefore evaluable with reference to her personal life story.[235]

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231 Ṭāhā, *Su'āl al-Akhlāq: Musāhama fī al-Naqd al-Akhlāqi li-l-Ḥadātha al-Gharbiyya*, 188; Abderrahman, "Renewing Religious Thought in Islam: Prerequisites and Impediments," 89.

232 Ṭāhā, *Su'āl al-Akhlāq: Musāhama fī anl-Naqd al-Akhlāqi li-l-Ḥadātha al-Gharbiyya*, 146–47.

233 Ṭāhā, *Su'āl al-Akhlāq: Musāhama fī al-Naqd al-Akhlāqi li-l-Ḥadātha al-Gharbiyya*, 147–49.

234 Ṭāhā expands on and adds to these three kinds of breakage in Ṭāhā, *Su'al al-ʿAmal: Baḥth ʿan al-Uṣūl al-ʿAmaliyya fī al-Fikr wa-l-ʿIlm* (Beirut: al-Markaz al-Thaqāfī al-ʿArabī, 2012), 65–110.

235 Here, Ṭāhā mentions Alasdair MacIntyre and Paul Ricoeur as two Western proponents of the narrative approach; see Ṭāhā, *su'āl al-akhlāq: musāhama fī-l-naqd al-akhlāqi li-l-ḥadātha al-gharbiyya*, 156–57. Interestingly, his latest book is entirely focused on the relationship between a phi-

Using three Islamic narratives to explain the kind of ethics that he envisages, Ṭāhā argues that it ought to conform to the first covenant between man and God, meaning that this ethics ought to be of divine origin and universally applicable. Referring to the hadith that relates how early in his life, Muḥammad's heart was taken out of his body by the angel Gabriel in order to be cleaned, he illustrates how this ethics ought to cleanse the inner soul and to prepare for renewal and ethical depth. Lastly, he proposes the change in the direction of prayer (*qibla*) from Jerusalem to Mecca as exemplifying an ethics that transposes what is tangible and can be expressed directly into allegorical forms of expression that are understood by reason. This results in an ethics that is not just deep, but also dynamic, because it is rooted in the kind of cognition that allows man to be in touch with his changing surroundings.[236]

Of course, what Ṭāhā is getting at with these religious allegories is the kind of ethical program laid out a decade earlier in *Religious Praxis.* The world that is upon us must be based on guided reason, in the form of an ethics of Divine Revelation, and on supported reason, namely the kind of mystical experience that the believer can acquire through Sufi praxis, and which brings him into direct contact with the changing spiritual meanings that surround him. *The Question of Ethics* can thus be seen as continuing the program of ethical renewal that was outlined in his earlier work. What it adds to this is a sharp critique of Western modernity as the antithesis of everything that his philosophical-ethical project stands for. With these two elements, a mystically inspired Islamic program for ethical renewal and a critique of Western modernity, the groundwork is in place for a further step in his project: an alternative Islamic modernity.

6.5.4 Creativity and the spirit of modernity

Like Adonis – although obviously with very different aims in mind – Ṭāhā emphasizes the role of creativity (*ibdāʿ*) in *turāth* discourse. He feels that Muslims must return to the authentic *turāth*, but he also argues that this return must serve as the source for a creative, modern Islamic society. The path to modernity goes through authenticity, because modernity is creative, creativity requires authenticity and authenticity is found in the undistorted use of *turāth.*

losopher's ideas and his life story – see Abd al-Raḥmān Ṭāhā, *Suʿāl ls-sīra al-falsafiyya* (Beirut: Markaz al-Nuhūḍ, 2023).

236 Ṭāhā, *Suʿāl al-Sīra al-Falsafiyya*, 157–67.

This will be the core argument that gets its full shape in *Rūḥ al-Hadātha* (*The Spirit of Modernity*). In the introduction to this book. Ṭāhā sketches the state of Arab thought in broad and (by now) familiar strokes. Following the standard narrative, he describes a fundamental division between those who are lagging behind (*mutaʾakhkhirūn*[237]) and those who are progressive (*mutaqaddimūn*). Ṭāhā's rendition of the standard narrative, however, carries a twist. It does not straightforwardly equate the former with imitation (*taqlīd*), as is usual when reformists refer to their traditionalist opponents as "imitative" (*muqallid*).[238] Revisiting his critique of *taqlīd* explored 25 years earlier in *Religious Praxis*, where he maintained that *taqlīd* refers to *any* form of unthinking copying of others, Ṭāhā argues that both sides are imitative in their own way. The "backward" party blindly imitates the ideas, concepts, and institutions of the earlier centuries of Islamic tradition, while the party of progress copies foreign traditions without comment. What is lacking in both cases is true creativity (*ibdāʿ*).[239] They lack the urge to achieve the truly unprecedented, to apply reason in a way that goes beyond known boundaries. This, for Ṭāhā, is not simply one fault among many. Modernity is *defined* and made *possible* by creativity. In being uncreative, both parties fail to fulfil the first condition of modernity. Even if they consider themselves to be creative, their form of creativity is deficient, because it is not built on the sole fertile bedrock, namely the Arabic language and the Arab-Islamic *turāth* that form the *majāl tadāwulī.*

This kind of differentiation between the real and the apparent, between the spirit of modernity and the way it manifests in real life lies at the heart of this book. Ṭāhā's point is that, though modernity should be pursued as an ideal, one must not mistake the Western modernity that we are used to for the real thing. Though there may be only one "spirit of modernity," it knows many possible instantiations.[240] Western modernity only represents one of these, and a dysfunc-

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237 This translation is somewhat contorted. It is a perhaps testament to the pervasiveness of the ideal of progress in the English language, that it is exceedingly hard to find an antonym to "progressive" that does not carry a negative connotation.

238 While the term *muqallid* is usually translated as "imitative," it is semantically closely related to *taqlīd*, meaning "tradition." Ṭāhā obviously uses the double meaning here to imply traditionalism on both sides of the divide.

239 Ṭāhā, *Rūḥ al-Ḥadātha: al-Madkhal ilā Taʾsīs al-Ḥadātha al-Islāmiyya*, 11–12.

240 Ṭāhā, *Rūḥ al-Ḥadātha: al-Madkhal ilā Taʾsīs al-Ḥadātha al-Islāmiyya,* 16. This idea of modernity having many possible ways of being instantiated resembles the suggestion, discussed in Chapter 3, that one might study this phenomenon as a set of "multiple modernities" and not as a single movement originating in Europe. The link between Ṭāhā and the question of multiple modernities has recently been remarked upon by Enrique Dussel; see Enrique Dussel, "Chapter 2: Are Many Mod-

tional one at that. This he had already shown in *The Question of Ethics*. In a way, he notes, *The Spirit of Modernity* picks up where *The Question of Ethics* left off. It sketches the outlines of an alternative Arab-Islamic modernity to the Western modernity that he had already rejected.[241] Needless to say, given that the main lack in Western modernity is an ethical dimension, the proposed Islamic modernity ought to be founded on ethical principles. Ṭāhā is also aware of the temporal dimension that the question of modernity invokes, that it is a concept that is used to point to a particular era, to a progressive future, to whatever is opposite history or tradition. Interestingly, this temporal aspect of modernity is connected to the ethical. Ṭāhā states somewhat obscurely that "Islamic time takes the place of ethical time in which the phenomenon of modernity is realized and which completes the noble traits that were lacking in previous times."[242] That is, with the advent of Islam a new ethical time was introduced. In coming to understand how modernity, time, authenticity, and ethics connect up, we will need to explain what is meant here by "ethical time." But before we dive into this, we need to clarify a question that goes to the heart of *The Spirit of Modernity:* what, according to Ṭāhā, does modernity *mean?*

6.5.5 Modernity (or modernities) according to Ṭāhā

The thing to keep in mind when reading Ṭāhā's take on modernity is that it is meant as a redefinition. As with Adonis, the goal is to reshape the parameters of the debate about modernity and authenticity, by proposing a different understanding of modernity. Therefore, even if it may seem at times that Ṭāhā is talking about something that seems far removed from what we would recognize as "modernity," that is precisely the point. According to his redefinition, modernity is *not* something exclusive to the West and *not* something that must lie in the future. As he explains under the suggestively chosen rubric *Aṣālat rūḥ al-ḥadātha* ("The authenticity of the spirit of modernity"):

> It is not the case, as is often thought, that modernity is constructed by Western society, as if it established modernity from scratch. Rather, it is a construction of human society in its different stages, and hence its causes stretch far into man's long history. Hence, it not unlikely that the principles of this spirit, or some of them, have already been realized in previous societies

ernities Possible? A South-South Dialogue," in *Decolonizing Ethics*, ed. Amy Allen and Eduardo Mendieta (University Park, PA: Penn State University Press, 2021), 23–25.

241 Ṭāhā, *Rūḥ al-Ḥadātha: al-Madkhal ilā Ta'sīs al-Ḥadātha al-Islāmiyya*, 17.

242 Ṭāhā, *Rūḥ al-Ḥadātha: al-Madkhal ilā Ta'sīs al-Ḥadātha al-Islāmiyya*, 17–18.

> in ways that differ from the ways in which they were realized in the present Western society; just as it is not unlikely that it remains possible to realize other aspects of it in other societies.[243]

The juxtaposition of authenticity and (the spirit of) modernity here is noteworthy, because it shows again how Ṭāhā tries to destabilize the common perception that authenticity and modernity are inherently opposed to each other. Modernity is authentic in the sense that it is part of a shared human heritage and not, as he explains, the property of a single people (*umma*).[244] It is true that different peoples bring out different aspects of modernity. The West has prioritized its material aspects, whereas others may privilege its spiritual (*maʿnawī*) side. Relative progress and backwardness cannot be judged using a single scale that tells you whether a society is more or less in line with a single measure of "modernity." The West may be more advanced in material terms, but it is backward with regard to matters of spirit.[245]

If there are many possible instantiations of modernity, what keeps them together? What is this spirit of modernity? According to Ṭāhā, modernity as a general ideal is based on three general principles (*mabādiʾ*), each of which is founded on two pillars (*ruknān*). The first principle is that of majority (*mabdaʾ al-rushd*).[246] This principle has clear Kantian overtones insofar as it refers to the autonomy (*istiqlāl*) of the individual person, her ability to think for herself, to legislate her own acts, and to act on these self-set laws. It embodies most clearly the Enlightened ideal of the rational human being who "dares to think." This is the first pillar. The second pillar is a theme that we have encountered before: creativity (*ibdāʿ*).

The second principle of modernity mentioned by Ṭāhā is that of critique, by which he means that every belief ought always to depend on evidence. Again, this principle rests on two pillars: rationalization (*taʿqīl*) and differentiation (*tafṣīl*). The former refers to the effort "to subject all the natural phenomena, societal institutions, human behaviors and historical inheritances to the principles of rationality."[247] With "differentiation," the second pillar, Ṭāhā means the process of taking something apart, of changing something from a state of homogeneity (*tajānus*) into

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243 Ṭāhā, *Rūḥ al-Ḥadātha: al-Madkhal ilā Taʾsīs al-Ḥadātha al-Islāmiyya,* 30–31.
244 Ṭāhā, *Rūḥ al-Ḥadātha: al-Madkhal ilā Taʾsīs al-Ḥadātha al-Islāmiyya*, 31.
245 Ṭāhā, *Rūḥ al-Ḥadātha: al-Madkhal ilā Taʾsīs al-Ḥadātha al-Islāmiyya*, 31–32. This is a well-known trope.
246 This is the translation used by Hallaq. It refers to the concept in Islamic law that distinguishes a person who is fully rational and therefore responsible for his actions from people who are not – that is, minors.
247 Ṭāhā, *Rūḥ al-Ḥadātha: al-Madkhal ilā Taʾsīs al-Ḥadātha al-Islāmiyya*, 26–27. Naturally, Ṭāhā advocates subjection to supported reason.

one of heterogeneity (*taghāyur*), in order to analyze and control its various elements in isolation. This we see most clearly in the secular division between church and state, between religion and ethics, between religion and reason, and between ethics and politics.

The third and final principle of modernity is that of universality (*mabdaʾ al-shumūl*). It pertains to the modern tendency to take anything that is specific either to a certain area of society, or to a society as a whole and apply it more broadly. In the first case, that of taking an idea or way of doing things specific to one area and applying it to all areas of society, is called extensibility. This is the first pillar of the principle of universality. The second pillar of universality is connected to the phenomenon that values, ideas, traditions, etc. that are particular to an entire society are applied in other societies as well. What Ṭāhā has in mind here is the modern phenomenon of globalization.

The goal in *The Spirit of Modernity* will be to work out what these principles entail, how they have been wrongly implemented in the West, and how an Arab-Islamic version of modernity presents a more wholesome alternative based on supported reason. Echoing Guénon's central traditionalist thesis, Western modernity is ruled by what may be termed the "law of 'inversion of what is intended into its opposite.'"[248] Modern man's goal of ruling over nature has resulted in new diseases, environmental destruction, and the proliferation of all kinds of destructive weaponry. The modern capitalist system is out of control and has become entirely unpredictable. Western modernity was premised on the idea that all connections to traditional authorities could be irrevocably severed, but instead we now see them return in stranger and more convoluted forms.[249] The reason behind these inversions, according to Ṭāhā, is the fact that Western modernity is focused on the means that enable man to rationalize institutions and behavior, and have greater control over nature, but without any idea of a final end. Instead, it takes the means themselves to be the end, leading to a state of constant change, illustrated by such slogans as "change for the sake of change," "progress for the sake of progress," "growth for the sake of growth," and also "creativity for the sake of creativity," or "art for art's sake." Ṭāhā adds that modernity ought always to come from the inside, that it should be developed on the basis of the general principles of modernity, but in a way particular to each culture. This, moreover, implies a measure of creativity. Modernity can never be achieved by blindly following another culture's instantiation of it. Each culture must think creatively about its own

248 Ṭāhā, *Rūḥ al-Ḥadātha: al-Madkhal ilā Taʾsīs al-Ḥadātha al-Islāmiyya*, 32. The resemblance to Guénon's theory of inversion is striking on this point.
249 Ṭāhā, *Rūḥ al-Ḥadātha: al-Madkhal ilā Taʾsīs al-Ḥadātha al-Islāmiyya*, 32–33.

forms of rationalization and differentiation, autonomy and creativity, extensibility and universality.

6.5.6 Creativity as the essence of modernity

It is on this value of creativity that I want to focus here. Since the principle of majority (*mabdaʿ al-rushd*) is one of three principles of modernity, and creativity (*ibdāʿ*) is merely one of the two pillars (*ruknān*) of the principle of majority, it would seem that creativity is subordinate to this principle. But when we focus on the role of creativity in this analysis of the spirit of modernity and in his overall project, this picture changes. Creativity is already assigned a special role in the exposition of the three principles of modernity. The general theoretical introduction carries as a subtitle *Rūḥ al-ḥadātha wa-ḥaqq al-ibdāʿ* ("The spirit of modernity and the right to creativity").[250] The centrality of creativity is reiterated when Ṭāhā points to the way out of the current state in which the Western form of modernity dominates, using the slogan "How to move from an imitative modernity to a creative one" (*kayf al-intiqāl min al-ḥadātha al-muqallida ilā al-ḥadātha al-mubdiʿa*).[251] Creativity, it appears, is not just one of the pillars of modernity, but is the indispensable aid in renewing Arab-Islamic society in such a way as to formulate an alternative modernity in which each principle of modernity takes on a new, revised form. The alternative, ethically-minded, modern Islamic way of structuring society is to be found through creativity.[252]

By creativity, Ṭāhā does not mean of course the kind of radically free act of creation that is idealized by someone like Adonis. This kind of radical disruptive, individualistic creativity is typical, Ṭāhā thinks, of the inferior Western conception of creativity that is based on the following three axioms:

– The highest form of creativity possible is that which constitutes an absolute rupture.
– Creativity is essentially consumerist, that is, it invents a need which it then also satisfies.

250 Ṭāhā, *Rūḥ al-Ḥadātha: al-Madkhal ilā Taʾsīs al-Ḥadātha al-Islāmiyya*, 21.

251 Ṭāhā, *Rūḥ al-Ḥadātha: al-Madkhal ilā Taʾsīs al-Ḥadātha al-Islāmiyya,* 35.

252 Creativity, it should be noted, is only possible through rationalization, which, in turn, cannot be achieved without differentiation. In other words, the pillars of modernity, though presented individually, intersect and support each other – see Ṭāhā, *Rūḥ al-Ḥadātha: al-Madkhal ilā Taʾsīs al-Ḥadātha al-Islāmiyya*, 29n17.

– The truest kind of creativity is the one that has its final end in the flourishing of the self.[253]

These axioms are refuted by Ṭāhā on the grounds that, firstly, it is impossible for anyone to foreswear his background. Man is not, nor can he ever be a blank slate (*safha bayḍāʾ*). To do or create anything we rely on what has been passed on to us, whether we are aware of this or not. Rather than cut all ties with the past, Islamic creativity proposes that we differentiate between the values that are eternal (*qiyam khālida*) and those that are ephemeral and may be abandoned for the sake human progress (*irtiqāʾ al-insān*). Islamic modernity is able to do this, because it is not premised on the notion that modernity is first and foremost something temporal, but that it is instead a moral notion, a “modernity of values” (*ḥadāthat al-qiyam*).[254]

The second axiom is equally false, insofar as it remains an absolute appeal to always invent new needs and wants. Islamic modernity, rather, differentiates between needs that are material and those that are spiritual. It acknowledges the virtue of developing the self and society by exploring the spiritual, and developing new aesthetic tastes and forms of artistic perception (*al-adhwāq al-jamāliyya wa-l-madārik al-fanniyya*). In Western modernity, however, the development of the spiritual is overshadowed by the invention of material needs as part of a techno-scientific project that has as its highest goal unlimited material progress and economic development, and is built on meaningless consumerism. The Muslim answer to this form of need-creation (*taḥwīj*) is to use its reservoir of meaning and long-standing experience in helping human existence advance to a higher plane, by “inventing new aesthetic tastes and ethical influences that fit the aspirations of modern man.”[255]

Likewise, the third axiom is mistaken when it remains unrestricted. As long as the individual self is developed in a way that respects the demands placed on it in its cooperation and interaction with others, it is surely a good thing. Yet the way it tends to be interpreted in the West is as a license to develop one’s own self to the exclusion of others. This results in a closed kind of individualism that harms the humanity of the individual, as well as social bonds – Ṭāhā sees this reflected in what he derisively describes as typically Western forms of comportment like egoism (*anāniyya*), subjectivism (*dhātiyya*), and narcissism (*narjisiyya*). This kind of

253 Ṭāhā, *Rūḥ al-Ḥadātha: al-Madkhal ilā Taʾsīs al-Ḥadātha al-Islāmiyya*, 39.
254 Ṭāhā, *Rūḥ al-Ḥadātha: al-Madkhal ilā Taʾsīs al-Ḥadātha al-Islāmiyya*, 39–40.
255 Ṭāhā, *Rūḥ al-Ḥadātha: al-Madkhal ilā Taʾsīs al-Ḥadātha al-Islāmiyya*, 40. Interestingly, this is a critique that Adonis could very well get behind.

behavior cannot flourish in the authentic Arab-Islamic *majāl tadāwulī*, which is inherently social and directed towards the well-being of the other. [256]

6.5.7 Creativity through authenticity

In discussing these three axioms and their refutations, creativity is presented as an aspect of Ṭāhā's vision for modernity. But as we saw earlier in his views on *turāth*, it also plays a more basic role. Creativity that is informed by the *majāl tadāwulī*, that is, the creative use of sources found in *turāth*, growing out of the methodologies, interpretative frameworks, and praxis that are bound up with these sources, is the bedrock for a healthy modern society. Because the philosopher's task is to produce concepts that stem from and are useful in his immediate surroundings, he ought to be acquainted with his *majāl tadāwulī* and use it as a resource for analyzing what is wrong in contemporary society. He then adapts older ideas and create new ones that fit the current times, and offer new possibilities for the moral and aesthetic development of mankind. When modernity as it is currently practiced does not attain its full potential because its core principles are misapplied – that is, when it leads to materialism and away from the spiritual link to God – it is up to the Arab philosopher to point this out and invent new ways of applying these principles that are consistent with the spirit of modernity and that grow out of his *turāth.* Creativity of this kind is both an aspect of modernity's spirit and the primary resource for attaining it.

There is another sense in which creativity is unlike the other pillars of modernity. To see this, we need to turn back almost to the beginning of our story. In his Parisian phase, we met Ṭāhā as a young philosopher with a theory of natural language that emphasized the inherent link between language and reason. Each language gives rise to a different reason, because of the expressive and creative impetus contained in each language's *noétique.* We learned that this *noétique* underlies the "uses of language, the habits, and the linguistic traditions," and that the *noétique* of the Arabic language was special in that its verbal structure's large allegorical potential allows it to latch onto the world in a way that is deeper and does justice to each dynamic nature. In *Religious Praxis,* his study of reason continued. Here, instead of comparing the reasons associated with different languages, Ṭāhā presented a theory of how reason may pass through different stages within the same language, the highest stage of supported reason being one that combines adherence to the Islamic creed with a full command of the allegorical

256 Ṭāhā, *Rūḥ al-Ḥadātha: al-Madkhal ilā Taʾsīs al-Ḥadātha al-Islāmiyya,* 41.

potentialities of (the Arabic) language. It is crucial to realize that these simply *are* the three elements of what Ṭāhā in his discussions of *turāth* during the 1990s would bind together in the notion of a *majāl tadāwulī*, consisting of the Arabic language, the Islamic creed, and an Arab-Islamic reason that is the result of their combination. The upshot is that, if creativity relies on the correct and creative use of *turāth*, in order to be creative, one does not just need *turāth*, but one needs to use it in a way that gives due weight to its three constituting elements, and this simply means that one uses *turāth* productively through supported reason! This is why Ṭāhā, when criticizing people like al-Jābirī, or Laroui for mishandling and distorting *turāth*, points to the fact that they do not have the required understanding of Arabic or that they approach *turāth* theoretically, not practically. What they lack is not simply an understanding of the Arabic language as such, but of its mystical, allegorical, and dialectical potential. What their theorizing lacks is the putting into practice of the Islamic norms that *turāth* contains, both in the general sense of following the revealed law, and in the mystical sense of engaging in a practice of attuning oneself morally through a combination of an allegorical reading of the Qur'an and the sunna and embodied practices like *dhikr*. Lacking this, they cannot be creative and therefore they cannot ever be modern. Already in *Religious Praxis*, Ṭāhā points to blind imitation (*taqlīd*) as one of the potential defects of guided reason that would be remedied by supported reason. Now we understand why. *Turāth* is the storehouse of all creative potential and supported reason is the key that opens it.

This may be so, but Ṭāhā has still not given us a clear idea of how creativity actually works. For reasons of space, and because Ṭāhā's exposition of the pillar of creativity has already been described in detail by Wael Hallaq,[257] I will limit myself to some general remarks regarding Ṭāhā's preferred concept of a connected creativity. He demonstrates the different conceptions of creativity by looking at modern readings of the Qur'an that have been influenced by the Western conception of creativity. Arab intellectuals beholden to the idea that creativity requires the sanctification of the individual, a focus on material improvement, and a clean break with history, have translated these axioms into interpretations of the Qur'an that:

– humanize and thereby discard the sacred nature of Revelation;
– rationalize and thereby dispense with its transcendental nature; and
– contextualize the message of the Qur'an, so that its rules and commandments are only historically relevant, not for people living in our age.

257 Hallaq, *Reforming Modernity: Ethics and the New Human in the Philosophy of Abdurrahman Taha*, 120 – 35.

Ṭāhā chastises these modern interpreters on grounds similar to those used in his critique of *turāth* discourse. They adopt foreign methods and theories uncritically and without any proper understanding of them, and disparage their peers, insofar as they remain skeptical of these imported ideas, for being backward. In a subtle act of inversion, Ṭāhā then points out that because these intellectuals do not show any inclination to genuine (self-)criticism, we should consider them dependent on others and therefore pre-modern – since they do not put into practice the principle of majority.[258]

The proper way to reply to these imitative modernist readings (*qirāʾāt ḥadāthiyya muqallida*) is to come up with modernist readings that are creative (*mubdiʿa*), ones that do not rely on breaking away from tradition (*tafṣīl*), but on connecting to it (*tawṣīl*). Only by reading the Qur'an in a new yet "connected" light can Muslims achieve their own modernity. Such a reading ought to start with the realization that the Prophetic Revelation (*al-bayān al-nabawī*) or the Prophetic reading (*al-qirāʾa al-nabawiyya*) inaugurated "the first Islamic modern act" (*al-fiʿl al-ḥadāthī al-islāmī al-awwal*).[259] The second Islamic modern act, by contrast, is a kind of reactivation of the first, a renewal of the bond (*tajaddud al-ṣilla*) with Prophetic Revelation, and the measure of success in achieving this second modern act is that a "second reading is able to bequeath to its age the creative energy that the Muhammadan reading bequeathed to its own age."[260] What Ṭāhā is describing here is what we encountered earlier – in *The Question of Ethics* – as the renewal of the spiritual bond between God and man, the bond that has steadily eroded under the materialist thrust of Western modernity.[261]

What this means in practice is that instead of an imitative humanization of the Qur'an through a Western anthropocentric perspective, Ṭāhā proposes humanizing the Qur'an in a way that respects its universal message and man's position of stew-

258 Ṭāhā, *Rūḥ al-Ḥadātha: al-Madkhal ilā Taʾsīs al-Ḥadātha al-Islāmiyya,* 193.
259 Ṭāhā, *Rūḥ al-Ḥadātha: al-Madkhal ilā Taʾsīs al-Ḥadātha al-Islāmiyya,* 193. Hallaq's discussion of this passage omits the adjective "Islamic" – see Hallaq, *Reforming Modernity: Ethics and the New Human in the Philosophy of Abdurrahman Taha,* 128. The unfortunate consequence of this omission is that the difference between an Islamic modernity and modernity "as such" is again blurred. This is relevant, because it relates to a deeper question about Ṭāhā's thinking, namely whether he tries to articulate what a modernity particular to Islam would look like, or whether this Islamic modernity is to have a universal claim, as a model for all of mankind.
260 Ṭāhā, *Rūḥ al-Ḥadātha: al-Madkhal ilā Taʾsīs al-Ḥadātha al-Islāmiyya,* 193.
261 Ṭāhā adds a second point, namely that the West's relation to religion was marked by the different and more oppressive role of the church. See Ṭāhā, *Rūḥ al-Ḥadātha: al-Madkhal ilā Taʾsīs al-Ḥadātha al-Islāmiyya,* 194.

ardship over God's Creation.[262] One still humanizes the Qur'an, but in a way that connects to the Islamic tradition. Similarly, he argues for a strategy of creative rationalization, by which he means a reading that does not discard the transcendental aspects of the Qur'an, but regards them as the necessary elements that lead to a deeper understanding of its message, one that encompasses a wider range of the human registers of rationality. Finally, Ṭāhā posits an alternative to the imitative historicization of the Qur'an that regards all legal and moral commandments as valid for a bygone age. Instead, we should see the original circumstances in which the Qur'anic verses were revealed as representing "the first and optimal realization of the intentions or values that these verses contain."[263] These values are eternal and should inform our actions, even though the way in which they do so through specific legal rulings will depend on the circumstances of the time and place that we live in. Creative historiography focuses on distilling the ethical content from a historical moment, thereby going beyond stale legalism (*al-ḥukmiyya al-jāmida*) towards an inspired legalism (*al-ḥukmiyya al-mundafiʿa*) that is concerned with worldly matters. In this sense, Ṭāhā argues – again in the inversive mode – the kind of historicism he proposes is more modern than the detached kind imitative historicism he rejects.[264]

In sum, creativity is more than just a principle. It is the ultimate goal of Ṭāhā's theories of reason and of *turāth.* It contains the point of Ṭāhā's philosophical endeavor, which is to offer an alternative framework for bringing these two central themes of contemporary Arab thought together, and thereby form a conceptual and practical framework for the moral renewal of modern society. Modernity is the result of creativity, and since true creativity can only come through authenticity, it is incumbent on anyone who wants to be modern to gain a deeper understanding of his authentic heritage. Thus, as with Adonis, authenticity and modernity are essentially one. Of course, like Adonis, to get to this point Ṭāhā needs to do a lot of redefining. Modernity, authenticity, *turāth*, all take on meanings that are out of step with the standard narrative. And that, of course, is precisely the hypothesis behind this study, that once we open ourselves up to the possibility that Arab thinkers may not all have acquiesced in the parameters of the common problematic of authenticity and modernity, we will find new dimensions in contemporary Arab thought that remain hidden if we focus on the familiar opposition between the past and the future, between East and West, between religious and secular.

262 In other words, man should act in accordance with his position as "trustee," a notion that is pivotal to the "trusteeship paradigm" discussed earlier.

263 Ṭāhā, *Rūḥ al-Ḥadātha: al-Madkhal ilā Taʾsīs al-Ḥadātha al-Islāmiyya*, 203.

264 Ṭāhā, *Rūḥ al-Ḥadātha: al-Madkhal ilā Taʾsīs al-Ḥadātha al-Islāmiyya*, 203–4.

I have argued at the outset that the structure of the standard narrative rests on a progressive, linear temporal foundation. I also put forward the hypothesis that if the temporal order is essential to the way in which the discourse on authenticity and modernity is understood, then we are likely to find that philosophical models that challenge the standard narrative will make use of alternative conceptions of time. We already saw this hypothesis confirmed, both in Maḥmūd's agreement with the linear model and Adonis's subversion of it. Ṭāhā, as we saw already, also puts forward his own conception of time. Now, as a final conclusion to wrap up his redefinition of authenticity and modernity, let us tie the different strands in his notion of time together.

6.6 Ṭāhā on time and authenticity: some concluding remarks

6.6.1 History and Ṭāhā's concept of "ethical time"

We have seen hints of Ṭāhā's views on historical time on several occasions; firstly, in *Religious Praxis*'s call to reach back to the time of revelation through Sufi practice, and then in his prophetic contention in *The Question of Ethics* that we are on the verge of entering a "world to come." Now, in *The Spirit of Modernity*, we again saw how Ṭāhā connects his project of sketching an alternative, Islamic modernity to an alternative conception of history. If we return to the last point that Ṭāhā makes with regard to the proper use of creativity, we see him effectively reject historicism. What he takes issue with is a modern outlook that is guided, in the abstract, by the concept of a break or rupture (*faṣl*). In historiography, this structural tendency towards fragmentation (*tafṣīl*) leads to a conception of history in terms of eras that are entirely separate from each other, in which history is made through constant change. This portrayal of the modern conception of historical time is not another idiosyncratic move by Ṭāhā. Here, he sticks closely to Koselleck's argument that modernity is characterized, among other things, by its perspective on history. Modern historiography portrays history as a unique trajectory in which no two events are the same, in which past and future are always distinct. This perspective, Koselleck argued, formed the conceptual basis for the connection between history and progress: The lack of repetition paved the way for a conception of history as a progressive path forwards. The historicizing of history and its progressive exposition are, he says, "two sides of the same coin."[265]

265 Koselleck, *Vergangene Zukunft*, 1989, 192.

Koselleck's claim is reflected in both Maḥmūd and Adonis. The former clearly subscribes to a liberal ideal of progress that portrays history as a story of increasing rationalization that results in the betterment of the nation. The latter vigorously defended a different conception of artistic progress, yet one that is equally premised on a break between past and future. For him, the act of breaking with the past is itself idealized as a sign of the dynamic. Ṭāhā, by contrast, turns against this modern conception of historical time, but in a way that is more sophisticated than the simple rejection of modernity commonly attributed to traditionalists. His is not the standard reactionary move backwards in time, to a past golden age. What Ṭāhā asserts is that we should distinguish between chronological time, which indeed can be measured along a horizontal axis, and something else, an alternative time, an ethical time (*al-zaman al-akhlāqī*) that is, in a sense, timelessly modern. This ethical time is eternal because it is constituted by what Ṭāhā earlier picked out as the first modern act, namely the revelation of the Qur'an to Muḥammad, which is the "final and concluding religious text" (*al-naṣṣ al-dīnī al-khātim*).[266] As he mentions in another work, there have been successive religious stages (*aṭwār*) accompanying successive ethical times (*azmina akhlāqiyya*) since the dawn of man, each of which is characterized by a different and more perfect revelation. Within these times there are, again, different stages of practicing religion.[267] The Muhammadan text or act of revelation, being the final revela-

266 Ṭāhā, *Rūḥ al-Ḥadātha: al-Madkhal ilā Ta'sīs al-Ḥadātha al-Islāmiyya*, 204.

267 Ṭāhā, *al-Ḥaqq al-ʿArabī fī al-Ikhtilāf al-Falsafī*, 177. It is not stated explicitly whether by "ethical times" in this work the author means only the Abrahamic faiths, or whether he is thinking of a broader conception of revelation linked to each of the prophets mentioned in the Qur'an. He does consider the three Abrahamic faiths here in an example to clarify that the highest level of ethics in the current Islamic age can never be attained by anyone practicing Judaism or Christianity. It should be noted that this debasement of Judaism fits the overall hostile and at times antisemitic tone of this particular book, in which Ṭāhā makes sweeping conspiratorial claims about Judaism and supposed Jewish plots for world domination, while expressing his support of the Second Intifada – see footnote 48 of this chapter. Thus, he explains that of the different stages of ethical development that one can reach within each ethical time, modern-day Jews can only occupy the lowest rung, which is that of "humanity," which Ṭāhā (in another inversion) equates with the level of actions that befit animals, such as "the desecration of the holy places or the looting of the earth or the killing of children" (p. 178). By contrast, he distinguishes the higher levels of ethics – manliness (*rujūliyya*), chivalry (*murūʿa*), and the noble manliness of the adolescent (*futuwwa*) – as being more religious and oriented towards practice. The highest example of this is the militant *futuwwa* displayed by the Palestinian youths who carry "light stones in their hands [that are] stronger than the heaviest weapons in the hands of their opponents as if they *were stones made of shale with which they pelt the People of the Elephant*" (p. 185); the italicized part is a reference to the Qur'an, Sura 105, Al Fīl (The Elephant.) For a brief analysis of this argument, see Suleiman, "The Philosophy of Taha Abderrahman: A Critical Study," 9–11.

tion, is of a different kind than any historical text or act. Its time extends beyond the time of (chronological) revelation, to the extent that every time that comes after it belongs to the time of Muhammadan revelation. Our task is not to read revelation in its historical context, but to read it as a guide for our age, turning it into a "future historicity" (*tārīkhiyya mustaqbaliyya*). This text of revelation, in other words, ought always to be kept current, because the values that it embodies are eternal.

In its essence, "ethical time" is not a new addition to Ṭāhā's philosophy. The idea that time is not a stage on which we witness man's gradual progress, but a smoldering fire quietly dying down unless it is rekindled and provided with new spiritual energy has been in the background, perhaps since when Ṭāhā began to articulate his program. In the late 1980s, he was already arguing that the practice of *nawāfil* had become necessary, due to the materialization and consequent moral degradation that had occurred as human society had moved away from the time of revelation. In *The Question of Ethics* it resurfaced in the form of the "world that is upon us" after the current world has succumbed to increasing materialization. Both instances express a circular conception of time following the ebb and flow of spirituality. What is novel in the notion of ethical time is that it uses this way of looking at time to reconceptualize modernity. Modernity is no longer measured according to a chronological scale on which it is opposed to an authentic tradition past. Instead, modernity measures the degree of spirituality at each moment along the chronological axis. A society or civilization is modern at any point in time to the extent that it embodies the spirit of modernity. Of course, this term "spirit" is deceptive. It not only refers to the spirit of modernity as opposed to its actual implementation, but also to the fact that to implement modernity correctly simply means to implement spiritual values. Modernity *is* spirit.

Likely enough, this will not convince Ṭāhā's opponents, nor anyone, for that matter, who does not subscribe to his specific view of the Qur'an in relation to time, or to the perfect status of the Arabic language in which it was revealed and the Islamic religion that grew out of it. My point in describing Ṭāhā's philosophy has not been to promote it, but to understand it as an intervention in the discursive field of Arab thought and, specifically, to show how this intervention proceeds through a critical engagement with some of its central concepts. What the above shows is the centrality of time for understanding this important contemporary Arab thinker, in particular where it concerns his ideas about modernity. Agree with him or not, Ṭāhā is undoubtedly aware of the importance of time for articulating the modern project. His own writings of course range over much more than his time conception outlined here, but it remains a central part of his philosophy. His entire reading of *turāth*, after all, is based on this crea-

tive reading of the past, on the idea that the real road to creativity leads not through a break with, but through a creative interpretation of the Islamic heritage.

6.6.2 Ṭāhā and authenticity

In the course of discussing Ṭāhā's philosophical project we have come across a rather particular notion of authenticity. The basic argument was that although he does indeed defend a return to authenticity, his idea of a return to the authentic roots of Arab-Islamic culture as embodied in its *turāth* does not imply a turn away from, but towards modernity. Moreover, we have seen that the impetus for this project of recapitulating and regenerating *turāth* is ethical to its core. The ultimate goal is to create an ethical society through an authentic, creative use of *turāth.* Although this certainly constitutes a divergence from the mainstream understanding of authenticity as per the standard narrative, it does not indicate anything like the personal, individual notion of originality, which we earlier recognized as a counterpoint to the culturalist model and the core of the genealogy of the ideal of authenticity. References to creativity abound, but there appears to be no place in Ṭāhā for the individual person. Indeed, his disdain for Western subjectivism with its characteristic forms of egotism and narcissism and, more importantly, his early recognition of the principle of subservience to God (*ʿabdiyya*/*ʿubūdiyya*), appear designed to do away with a subject recognizable as the authentic individual idealized in contemporary society.

Naturally, it would be wrong to attribute this individualist sense of authenticity to Ṭāhā willy-nilly. We should be wary of forcing his ideas into a model that he rejects. Yet even here, I want to argue that there is a sense in which it could make sense to read Ṭāhā's model of the modern subject in relation to the ideal of personal authenticity. To see why, we need to remember one of the driving forces behind the ideal of authenticity. It is not simply a call for a specific kind of identity, but also a way of grappling with the apparent loss of a meaningful horizon in modern societies. The idea that truth and beauty can be found in the self can be understood as a way of uncovering a realm of meaning in a disenchanted world. This is a theme that comes up again and again in the genealogy of authenticity, whether it is in the existentialist recognition that the subject is free in assigning meaning to existence, or the Nietzschean project of revaluating all values.

We saw one version of this in Adonis, and even though Ṭāhā does not promote anything like Adonis's radical creative individualism, he does offer a personal link to the realm of meaning. Whereas Adonis sees meaning and value in human creations, Ṭāhā views them as having a separate divine existence. But at the same time, we can only really come into contact with the ethical and aesthetic dimen-

sions of the Unseen by working on the self. If we think back for a moment to the difference between guided reason and supported reason, the truly austere, abstract, general moral framework is found in the former. The attraction of supported reason lies in the promise of a personal link with the Divine, where God becomes a constant presence and you consciously choose Him as your master. This personal dimension is central to Ṭāhā's project for ethical renewal. Man, in essence, is an ethical being. Modern life has made him forgetful of this essence, and he therefore needs to work on himself to regain the link to his inner voice. What we have here is, if not an instance of the later existentialist and Nietzschean modes of personal authenticity, certainly an echo of the Rousseauian view of the human subject. Man is essentially good, he just needs to recognize this basic fact and be educated into listening to his authentic voice. The message of Islam is to remind him of this essence and lead him back to his original state. In this schema, the individual is not erased. Rather, he is made into the primary conduit for meaning; not the kind of meaning that he himself creates, but the kind of meaning that he finds in the cosmos.

Even here, the space for individual authenticity is not exhausted. If we look at the highest form of reason espoused by Ṭāhā as the antidote to the malaise of modernity – that is, supported reason – we find that it leaves a large, perhaps an infinite realm of possibility for getting in contact with the Divine in nature. There are countless ways of shaping one's personal reason, based on one's particular history, background, and interests, and there are even more forms of relating the personal, constantly evolving self to the flux of nature in which we live. The cosmos, according to Ṭāhā, is not a stable Being that is objectively describable in one single, abstracted way. It is an evolving Becoming that can be known in infinitely many ways, and each way of knowing the world requires a different way of attuning the individual knower to its signs. This picture, then, leaves endless opportunities for the individual to shape an authentically individual relationship to the Divine Truth.

Now one might argue that this way of reading authenticity into Ṭāhā's texts is anachronistic. His ideas of the cosmos are clearly inspired by centuries-old Sufi traditions. To impute a modern sensibility of individual authenticity to Ṭāhā is to impose on the Sufi tradition modern standards, to read it out of context. I am sympathetic to this argument insofar as it concerns the philosophy of a Sufi like Ibn ʿArabī, whose life straddled the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. However, to my mind, it does not hold the same force when applying it to someone like Ṭāhā. Or, rather, it only holds the same force if you regard philosophies or ideas as discrete immutable entities that are bound to a specific time and location.

There is, however, good reason to adopt a different view of intellectual history. As R. G. Collingwood reminds us, "a body of knowledge consists not of 'proposi-

tions,' 'statements,' or 'judgments,' but of these together with the questions they are meant to answer."[268] If this is the case, if bodies of knowledge depend on both propositions and the questions to which they give an answer, then it would be a mistake to assume from the fact that Ṭāhā's view of the human individual is substantially derived from Sufism, that it therefore cannot also be part of a modern discourse of authenticity. After all, even if this "body of knowledge" is linked to a tradition, once it is used to answer modern questions, it becomes a different entity, a different body of knowledge. This, I believe, is how we can make sense of Ṭāhā's philosophy in relation to the modern question of authenticity. Sure enough, he draws inspiration from Sufi conceptions of the individual and his attunement to the world, but he does so in a modern context. The questions he is faced with are not Ibn ʿArabī's. They are the modern questions of how to preserve individual identity in an environment that, from a Counter-Enlightenment perspective, is marked by a universalizing tendency, materialism, the overwhelming power of science, technology, and the nation-state, and the general loss of spirituality and meaning. The task of reforming modernity through an ethical reformation of the subject on the basis of *turāth* is an answer to these questions, and as such it is a project that is intimately connected to the genealogy of authenticity that we have traced to Rousseau's concern about the consequences of the Enlightenment.[269]

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268 R. G. Collingwood, *An Autobiography* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1939), 30–31.

269 This understanding of Ṭāhā's philosophy in light of a logic of question and answer also comes up in Viersen, "The Modern Mysticism of Taha Abderrahmane."

Conclusion

This book has aimed to do three things: first, it has analyzed how debates among Arab intellectuals function. Recognizing that these debates largely turn on the topic of the Arab-Islamic intellectual heritage (*turāth*), it went on to describe the common paradigm used by both Arab and non-Arab commentators to systematize, summarize, and gloss this discourse. While it was acknowledged that the binary opposition between authenticity and modernity plays a pivotal role in this standard narrative, our study has tried to go beyond this diagnosis to describe the deep structure supporting it. The argument here was that the authenticity–modernity problematic is indebted to a specific communal, culturalist conception of authenticity as well as to a linear-progressive conception of time.

Second, having shown how specific conceptions of time and authenticity play a fundamental role in structuring these debates, this book has discussed their historical contingency, as well as their centrality to the modern imaginary. This story about the history and meanings of time and authenticity prepared the ground for two claims. On the one hand, it was argued that contemporary Arab thought is deeply entangled with global discourses in which similar concepts, ideals, and questions play a major role – even if they have been interpreted and answered differently in different places – and that therefore we need to balance the story about local articulations of these intellectual trends with a global story. On the other hand, it led to the hypothesis that, if the standard narrative is structured by specific, modern understandings of authenticity and time, and if different ways of understanding these concepts are possible, then alternative perspectives on contemporary Arab thought may be explored by looking at how Arab intellectuals since the 1960s and 1970s have articulated different conceptions of time and authenticity.

Third, the study has applied this hypothesis to three authors, one of whom (Zakī Najīb Maḥmūd) illustrates primarily what the standard narrative looks like in action, while the other two (Adonis and ʿAbd al-Raḥmān Ṭāhā) were taken as examples of how one can diverge from this model. Showing this divergence was only possible by bracketing the parameters of the standard narrative. This narrative after all tends to categorize Arab intellectuals who participate in debates about *turāth* according to their apparent philosophical, political, or religious affiliations, which are routinely associated with being either conservative or progressive. Our model, by contrast, presents them as thinkers who in their writings on *turāth* construct alternative worldviews that are, first and foremost, informed by different interpretations of fundamental concepts like time and authenticity. While these basic worldviews surely shape and justify positions on more immediate social, religious, and political issues, there is not the kind of one-to-one corre-

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lation that is commonly assumed in the standard narrative. This study exploits the difference between the basic worldview and the more apparent views expressed in writing to complicate our readings of these (and possibly of other) authors. Those who would seem to share a commitment to secular liberalism and the ideal of progress may vary greatly in their more basic conceptions of what progress means, on the functions that religion fulfils in society, or more generally on the things that make human life meaningful. Conversely, authors with utterly different views on religion may be quite close in their perspective on the historical dimensions in which persons relate to their own lives and to the culture and tradition in which they partake.

The first of the interlocutors to which this model was applied is Zakī Najīb Maḥmūd. This distinguished scholar, a logical-positivist, a liberal committed to modernizing Arab society by rationalizing its discourse, has reached millions with his articles on the history of philosophy and continues to be held in high regard by many. Without wanting to deny the merit of his work in inspiring generations to read, think, and discuss cultural and philosophical issues, our discussion has used his oeuvre mainly as an illustration of the standard narrative. It has demonstrated how his interpretation of authenticity in largely collective, culturalist terms links up with a linear notion of time coupled with a firm belief in the ideal of progress. Together, these features of Maḥmūd's philosophical outlook structure his binary treatment of the question of *turāth* as well as the future that he imagines for Arab societies generally. This vision neatly fits the parameters of the standard narrative of Arab thought. Maḥmūd relies on a dualist picture that divides the world into a traditional realm linked to personal and communal values, and a modern realm linked to scientific facts. These two realms are represented in the modern world by the East and the West respectively. His goal is to find a golden mean between these two options, a task for which he thinks the Arab-Islamic heritage can serve as a model. In the final analysis, moreover, we recognized how Maḥmūd's binary way of treating *turāth* hangs together with a dual notion of time and authenticity. On the one hand, time is interpreted as a simple story of progress, leading him to dismiss the authentic as lying in a less developed past. On the other hand, authenticity is embedded in a history that, in a sense, runs towards both past and future. Here, authentic tradition is accorded the status of modernity's antithesis. It is associated with values that offer a counterweight to a materialistic, valueless society. Regardless of the merits of this solution to the problematic of authenticity and modernity, the point of our engagement with Maḥmūd was to show how the standard narrative binary flows out of both a commitment to a linear-progressive conception of time and a culturalist and historical-mimetic notion of authenticity, which sustain Maḥmūd's thinking. In this way, Maḥmūd's philosophy of *turāth* serves as a microcosm for the standard narrative.

Conversely, the other two interlocutors, Adonis and ʿAbd al-Raḥmān Ṭāhā, were seen to go against this paradigm in ways that are both very similar and dissimilar. The central feature of their work which this study highlighted is that their interpretations of time and authenticity do not fit within the parameters of the standard narrative. In the standard narrative, it would make sense to see Adonis as somewhat aligned with Maḥmūd in his rejection of traditionalism and his advocating (poetic) modernism in the Arab world. Looking more closely, however, we recognize that the two differ substantially. Insofar as his temporal imaginary is concerned, Adonis differentiates between vertical and horizontal time to make room for "a time of creativity." This vertical, kairotic time goes against the normal, "horizontal" chronological order, and thereby rejects the opposition between an authentic past and a modern future that is crucial to the standard narrative. This, it was argued, changes the meaning of authenticity and modernity, and thereby changes the meaning of the problematic. True authenticity and true modernity, in this view, come to stand for the same thing, namely the *dynamic* force of creativity as opposed to the *static* shackles that hold back the exploration of meaning and beauty. Compared with the static model, which prioritizes the integrity of the group and keeps it together by enforcing rules, the dynamic model espoused by Adonis focuses on the individual who finds authenticity, not in reliving and idolizing the past, but in exploring and creating new meaning through art. In this way, Adonis does not commit to either a nostalgic return to the past or to a future-oriented modernism in the straightforward sense of picking one side over the other. Rather, he undermines this distinction by changing the meaning of the terms used in the *turāth* discourse. As with Maḥmūd, the point of this discussion is not to scrutinize Adonis's arguments or to judge the merit of his proposals. Our main goal is to show how a different framework for analyzing Arab thought can offer perspectives on Arab thought that diverge from and challenge the common paradigm.

Although Ṭāhā's position is very different from Adonis's, he shares with him an inclination to move beyond what he calls the "hoary old problematic" of authenticity and modernity. To do this, Ṭāhā also considers how time can be thought of differently, and how such a different understanding of time influences conceptions of authenticity and modernity. His notion of "ethical time" suggests measuring time, not in chronological units, but in terms of spirituality. A modern society, in this view, is one that upholds spiritual principles that ultimately derive from God. Moreover, it is this kind of authenticity (in terms of upholding traditional principles) that serves as a basis for another kind of authenticity, namely of the creative, innovative kind. True authentic innovation, according to Ṭāhā's mystical outlook, is built on an enlivened heritage, because it is only through accessing this heritage that man can come into contact with the divine essences behind the appearances. Real, meaningful, and above all, ethically grounded creativity can only

be achieved through this productive use of *turāth.* This then leads to the interesting conclusion that, although Ṭāhā can be classified as a defender of *turāth*, his framing of what *turāth* is and what it is *for* changes the meaning of this position beyond recognition. Whereas in the standard narrative the defenders of *turāth* are hostile to modernity and see it as corrupting traditional society, Ṭāhā portrays *turāth* as a prerequisite for any real modernity, that is, for a modernity that is spiritual and not merely a materialist sham. Authenticity of a traditionalist kind thus becomes a means for reaching this spiritual modernity, and it is this kind of modernity that, in turn, causes an outpouring of unique creativity and civilizational progress.

Admittedly, Ṭāhā's emphasis on *turāth* and on following the precepts of Islam is far removed from Adonis's secular vision for a creative, artistic society of meaning-making. Yet despite their obvious differences, these figures find each other in their dissatisfaction with the common frame of positioning authenticity over and against modernity. Both articulate a view of authenticity and modernity as, in a sense, each other's equal. Modernity, for them, is not the chronological opposite to the (authentic) past, but rather a timeless state in which creative authenticity is allowed to flourish in order to either grasp the real meaning inherent to this world (Ṭāhā), or to create meaning through human imagination (Adonis). Moreover, both stress the individual instead of the communal pursuit of this authenticity. As with Adonis, the focus of Ṭāhā's philosophical project does not lie with a general, communal adherence to *turāth,* or even to the rules laid down by Islam. Of course, this does not mean that Ṭāhā argues against following these rules. He acknowledges them as central to the life of the Muslim community, and they are key to the rational stage that he dubs "guided reason." His philosophical project, however, is not about sticking to these rules in a general sense, but about how to uphold these rules and perfect one's adherence to them in the best way possible. This, according to him, can only be achieved by each person individually. Since the perfect way to follow a rule necessarily involves the context in which you find yourself, both in terms of the time and place in which the action takes place and the way in which this action fits into your life story, the ethical renewal that Ṭāhā considers vital for our world must be a deeply personal endeavor. Hence, another way in which Ṭāhā distinguishes himself from the typical advocate of *turāth* is by putting forward a deeply personal notion of how one ought to interact with one's heritage. Repeating the remark made with regard to Maḥmūd and Adonis, the purpose of this dissection of Ṭāhā's philosophy is not to argue with it. Rather, the goal is to show what happens if someone like Ṭāhā proposes a conception of time and of authenticity that are different from the main line in Arab thought. The goal is to show that his dissatisfaction with the way key issues in contemporary Arab thought are discussed can give rise to an alternative point of view

that cannot be understood if we remain within the strictures of the standard narrative.

These results are interesting for several reasons. Apart from the insight they give us into the philosophies of three Arab intellectuals who, each in their own way, continue to influence the cultural landscape in the Arab world, this treatment of their philosophies demonstrates an alternative method of reading contemporary Arab thought. It shows how we can use different parameters to bypass the common categorization of Arab thinkers according to their political allegiances and their individual stance on issues of religion, emancipation, or politics. Such a structural account can offer us different ways of carving up discourse among Arab intellectuals, and let us think anew about what binds and what divides them. In our case, the surprising upshot is to align two thinkers, Adonis and Ṭāhā, who are usually portrayed as standing on opposite sides of a religious-secular divide that still dominates not only reflections on Arab thought, but also of Arab politics and society at large. This is but one such result. We may stumble upon other surprising comparisons if we include others who figure in Arab thought, some of whom we have met in this study – for example, Muḥammad ʿĀbid al-Jābirī, Fuʾād Zakariyyā, Ḥasan Ḥanafī, ʿAbd Allāh al-ʿArwī (Abdallah Laroui), Jūrj Ṭarābīshī, or Mohammed Arkoun. Expanding the scope of our inquiry using this framework may add richness and nuance to our perception of contemporary Arab thought.

Or perhaps there are other ways of reimagining Arab thought. This study, it should be emphasized, offers just one reading of the *turāth* debate that diverges from the main line. It does not presume to offer an account that is substantially more real, true, or final, any more than it intends to disprove or displace the standard narrative. Rather, it proceeds from the conviction that we gain deeper understanding of a discourse by developing different perspectives, both complementary and competing, that together help us penetrate what this discourse is about and what its participants mean when they engage with its central questions. The novelty of this research, therefore, does not (in fact, it *cannot*) lie in broaching a new subject. As we saw in Chapter 1, the *turāth* debate has already been widely studied, and surveys of it have long been available in Western languages, despite the relative lack of interest that contemporary Arab thought has generated outside of Arab academia. The fact that this aspect of Arab thought is well documented, rather than being a reason for moving on to a different topic, is instead the premise of this study. After all, there is not much use in presenting an alternative reading if there is no standard reading to begin with. The main problem with this paradigmatic view of Arab thought, as discussed early on, is not its content, but its dominance. It presents an easy-to-grasp and highly influential model for understanding what these debates about *turāth*, authenticity, modernity, and all the social and political issues related to them are about, and it does so in a way that crowds out

other interpretative frameworks. To change it, it is not enough to argue against this framework. For, as we have seen on several occasions, even explicit dissent from this model does not accomplish much if the audience is not attuned to this different way of looking at things. Receptivity to alternative interpretations, alternative concepts, alternative questions, can only be cultivated by challenging orthodoxy with heterodox alternatives. Even if the goal is not to replace the former, it is by taking the latter seriously that we may reimagine what Arab thought is and what it might become. This active, dialectical engagement, I have argued, presents a way of dealing with contemporary Arab thought respectfully, even while it does not necessarily abide by how Arab thinkers themselves conceive of what Arab thought is about and how it is structured.

This brings me to a final point. At the end of the Introduction, I mentioned that what has in the end became a study of the ubiquitous *turāth* debate and notions of time and authenticity had its origins in an inquiry into ethics. I also mentioned that, though not always clearly observable, the theme of ethics in contemporary Arab thought has remained a thread throughout this work, even if it is not its main focus. It is not there in the manifest sense of a doctrine about what one ought to do, but in the more basic sense of the views that people articulate about man's basic nature and his relation to others, views on the basis of which doctrines and notions of virtue are founded.

Now is perhaps the occasion to emphasize this "ethical streak," if only as an afterthought or a suggestion of how one may do a study on ethics in contemporary Arab thought. A major reason for turning from a study of ethics to one of authenticity was that authenticity is pregnant with ethical meaning, and could thus prove a tool for writing about Arab ethics indirectly. The ethical richness of this concept was brought out in Chapter 3 when we discussed the genealogy of authenticity as a modern ideal. Over the previous centuries, the concept morphed from a historical-mimetic ideal of sticking to the original, to an ideal of being true to yourself or to a collective identity. All of these interpretations of authenticity have ethical as well as aesthetic implications. The ideal of being true to an original can make demands on the individual to be punctilious, disciplined, and sincere. The ideal of subjective authenticity may require creativity, originality, attentiveness to one's inner voice, or courage to stand one's ground in the face of criticism. The ideal of collective authenticity may imply a willingness for self-sacrifice or self-denial and an egalitarian spirit. These virtues are not linked mechanically to the different conceptions of authenticity. The dividing lines between different conceptions are hardly ever that clear, and they can be used in different ways to justify different ideas of the good and of human virtue. What they represent is not a decision tree that allows you to find the correct virtue with each conception of authenticity, but rather a repertoire of stories that people tell about themselves and about others to justify their own

behavior and to judge that of others. This repertoire, as the genealogy of authenticity showed, is volatile, and constantly adjusts to changing circumstances in society. In addition to the ethical implications of authenticity, we have seen that conceptions of time also influence moral imaginaries, suggesting visions of future progress, of moral differentiation between peoples at different stages of development, or in allowing a person to break free from traditional, orthodox values with an appeal to a rupture or a different, non-chronological sense of time. Lastly, in our discussion of the Counter-Enlightenment we have seen how the modern sense of a loss of value and meaning was articulated by opposing the progressive idea of time associated with the Enlightenment.

In sum, issues of ethics have come up in several ways, in discussions of authenticity, of time, and of these two concepts together. When concluding the last three chapters on our Arab interlocutors, I have also made a point of closing each with a reflection that relates authenticity and time to ethics. For Adonis, we found that his idolizing of the creative, authentic individual has a Nietzschean vibe. The individual is called upon to oppose bourgeois mediocrity by creating new values through vertical time. With Ṭāhā, we found that he takes the mimetic ideal of honoring one's heritage and changes its meaning by fiddling with notions of time and progress. He links the authentic use of the Islamic heritage and the Arabic language to the individual notion of creativity, and makes this a prerequisite for spiritual progress and the ethical renewal of society. For him, it is only a renewal grounded in heritage that can form individuals attuned to the moral and aesthetic value in this world hidden behind the appearances, and it is ultimately this reestablishment of contact with the Unseen that leads to human creativity and flourishing.

In the case of Maḥmūd, the ethical dimension is perhaps least obvious, but it is there. His historical view of authenticity and his belief in the forward, future-oriented, progressive impetus of time explains his viewing values in historical terms. Value, for him, is whatever is passed on, and *turāth* is therefore essentially a storehouse of values. Moreover, the use of these values is interpreted by him in pragmatic terms. You ought to use these values as long you draw benefit from them, and shed them when they start to curb your ambition to get with the times. This treatment of value may appear unsentimental, reducing moral values to a combination of personal whim and common utility, and ruling out any substantial ethical discussion. We should not forget, however, that this stance on value and ethics is very much in line with Maḥmūd's logical-positivist background. The whole point of Ayer's emotivist theory of ethics is to reduce moral propositions to descriptions of feelings, and thereby obviate the need for a discussion of ethics at the metaphysical level. The absence of a deeper discussion of ethics in Maḥmūd, therefore, does not indicate a lack in the sense that it is a part of his philosophy

that requires filling in. Rather, this absence is precisely what one would expect from someone steeped in a logical-positivist worldview built on a radical divide between fact and value. This absence *is* his philosophy of ethics – even if this does not preclude us finding certain virtues implied in his writing, such as a high regard for honesty, rationality, and self-sacrifice for the sake of duty.

This approach to the metaphysical, one that tries to sideline questions of value, is a far cry from Adonis's aesthetic worldview as well as from ʿAbd al-Raḥmān Ṭāhā, whose philosophical project is built on a deep concern for ethics. As much as these latter two authors may disagree with each other over whether the search for meaning requires a turn to religion, neither would likely agree with Maḥmūd's position. This triangular relationship between our interlocutors, I believe, brings us back to the modern context in which these authors work, and affords us a broader view of how their philosophies relate to each other and to a modern society marked by insecurities about the source of value. Despite their differences, we saw that a structural analysis of the positions of Adonis and Ṭāhā on *turāth* is able draw them closer to each other. This convergence was not merely due to a shared dissatisfaction with the standard narrative. What they also share is a certain perception, a sensitivity to what is lacking in the modern world. Each in his own way is concerned with answering ways of thinking that rid this world of meaning, and they suggest ways to recover it. Ṭāhā writes of a world of meaning behind the appearances that we can get to through a Sufi praxis that molds our "supported reason." Adonis refers to artistic exploration and the creation of meaning as the hallmark of the "dynamic." Also, for both, this quest for meaning runs through the individual. It is the individual seeker or maker of meaning who is central to their vision. This convergence, I would suggest, is no coincidence. They are two common responses to a modern question, namely the question of how to conceive of meaning at all in a world that has seemingly been rid of it by the brute force of positive science. Adonis and Ṭāhā respond to this question in different ways, but their concern is similar, and is informed, perhaps not entirely but certainly in part, by the kinds of questions that the early modern Romantic tradition also struggled with, and which it has tried to answer by developing the modern notion of authenticity as a source of meaning. If we add to this the third voice in our ensemble, that of Maḥmūd, we can appreciate more clearly the tension between the latter's view of ethics and that of the other two. Maḥmūd, with his inclination to discard metaphysical talk in the interest of progress, is more aligned with the Enlightenment spirit, while Adonis and Ṭāhā represent its antithesis. Where the former is comfortable with relegating moral values to the level of Humean "custom," the latter two regard this as either a bourgeois or an atheist affront to man's intrinsic nature as a creature that craves meaning. Similar to what generations of modern mystics and existentialists have done before them, Adonis and

Ṭāhā have turned to individual forms of meaning-discovery and meaning-making to make up for this loss. To claim this, we do not need to affirm the "disenchantment thesis" that informs this reaction, nor do we need to show how what Adonis or Ṭāhā writes is really influenced by this or that Romantic or existentialist strand of thought; what we are talking about is merely the perception of a loss of values, not whether this perception is justified. More important is the fact that, due to modernity's success, societies globally have been shaped in similar ways, with similar forms of government and education, giving rise to similar discursive landscapes where similar questions about what it means to be human in these times become pertinent. Precise answers to these questions may differ between societies and traditions – as they do in the case of Arab thought – and there will always remain space for different questions that pertain only to these local circumstances. This, however, should not prevent us from acknowledging certain constants. These constants are not (necessarily) the result of direct influence. They can just as well be attributed to the more basic fact that when threats and opportunities for human flourishing are comparable, the questions they engender will likely be similar. It is against this background that it makes sense to combine a local perspective on thought in the Arab world, Europe, or any other region with that of a global discourse prompted by a modern set of preoccupations and offering a recognizably global set of ethical questions and ideals.

In closing, I want to stress that it is precisely such an approach, one that recognizes Arab thought both as a local discourse and as being embedded in global trends, that we can give Arab intellectuals their due, and recognize them as thinkers who have something to say beyond the parochial confines of a debate about Arab-Islamic heritage. As was argued in the Introduction, it is by recognizing the universal appeal of their arguments that we take them seriously as intellectuals. This, in turn, implies that the supposed barriers between insiders and outsiders in these Arab debates need to come down. True intellectual recognition of Arab thinkers requires a form of critical engagement that necessarily draws outsiders in and obliges them to participate by reading, listening, and reacting to ideas and arguments that spring from discussions in Arab journals, at universities, and on television. Such engagement, moreover, must go both ways. Besides opening up to criticism of Arab intellectuals like the ones discussed in this study, it also requires those of us who engage with their work to see how their ideas may be taken up outside the Arab context in which they were first articulated. In other words, true engagement demands of us that we ask ourselves what we can learn from what we study, that we risk standing corrected in how we think about themes that our trio of authors have discussed. It asks of me as an author and of you, the reader, to consider what people like Maḥmūd, Adonis, Ṭāhā, or others can teach us.

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