

Surūsh's theory of the contraction and expansion of religious knowledge

A. Its principal objectives

The book *Qabḍ wa baṣṭ-i tiṣṭūrīk-i sharīʿat* (The Contraction and expansion of legal theory) is Surūsh's first analysis of epistemology and hermeneutics with reference to the *takāmul* (development) of religious knowledge. His choice of the Arabic terms *qabḍ* and *baṣṭ* is inspired by traditional Sufi literature where they represent distinct mystical states, the constriction respectively the dilation of the mystic's heart.¹ The book is divided into four parts with an introduction and supplements.² In the foreword, Surūsh asserts that the purpose of the book is to provide a philosophical investigation of a specific field of human knowledge, *fiqh*, and at the same time make theoretical reflections on science as such. Another purpose is to create possibilities for the development of a pluralistic *dimūkrāsī-yi dīnī* (religious democracy), which is an outgrowth of the community of believers, by substantiating the concepts of the plurality of reasons and the contingency of religious knowledge with a *mabānī-yi ipīstīmūlūzhīk* (epistemological basis).³ The third purpose of the book is to present what he calls a *dark-i azizānah-yi dīn* (endearing conception of religion) and to close the possibility of ideological or official interpretations of religion. He argues that the most beneficial advantage of the theory of contraction and expansion is that it makes peace not merely between the eternal and the time-bound and between religion and science, but also between tradition and modernity, by

¹ Cf. chapter twenty-six in 'Alī b. Uṣmān Hujwiri's *Kitāb-i kashf al-mahjūb* (The Book of unveiling the hidden). The terms are also mentioned in the Qur'an to denote that God enlarges and straightens the means of spiritual provision for His servants (*Qur.* 28:82).

² The first three parts of the book are comprised of a lengthy exposition of the evolution of religious knowledge with specific reference to *fiqh* and *'ilm al-kalām*. The first chapter may very well be considered a preliminary attempt to sketch an outline of the major features of an Islamic *kalām-i jadīd* (modern theology). Part four includes an article by Aḥmad Naraqī where he elaborates on Surūsh's view of the history of science together with an inquiry posed to Surūsh by some theology students of a *ḥauzah-yi 'ilmīyah* in Qum. The supplementary part covers five articles by Surūsh and other participants, who present their critical contributions to the current epistemological debate.

³ For Surūsh's writings on the concept of religious democracy and his criticism of the theological doctrine *wilāyat-i faqīh*, cf. 1997a:301–380, 1999a:243–281 and 1999h. Cf. Jahanbakhsh 2001:153–171.

clarifying the relationship between transcendence and immanence as well as revelation and reason (Surūsh 1996c:32, 34, 58).

Surūsh presents no systematic clarification of the terms *qabḍ* and *bast* in the sense of a conceptual analysis which would provide his terminology with a theoretical *raison d'être*. He instead considers the theory of contraction and expansion of religious knowledge as the mechanism behind the alternating moments of epistemic openness and closure of religious knowledge in general terms and claims that it explains how modern science influences and gives rise to change in the traditional Islamic disciplines. He believes that it determines the time-boundness of religious knowledge and understanding and displays the *ramz* (enigma) of divergent opinions in the realm of exegesis and jurisprudence (ibid.:56). Surūsh's overall purpose can hence be said to substantiate the idea of *'asrī kardan-i dīn* (temporalising religion), where the age not only adjusts to religion, but religion moreover becomes 'humanised'. By advocating a kind of religious humanism that is fundamentally different from the traditional literary 'humanism' as epitomised in the Islamic *adab* tradition, he suggests, referring to Feuerbach's words that "the root of theology is anthropology", that the transformation of theology should be integrated into a larger 'human' enterprise where human beings are neither manipulated as objects by technology nor by religion.⁴ Treating humanism as a feature of religion *per se*, Surūsh (1996f:51) claims that God is dependent on man for His existence as much as man is dependent on God. His affiliation with modern humanism, according to which man is the measure of all things and the centre of the universe, is not a coincidence since Kant, his prototype in philosophy, indeed was deeply influenced by Rousseau's humanistic ideas on nature, culture, education and history in his philosophising about human nature.

In Surūsh's (1996c:79) view, the theory of contraction and expansion is in general terms related to theology, law and mysticism or more specifically to *dīn-shināsī* (science of religion) in the sense that it represents a scientific study of religion from the 'outside' and that it reveals the various presuppositions and expectations of Islamic theological positions from the revealed text. In his definition of *dīn-shināsī*, Surūsh argues that this concept includes the elaboration of philosophy of religion where religion is seen as a definite enough object to become object of a systematic investigation that is not aimed at deciding on the truth of a particular religion (Surūsh 1996a:9). He distinguishes philosophy of religion proper from philosophical theology and seems to suggest that reflection on religion is philosophically respectable only if it confines itself to mere theism and is abstracted from all

⁴ For a study of the traditional Islamic *adab* tradition and its role in the emergence of modern humanistic studies in the West through the subject of *studia humanitas* of the Italian Renaissance, cf. Makdisi 1990 and Kramer 1992.

particular religions (anything else is taken to be theology, not philosophy). Influenced by the American scholar Ian G. Barber's work *Religion and science*, he attempts to create a modern and dynamic theology that is contingent on the modern sciences for its articulation and considers the historical development of human thought at large.⁵ In contrast to the majority of European as well as Islamic medieval philosophers, whose aim was to develop theology as *scientia* (or *‘ilm*), including sacred theology, Surūsh makes very restricted use of the deliverances of natural human reason and rejects using propositions revealed by God as premises. Besides theology, the theory of contraction and expansion is (as indicated by the title of the book) connected to legal theory in the sense that it aims to illustrate why traditional works of *uṣūl-i fiqh* deal extensively with matters of *ijtihād* as a foundational category and significantly marginalize its cognitive identity. "It demonstrates which other sciences the *faqīh* is dependent on in the process of inferring of rulings and how crucial hidden or pronounced presuppositions are in *iftā'* and juristic understanding" (Surūsh 1996c:57). Surūsh similarly argues that the theory presents evidence for the contingency of procedural *ijtihād* in the realm of *furū'* to prior structural *ijtihād* in *uṣūl*. He also explains to what extent the theoretical underpinnings of *fiqh* is supplied by theology. In addition, he claims that the theory of contraction and expansion is connected to mysticism in that it renders meaning to the traditional distinction between *sharī'at*, *ṭarīqat* (the esoteric way) and *ḥaqīqat* (truth), which he believes is grounded in "the eternal differences" of hermeneutical methodology and constitutes "three categories of religious perception, each one of them corresponding to a specific religious faction and heir to a unique philosophical perspective" (ibid.:57).

B. History: The Stage of natural man

Surūsh's philosophy of history wrestles with the idea of progress and supposes that there is a way of rising above the present and viewing it in relation to inquiry in general, where the history of man is essentially considered a mirror of reason, that is, of its contraction and expansion. Influenced by Hegelian purports to have views on progress, synthesis and the self-correcting character of scientific enterprise, he criticises Aristotle and Descartes for their pessimistic comprehension of history that does not consider history to be, strictly speaking, a branch of knowledge at all. Surūsh believes that theology and *fiqh* are in need of history in the sense that no religion may ignore its historical development and every interpretation is

⁵ Cf. Surūsh 1996c:87. Ian G. Barbour is most known for his book *Issues in science and religion*, first published in 1966, which was one of the first books to treat these fields as two disciplines that shared a common ground rather than as two completely separate or conflicting spheres of study.

bound to its historical context. The inquiry into our knowledge of religion is part of a larger inquiry into the history of human science and thought. While the historical perspective affects the sacredness of religion from the point of view of the believer, a historical as well as sociological method is indispensable for the study of religion:

No school of thought can conceal its historical fate and consider it irrelevant or only count its accomplishments and divorce its earnings from its expenditures. Practical successes and defeats are like mirrors of comprehension from which human beings construct opinions in conformity to certain beliefs. Theology and history are hence contrary to the general belief indispensable and necessary for each other (ibid.:33).

Notwithstanding Surūsh's anti-Cartesian view of history, it is not Descartes but Hegel who is the main object of his criticism. While Surūsh in his later works such as *Qabḍ wa baṣṭ-i tiṭūrīk-i sharīʿat* refutes the Hegelian-style unification of cosmology and theology which is characteristic of his earlier work *Nahād-i nā-ārām-i jahān* (The Restless nature of the universe), describing the unfolding of single events as a divine process (1999b:81–82), he maintains the view that change pertains to existence and not merely to time since both of them are bound to the world. In contrast to the latter work that innovatively links to Ṣadr al-dīn Shīrāzī's concept of *ḥarakat-i jauharī* (essential movement)⁶ and considers teleological statements as a condition *sine qua non* of the discovery of meaning in history, Surūsh's definition of progress in *Qabḍ wa baṣṭ-i tiṭūrīk-i sharīʿat* enfolds progress in history as well as in nature (i.e. evolution in the strict sense) and does not merely view history as process. Inspired by Darwin's concept of evolution which functions as a paradigm in modern science, he argues that the new forms, discoveries and events coming into existence are modifications of the old, which also includes the concept of improvement. Surūsh's view of history is typically modern in the sense that he considers history as liberation from the past through the discovery of new scientific truths and he transcends the traditional view that considers history as the repetitive cycle of birth and decay (containing a transcendent core of eternal truth). Similar to Kant, he believes history to be inherently characterised by progress, necessity and

⁶ The theosophical concept *ḥarakat-i jauharī* constitutes Ṣadr al-dīn Shīrāzī's unique contribution to Islamic thought. As Fazlur Rahman (1975:109, 36) argues, its results are that "grades of being are no longer fixed and static but ceaselessly move and achieve higher forms of existence in time" and that this movement from the less perfect to the more perfect is "unidirectional and irreversible, for existence never moves backward". At the bottom of the scale of existence lies primary matter and at the highest point is God, and the movement, as far as the human being is concerned, hence culminates in man becoming the *insān-i kāmil* (perfect human being). Surūsh's (1999b:99) idea of movement in *Nahād-i nā-ārām-i jahān* seems also to be fairly articulated under the influence of the French philosopher Henry Bergson (d. 1941) who established and developed a theory called *évolution créatrice* (creative evolution). Bergson's philosophy also inspired Muḥammad Iqbāl in his poetical formulation of a mystical and self-affirmative evolutionary cosmology as envisioned, for instance, in his Persian poem *Asrār-i khudī* (Secrets of the self).

critical rationality that is ultimately directed to man's attainment of maturity.⁷ His notion of history breaks, in other words, with the interest of the traditional view of man's place and involvement in the divine cycle and turns the repetitive and unitary organic cycle into a linear arrow of evolutionary progress, where the transcendent core of human existential reflection dissolves into scientific secularisation.⁸

In contrast to Kant, who uses mythological language to describe the progress of a plan of nature, Surūsh's idea of a 'plan of nature' developing itself in history does not anticipate an actual mind called nature that consciously makes a plan to be carried out in history. The argument is, rather, that history proceeds *as if* there was such a mind in the sense that "the process of enfolding human knowledge lies not in the order of anybody, but is self-governed and results from the free competition of human thought itself" (Surūsh 1999k). Surūsh's concept of history possesses no teleological end towards which it is directed but rather adopts a secularised idea of progress that lacks any original sense of destination and gives ontological weight to history itself and a determining sense to our position within it:

The historical past is rediscovered by each generation and each time it demands a fresh 'real' *ma'nā* (meaning) and *tafsīr* (interpretation) and not an allegorical one. There is no doubt that Napoleon did not understand the true impact of his campaigns as well as we do today. This is so because the waves of his feats have now expanded and whispered new mysteries into the ears of the historians. The future historians will hence be in a better position to make discoveries about the present. The multitude and variety of human action in history and the gradual and self-unfolding quality of historical knowledge can scarcely be encountered to this degree in any discipline... From now on, we must think of knowledge not as a snapshot of an object that we take once and for all but as a pond that we constantly replenish with new knowledge or a plant that we irrigate and nourish with new data. Even more importantly, we realise that in addition to human action, other things can also become the subject of historical portrayal, the gradual expansion of which invites our gaze and evokes our sense of familiarity. All the moulds and limits must become fluid in the tumultuous flow of history and no science must be branded with the seal of culmination (Surūsh 1994b:259–260).

Whereas Surūsh considers the aspect of evolution as essential to scientific study, he likewise insistently objects to the idealistic historicism that was born of the time of Hegel, characterised by its belief in intractable laws of human history and being as historical *in toto*. He alleges that the most serious mistake of Hegel, who developed his epistemology *pari passu* with ontology, was to make value-judgements on the concept of evolution as well as to make reason, whether true or false, submissive to history and

⁷ In 1784, Kant responded to the question posed by a Berlin newspaper, "What is enlightenment?" by equating enlightenment with the attainment of maturity through the use of reason.

⁸ Cf. Surūsh 1996c:252.

chronological periods (Surūsh 1996c:179).⁹ In the sense that rationality is not the same thing in every age and every place, Surūsh believes that the Hegelian attitude that takes historically and sociologically assumed rationality for granted is nothing but an empty compliment. In fact, he believes that Hegelian historicism denies the possibility of any pluralism of rationalism by adopting an approximately Neo-Platonic notion of human reason as well as throwing doubt on the basic criteria of scientific and critical realism, i.e. the independence of thought from its object:

It must also be mentioned that our argument is not akin to the philosophical belief that *ashiyāʾ fī anfusikum* (objects in-themselves) have an essence or boundary nor to Hegel's view that history is an independent entity and the stage upon which the Supreme Soul and the Absolute Idea unfold. For one thing, our discourse concerns the discovery of the nature of things (not their objective nature), which as we argued earlier, occurs gradually. The appeal of Hegel's view is due to its affinity with epistemological insight explained in this treatise, not vice versa. Our view does not require imagining history as a singular person with different modes of behaviour. The heart of our case is rather to argue for the existence of knowledge, or in Dilthey's parlance, a reason known as 'historical reason' that could be used to enrich our pure as well as practical philosophy (Surūsh 1994b:260).¹⁰

Surūsh (1994a:124) considers in fact the holistic and utopian experiments of Hegelianism as well as Marxism as nothing else than ideologies of *shirk* (multitheism) and as substitutes for religion in their worship of history. He argues that these philosophical currents in common with Rousseauesque idealism are based on belief in the innate good of mankind which underestimates the potential power of social evil and produces destructive social utopia (in the form of modern totalitarian states).¹¹ Whereas the concept of development in the thought of Hegel (as well as Marx) was made possible by Kant's essays on history, which envisioned the possibility of progress in human history, Surūsh endorses the epistemological basis of Kant and is influenced by Kant and Schleiermacher, who of course had their concept of *Entwicklung* not only in common with Hegel, but also with Ritschl, Dilthey and Troeltsch (Murphy 1999:11). By adhering to the position of empirical realism as formulated by Kant, Surūsh (1994b:257) opposes the idealist mingling of phenomena and reason and endorses a diachronical view of science, motivated by his interest in evolution of human thought:

⁹ Cf. Surūsh 1994b:269. Surūsh is, however, influenced by Hegel's dialectics. Referring to the Hegelian notion of assimilation, Surūsh stresses the fact of the oppositional structure of existence, where the self is comprehended and becomes itself in and through the *other* discursively. He believes, for instance, that we cannot fully grasp the thought of Murtaḍā Muṭahharī without any acquaintance with Marxist ideology (Surūsh 1996c:139).

¹⁰ Cf. Surūsh 1994b:230.

¹¹ Cf. Surūsh 1996a:184.

In the same manner, the ancient sages did not propose a historical method for understanding the allegedly unfolding nature of water, man or fire. They did not entrust the definitions of these entities to the vicissitudes of history. Kant, who was awakened from his dogmatic slumber by Hume, recognised the human character of our knowledge, rightly acquiring the title 'Father of modern epistemology'. His main contention was that knowledge always bears the stamp of humanity. For Kant, it is an impossible dream to vanish in the embrace of the naked truth as if there were no knowing subject to capture the truth in the first place. In his view, knowledge is *nasbi* (relative), but only in relation to the world of humanity, not in its relation to this or that specific knowing subject.

While Surūsh's theory of contraction and expansion has some common correspondences with, for instance, Rudolf Otto's (d. 1939) doctrine of *Entwicklungs-lehre geist* (Idea of spiritual development), the correspondence is significantly restricted to the view of evolution as the unfolding of a potential that is essentially qualitative and non-materialist. Surūsh's concept of history exhibits no tendency to teleological thought equivalent to that of the eighteenth century European theology, which teaches that there is a wise and intelligent Creator who ordered the course of things. It does not suppose that the goal of progress is in the future, according to which man has a chief end to which all his other purposes must be subordinated but rather believes that history terminates in the present. Referring to the British philosopher Robin G. Collingwood, Surūsh (1996c:259) argues that the task of the philosopher-historian is to demonstrate how the present with all its problems (in the form of events, opinions, etc) has come into existence and not how the future will be. "Collingwood, the contemporary British historian and philosopher, quoting the nineteenth century historian Lord Acton, advised the historians in the following manner to study problems not periods. That is, study follows from questioning".¹² As Mehrzad Boroujerdi argues, Surūsh adopts the term historicism mainly in a methodological sense rather than epistemological, in the sense that he has an interest in discovering the historical structures, patterns and trends that underlie scientific development. He states that Surūsh's position has some distinct similarities with Hegelian historicism, when defined in its epistemological sense as human knowledge constructed in time and space:

If one were to define 'historicism' in an epistemological sense, however, to denote the view that all human knowledge is essentially relative to time and place, then much of Sorush's own hypothesis can be viewed as 'historicist'. For example, his

¹² Collingwood was one of the first to recognise history as productive of results no less entitled to be called knowledge than those of natural sciences. He made a crucial contribution toward setting the philosophy of history on a new path where historical thought has an object with peculiarities of its own. Collingwood's (1948) attempt was very much to delineate the specific character of historical knowledge and understanding. He developed an account of historical understanding as imaginatively constructing historical events rather than by showing events to be instances of general uniformities that are established by induction.

belief in the idea of the accumulation and successive approximation of knowledge toward truth is itself a shadowy replica of the eighteenth-century enlightenment idea of progress, which fits very well within the confines of Hegel's philosophy of history (Boroujerdi 1996:174).

But it seems that the distinct concept of philosophy of science that emerges from Surūsh's writings, with its stress on falsification, remains very far from an historicist way of thinking. His approach to the philosophy of science is essentially structural. Since no truly 'historical' element is considered relevant in understanding the structure of scientific theories, he is, rather, disposed towards a structuralist interpretation of history than a historicisation of scientific structures. His concept of scientific change is (as will be properly elucidated below), similar to that of Popper (1969:11) in his *The Poverty of historicism*, concerned with historical trends rather than a single law of nature or evolution, and it recognises no religious, scientific or rational laws of historical development that make history predictable. For Surūsh, history is influenced by the growth of knowledge that proceeds from our problems and our independent attempts to formulate theories that go beyond existing knowledge. In contrast to the post-Hegelian epistemological historicists, he clearly differentiates the epistemic value of scientific theories from historical hermeneutics or interpretation and values history as human rather than humanity as historical:

There is an essential difference between our arguments and those of the fatalistic and deterministic school. Our views are in no way based on the assumption that history unfolds according to a predestined plan. Human history is made out of human choice that emanates from human nature. Only in this sense is history natural; it reveals the nature of our understanding of history. My argument is that no external hand can be said to interfere with and alter history or use human beings as instruments for the justification of its own goals and desires. There is no trace of Hegel's 'cunning of reason' in our understanding of history. One hundred percent of what transpires in history is caused by human volition, not a predetermined plan. The free will and action of humanity is the very core and domain of history (Surūsh:269).¹³

Surūsh is nevertheless primarily influenced by writings of Collingwood and Toynbee rather than Kant or Popper in his conceptualisation of history. In contrast to Popper's account on the sociology of knowledge or the public character of science, Surūsh is interested in reconciling philosophy and history in order to present a philosophical reflection upon the enfolding of human knowledge. He is in particular inspired by Collingwood's assertions about the necessity of rational faith and his refusal to ascribe a monopoly of truth to any scientific discipline. He shares Collingwood's ambiguous views on the questioning of any universal characteristic of knowledge and he is not

¹³ Aware of the traps of epistemological historicism, Surūsh (1996a:193) also maintains that history cannot be the sole source for religious truth since that would run against Shi'i historical and existential conscience.

wholesomely convinced of finding a truth that is universal and valid for all thought. While Surūsh does not embrace Collingwood's idea of a priori historical imagination, he matches Collingwood's criterion of the ideal historian as being a reflective philosopher whose philosophy in particular includes special attention to the problems of historical thought. But what is most striking in Surūsh's influence from Collingwood is the recognition of historical knowledge as man's knowledge of man rather than man's knowledge of the gods. In his book *Tafarruj-i sun'*, Surūsh makes a conscious break with the traditional Islamic concept of *fiṭrat* (natural disposition). Ultimately inspired in his pessimism by Hobbes, he argues that this term, rather than being a transcendent ethic by content, must be considered anthropologically within the horizons of history. In contrast to the traditional view of *fiṭrat*, which depicts the cosmological state of man as something constant and permanent from which there only are insignificant deviations at certain moments of history, Surūsh (1994b:264–268) claims that *insān-i mustaqīm wa tabi'ī* (immediate and natural man) cannot be found anywhere but in history:

The rubbish and sewage of the cities inform us of the civilised lifestyle. These pollutions are natural and common; human life itself generates them. Refuse is a problem that must not be wished away but acknowledged and handled. This acknowledgement is necessary for understanding human life on earth. By the same token, medical and biological scientists cannot avoid the study of blood, urine, and the like. Depravities and obscenities can function as a valuable *rāhnāmā-yi mitūdīk* (methodical guide). Decadence is necessary for learning about decency, and indecent practise is instructive for method. Jokes, dreams and sexual perversions that for centuries were ignored or merely cursed and damned have provided psychotherapists with insights into the depth of the human psyche. Those who search for the natural dispositions of man have to look into history, which is the place for the most adequate manifestation of immediate and natural man. [...] History is the most natural stage on which humankind has expressed itself. It is hence the best means for knowing it. On this stage, human beings have not hidden, altered or exaggerated their true nature. They have not been forced to sway away from their inner nature. They have, in other words, left in their historical wake obvious hints about their nature for the benefit of posterity.¹⁴

Consequently, Surūsh is highly critical of the a-historic idealism that he believes is characteristic not only of traditional *fiqh*, but also of the writings of several contemporary authors such as Ḥusain 'Alī Muntazirī and 'Abdullāh Jawādī-Āmulī. In a reply to an article written by Muntazirī on the

¹⁴ Cf. Surūsh 1994d:67–73. In his book *Širāṭhā-yi mustaqīm* (Straight paths), Surūsh (1999d:59) draws the radical conclusion that the whole development of the religious phenomenon itself, such as the articulation of specific sectarian positions, has a definite historical mark in terms which come close to reducing the metaphysical to the historical. "There exists no such a thing as genuine Shi'i Islam or genuine Sunni Islam. [...] Shi'i Islam is merely the history of Shi'i Islam in the same sense that Sunni Islam is merely the history of Sunni Islam".

nature of Islamic law in the twenty-first century, he rejects in particular the former's supra-historical view of man when it comes to the nature of legal norms that have socio-political implications:

My impression of the general arguments in the honourable *āyatullāh* Muntazirī's article in the journal *Kiyān* is that he considers the addressee of divine legal norms to be *insān-i fiṭrī* (natural man), a supra-historical or non-historical being. He considers generally legal norms in terms of their supra-historical disposition as if topics such as travel, marriage or murder have a one-scale character. This presupposition is not only to be found in his writings but in the writings of most jurists. It seems as if these honourable jurists believe that man on account of being human and possessing a permanent and fixed identity is the addressee of divine norms and not in respect of being a historical being with a social identity subjected to mental, social and political changes (Surūsh 1999i:20).

Surūsh's conception of the historical identity of man runs evidently against the traditional Islamic view of history which includes God among the *dramatis personae*. In fact, he suggests that there no longer can be anything 'mystical' about terrestrial space, since the configuration of history no longer is *payāmbār-parwar* (prophet-nurturing) (Surūsh 2000d:7). By considering history in rational and scientific terms, history is not necessary because revelation is historical (through prophets sent to given peoples at given times) or because life on earth is supposed to culminate in the blissful reappearance of the hidden *imām* (which is the case according to traditional Shi'i milleniarism), but because evolution is inherently self-guiding and governed by an inner dynamic force. By arguing that history cannot be manipulated or distorted by anything external, he releases the subject matter of history from its traditionally determined esoteric and law-based meta-historic vision and makes religious historical conscience amendable to secular and humanistic notions of man's cosmological position (Surūsh 1994b:262). While the historical product of traditional Islamic science and thought may yield insights, it is in Surūsh's view more of an object of judgement for new understanding than an aid to it. The overall results of his exposition on history as well as jurisprudence that considers Islamic law as mutable and subjected to constant flux, makes human knowledge on religion increasingly receptive to external historical circumstances.

C. Critical rationality: Self-determining and liberated

In contrast to the traditional Shi'i belief that certainty is achieved through God's knowledge as revealed to and transmitted through the Prophet and the *imāms*, the point of departure of Surūsh's treatment of rationality is that the believer has the right to employ his or her intellect independently. The human mind is in his view creative, not receptive. Influenced by the enlightenment insistence on the methodical character of reason, he does not accept reason as theologically ordered toward truth but believes that reason invents itself and constructs its truths by way of critical methodologies. Aware of the need to clarify the boundaries of human rationality in order to have a theoretical basis for hermeneutical questions, such as the question of difference of knowledge, experience and form, he considers in general reason as complementary to revelation.¹⁵ In a 1991 essay on the nature of reason, Surūsh (1991:9) acknowledges that the term has multiple meanings and he characterises the human faculty of reasoning as well as reasoning itself. He maintains that reason is adopted in a variety of contexts as an activity and discipline and divided into categories such as *naẓarī* ('visionary'), *ʿamalī* (practical), *kasbī* (acquired), *fiṭrī* (innate), *juzʿī* (particular) and *kullī* (universal). Referring to a number of *akhbār* from ʿAlī b. Abī Ṭālib and Jaʿfar al-Šādiq that praise wisdom and intellection, he concludes that reason is the lens man needs for comprehending revelation:

God has given humankind two proofs: The exoteric proof and the esoteric proof. The exoteric proof is the Prophet and the esoteric is reason. This means that reason and the Prophet are of the same kind, since both have a common source and function as eyes. Reason serves as a lens to see revelation while revelation makes reason catch sight of higher points. The relationship between revelation and reason is similar to the relationship between the eye and a lens, not that of two opposites. It is also similar to the relationship between a lamp that gives little light and a lamp that gives abundant light in the sense that the second makes the former of little value or even ineffective. In our time, the light of revelation has been wiped out and we are in need of reason more than ever before (ibid.:12).

While Surūsh in his early writing *Nahād-i nā-ārām-i jahān* considers reason as an instrument of faith, where science accordingly is defined in mystical terms as a hierarchical light consisting of various inner levels that man discovers with his rational faculty, he seems more aware of the contradiction between critical reason and the transcendent mystical grounding of knowledge in a 1984 essay on the causalistic cosmologies of Muḥammad al-Ghazālī and Jalāl al-dīn Rūmī. He criticises these two followers of *ashaʿrī* theology for placing God above human notions of causality and justice and claims that their God "is an illogical and self-centred God that has no rational and ethical justification for His action" and concludes that "there is

¹⁵ Cf. Surūsh 1999d:73 and 85.

hence no way to have faith in Him” (1996d:192–193).¹⁶ In *Farbihtar az idī’ulūzhī* (Loftier than ideology), Surūsh calls furthermore for a transformation of hierarchical relationships between reason and revelation that separates critical philosophical rationalism from mystical metaphysics. He despises the traditional view of reason as depository of truths that allows for its separation from freedom and considers the enterprise of rationality as an all-or-nothing project, or more correctly procedure, since the justification of religion cannot be complete without critique and analysis:

My discussion is about the kind of reason that serves as a dynamic faculty for thinking and seeking the truth. It is about the kind of freedom that is required by reason *qua* reason... There are two categories of reason: reason as destination and reason as path. The first sees reason as the source and repository of truths. The second sees it as a critical, dynamic and forbearing force that meticulously seeks the truth by negotiating tortuous paths of trial and error, for instance, through philosophy. [...] The dynamic view of reason prefers *khaṭā-yi rawishmand* (methodologically acquired error), since it contains the kind of movement that is the only guarantor of life and longevity of reason. The advocates of administered truth need no room for questioning and doubt; dynamic reason sees such an environment as stifling and stupefying (Surūsh 1996a:236–239).

Inspired by enlightenment thinkers, Surūsh adopts the second definition of reason as a dynamic and critical activity and argues that reason must be liberated, unbound and free to function in accordance with its own rules. In *Qabḍ wa baṣṭ-i ti’ūrik-i sharī’at*, he claims that while reason is granted a highly esteemed position in Shi’i law despite the dogmatic effort of the *akhbārī* school to reject it, this high status was never actually concretised, since the ambiguous nature of human rationality was never systematically theorised by traditional Islamic scholars. As he argues, the function of rationality in Islamic law has hitherto been that of a servant of a sacred and polemical notion of religion:

This principle is particularly pertinent and true in the case of Islamic law, since *sharī’at* invites and persuades people to investigate history, explore the world and examine nature. The kind of *sharī’at* that has this attribute cannot disavow the products of rational research and analysis or consider them as offensive or improper. It is not possible to invite a person to rational thinking from one angle and reject and degrade the results of rational thinking from the other (Surūsh 1996c:388).

The role of rationality in the arena of religion has hitherto been that of a timid and discreet servant of understanding and defence of religion. Defence and affirmation cannot however be complete without critique and analysis. The enterprise of

¹⁶ This line of argument is also developed in Surūsh’s (1996a:285–291) article on the concept of causality and justice in Rūmī’s poetry where he asserts that the *asha’rī* view, which states that evil as well as good comes from God, believes that God can impose on men obligations that they are incapable of carrying out. He can punish a creature who has not sinned and without owing him any compensation. In Surūsh’s view, this God owes man no justice and goodness and is hence an immoral God.

rationality is an all-or-nothing project. One cannot employ reason to attest to the truth of one's opinions without leaving the door open to its fault-finding. The attempt to enjoy the sweet affirmation of reason without tasting its bitter reproach is pure self-delusion. Writing books in defence of women's rights, human rights, and the system of government in Islam, summoning reason to affirm and defend the truth of one's arguments while turning a deaf ear to rational critique of the rest of one's beliefs exemplifies a half-finished enterprise that falls short of the requirements of reasoned discourse and the standard of rationality (Surūsh 1997a:333).

In his criticism of traditional metaphysics, Surūsh (1996c:253) claims that all conscious cognition involves selection, organisation and interpretation, including mystical experience, which is different in the sense that it involves interpreting at another level of meaning. Since the communication of mystical experience has no choice but to use representation it becomes knowledge by correspondence. While metaphysics and the higher levels of consciousness are accepted as a method of understanding metaphysical reality, it is only a method and not necessarily the most elevated method, since the transcendental desire is unsatisfying with respect to the historicity and social heterogeneity of understanding. It is, in his view, a desire that always seems to end in contempt for interpretation and a suspicion concerning the whole idea of interpretative dialogue. Limiting reason to discursive cunning in the modern world, i.e. an analytical function, he believes that the cognitive categories of philosophy and theosophy, however, can help us to acquire a better comprehension of human existence:

This delivery is not merely fostered by science, but also by philosophy and theosophy. The judgements of the philosophers and the experiences of the mystics also assist the understanding of revelation and the comprehension of the world. When we approach the external world, we are forced to give meaning to every object and this meaning is contingent on scientific, philosophical and theosophical theories. Even the sentence 'God has created the world' does not have one single possible meaning (ibid.:138).¹⁷

Surūsh ultimately leaves religious belief at the mercy of ever-changing scientific theories caught in the process of constant transformation. In the recognition of the limits of dogmatic reason, he argues that reason cannot be supposed to provide truths about transcendent reality, since it rarely figures as the harbinger of righteousness, bliss and common good of mankind. Referring to Rūmī's concept of '*aql-i dīw* (demon's reason), he asserts that even the advocates of transcendent reason accept that human beings can be misled by their own reason (Surūsh 1994b:247–257). But while Surūsh's reason, contrary to the pure and untainted intellect of theosophy, has a distinct human character, he is not prepared to sacrifice reason, similar to the sophists, because of its occasional faults and afflictions. Similar to Dilthey, the primary figure in the movement called 'historicism', who wrote his

¹⁷ Cf. Surūsh 1999d:146.

Critique of the historical reason as a prolongation of Kant's *Kritik der reinen vernunft* in order to provide historical sciences with the same character of real science that natural science already had, Surūsh (ibid.:260) considers knowledge as 'historical reason'. But while Surūsh emphasises the importance of historical development in our understanding, he does not place the problem of hermeneutics to the first level of a priori epistemological preoccupations, where it is concerned with questions of ontology. In this sense, he disagrees with Dilthey, who perceives existence as having a radically hermeneutic character, where understanding is the fundamental ontological structure of existence.

Asserting that the majority of human convictions are conjectural, Surūsh suggests that rational belief requires a critical attitude in which we do not simply believe whatever seems to be so but test and probe and insist upon taking account of all relevant considerations. The outcome of his epistemology is the so-called *‘aqlānīyat-i intiqādī* (critical rationality), where reason is used in an independent and more unrestricted manner to constantly threaten our most cherished and comforting assumptions. His discourse ultimately connects to enlightenment, where reason denotes logical analysis and thinking and the certainty of absolute knowledge is relativised. But while Surūsh, similar to the enlightenment thinkers, attempts to free reason from the clutches of history as well as culture, the theory of contraction and expansion subjects reason to constant change and makes the acquiring of objective culture-transcending knowledge difficult. While reason is indispensable as the major source of scientific theories, together with observation and intellectual intuition, it is no firm authority of knowledge since it is uncertain and unreliable. To be a rationalist is, in his view, hence to deny the omnipotence of pure reason:

My position is in actual fact that of critical or sophisticated rationality in the sense that I believe that the world of reality, whether religion, philosophy or nature, has become too complex for us to describe with a number of pure rational principles or via the manifestation of our [inner] hearts. The most salient result of critical rationality is that the majority of human convictions are nothing but conjectures. This does not mean that we do not have the capacity to get hold of reality but rather that the grasping of reality has no clear sign and that the indications employed by traditional philosophy, such as *bidāhat* ('invention'), *yaqīn*, and the like, are flawed and insufficient. We cannot therefore simply claim that this is truth or that truth is erroneous. [...] We comprehend conjectures in common experience, in the interpretation of text or in religious experience, *fiqh* and science. As Kant says, these conjectures appear very natural to us and it lies in the nature of reason to arrive at a cul-de-sac from time to time, since multiple rationales disclose a variety of interpretations of one single observable fact and no interpretation is capable of refuting the others (Surūsh 1999d:144–146).

D. Science: Falsification and corroboration

Surūsh's general scientific exposition in *Qabḍ wa baṣṭ-i ti'ūrik-i sharī'at* connects mostly to the modern subject of the history of science, which substantiates the theory of contraction and expansion using a theoretical basis. He draws on the ideas of a broad spectrum of Western philosophers such as Karl R. Popper, Alfred N. Whitehead, Immanuel Kant, Wilfred van Orman Quine, Imre Lakatos and Rene Descartes. His point of departure is that science essentially is different from philosophy, although not its replacement. He defines science as a branch of human learning with a collective and flowing identity, a mirror of all aspects of human existence, composed of subjects, motives and methods:

Our object with the concept 'science' in this discussion is a branch of subjects that is composed of *guzārahā* (theorems), i.e. a collection of theorems that is unified by a common subject, motive or method, and this we comprehend as a branch of science. It becomes hence obvious that our discussion is not concerned with the conjecture or certainty of theorems, which belongs to the state of the individual scholar, but rather with the relationship between the theorems and reality as well as the relationship between the theorems themselves (Surūsh 1996c:93).

While Surūsh adheres to the Cartesian conviction of the possibility of dividing culture into areas in which we have 'objectivity' and 'rationality', the hard and the mature sciences, he opposes the notion that softer areas of discourse, such as religion, morals and art, do not count as 'knowledge'. He acknowledges that the natural sciences have a mark of objectivity that the human sciences do not have but rejects the strict positivist division of sciences into human science, governed by philosophical and ideological values on the one hand, and non-speculative and objective natural science that operates with mathematical and experimental methods on the other. While claiming that the method of reasoning adopted by modern science is the method of reasoning that philosophy should also adopt in dealing with at least some of its problems, he disagrees with August Comte's notion that philosophical theory must assign a dominant intellectual role to empirical science. Metaphysical thinking should, in Surūsh's view, not be replaced by scientific thinking. He believes, rather, that metaphysical thinking should consist of a kind of scientific thinking. He criticises the stance of positivists who make a very strict distinction between the natural sciences and philosophical speculation and confine science and philosophy to the facts presented by experience. In his view, positivists from David Hume and John Locke to Rudolf Carnap and Carl Gustav Hempel frequently become engaged in the problem of the function of hypotheses in science since not every hypothesis has an empirical basis:

For this very reason, some distinguished scholars have even made mistakes concerning the nature of natural science. Several positivists are afflicted with the

problem of the position of hypotheses in science, since a scientific hypothesis has non-sensible probability and is not a premise that has been realized through the senses. All hypotheses that possess theoretical concepts cannot be produced solely through the senses (Surūsh 1996c:95).¹⁸

While Surūsh does not refer to Dilthey's proposition which identifies *comprehension* as the specific cognitive operation of hermeneutic human science and *explanation* as the characteristic cognitive operation of the natural sciences, he seems to be aware of the serious problem involved in the above separation, since it proves impossible to base scientific historical knowledge on simple comprehension. The relationship between human sciences and *sharīʿat* is a question that Surūsh is concerned with in his book *Tafarruj-i sunʿ*. He argues that modern Muslims' ambiguous and sometimes resistant attitude towards the humanities (in contrast to natural sciences) can largely be explained by the fact that the traditional Islamic theocentric concept of man is diametrically opposed to the intricate critical scrutiny of human existence that dominates modern humanities. He also claims that the humanities are not a product of divine law and by no means can be extracted from the revealed sources (Surūsh 1994b:9 and 195). In his attempt to acclimatise a wider acceptance of the human sciences in Iran, Surūsh refers to the writings of the British philosopher Gilbert Ryle (d. 1976) and explains that the human sciences, similar to natural science, have an empirical basis and are scientific and analytical. The human sciences are, in other words, not pure philosophy, which would be a tautology:

The second matter is that the humanities are equal to natural science in the sense that they are empirical science and not ethics or philosophy... It is correct that we need philosophy, ethics as well as theosophy and also other subjects that have not yet been discovered by man in order to know human society but none of these learnings replace empirical human science. An attribute of human science is that it is empirical in an anthropological sense but not *insān-shināsī* (anthropology) in the common sense (ibid.:18).

In his concern to raise the human sciences, including philosophy, to the level of science in some sense similar to mathematics and physics, Surūsh's position has affinities with the Kantian movement. The most fundamental terminological distinction of the theory of contraction and expansion is in fact the originally Kantian division between 'is' and 'ought', which in Surūsh's terminology corresponds to the levels of *taḥaqquq* (fulfilment) and *taʿrif* (description). In his early book *Dānish wa arzish* (Science and value), he examines the relations between these categories as well as other terminologies of modern science such as fact and value, end and means, and so on. He refutes the modern self-confidence that science supplies with a comprehensive alternative worldview to that of religion and argues that the

¹⁸ Cf. Surūsh 1999a:303.

'deadly plague' of modern ethics is "the severe erroneous belief of deducing 'ought' from 'is', 'values' from 'realities' and 'ethics' from 'sciences'" (Surūsh 1983:8).¹⁹ But in *Qabḍ wa baṣṭ-i tī'ūrīk-i sharī'at*, Surūsh (1996c:99) argues oppositely that all sciences are characterised by a number of a-historical and abstract descriptions that depict what science ought to be, as well as a historical dimension that explains its gradual development and adopts the modern idea of ordering science as well as society according to 'is'. While all sciences are perfect and complete at the level of 'description', he claims that they engage in a constant and mutual dialogue at the level of 'fulfilment':

It is therefore evident that our object with knowledge, in particular religious knowledge, is a collection of theorems that is produced from a specific form of *dāwarī* (justification). The production of knowledge occurs after justification. We must hence distinguish the two levels of science, the level of 'ought' and the level of 'is'. The level of 'ought' corresponds to the level of description and the level of 'is' corresponds to the level of fulfilment (Surūsh 1996c:96).

It becomes in particular evident that religious knowledge on the level of fulfilment is related and interconnected in a dialogue with other sciences at the level of fulfilment, where they mutually influence each other. Their relation at the level of description is another topic, which is beyond the framework of the present discussion (ibid.:113).

Since Surūsh's theory of contraction and expansion relates to science according to the category of *taḥaqquq*, it does not involve 'first philosophy' as grounding, and sitting in judgement of, science and the rest of the epistemic culture on account of philosophy providing us with apodictic knowledge on the foundations of knowledge. He claims that his analysis is restricted to *tauṣīf* (report) and does not indulge in questions related to *taklīf* (prescription) (ibid.:170). Surūsh refrains, therefore, from rendering a criterion to separate true opinions from false opinions since all interpretations are subjected to flow and variation. His attempt is rather one of giving an empirical and historical account of divine guidance and human rationality (Surūsh 1999d:95–97). He rejects any normative function of epistemology and claims that we can only describe how we arrive at knowledge. In fact, he accentuates that the study of the linear development of religious knowledge is not equal to extracting new philosophical and scientific information and data from the revealed sources:

The purpose of a linear development of legal understanding and religious knowledge is not to bring forth new philosophical and scientific explorations from the Qur'an and *riwāyat* and to demonstrate their compulsory and legally binding character. The

¹⁹ In Neo-Kantian philosophy, a sharp separation is generally made between the existential and normative grounds of the 'is' (*Sein*) and the 'ought' (*Sollen*). Kant himself showed the impossibility of deducing from what 'is' that which is valuable, that which is right and that which 'ought' to be. Cf. Friedrich 1958:166.

argument is rather that a deeper human exploration of reality lends a hand to a deeper exploration of the content of revelation according to the mechanism of falsification, i.e. that meanings are contingent on theories (Surūsh 1996c:303).

Surūsh (ibid.:170) specifies that what distinguishes the modern *raushanfikir-i dīnī* (religious intellectual) from the *‘ālim-i dīnī* (religious scholar), who considers religion only in an a priori way, is his or her understanding of religion from the ‘outside’. He argues that since not every religious scholar is a traditionally trained *‘ālim*, new concepts of *‘ilm* and *‘ālim* are necessary in line with the criterion that whoever is “competent to interpret” and shed light on the revealed text is an *‘ālim* (Bodi 1996:20). As opposed to the Iranian climate of a generation ago, when the notion of an Islamic intellectual was almost a contradiction in terms due to the denotation of this term as the enlightened liberation of reason, Surūsh attempts to make religious thinking intellectually respectable.²⁰ His definition of the term *raushanfikir* (intellectual) is not restricted to religious believers. The intellectual is, rather, the child of modernity and the intelligentsia is comprised of thinkers from the university as well as the *ḥauzah*, who have in common their efforts to create a *guftamān* (discourse) between tradition and modernity in common in terms of criticising tradition in the light of modern knowledge (Surūsh 1997a:188).²¹ As far as Islamic law is concerned, Surūsh claims that the whole discourse on *fiqh-i pūyā* and *fiqh-i sunnatī* therefore only states two interpretative possibilities, the one concerned with capacity of law and the other with pureness of law. Indifferent to the specific philosophy of future Islamic jurisprudences, he argues that whether the new methodology of law is called *fiqh-i puyā* or anything else, similar to the story of *ghaimah wa qaimah* (two different ways to spell a Persian meal), is of secondary importance and that “what is of importance is the split peas and the meat, the spelling does not matter”:

Does not all the talk, also in our country, about *pūyā* and *sunnatī* and the emphasis that one group lays on tradition and the love they exhibit for the pureness of religion and the rush another group has in the renovation of thought and reunderstanding of principles, demonstrate that both of the two groups react on the inroad of external knowledge and opinions? Both have found that a flood has arrived that will not leave the house in its prior position and place (Surūsh 1996c:175).²²

In a recent interview, Surūsh (1999k) refutes the contemporary Shi’i discourse on *fiqh-i pūyā* as “empty talk” and argues that this legal faction establishes all its reasoning on the revealed texts and actually restricts the use of reason in every way. He also claims that most of the advocates of

²⁰ Cf. Richard 1995:194.

²¹ Cf. Surūsh 1999c:22, 35, 47 and 246.

²² Cf. Surūsh 1999c:318–319, 1999f:37 and 1999a:78. Surūsh’s position differs in this respect from the general academic view that portrays him as an advocate of *fiqh-i pūyā*. Cf. Vahdat 1998:394.

fiqh-i pūyā have not articulated any systematic theoretical outlook. They instead focus on minor issues such as the *khulūṣ* of Islamic law instead of producing a critical analysis of the subject matter of the so-called 'dynamic' attribute of Islamic law. Nevertheless, he believes that the effort of dynamising jurisprudence by contemporary jurists "demonstrates that the notion of contingency has penetrated (Islamic) thought" (Surūsh 1996c:176). While the theory of contraction and expansion explains the existence of divergent interpretation, it does not, in other words, attempt to solve the contractions or conflicts at hand:

The original purpose of the theory of contraction and expansion is not to solve the conflict between traditional jurisprudence and dynamic jurisprudence, to modernise religion, to decipher or complete Islamic law or to relativise and deny truth but to highlight the meaning of how religion is comprehended and in what sense this understanding accepts evolution. As long as the enigma of religious understanding and evolution of religious knowledge is not comprehended, the effort to revive religion remains incomplete (ibid.:57).

Instead of making a systematic study of the historical development of the traditional Islamic disciplines, Surūsh adopts the conceptual framework and terminology of analytical philosophy and divides the sciences into two categories: *taulīd-kunandah* (producing) and *maṣraf-kunandah* (consuming). While he underlines that all sciences are active on a common level since human knowledge in its totality is subjected to mutual transaction, he explains that there is a logical relation between the sciences that motivates a differentiation. As he argues, the producing sciences have "an intrinsic theoretical aspect and are law-making" (ibid.:88). Among the producing sciences, he mentions physics, psychology, mathematics, sociology, chemistry and philosophy in contrast to sciences, such as jurisprudence, theology, medicine and administration, which are consuming sciences. As the classification is basically related to the question of theories, he asserts that scientific theories formed by the producing sciences are adopted by the consuming sciences. Medicine or administration have, for instance, no theories of their own, but adopt the theories used by biochemistry, histology and anatomy respectively psychology and sociology. Acknowledging the existence of exceptions to the above scheme, Surūsh defines the modern discipline of history as a producing science despite the fact that history is contingent on other disciplines, such as economy, psychology and sociology for its growth.²³ The increasing autonomy of certain consuming sciences is therefore explained by their expansion in the realm of theory and methodology that is due to the collecting of ingredients and data from the

²³ In this respect, Surūsh (1996c:89) refers to the scientific classifications of Ibn Khaldūn whom, similar to the British historian Arnold Toynbee, he considers the founder of historical analysis, "even if the extent of his success to implement a sociological study of historical growth can be disputed". Cf. Toynbee 1935:322.

producing sciences:

Science can be divided into two categories: producing and consuming sciences. The producing sciences have an intrinsic theoretical character and are law-making. The consuming sciences are sciences that consume and make use of the theories that are produced by the producing sciences. *‘Ilm-i ṭabb* (medicine) is a delicate example of a consuming science. The consuming sciences are a mixture of knowledge and skill in the sense that the scientist must be knowledgeable about certain theories and also have some skill in their practical use and benefit. Medicine is such as science. There is a group of sciences called ‘basic medical sciences’, which include biochemistry, histology, anatomy, physiology, and the like. These are producing sciences that in a direct manner give a picture of external reality and describe it in order to articulate laws. The medical doctor studies this group of sciences and learns about their theories in order to implement them in their daily work. In this respect, we characterise medicine as a consuming science (ibid.:88).

In *Qabḍ wa baṣṭ-i tīṭūrīk-i sharī‘at* (ibid.:151), Surūsh argues that the pure distinction producing/consuming sciences is not exhaustive for elucidating the relationship between the scientific disciplines, but that this does not imply that no relations exist or that all relations pertain to production of theories in science. He claims that many relations are not connected to logic by referring to the use of mathematical methods in many disciplines, such as physics, chemistry and sociology or the relationship between philosophy and natural science. Alluding to Kant’s argument of a priori concepts or categories of the pure understanding, he argues that the logical principles themselves rather are based on a priori philosophical premises. He believes that science would prove impossible without a number of a priori (‘from what is before– experience’) propositions such as the premise that the world of phenomena exists since observations always are interpreted in the context of a priori knowledge.²⁴ Knowledge of the external world rests not merely on sense experience but requires nonempirical or a priori principles to validate it and human sensory representations are not self-validating:

Another example is the contingency of natural science to philosophy. When human beings initiate scientific research, they take advantage of much preliminary data without which natural science would prove impossible. These preliminary data have

²⁴ In philosophy, a priori knowledge is frequently equivalent to innate ideas and necessary truths. In Kant’s view, a priori knowledge concerns only necessary synthetic judgements that cannot be proved analytically in contrast to a posteriori knowledge that concerns only contingent truths. Kant divided all sentences according to their logical form into analytic and synthetic ones, the analytic being those that are decidable as true or false using logic alone. The synthetic a priori are contributions of our minds to knowledge, prior to experience because they are brought to experience by the mind. A priori concepts and intuitions are hence in a way necessary and universal in their application (Parson 1992). As will be properly elucidated below, Surūsh suggests that whether knowledge is a priori is quite a different question from whether it is innate. As he argues, mathematics provides the most often cited examples of a priori knowledge but is no doubt acquired through experience even though it is justifiable independently of experience.

a perceptual and corroborative basis. In order to pursue natural science, we must, for instance, presuppose that external reality does exist. This is a philosophical preliminary that the whole scientific study rests on. In similar terms, we must acknowledge that our sense organs and intelligence are capable of comprehending reality and that our intellect is reliable, and so on. Therefore, we say that natural science is based on philosophy and without recourse to these philosophical premises all natural science are without meaning (ibid.:151).

Surūsh's reliance on intuitive knowledge independent of experience, as distinguished from deduction, the second source of knowledge, arrived at by unmediated reflecting upon the content of our concepts, fulfills the minimum claim of rationalism, i.e. that some of our a priori beliefs seem to be true. In contrast to several recognised empiricists, who not only deny a priori propositions but also a priori concepts, Surūsh's theory of meaning (inspired by Kant's subsuming of Descartes rationalism and Bacon's empiricism) asserts that there are necessary concepts that are not derived from or correlated with experimental features of the world.²⁵ While Surūsh does not consider epistemology as Cartesian 'first philosophy', where the theory of knowledge is prior to any empirical knowledge, his position is very much foundationalist in the sense that he supposes the existence of non-inferential, nonsensory knowledge acquired by a kind of basic intellectual insight. Needless to say, his position has its dilemmas when combined with Popper's falsification principle which runs against foundationalist claims (as well as commonsensic and reductionistic induction). He is therefore a rationalist in the sense that he supposes that the conditions for science cannot be discovered but only be reasoned to through experience. While he does not yield to the enthusiasms of rationalism as he rejects the dogmatism of reason by affirming a self-critical rationalism, the question remains as to what extent the demonstrative element in his epistemological thought transcends the purely empirical.

Affirming the insistence of epistemological coherentism that the justifiability of belief is determined jointly by all of one's beliefs taken together, Surūsh explains that the principle of coherence elucidates why Islamic philosophers have a dominantly Aristotelian or Platonic interpretation of Islam and why the philosophical perspectives of religion is governed by specific philosophies themselves. In his terminology, the coherence theory is called *intizār-i mā az dīn* (our expectation of religion) and states that the validity of any proposition consists in its coherence with some specified set of propositions.²⁶ In contrast to the correspondence

²⁵ Kant believed that the principle of universal causality is a priori and Descartes thought there was an a priori argument for God's existence.

²⁶ Cf. Surūsh 1997a:135. Surūsh seems in this respect to be influenced by Popper's (1972:344) idea that observation always presupposes the existence of some 'system of expectations', i.e. that the process of knowing begins when observations clash with existing theories or preconceptions.

theory, which states that the truth conditions of propositions are not (in general) propositions, but rather objective features of the world, the valid conditions of propositions consist, in his view, of other propositions. Surūsh (ibid.:409–410) refers, for instance, to the dispute between Hādī Sabziwārī and ‘Abd al-Razzāq Lāhijī on the question of the Prophet’s *mi‘rāj* (body-ascension to Heaven) and argues that Sabziwārī’s Greek philosophy legitimised his belief in body-ascension, in contrast to Lāhijī, whose rejection of Hellenistic influences on Qur’anic teachings made him preserve the *ṣawāḥir-i sharī‘at* (literal words of *sharī‘at*) and defend a purely spiritual interpretation.

But while Islamic thinkers such as Sabziwārī, Faiḍ al-Kāshānī and Ṣadr al-dīn Shīrāzī attempted to integrate *fiqh* into philosophy with the aim of reaching peace between *sharī‘at* and philosophy, Surūsh (1999a:307) refutes their attempt as a frail and inauspicious compromise in the sense that their positions presuppose a specific traditional philosophical view of Islamic law. He argues, however, that the coherence principle clarifies that the contemporary dilemma of Islamic thought primarily involve a conflict between premodern philosophies and modern ones rather than a disagreement between religion and philosophy. Rejecting contemporary traditionalist interpretations of Islam as epistemologically incompatible, Surūsh believes that the contradictory character of traditionalist interpretations of Islamic law is due to the inconsistency of their philosophical and anthropological viewpoints:

If the traditionalists’ interpretations of jurisprudence are traditional, the secret is that their anthropology, i.e. their conception of man, society and the relationship between God and man, and so on, is traditional. Therefore, their expectation of religion and *fiqh* is traditional. They honestly make an effort to infer legal norms but their presuppositions, i.e. anthropological and sociological data, are bound to interfere with their inference. Their conclusions therefore always become so strange and *traditional* (Surūsh 1996c:189).²⁷

But in contrast to modern epistemological coherence theories, Surūsh’s analysis supposes the existence of epistemologically basic beliefs (i.e. beliefs that must be justified independent of reason), which distinguishes his position from that of the coherentists. As will be properly elucidated below, he accords this special epistemic status to *tawātur* (“successive hearsay”)²⁸ which emerges as a privileged subset of his entire doxastic corpus. Surūsh’s purpose with the classification producing/consuming sciences is not to

²⁷ For Surūsh’s criticism of Muḥammad Ḥusain Tabāṭabā‘ī, ‘Abdullāh Jawādī-Āmulī, Ṣādiq Lārijānī and Seyyed Hossein Nasr, cf. Surūsh 1996c:37–41, 222–241, 528–564 and 1999c:87.

²⁸ In modern Persian, the term *tawātur* denotes a recurrent mode of transmission and is used synonymously with the Qur’an and *ḥadīṭ*. In this respect, it is significant that Surūsh is unconcerned with the possibility of error or forgery of the latter textual material and its channels of transmission despite his view that these sources yield some kind of basic and hence necessary knowledge.

articulate a set of rational arguments for the validation of religious truths but rather to point to the close relationship between modern philosophical anthropology and our understanding of nature, epistemology and religion as if they constitute “part of a circle” (ibid.:91). Reflecting on the constituency of traditional Islamic science, he argues that the religious sciences such as *‘ilm al-kalām* have become consuming sciences:

During one period theology was a producing science in the sense that it formed its own philosophy. Theologians were also philosophers and even opposed the *falsafah* of the philosophers whose philosophical principles were considered distorted. They established hence their own principles in order to clarify and confirm the tenets of *sharī‘at* and to repel doubt. But from the time of Naṣīr al-dīn Ṭūsī and onwards theology has truly become a consuming science. Ṭūsī did not believe it necessary for theology and philosophy to work out separate philosophies. Instead, he argued that theology could benefit from the philosophy of the philosophers, which he considered more grounded than the philosophy of the theologians. Theology became contingent on philosophy and lost its previous autonomy, at least among Shi‘i thinkers (ibid.:90).

Naṣīr al-dīn Ṭūsī’s rapprochement of Hellenistic philosophy and Islamic theology was, in Surūsh’s view, a determining factor in the decay of Shi‘i theology. But what he seems to neglect is that the contingency of theology to philosophical theories and arguments did not result in any particular concession on behalf of theology to the philosophical dogmas.²⁹ Surūsh argues, however, that the result of the ‘contraction’ of Islamic theology is that this discipline, in its capacity as a consuming science, has become increasingly receptive to the developments of modern science. He actually claims that theology borrows its theories, methods and terminology from the modern sciences to the extent that “every change in these sciences categorically influences theology” (ibid.:90). As regards *fiqh*, he suggests that jurisprudence is a consuming science “in the complete sense” and is contingent on the methodological principles of theology for its expansion. In the sense that *fiqh* presupposes certain propositions about God, prophethood and man which form the subject matter of theology, he believes that a prior transformation of the theological foundations of *fiqh* is necessary in order to dynamise Islamic law (ibid.:387).³⁰

²⁹ It should be noted that Surūsh’s view of Naṣīr al-dīn Ṭūsī is contested. As Wilfred Madelung (1968:27) argues, Ṭūsī’s theological thought remained within the context of former Shi‘i theological expositions. “His interest in philosophy, however, did not affect the orthodoxy of his position of Imāmite theology. His theological thought is to be viewed as part of that late phase of *kalām* which adopted some of the terminology, the methods of arguing and the logic of philosophy while rejecting any concession to it in dogma”.

³⁰ Cf. Surūsh 1999i:21. Surūsh neglects to remark that *fiqh* and *‘ilm al-kalām* from their beginnings developed separately and that their relationship first became established when a system of religious sciences was developed. This system required that the *‘ulūm naqliyah* be distinguished from the *‘ulūm ‘aqliyah*, the former being set up on a higher pedestal than the latter and that a hierarchical system of religious sciences be elaborated.

For Surūsh, epistemology and hermeneutics (frequently intermingled in *Qabḍ wa baṣṭ*) stand in close relationship to all scientific disciplines and while the various divisions of philosophy differ in their subject and often in the approaches taken by philosophers to their characteristic questions, they have a common desire of arriving at the truth about reality. Besides the relationship of dialogue between the various sciences that takes place in logical (producing/consuming sciences) and non-logical relationships, he believes that the evolution of human knowledge and understanding is visible in the realm of hermeneutics-epistemology and methodology and in general approaches to specific problems.³¹ In principle, hermeneutics is no different from any other branch of science in the sense that each scientific discipline attempts to arrive at a systematic understanding of issues that arise in its particular domain. The conception of knowledge attains, in other words, constantly new consciousness and identity that is collective and flowing in the sense that it occurs *ham-sathī* (on a common level):

In short, the collective character of human learning is a rule that is corroborated deductively as well as inductively and can be observed in the continuous dialogue between the various human sciences (such as religious knowledge) in their response to the developments produced in various fields, in their participation in the reroute and demise of knowledge and in the continuous coordination and harmonization of knowledge (ibid.:212).³²

Surūsh believes that the fundamental aspect which differentiates knowledge from understanding, which is individual, is that knowledge is *jamʿī wa jāri* (collective and flowing) in its social dimension. Inspired by Popper's evolutionary epistemology, he asserts that the collective character of knowledge is suggested by the fact that even if an *untrue* idea is refuted by a distinguished scientific scholar or even by the scientific community at large, that idea will still continue to exist in the collective knowledge. Collective knowledge implies, in his view, a historical identity as well, in the sense that contemporary scholars continuously partake of the knowledge of several generations of human learning. Referring to Michael Ruse's essay *Darwin's debt to philosophy*, Surūsh argues that Darwin's contribution to science was achieved due to previous scientific discoveries and knowledge and that the

³¹ Referring to the ideas of Edwin Burtt and Arthur Koestler, Surūsh (1996c:152) argues that while the new philosophical basis of renaissance science provided modern science with a new epistemological structure, the new scientific discoveries and conclusions never influenced philosophy directly in order to confirm or falsify its conclusions. The new scientific renaissance instead had its roots in changes in *tafakkurāt-i falsafah-yi maʿrifat-shinākhtī* (hermeneutical philosophical thought). Surūsh (1996c:218) argues, for instance, that without the new emphasis of Galileo and Kepler on the quantity of forms, as illustrated in the latter's distinction primary qualities (quantity, shape and motion) and secondary qualities (odour, taste, sound etc), there could be no revival in mathematics. He considers the importance given to quantity of forms, as opposed to quality, to be the mark of modern science, where existence is quantified, mechanised and explained in mathematical terms (Surūsh 1999c:73).

³² Cf. Surūsh 1996c:101 and 187.

reason why embryology was of chief concern to the theory of the mechanism of natural selection (modelled on Newtonian astronomy) stems directly from Darwin's acceptance of the Herschel-Whewell philosophy of theory-confirmation:

From Newton to Malthus, Herschell and Whewell, everyone played a part in the making of Darwin, and it was by relying on them and their inspiration and by measuring and balancing his own opinions against their opinions that Darwin presented and defended his own hypothesis. This is the meaning of the social identity of science (ibid.:229).³³

In his assessment of the contraction and expansion of religious knowledge, Surūsh criticises the view of, for instance, Muḥammad Bāqir Ṣadr and others that interprets inductive inquiry in absolute terms as the principal catalyst behind scientific growth.³⁴ Whereas Surūsh (1994b:419) acknowledges that human understanding overall is based on inductive premises, he refers to the Kuhnian correspondence principle that the main reason behind scientific evolution is due to the fact that earlier theories are amalgamated and fused into the new ones. Suggesting that the Darwinian revolution of the nineteenth century supposes that human beings as the products of evolutionary development are natural beings, Surūsh argues that the human capacities for knowledge and belief are also the products of a natural evolutionary development. Closely resembling the process Darwin called natural selection, he argues, similar to Popper's evolutionary epistemology, that the growth of knowledge advances by means of conjecture and refutations.³⁵ In his view, there is no sharp division of labor between science and epistemology, and he therefore resorts to pure examples of deduction in the exposition of the theory of contraction and expansion:

³³ Cf. Ruse 1975. Surūsh (1996c:56, 101) also describes the collective nature of knowledge by reference to scientific positivism and Wittgenstein's philosophy, inherited from Kant.

³⁴ Cf. Surūsh 1994b:462–467. Surūsh (1994b:426) views the philosophical ideas of the Iraqi Shi'i jurist Muḥammad Bāqir Ṣadr (d. 1980) as the first Islamic critique of Western scientific method. Bāqir Ṣadr drew a new synthesis for economics by adapting new notions, such as banking and insurance, to Islamic norms. He also reconceptualised parts of Islamic legal methodology and the notion of *ijtihād* according to a diachronic approach that had no precedent in Shi'i writings. He adhered to *fiqh-i sunnatī* and maintained that reason can discover legal norms and that all legal norms are discovered through categorical judgments derived from the revealed texts based on abstract thought. He developed distinct notions of a popular Islamic political theory that have been influential in the Iranian intellectual context. His major works *Falsafatūna* (Our Philosophy) and *Iqtisādūna* (Our Economy) were mainly a response to the growing influence of secular intellectual discourses in Iraq in the 1960s.

³⁵ Cf. Popper 1972:17. Surūsh (1996c:423) claims that Darwin's theory of evolution altered the scientific as well as theological conception of man's place in the cosmos and also ultimately inspired recent post-positivist philosophers to formulate a modern evolutionary epistemology. He does not mention the arguments presented by European biologists against Darwinism, but rather is primarily interested in the incompatibility of Darwinism with traditional Islamic metaphysics. As far as the philosophical foundations are concerned, Surūsh seems to consider the groundwork of Darwin's theory of evolution as dogma and not as a scientific theory.

The examples that we refer to are not at all inductive examples but pure (or individual) examples that demonstrate the pure influence of external data on knowledge of the Qur'an and *sunnat*. This is so since even one analogical example confirms some premises. Our reservation towards induction is that it does not give us any pure cases, but cases corroborated by hundreds of generalisations (a pure example is a case of one generalisation). We cannot therefore judge which generalisation a certain induction depends on in order to draw a conclusion. In epistemology, mathematics, and logic (at least in a few cases), we give pure examples, not induction, in the sense that our norms are not derived inductively by analysing several deductions. A correct and concrete deduction derives from a deductive example in the general sense (Surūsh 1996c:516).³⁶

The most salient feature of Surūsh's concept of science is that theories essentially are bold provisional conjectures that must be subjected to the most severe and searching criticism and experimental scrutiny of their truth claims. Inspired by Popper's idea of theoretical preference, he explains that scientific growth is related to the permanent contradictions that occur while new data and discoveries are introduced that either *ibtāt* (confirm) or *ibtāl* (refute, falsify) previous scientific assumptions by relying on other branches of science. The question of preference arises with respect to a set of competing theories. The falsification principle, the major meta-methodology or meta-instrument in the process of contraction and expansion of knowledge, concerns the *naqlī* (empirical-narrative), *'aqlī* (rational) as well as *tajrubī* (natural-empirical) sciences and opens two key possibilities to scientific hypotheses: it either falsifies or confirms them. Surūsh argues that whether a hypothesis is confirmed or falsified, allowing for the possibility of neither of these, the internal structure of previous knowledge is changed in the course of which "the circle of meaning" is expanded or contracted:

The way we inevitably settle on the occurrence of falsification and contradiction in science in order to remove contradiction is reliance on the other 'provinces' of science in order to acquire factual capability. In this respect, there is no difference between empirical-narrative, rational and natural-empirical science since each of them are occupied with describing reality (ibid.:401).³⁷

³⁶ Despite its formal adherence to the falsification principle, Surūsh's theory of contraction and expansion derives largely from inductive reasoning since his historical examples in *Qabḍ wa baṣṭ-i tī'ūrik-i shari'at*, taken together, form the structure of several inductive corroborations. Surūsh (1996c:212) is knowledgeable of this fact but seems to consider the historical examples as a sort of *tazkīr* (notification) in the general sense rather than *ibtāt-i istiqrārī* (inductive corroboration). His theory is also, strictly speaking, arrived at inductively in terms that it initially is bound to exclude some views as false, or at least unworthy of consideration. Cf. 1996c:516.

³⁷ Cf. Surūsh 1996c:91 and 164. Popper's views on science are almost identical to those of Kuhn, although he considers scientific revolutions as permanent rather than exceptional. As Kuhn (1970:1–2) elucidates, they are both concerned with the dynamic process by which scientific knowledge is acquired rather than with the logical structure of the products of scientific research. "Given that concern, both of us emphasize, as legitimate data, the facts and the spirit of actual scientific life, and both of us turn often to history to find them. From

The adoption and influence of a posteriori knowledge in a priori knowledge includes three categories: 1. Corroboration and confirmation, 2. Refutation and falsification, 3. Contraction and expansion or transformation of the circle of meaning and denotation (Surūsh 1996c:210).

In short, science does not merely evolve in the sense that a theory accepted at one time is frequently rejected in whole or in part at a later time. Theories themselves evolve as they are modified to take into account new data and new calculations. A certain instability characterises the ontological commitments of science, where the entities to which a science is committed at one time may fall out of favour or be replaced by different entities postulated by new theories at a later time. Due to Surūsh's weak philosophical realism, it is not coincidental that his primary interest is philosophical theorising about the scientific enterprise in its historical sweep, where his own philosophical claims are not overtly committed to the content of science at any specific time. For Surūsh (ibid.:211–212), the theoretician who is interested in truth must, in other words, be interested in falsity since finding that a statement is false is the same as finding that its negation is true:

Confirmation and falsification are obviously two logical avenues that signify positive and negative cases in the sense that they have a logical correspondence to what is correct or false. The constant trimming or expansion of prior data by means of discovery of contradictions by later confirmations is a scientific and incontestable rule.

Popper claimed that science is 'to learn from the faults', and I would like to add that a false theory sometimes influences science and is sometimes useful to other disciplines in the sense that the discovery of a false scientific theory may end up in the discovery of a false philosophical, theological or historical theory which also provides evidence of their interrelationships (ibid.:404).

The primary role of the scientist of any discipline is therefore very much that of posing new hypotheses to new problems and discovering and refuting false propositions buried in existing scientific theories and data:

It [the appearance of contradiction in science] either enters deeply into understanding by developing original comprehensive knowledge or overthrows earlier theories, presents new hypotheses or expounds the hidden assumptions of the *bahı̄* (discourse) by bringing them forward, questioning their validity and altering their incontrovertible character. The scientists rediscover, in other words, the hidden

this pool of shared data, we draw many of the same conclusions. Both of us reject the view that science progresses by accretion; both emphasize instead the revolutionary process by which an older theory is rejected and replaced by an incompatible new one; and both deeply underscore the role played in this process by the older theory's occasional failure to meet challenges posed by logic, experiment, or observation. Finally, Sir Karl and I are united in opposition to a number of classical positivism's most characteristic theses".

aspects of data that they supposed they were familiar with and therefore are required to come to know better (ibid.:217).³⁸

Knowledge is hence rendered a constantly new identity through the constant interaction between different spheres of science and the development of human knowledge which falsifies and removes false assumptions of earlier scientific theories. Surūsh suggests that scientific theories are not the sort of things that can be known in any philosophically robust sense of the term and claims that the belief in the absolute character of knowledge is erroneous since *khulūṣ* (genuineness) is not an absolute rule. In his view, the evolution of knowledge is a *taḥawwul-i jauharī* (qualitative process), which, similar to the transformation of molecules, is related to substance. "Every new chemical molecule is a new existent that is transformed through the extermination of earlier molecules" (ibid.:164). Referring to Ṣadr al-dīn Shīrāzī's ontological principle *ḥarakat-i jauharī*, he explains that the 'genuineness' of human knowledge, similar to the *ṭabāt-i huwwīyat-i mutaḥarrik* (constants of moving identity) in Shīrāzī's system, is flowing and time-bound:

Some erroneously believe that genuineness is an absolute rule. They have not excavated their minds and hearts in order to see that their religious beliefs in reality belong to a specific 'geography' and are based on external knowledge and data which are related to an ancient view of nature, man and reality. These beliefs are unjustifiable in our day. Genuineness is, indeed, a rule that is time-bound and fluid. Those who are acquainted with *ḥarakat-i jauharī* know that the brilliant innovation of that sage of Shiraz was to describe and establish the constants of moving identity in the substance of movement (ibid.:171).³⁹

In contrast to a number of Islamic philosophers, such as Ibn Sīnā and Suhrawardī, who asserted the precedence of essence over existence, Shīrāzī formulated, almost at the same time as the breakthrough in Western science, his doctrine of the priority of *iṣālat-i wujūd* (principality of existence) over *iṣālat-i māḥiyat* (principality of quiddity), where existence itself is the nucleus around which all principles of metaphysics revolve. Being, while spiritual, is not an attribute to essence in Shīrāzī's system, but transcends all logical categories. Existence has an element of systematic *tashkik* (ambiguity) in that its grades are not static but move substantially and

³⁸ According to Surūsh (1996c:231), this is the major point that distinguishes a modern scientist and philosopher, such as Darwin, from a traditional scholar such as Muḥammad Ḥusain Ṭabāṭabā'ī. While the former works with a number of hypotheses that must be verified by empirical material, the latter accepts a definitive and closed scientific hermeneutics and method.

³⁹ In this respect, Surūsh (1996c:248) claims that any attempt to restrict the evolution of human knowledge by resorting to the idea that *fiqh* is eternal and immutable is deemed to fail since the dynamics of the evolutionary process are too powerful. He argues that since the belief in the *khulūṣ* of religion is subjected to evolutionary flow, the effort of Islamic scholars should be "to make peace between genuineness of knowledge and its simultaneous evolution". Cf. 1996c:184.

qualitatively towards higher forms. But in contrast to the adoption of the word existence in the writings of modern philosophy (Søren Kierkegaard, Jean-Paul Sartre, etc), where essence denotes the essence of particular individuals, essence is an abstract concept for Shīrāzī, without any concrete reality on its own. Despite Surūsh's references to Shīrāzī's terminology, it seems, however, that Popper's evolutionary epistemology, with its emerging representationalism and critical realism aimed at clarifying and investigating the process by which knowledge grows, rather than the principle *ḥarakat-i jauharī*, is the primary inspiration for Surūsh's account of the historical growth of human knowledge.⁴⁰

Since what distinguishes the whole dialectical thought process in its development (from the nineteenth century onwards) from *ḥarakat-i jauharī* is not its concern with becoming or change, but the reduction of reality to ever-changing and temporal thought processes. In Surūsh's positivistic and diachronic interpretation of reality, science is de-ontologised and denied any ontological significance. With the destruction of the notion of hierarchy in reality, the rapport between degrees of knowledge and the correspondence between various levels of reality upon which traditional Islamic science were based disappears. Metaphysics is abandoned in favour of rationalistic philosophy. Surūsh's approach is marked by an abandonment of the quest after an ontological vision of the whole in the sense that no standpoint exists outside the flow of historically situated experience and that all knowledge is the explanation of previous knowledge. Knowledge becomes externalised, desacralised and separated from Being. Influenced by positivist notions of science where physical science ultimately is the epitome of critical rationality, religion appears to constitute a non-rational set of experiences, since it purports to deal with realities beyond the reach of empirical science.

While this noncognitivist approach to religion is a familiar move in the philosophy of religion, Surūsh is not interested in the religious experience as such in *Qabḍ wa baṣṭ-i tī'ūrīk-i sharī'at*, but rather focuses on the nature of religious knowledge in its sequential historical advance. His task is not to vindicate revelation as divine law and by subscribing to an evolutionary view of existence devoid of the sacred. His definition of epistemology comes to represent a loss of all permanence and fixity of human spirituality. Referring to the conflict between science and religion in post-medieval Europe, he claims that science has the last say over religion:

⁴⁰ In his description of evolutionary epistemology, W.W. Bartley (1988:21) writes, "Evolutionary epistemology results from pursuing the ramifications of Popper's understanding of the fundamental task of epistemology. This task is, as Popper and his associates conceive it, to clarify and investigate the processes by which knowledge grows. In this context, 'knowledge' refers to the objective products of certain evolutionary processes, ranging from the endosomatic cognitive structures of men and animals to the most abstract scientific theories. The resulting epistemology—drawing from logic, methodology and physics, from psychology, and from physiology—amounts to a systematic development of, vindication of, representationalism".

But what did the Christian theologians do in case contradiction occurred between science and religion? Either they repressed science, or if they were able, they developed a distinct philosophy of science and provided a particular judgment of epistemology. In the end, they acknowledged that when definite (scientific) proof is located in conflict to revelation, we must change our previous judgment and recognize that we have not understood the latter correctly. Coordinating the sciences with each other is consequently reason for leaving off the literal word of Islamic law in case definite scientific proof exists (Surūsh 1996c:231).

Surūsh's view of the growth of knowledge as proceeding through the elimination of error, i.e. through the refutation of hypotheses that are either logically inconsistent or entail empirically refuted consequences, is unmistakably inspired by Popper's evolutionary epistemology and his theory of falsification as a critique of 'verification'. Surūsh also seems to be inspired by the Hungarian post-positivist philosopher Imre Lakatos (d. 1974), who was more concerned with theoretically progressive families or series of theories, so-called 'research programmes', rather than isolated theories. In contrast to Popper's view of falsification as a relation between a theory and an empirical basis, Lakatos' notion of multiple relations between competing theories renders falsification an explicit historical character.⁴¹ While Surūsh (ibid.:212) certainly adheres to Popper's falsification principle in the general sense, Lakatos concept of 'research programmes', referred to three times in *Qabḍ wa baṣṭ-i tiṣṭūrīk-i sharīʿat*, concerned a whole family of theories, not merely individual ones appearing one by one. This concept governs his study of Islamic law and theology:

It is this relationship that gives rise to most of the development in religious thought, and our noble claim is precisely that the secret of transformations in religious thought (transformation is a reality that demands interpretation) is nothing but a new consciousness consisting of positive, negative and neutral results, which are formed and does not leave the a priori beliefs in their former condition. Even if the a priori beliefs are not extinguished and replaced, their geometry is given a new character, class, substance and colour. The structure of new data produces hence a new structure from previous data that is not an individual confirmation.⁴²

All sciences are, in other words, interconnected and must be analysed as a whole rather than as a collection of individual discrete theories. As far as Surūsh's concept of science considers empiricalness (or scientific character) and theoretical progress as inseparably connected, he remains a Popperian, since although Popper is broadly sympathetic to positivism he voices some reservations about its more specific empiricist elements. Similar to Popper, Surūsh also subscribes to antideterministic metaphysics and believes that

⁴¹ According to Lakatos (1970:120), research programmes (for instance, Marxism, Freudism, Cartesian metaphysics, etc) are characterised by a certain methodological continuity that connects their members.

⁴² Cf. Surūsh 1996c:220, 534, 540.

knowledge evolves from experience of the mind. He shares the postpositivist and hermeneutic viewpoint and criticises the epistemic 'foundationalist' certainty in inductive reasoning, believing that there is no guarantee that inductive method is reliable. The human subject does not enjoy any neutral position in the production of knowledge but is contextually conditioned and inescapably includes evaluative elements.

In order to demonstrate how correct and false hypotheses are separated methodologically, Surūsh explains that science functions on two levels in the process of falsification, *maqām-i gird-āwarī* (context of discovery) and *maqām-i dāwarī* (context of justification). He argues that this distinction can be equated to the traditional Islamic distinction between the *naqlī* and '*aqlī* sciences in the sense that the first level consists of the collection of pure ingredients that are objects of justification on the second level. He claims that his study, together with his definition of scientific method, takes place on the level of justification, where the scientific character of the relevant hypotheses are subjected to the falsification principle. While the production of knowledge takes place on the level of justification, it remains at all times contingent on the discoveries made prior to the level of discovery:

The context of discovery is the level of collecting pure data and the context of justification is the level of justifying these pure data. The pure data are collected or discovered in the context of discovery. Discovery does not immediately imply that correct data are exposed, since it is possible to discover correct as well as false data. Discovery is composed of correct and false information. The context of justification or, so to speak the context of confirmation, corresponds to the distinguish of correct data from false data. Since the two levels are repeatedly mixed up, it is the duty of the scientists to differ them from each other. To sum up, all scientific branches are determined on account of the concept of these two categories (ibid.:94).

Since all observation is potentially contaminated, whether by our theories or our worldview or past experiences, Surūsh rejects the traditional conclusion that science can objectively discern and choose from among rival theories in any absolute certain sense. While an hypothesis is correct if it corresponds to the facts, no claim can be made for absolute certainty, i.e. no possibility of error. In contrast to absolutist ideas of truth, all knowledge claims are tentative and subject to revision on the basis of new evidence. No belief is epistemologically warranted merely because it is produced by a method that produces truth more often than not. With the emphasis upon falsification in science, Surūsh rejects an idealist neglect of objectivity in science and adopts his own distinct notion of inter-subjective corroboration, according to which it is possible for other investigators to ascertain the truth content of scientific explanations. While science cannot provide one with certainty, it is the only objective mode of pursuing valid knowledge in the sense that it rests on the bedrock of empirical testability:

A phenomenon that is subjected to *kāwīsh-i tajrūbī* (empirical scrutiny) must be capable of going through an examination by someone. Everyone who has the specific required skills must be able to put the relevant proposition to the test. Matters that only occur once or are unqualified for being subjected to open scrutiny are external to the scientific procedure. The meaning of objectivity in science has no other meaning than inter-subjective testability. Everyone can carry out objective and scientific research and test the result produced from that research. Revelations of holy men and prophets cannot be subjected to scrutiny, since the means of direct revelation is closed to everyone but themselves. Revelations cannot therefore be the object of empirical and scientific investigation (Surūsh 1996b:18).

In this respect, Surūsh's notion of science, inspired by Popper's notion of "the third world of objective knowledge" with its strong confidence in natural science, approaches the question of the contingency of human knowledge as a product of public critique and understanding. Valid knowledge, whether scientific or religious, depends on its being public:

What exists only in the mind of an isolated thinker is not science. Science must lift the veil from its face and expose itself to the judgement and critique of others. What constitutes science is the product of public critique and understanding as well as meanings given to terms by the scientific community (Surūsh 1994b:177).⁴³

Surūsh's (1996c:96) purpose with his discussion on objectivity in science is not a pursuit of discovering truth, but an evaluation of the relationship between religious knowledge and modern science and how it is possible to renew the traditional sciences as well as to acquire a more correct understanding of religion from the process of justification. In his view, truth seems to be an imaginative grasp that takes place in the mind of the individual scientist but never crosses the threshold to the continuous flow of knowledge at the level of fulfilment. Referring to the studies of Carl Hempel (d. 1997) and Nelson Goodman (d. 1998) on the logic of confirmation or paradox of confirmation, i.e. how empirical evidence confirms or disconfirms general hypotheses, Surūsh (ibid.:213) argues that scientific explanation occurs continuously and we might very well expect that contemporary 'facts' and discoveries will be falsified in the future:

The contradictions that occur in science are not always direct or apparent. In some cases, it takes years or centuries for abandoned facts to inform a spot that for several reasons make us comprehend falsified contentions in other sciences. If we leave the topic of contradiction in science and consider the confirmed and objective findings, logic alone demonstrates that our falsified hypotheses are never objective. A contemporary understanding of affairs must always wait to see what the future has to say.⁴⁴

⁴³ Cf. Surūsh 1996a:91.

⁴⁴ As a leader of the logical empiricist movement in the philosophy of science, Hempel argues that Popper's proposal of the character of falsification, while correct at its foundations, limits scientific hypotheses to the form of relatively falsifiable sentences and involves a very severe

Following Hempel's criticism of Popper, Surūsh argues that what is wrong is not in the customary way of construing and representing general hypotheses, but rather our reliance on misleading intuition in the matter. The impression of a paradoxical situation is, so to say, not objectively founded but a psychological illusion. Our factual knowledge tends to create an impression of paradoxicality that is not justified on logical grounds but due to misguided intuition in the matter. Surūsh asserts that this largely depends on the nature of inductive basic statements and argues that it is perfectly valid and sound to make the observation 'this leaf is green' and to verbalise the claim, 'there is a green leaf on the ground'. But he claims that no matter how many observations of green one makes, one can never justify the universal claim that 'all leaves are green' based on multiple singular basic statements. 'All leaves are green' has the form of a conditional, that is, a statement of the form 'if *A* then *B*', which means that *if* a given object is a leaf, *then* that object is green. According to the laws of logic, a conditional is equivalent to its contrapositive. The hypothesis 'all leaves are green' has therefore the equivalent form 'all non-green things are non-leaves', or more precisely, 'if an object is not green then it is not a leaf'. If every sighting of a green leaves confirms our hypothesis, then every sighting of a non-green non-leaves equally confirms our hypothesis. Due to Surūsh's (1996c:213–214) criticism of inductive method it seems quite unexpected that he makes much of this form of reasoning that accepts inductive hypotheses and confirmation by experiment by asserting that every observation *except* one that refutes the hypothesis confirms it, even if it is irrelevant:

The equivalence of two premises implies that the rejection of one of them leads to the rejection of the other. The confirmation of one premise similarly means that the other is confirmed. Two matters that are outwardly isolated are, so to say, interrelated. The statement 'all leaves are green' is equivalent to 'everything that is not green is not a leaf'. The more we see green leaves, our imagination leads us to think that the validity of the hypothesis is correct. Since green leaves confirms the first hypothesis, it also confirms the second hypothesis that 'everything that is not green is not a leaf'. Therefore, green leaves confirm that 'cows are yellow', 'flowers are red', 'pigeons are white' and that 'ravens are black' (yellow cows and red flowers are neither leaves nor green according to 'everything that is not green is not a leaf'). In this respect, red flowers also confirms that leaves are green. In short, we could say that the hypotheses that are confirmed or falsified in the various sciences

restriction of the possible forms of scientific hypotheses. Hempel (1965:45) asserts that "it rules out all purely existential hypotheses as well as hypotheses whose formulation requires both universal and existential quantification". In his view, falsification (verification) has two meanings, the relative verification which belongs to formal logic and absolute falsification, which belongs to pragmatics and is capable of being established definitely. Lakatos (1999:91–92) has criticised Popper for his view on conjecture and anomaly and argues that Popper's definition of scientific method does not discern between what a refutation is and what it is not, if we do not know right from the beginning which anomalies it cannot account for.

are interrelated in a hidden manner and influence each other. A hypothesis that is confirmed in a specific science has automatic effects on the other sciences.

Since human knowledge can never attain a perfect state concerning the forms and the scope of the laws that hold in our universe, human justifications are, in Surūsh's view, always made on the basis of incomplete information, a state that enables us to anticipate the consequences of alternative choices with only probability at best. Hempel's concept of confirmation provides him with a general and formal criterion of confirmation in addition to the criteria of valid deduction/induction (which is supplied by logic). But while Hempel's specific proposal for a systematic and comprehensive logical reconstruction of the concept of confirmation considers confirmation as the base of the methodology of empirical science as well as of epistemology, Surūsh's (*ibid.*:219) purpose is not final in this case, but rather tries to substantiate his belief that science because of the paradox of confirmation must turn to the field of hermeneutics. Preliminarily, he seems to suggest that no clear-cut method exists for interpreting the revealed sources, since science has no final answer to offer, in the sense that all features of the structure that models theories are not available for observation. The hypothetical character of science may therefore suggest that the positivist contrast between the rationally grounded certainty of science and the literally 'false' character of religious dogmatism can no longer be maintained and that there consequently can be no a priori reason for imagining that science must always be the dominant partner and that theology cannot feel as confident as science in its claims to truth.⁴⁵

⁴⁵ Surūsh neglects the criticism that has been presented against the falsificationist approach during the last century. Pierre Duhem, who maintained that the role of theory in science is to systematize relationships rather than to interpret new phenomena, claims that it is impossible to conclusively refute a theory because realistic test situations depend on much more than just the theory that is under investigation. T.S. Kuhn as well as Paul Feyerabend demonstrates the difficulties that falsificationists face in proving their claim and provide a host of examples to undermine the falsificationist thesis. As they argue, there is nothing in their enterprise that proves that they do it in an objective, neutral way. Kuhn (1962) has also noted that Popper neglects the fact that scientific practice is often governed by a conceptual framework (or paradigm) which is highly resistant to change. Surūsh also neglects to consider the major input of values when it comes to the selection process inherent in science, since even at the heart of the positivistic method itself the selection is made on the basis of values and values are brought to the framing of the problems.

E. Religious epistemology: Divine absolute or provisional conjecture?

Surūsh's analysis of science has fundamental importance for his discussion on the central problems of religious epistemology. He draws some major conclusions from his account of falsification in science that are relevant to religion. He claims that all religious knowledge is contingent on external non-religious knowledge for its development and growth and likewise is subjected to flow in the sense that the context of its presuppositions is unfixed and caused by totalities (1996c:157). In his view, the contextual and external factors are responsible not only for change but also for the continuity of religious interpretation throughout the ages:

Religious knowledge, the learning produced from the understanding of revelation, the *sunnat* and the history of the lives of religious predecessors, is a consuming knowledge that is directly under the influence of producing sciences. My claim in this respect is that there is no knowledge of religion that is not contingent on non-religious external knowledge and understanding. If external knowledge develops, the religious knowledge develops as a result. If external knowledge is stable, the religious knowledge is stable as a result. External knowledge is *taḥawwul-yābandah* ('evolution-seeking') and is always caused by totalities. These rules are, indeed, pertinent to religious knowledge at the level of fulfilment.

Religious knowledge is, in other words, a mirror of scientific and philosophical knowledge. By suggesting that the external non-religious data of the producing sciences, i.e. anthropology, natural science, sociology and psychology, are necessary to inform the foundational assumptions in religious knowledge, Surūsh (ibid.:158, 192) argues that these sciences are "the first ingredients of understanding". He claims that the nature of the systematic questions posed by modern science to religious thought radically differ from those of Aristotelian logic, since they have the shape of systematic questions that are not logically born out of answers or stem from predefined premises or conclusions (ibid.:272). The Islamic jurists and theologians have, in Surūsh's view, therefore to become fully conversant with modern sciences and philosophical approaches, since practical political development in the contemporary Islamic world is dependent on the acceptance of the scientific and philosophical underpinnings of modernity:

The *modus operandi* or technology of modern life does not epitomise modernity but is rather the fruit of modernity. Modern world and modern life are incarnate in modern knowledge. One of the most essential components of modern knowledge is empirical natural science... If science develops, politics develops and is modernized. Modernization gives meaning to freedom and justice. It gives the intelligentsia its proper place in society and establishes the rights of human beings. We must never forget that politics and governance signify scientific politics and governance in the modern world nor should we forget that modern science transforms philosophy.

While Islamic philosophy may be dear to us, it is not the only possible philosophy neither the most reasonable (Surūsh 2000b:38).

Whoever accepts the basic norms of modernity enjoys, in other words, the benefits of modern rationality and autonomy. In hermeneutical terms, Surūsh (1996c:208) believes that this formation rests in the nature of things, since the Islamic scholars activate their whole personality in the act of interpretation so that “when some parts of reality are analysed, the others’ parts (of the worldview) are not abandoned”. The subject’s initial contribution to the process of understanding occurs, in other words, when external data, stemming from our contextual hermeneutical situation in the world, takes the shape of pre-understandings. The human subject is no *tabula rasa* nor is the object of interpretation considered to be some neutral, non-conceptualised ‘thing-in-itself’:

Non-religious human knowledge, by pursuing the two-fold role of discovering and justifying religious knowledge, gradually performs its third function, to render religious understanding a ‘frame-work’, and to improve its understanding. The scientific and philosophical data render religious understanding a specific form and character in interaction with the essential matters of religion, presuppositions about religion and a particular view of God, reality, man, history, language and knowledge (ibid.:281).⁴⁶

As far as Islamic law is concerned, Surūsh argues that since the anthropological basis envisioned in producing sciences such as physics, mathematics, anthropology and sociology has changed and since the new laws and regulations of international economical relations have produced new hermeneutic environments, the contemporary understanding of *fiqh* is bound to change. Since *fiqh* is a human activity that concerns human contexts, he claims that the humanities should guide the comprehension of Islamic law in order to focus more attention on the humane aspects of religion (ibid.:190).⁴⁷ He suggests in fact that only the conception of religious knowledge as consuming knowledge in continuous exchange and dialogue with modern science is capable of bestowing dynamism on the interpretation and function of Islamic law:

⁴⁶ Surūsh mentions the case of Darwin, who changed his conception of religion according to his scientific view when his religious beliefs turned out to be incompatible with his discoveries in natural science. He also refers to the French Zoologist, George Cuvier, who refuted Darwin’s theory of evolution since it was considered to conflict with the literal word of the Bible. Cuvier made use of the Bible to confirm some specific hypotheses in zoology and geology. In line with Cuvier’s correlation principle, the physical constitution of the species has a spiritual and non-evolutionary ground, in contrast to Darwin’s theory, where evolution is governed by material mechanisms. Needless to say, Cuvier’s conclusions are, in Surūsh’s view, indifferent to the evolutionary process of scientific knowledge itself and therefore ambiguous and incomplete.

⁴⁷ Cf. Surūsh 1999a:23 and 318.

All different branches of knowledge (human science, natural science, philosophy, religious science) are interconnected and separated. They act on a common level in the sense that every expansion or change in one science affects the others. *Sharʿat* is an eternal, heavenly and divine commandment, but our knowledge of *sharʿat* is a human, earthly and changeable rule in the sense that it is interrelated with theories of other human knowledge and involves constant evolution and development (ibid.:187).⁴⁸

What has become subjugated and neglected in the quarrel between tradition and dynamism is the point that it is impossible to dynamise a person's *fiqh* as long as his understanding of *sharʿat* (that is theology, exegesis, ethics and theosophy) remains stagnant and static, and it is impossible for a person to acquire a dynamic understanding of *sharʿat*, if the contingency of jurisprudence to modern science and learning is unacknowledged. Without mastery of the modern human disciplines, no revival (of Islamic law) will be successful (ibid.:188).

Inspired by Arthur Koestler's major work on the history of science, *The Sleepwalkers: A History of man's changing vision of the universe*, which is among the major works influencing the formulation of the theory of the contraction and expansion in an indirect way, Surūsh (1996d:392) asserts that the renaissance divorce between religion and reason was not the result of a contest for power or intellectual monopoly, even if the Church persisted in a direction that was in conflict with science and humanity. While Western society was forced to chose between the Church or man, as illustrated in the almost mystical confessions of Galileo, Leibniz, Descartes or John Locke, he argues that the overwhelming part of European scientists incorporated substantial religious elements into their work and were genuinely religious thinkers to whom religion transcended the rigid scholastic frame, reaching the mystical Pythagorean inspiration of God as the chief mathematician. Surūsh (1996c:221) also mentions the contrary position of the French physicist Pierre Duhem, who is alleged to have developed a new history of modern science in an 'instrumentalistic' critique against Galileo based on evolutionary metaphysical concepts. Inspired by the enlightenment thinkers, above all those in France, Surūsh looks for a 'religion of reason', which in the enlightenment context was vaguely deist in character with sentimentalist overtones, a religion at one with human nature.⁴⁹

Koestler's work provides Surūsh with evidence of the changing concept of

⁴⁸ Cf. Surūsh 1996c:52 and 1999a:158.

⁴⁹ In spite of the fact that enlightenment thinkers took reason to be the natural ability of any human being, most of them assumed that the average person's reason has been corrupted by the cultural environment and especially by the influence of the Church. The Church was considered the most corrupting of influences since it put revelation above reason and hold that there is something that transcends reason. While many enlightenment thinkers believed in God, they were deists: God created the universe, but he no longer bothers with it. Using an old metaphor, David Hume argued that God is at least as good a creator as a human clock-maker, and we would respect no clock maker who had to intervene in the workings of a clock once it had been made.

religious as well as scientific knowledge, where all understanding constitutes *yak bāzī-yi ‘aqlānī-yi muhtaram* (a play for honourable rationality).⁵⁰ Koestler’s personal and speculative account was met with much controversy when first published in 1959 as a major work within the recently established discipline history of science. While Koestler (1959:14) is particularly interested in the psychological process of discovery, which he considers to be “the most concise manifestation of man’s creative faculty”, it is rather his comprehension of scientific progress as a zig-zag course of collective obsessions and controlled schizophrenias, rather than as organic, clean or rational advance along a straight ascending line, which appeals to Surūsh. Similar to Koestler, Surūsh (1996c:167) also focuses attention on Copernicus, Galileo, Kepler and Newton, who represent the pioneering break of the modern scientific paradigm. Surūsh asserts that European theologians were forced to attain a renewed understanding of religion due to the effects of the mechanisation and dynamisation that occurred in science with Darwin’s theory of evolution, Newton’s theory of movement and Einstein’s theory of relativity.⁵¹ The Ptolemaic picture of the universe with our earth as its centre, which Islamic astronomy after Rabbān al-Ṭabarī (d. 870) was also built upon, as well as the analogous Christian concept of Christ as the centre of the religious universe, were gradually reversed since they contradicted the modern Copernican system. Traditional religious metaphysics was, so to say, transformed by the new scientific discoveries and data (ibid.:167).

Significantly, Surūsh believes that modern revisions of Christian theology, rather than being mere translation adjustments, were made in light of extra-religious shifts such as the pioneering Kantian theory on the possibilities of knowledge and Foucault’s concept of the notions of knowledge, method and theory as anathema.⁵² These shifts put new ‘thicker’ questions to the scientific study of religion and he claims that this process of adjustment applies to religion in the same manner as it does to the Newtonian theory of gravitation, which was discovered by reference to mathematics or the Cartesian definition of the soul-body relationship, directly influenced by the new ‘mechanicism’ in science. From the modern development of the history of science, Surūsh (ibid.:52) imagines that all human knowledge, whether scientific or religious, is unfixed, conjectural and contradictory.

⁵⁰ Cf. Surūsh 1996c:35, 85, 87, 207.

⁵¹ Aside from the influence of Darwin’s work *Origin of the Species* on Christian and Jewish theology, it was connected to dialectical materialism. It is well known that Marx wrote to Darwin and asked the latter’s permission to dedicate *Das Kapital* to him.

⁵² Cf. Surūsh 1999a:49. Surūsh (1996c:167–168) suggests that the influence of Kant’s theory of the limits of knowledge and Wittgenstein’s theory of the limits of speech on modern theological discourse represent the first considerations of the scientific provability of religion. Referring to contemporary theological thinkers, such as Barth, Hick, Smart, Küng, Alston and Platinga, he argues that the majority of theologians today accept that the rationality of religious belief also implies systematic error. Cf. Surūsh 1996a:172 and 184.

Influenced by Kantian cognitive concepts, he asserts that divine religion, similar to the philosophical foundation of empirical science or the fixed formulas of mathematics, depends on certain a priori presuppositions or beliefs that cannot be proved by a posteriori ('from what is after-experience') experience as they are beyond analytical logical truths. He considers in fact a priori principles as a necessary condition of any empirical experience of reality. But while the so-called *qawānīn-i tabī'at* (laws of nature) and *qaṭ'iyāt-i 'ilm* (definite postulates of science) count as *badīhiyāt-i ma'rifat* (a priori propositions), they are subjected to the flow of human understanding:

Our understanding of principles is, indeed, flowing. We should not assume that a scholar who believes in the principle of contradiction, the principle of causality or parts of the hypothesis and principles dominant in mathematics, forever, has a static comprehension of these principles and hypotheses or that change never occurs in his understanding of them (ibid.:135).⁵³

In other words, while there are facts that can be said to be know a priori intuitively, these intuitions can only be fallible. Surūsh seems hence to anticipate the fact that his definition of constant and non-constant is inconsistent, in the sense that the non-falsified hypotheses that underlie the theory of contraction and expansion are equally subject to the scientific process. As he argues, it would not be 'paradoxical' or 'contradictory' if the theory of contraction and expansion was falsifiable in the future.⁵⁴ In contrast to hermeneutical philosophers, such as Gadamer, who claim an ontological perspective according to a phenomenologist conception of truth and method, where truth disseminates through its interpretations, Surūsh (ibid.:157) asserts that the falsification principle as well as the theory of contraction and expansion is open to falsification since there is no fixed laws of hermeneutics:

The principle that all religious knowledge is based on external understanding is open to falsification, since it says that there is no example of understanding of revelation and *sunnat* independent of external thought. To find such a thing results, indeed, in the falsification of this principle.

Surūsh's position on scientific truth-claims (as well as his rejection of inductive reasoning altogether), according to which theories are accepted not because they are true but useful, corresponds very well to the pragmatist view that a particular theory is selected due to the fact that one is warranted in thinking it true. There is, according to this view, nothing to guarantee that science progresses toward anything, least of all toward 'the truth'. In contrast to the conceptual realism of the philosophical realists and scientific positivists, he is not concerned with any ontological commitment to 'the real

⁵³ Cf. Surūsh 1996c:278–279.

⁵⁴ Cf. Surūsh 1996c:332.

existence' of universals and argues that nominalism, for instance, highlights "to what extent the meaning of every particular reference in the Qur'an is open to change" (ibid.:302). To pragmatists such as Rorty or Quine, a theory is not accepted as a truth but as something possessing warranted assertability. They believe that the universals of science, similar to ontological commitments, are only 'occult entities', that is; they are a logical consequence of the conceptual scheme we adopt to understand the world as we know it through experience.⁵⁵

While Surūsh does not rule out the possibility that certain parts of our belief system will be revised by subsequent experience, his position on the relationship between constants and non-constants (i.e. his idea of ultimately unchanging truths) contradicts contemporary Western philosophy, which is his major intellectual resource. The main problem with his epistemology, as far as his terminology is concerned, is that it is not consistent with Popper's notion of falsification, the nominalist pragmatism of Quine and others or with Kant's doctrine of the synthetic a priori, which was decisively undercut by Einstein's theory of relativity. In contemporary epistemology, the Kantian synthetic a priori has been relativised, whereby no mathematical-physical framework is uniquely possible and fixed for all time. Surūsh's disinclination to reject synthetic a priori judgements all together seems, however, to be due to his will to allow the option of some mode of ontological knowledge (where the Divine Being is known):

In reality, if there is no a priori religious category and understanding in this world and if what we perceive and know, in other words, is not religion itself, but only the 'guest' of religion, then how are we to trust in the existence and continuance of religion at all? Will not all our investments be worthless if all goods are bought on credit without any ready money? (Surūsh 1999a:165)⁵⁶

Surūsh's purpose with his general account on science, however, substantiates his epistemological discussion on Islamic law with a theoretical basis. Analogous to the universal laws of science, he argues that religion by definition belongs to a priori synthetic judgements or presuppositions. Referring to a Qur'anic metaphor (*Qur.* 3:103) describing religion in terms of a silent rope of salvation, he asserts that religion is a 'silent' rope of guidance and remedy in the sense that it lacks a specific orientation or course.⁵⁷ While *sharī'at* is essentially divine and complete, its boundaries cannot be defined in any systematic way since the hermeneutical results of jurisprudence are formulated gradually in the midst of the expansion and contraction of religious knowledge. In order to illustrate the dual epistemological character of religious knowledge within Islamic tradition,

⁵⁵ Cf. Quine 1960:17, 28 and 1963:16–17.

⁵⁶ Cf. Surūsh 1996b:18 and 1999d:27–28.

⁵⁷ Surūsh (1997a:100–106) argues that the divine rope of salvation is the first tenet of his concept of *dark-i azīzānah-yi dīn* (endearing conception of religion).

Surūsh (1996c:271) refers to a saying attributed to ‘Alī b. Abī Ṭālib depicting the Qur’an as ‘silent’ in the sense that the believer makes the Qur’an speak through the act of interpretation. ‘Alī’s account reads:

Request this Qur’an to speak to you, but it will not speak to you unless I enlighten you about it. It contains the science of the future and events of the past, the cure for aches, and lets you know the order of your matters.

From ‘Alī’s words, Surūsh asserts that the Qur’an is hungry *for* rather than impregnated *with* meaning. He then transfers this saying to the sphere of law where it is used to legitimise a general epistemological redefinition of Islamic law. In an almost agnostic mode, Surūsh asserts that “if *sharī‘at-i ṣāmī* (silent *sharī‘at*) exists, it exists with the Law-giver”. He argues that the attribute silent does not mean that Islamic law is like ‘a closed mouth’ or ‘formless’ but rather that it is *khāmūsh* (silent) in the hermeneutical sense.⁵⁸ In its heavenly form, *sharī‘at-i ṣāmī* is divine and independent of human reform, but when it enters the threshold of human interpretation it becomes transformed into imperfect *sharī‘at-i nāṭiq* (speaking *sharī‘at*). While the texts of Islamic law and theology are considered to be silent, it is not, however, evident in what way the silence of the text actually leads to the agent and subject of interpretation:

Human understanding of *sharī‘at* is, similar to the human understanding of nature, subjected to a flow. While silent *sharī‘at* and silent nature are constant and free of contradictions, speaking *sharī‘at* and speaking nature are born out of human understanding, flowing and contradictory. This paradox informs us furthermore of another two-fold fact: Science of religion is born and develops out of contradiction and non-religious learning certainly influences religious knowledge (ibid.:167).⁵⁹

Surūsh (ibid.:392) claims that the epistemic distinction above elucidates the reason behind the variety and plurality of legal opinions and clarifies the existence of the three major traditional interpretations of Islamic law; the juristic, the philosophical-theosophical and the mystical. He believes that Muslims ought to constantly make an effort to acquire a new understanding of the revealed texts, even if *sharī‘at* according to the principle of ‘*aqīdat* (belief) is beyond interpretation from the perspective of the believers. In fact, he argues that religious beliefs should not be mixed with knowledge and distinguishes *īmān* (faith) and *sharī‘at-i nāzil bar nabī* (*sharī‘at* revealed to the Prophet) from *ma‘rifat* (knowledge) as well as *fahm* (understanding).⁶⁰

⁵⁸ *Khāmūsh* is one of the poetic persona of Jalāl al-dīn Rūmī in his *Diwān-i Shams-i Tabrīzī*. The term is adopted by Rūmī to point out the paradox of being unable to express in words the mysterious tremendous experienced in the presence of the Divine since true transcendent love is silent.

⁵⁹ Surūsh (1996c:305) also describes ‘silent’ *sharī‘at* as *sharī‘at -i ‘uryān* (naked *sharī‘at*).

⁶⁰ As Surūsh (1999a:319) argues in his *Baṣṭ-i tajrūbah-yi nabawī*, there is “an apparent difference between faith and knowledge in that faith is always personal, individual and has a fluctuating degree of vigour while knowledge is always what is collective, general and *khaṭā-pazīr* (conjectural)”.

While faith is a universal and ecumenical *ḥāl-i rūḥī* (spiritual state) and revealed *sharīʿat* constitutes the divine and permanent “pillars, principles and branches of religion” intended for the guidance of mankind, he asserts that the realisation of these sources is constructed and generated by human beings themselves (ibid.:206). The most central aspect of the theory of contraction and expansion is consequently that religious knowledge is considered not only time-bound, collective and conjectural, but also is given the attribute *sākhtah-shudah* (constructed). He argues that since human beings, prophets as well as common men, are no divine beings but *ḥaiwān-i ʿāqil* (rational animals) and defective terrestrial individuals, human knowledge is thus relative and socially determined:

Religious knowledge in terms of a posteriori knowledge from the perspective of second-order epistemology is human in the sense that it is subjected to human norms. This is our particular definition of human knowledge. Human knowledge has, indeed, an observable and completely reasonable meaning, namely that knowledge is constructed in the hands of human beings and generated by human beings. We also believe that the human attribute of knowledge does not only imply that knowledge is always rational. [...] If we are social beings who are confined by language and human qualities such as desire, envy, reflection and sociability, and who are involved in multiple and complex social relationships, these attributes have an impact on our knowledge (ibid.:107).⁶¹

The more concrete meaning of the idea that knowledge is socially determined is hence that human qualities other than reason, such as social setting, language and interests, are included in and influence the acquisition of knowledge. Besides, Surūsh (1999i:21) argues that the social contingency of religious knowledge, concerning itself with the emergents of history, involves the notion that knowledge is materialised and formed by a particular *sākhtār-i ʿijtimāʿ* (social environment). “The science of *fiqh* is formed by the social environment and is contingent on society and politics in its capacity as a social and political science that is flowing”. Surūsh (1996c:246) argues, in fact, that human knowledge is socially determined and constructed to the extent that the only specifically ‘religious’ aspect of religious knowledge is that it is characterised by “the scholar’s constant reference to revelation and *sunnat*” and his religious discourse seems to give very little credibility to any strict knowledge in metaphysical terms. He seems hence inclined to vindicate a religious resurgence solely grounded in contemporary profane thought and learning by permitting the secular age to speak in isolation, in the sense that all knowledge has an explicit social identity confined by time and space and is contextually determined. He acknowledges, however, that contemporary hermeneutics cannot forsake religion but rather should function as a tool or instrument for a better understanding of religion. The key word in his hermeneutics is *listening*:

⁶¹ Cf. Surūsh 1994d:62 and 1996f:51.

The claim that the discourse of the age is the same as that of religion and that religion itself has nothing to say is a correct conviction. Our argument is entirely that the contemporary sciences are a listening ear with which to hear the clamour of religion. We are not concerned with making alterations in religion but with the understanding of *sharīʿat* (ibid.:346).⁶²

Evidently, Surūsh's thought hence also includes the eradication of the view of rationalism as an attribute of elitism. While his exposition on the history of religious thought by and large is not influenced by any sociologically inspired account of science which looks to the social causes of a person's scientific beliefs in order to deconstruct and undercut any role of a belief in science, his idea that *sharīʿat* is silent involves the negation of any monopolisation of hermeneutical discourse or any attempt to possess religion in any intra-religious polemical way. In fact, the theory of contraction and expansion creates obstacles for the existence of any specific guardian of *sharīʿat*. Since knowledge has a communal identity we all partake of, comprised of both what is false and correct, no interpretation can be absolutely correct and certain. Since no understanding is *muṭlaq* (absolute), *qaṭʿī* (definitive) and *rasmī* (official), Surūsh (ibid.:35) argues that no religious person has the right "to put his or her religion on the market for gaining the status of others" or "to impose his or her understanding of religion on others or enforce it in government and politics". While all Muslims have an historical responsibility of seeking truth and there are no excuses for neglecting this duty, no particular group or faction possesses religion in the absolute sense. "Religion is the property of all the believers and the general blessing of the Divine" (ibid.:34).⁶³ Since man made a *miṭāq* (promise) with God in pre-eternal times and will return to God in his capacity of an individual human being on doomsday, he concludes that it is the blessing and duty of all Muslims to pose questions to silent *sharīʿat* and cause it to speak. This is, in his view, the true meaning of Galileo's statement that "every experience is a question":

Speaking and concealment, that is to verbalise and to incite, is the duty of all true believers and is not possible without having some preunderstandings and precommitments. There are springs of water in the depth of the earth. But only those for whom the pain of the thirst prevails dig out of desire and anxiety to find a drop of water. By way of breaking up earth many blessings will be granted them (Surūsh 1996c:271).⁶⁴

⁶² Cf. Surūsh 1994b:183–184.

⁶³ Cf. Surūsh 1997a:42.

⁶⁴ Cf. Surūsh 1996c:264.

F. Epistemological ambiguities: A priori and a posteriori

In his critical eschewing of traditional metaphysics, Surūsh connects ultimately to the critical philosophy of Kant, which he believes was made possible by way of Newton's theory of movement. For Surūsh, Kant's thought represents "the watershed of modern philosophy" and he considers the birth of a posteriori thought together with the ushering of a whole range of '-logies' and 'isms', where knowledge is relative to man as the essence of modernity.⁶⁵ Similar to Kant, Surūsh claims that epistemology is what defines the essential boundaries and competence of science. Epistemology constitutes a branch of philosophy that "turns to knowledge from a scientific point of view and determines its precincts and boundaries as well as its capacities and incapacities" (Surūsh 1996b:97). The impression of Surūsh's (1996c:154) treatment of the subject is that epistemology constitutes the most central area of philosophy since it is the cognitive foundation that substantiates scientific methodology with a theoretical foundation:

In the Western world, the emergence of modern epistemology influenced science as well as philosophy. It incited the development of science to its present status and its most important impact on philosophy was to make the philosophers sceptical towards traditional metaphysical philosophy. Modern epistemology is a posteriori, not a priori, and came into being as a result of the development of empirical and rational science. Epistemology involves, for instance, the justification of whether science, natural science as well as metaphysics or rational philosophy, is truth-worthy or not. Questions such as whether analogy is permissible according to the philosophical and metaphysical premises or not, are all contingent on epistemology.

But while Kant originally turned from physical and metaphysical science to ethics to find the ground of faith by reconciling the claims of morality and religion with scientific knowledge, Surūsh's interest is rather to defer the traditional principle of epistemic warrant, *yaqīn* (certainty), in order to destabilise the religious discourse.⁶⁶ Surūsh does not interpret Kant's writings in an attempt, similar to Heidegger, to lay the ground for metaphysics or to place the problem of metaphysics before us as a fundamental ontology. The particular choice of Kant as principal model of his exposition on epistemology is largely due to Kant's analysis of finiteness

⁶⁵ Cf. Surūsh 1994b:259, 1996a:352, 1996c:101–102. While Surūsh (1996b:98) in his early works considers Descartes, and his maxim *cogito ergo sum* (I think therefore I am), as "the founder of modern epistemology", it is Kant who emerges as the great intellectual example in *Qabḍ wa baṣṭ-i tīzūrīk-i sharīʿat*. According to Paul Guyer (1992:11), it was through Kant that the fundamental principles of science and morality, such as the form of space and time, came to be viewed as products of human thought alone. Kant was one of the earliest philosophers to make explicit the human foundation of knowledge and being. In his epistemology as well as his ontology the human is prior to all forms of knowledge and existence and it is the pivot around which everything revolves. Cf. Surūsh 1994b:257.

⁶⁶ Kant appeals to the immortality of the soul and the postulation of the existence of God to take care of reconciling virtue and happiness.

that contributed to the age of anthropological thought and humanities. Kant's belief in immortality and the existence of God as articulated in his fullest expositions in the second book of his *Kritik der praktischen vernunft* probably also contributes to mould Surūsh's affection to the German philosopher.

The core of Kant's epistemological writings is the thesis that all conscious cognition involves selection, organisation and interpretation, including religious experience, which is different only in the sense that it involves interpreting another level of meaning as mediating the Divine. But in this respect, Surūsh goes further than Kant who himself would not have sanctioned the idea that we in any way experience God, even if divine noumenon is distinguished from divine phenomenon. For Kant, God is not a reality encountered in religious experience, but an object postulated by reason on the basis of its own practical functioning in man's moral agency.⁶⁷ Instead of penetrating these aspects of practical epistemology, Surūsh points to the fact that Kant's critical theory of knowledge essentially differs from the traditional Islamic notions of epistemology. In his view, traditional Islamic epistemology represents an idealistic *idrāk-shināsi* (science of perception) which considers the possibility of knowing the external world as absolute. He argues that the traditional epistemology does not attempt to establish any comprehensive system of cognitive categories or any discursive analysis of things nor to account for a historical or contextual view which determines the evolutionary character and interaction of the various sciences:

It should be emphasised that this view of science is not comparable to epistemology. The science of the ancients was a science of perception that primarily considered the existence of the external world and the possibility to know it as definite and above questioning (and the least quibble in this respect was associated with scepticism or sophistry). It employed furthermore a spiritual attribute or description of knowledge and perception (Surūsh 1996c:323).⁶⁸

As Surūsh argues, the mark of modern epistemology after Hume and Kant has to a large extent been the acceptance of the attribute of systematic conjecture and error of all human knowledge:

In essential terms, traditional man believed that the human mind has been created properly in the sense that if error occurred it was considered to be a form of *khaṭā-yi taṣādufī* (random error). But from the birth of modern epistemology, some philosophers came to the conclusion that the activity of the human mind perhaps necessitates *khaṭā-yi sistimātik* (systematic error). These philosophers assumed, in

⁶⁷ In the preface to the second edition of *Kritik der reinen vernunft*, Kant (1996:Bxxxvi) argues that his criticism is the necessary preparation for a thoroughly scientific system of metaphysics that must perform its task entirely a priori, to the complete satisfaction of speculative reason and therefore must be treated scholastically.

⁶⁸ Surūsh (1999d:5) also argues that the traditional science of perception never reflected upon the question of divergent interpretation and understanding as a matter of theory or principle.

other words, that the human mind originally was created imperfectly and always comprehended everything in an accidental and defective manner. The major problem of Hume, Kant and Descartes was to find a solution to the notion that the activity of the human mind involves systematic error (Surūsh 1996a:90).

The distinction of random and systematic error suggests that knowledge is one thing and reality another and that there is no guarantee that knowledge truthfully represents reality. Following the complex philosophical architectonic made by Kant in the field of epistemology and referring to his discussion on 'is' and 'ought', Surūsh divides human knowledge into two broad categories, *ipīstimūlūzhī-yi pīshīnī* (a priori) and *ipīstimūlūzhī-yi pasīnī* (a posteriori).⁶⁹ While a priori knowledge, in Surūsh's (1996c:103) view, consists of natural judgements that take place before the context of justification and involve *idrāk-i dīhnī* (mental perception), he explains that a posteriori knowledge takes place after the context of discovery and corresponds to the context of justification:

From now on, we can acknowledge a general epistemological division into a priori and a posteriori or *ipīstimūlūzhī-yi sābiqī* (ex-epistemology) which occurs before experience and before the level of fulfilment vs. *ipīstimūlūzhī-yi masbūqī* (post-epistemology) which occurs after experience and at the level of fulfilment. Epistemology before the level of experience or fulfilment represents philosophical epistemology. It involves our mental existence, perception and faculties.

Surūsh's division of a priori and a posteriori is therefore not according to logical form but according to their warrant, that is, if the truth claim of a certain sentence is in need of empirical backing or not. In this respect, he asserts that empirical knowledge has experience as its source in the sense of a posteriori in contrast to his definition of the sacred that represents a priori knowledge. Contrary to Kant, who uses these distinctions in his *Kritik der reinen vernunft* to explain the special case of mathematical knowledge which he regarded as the fundamental example of a priori knowledge, Surūsh is primarily concerned with the nature of religious knowledge. The theory of contraction and expansion makes use of the second epistemological category and its method is a cognitive-historical one. While Kant wanted to find invariable and unalterable truths that could not be affected by time and change, Surūsh claims that it is impossible to identify fundamental principles in valid knowledge. Whereas Kant wanted to secure fixed, uniform, permanent, absolute and universal truths in his static vision of the world, Surūsh's (ibid.:136) notion of epistemology depicts an ever changing, dynamic, pulsating, chaotic world that is always in a state of flux.

Despite the fact that Surūsh's definition of a priori is not primarily made up of the knowledge of mathematical and logical truths, his definition of a

⁶⁹ The first recorded occurrence of the terms a priori and a posteriori is in the writings of the fourteenth century logician Albert of Saxony, but the distinction became drawn widely first in the seventeenth century.

priori suggests that there is a knowledge before experience that is not determined by a factual or empirical inquiry but merely on the basis of reflection prior to any investigation of the facts. In contrast, a posteriori knowledge can only be determined after some kind of empirical investigation. But still his definition of synthetic a priori judgements has its ambiguities, since it is not clear whether he defines a priori as transcendental principles, i.e. judgements that give verdict on the conditions of every experience *or* as speculative principles, i.e. judgements that concern what is *beyond* every possible experience. In other words: is the content of the a priori element, i.e. that which cannot be deduced from experience, the same for the individual as for the human race at large? In this respect, Kant himself claimed Newton's dynamics (arithmetic, geometry, the principle of causality, etc) as synthetic and a priori valid. While Kant asserted that we do know the truth of a priori statements intuitively (that is, without proof) but acknowledged that we do not have the knowledge that we think we have, Surüş's evolutionary perspective, with the falsification principle as its core is at odds with his view of an *ipso facto* necessarily valid synthetic a priori.⁷⁰ Similar to Popper, Surüş rejects the claim of a necessary a priori validity for Kantian categories of thought and intuition and rather provides a perspective under which these categories can be seen as highly edited, much tested presumptions, validated only as provisional scientific truth is validated.⁷¹

In the sense that Kant attempted to preserve the normative role of reason in the face of the collapse of metaphysics, Surüş has some reservations to his critical philosophy. Probably inspired by Popper, he asserts that the most fatal mistake of Kant was to accept Newton's dynamics as absolute, making cosmology a branch of physics, and wholesomely rejecting Leibnizian metaphysics. "Kant accepted the absolute basis and validity of Newton's physics and this was the biggest error of his philosophy" (Surüş 1996c:168). In Surüş's view, it is consequently possible to believe an a

⁷⁰ The distinction phenomenon-noumenon plays a major part in Kant's (1996:B69, B295–315) distinction of the a priori and a posteriori. He points out that since the properties of something as experienced "depend upon the mode of intuition of the subject, this object as appearance is to be distinguished from itself as object in itself". As Paul Guyer (1987:333) argues, Kant's epistemological modesty requires that a theory or conceptual framework is no more demonstrably false than demonstrably true. "What Kant sets out to demonstrate under the name of transcendental idealism is that a spatial and temporal view of things as they really are in themselves, independent of our perceptions of them, would be demonstrable false. Transcendent idealism is not a sceptical reminder that we *cannot be sure* that things as they are in themselves *are* also as we represent them to be; it is a harshly dogmatic insistence that we *can be quite sure* that things as they are in themselves cannot be as we represent them to be". In the view of Patricia Kitcher (1999:415), Kant's thought has also its dilemmas since the first *Kritik* contains several different strands of thought whose mutual consistency can be questioned and whose relative importance has been variously estimated.

⁷¹ Kant's a priori is interpreted in Popper's (1963:47–48) thought so as not to mean 'objectively valid' but only "prior to sense experience".

priori statement to be true, as in Kant's case, when it is not. But while Surūsh as a philosopher looks to a priori statements for security by assuming that inasmuch as these statements may themselves be certain (and necessary) they can certainly be known, he seems to create a contradiction in terms since contemporary epistemology accepts no special set of a priori statements of which it can be said that just these are beyond the reach of doubt.⁷² He also professes certain ambivalences towards Kantian notions of rationality that presume the possibility of metaphysics to extend our knowledge of reality as if its propositions are a priori synthetic. By adhering to a kind of postpositivist-postmodernist simulacra, Surūsh's hermeneutical discourse makes it clear that it is not non-problematical to cling to the Cartesian ideal of precision and certitude in thinking, which also includes Kant (1996, B419–420) to whom the subject is always enmeshed in an anthropocentric mode of knowledge but also inseparable from the universal.

While Surūsh leaves questions related to the boundary between the two levels of cognition largely undetermined, such as whether a priori knowledge occurs within or before the context of discovery and exactly which cognitive categories that are included in the term a priori, he uses the general Kantian distinction to combine the views of empiricism and rationalism in an innovative dialectic and synthesis to counter the challenges of metaphysical idealism as well as radical scepticism. While his theory is an empirical one in its denigration of any significance of a priori knowledge by focusing on matters of fact derived from experience, his view of human reason as the ultimate source of knowledge nonetheless affirms that if isomorphism (a mirroring correspondence) between reason and reality were lacking, the effort of human knowledge to understand the world would be impossible. In this respect, it is adequate to stress that Kant in many respects remains one of the most central figures of the whole modern age. By interpreting the limits of our finite apparatus of cognition into a transcendental condition for infinitely progressing knowledge and allowing for the possibility of the self-referential character of the cognitive subject, Kant's epistemology is still the point of departure for the bulk of contemporary Western philosophy from the logical positivism of A.J. Ayer (d. 1989) to the deconstructionism of

⁷² This ambiguity in Surūsh's thought is due to the fact that the Kantian realisation that the world as we consciously perceive it (phenomenon) is differentiated from the world and unperceived by anyone (noumenon), results in the notion that it is largely constructed. Kant's epistemological theory leaves the question of how it is certain that reason connects man to noumenon unanswered. If reason connects us directly to noumenon, Kant, then, does not allow for speculative metaphysics as practiced by the rationalists, since reason alone does not determine the positive content of knowledge. For this reason, much criticism has been directed towards Kantianism during the two recent centuries, which considers the search for correspondence as logically absurd since every search ends with some belief about whether correspondence holds or not (i.e. it has not advanced beyond belief). To make the distinction noumenon and phenomenon is, in other words, to have noumenon as an ontological object in consciousness and not in itself.

Foucault.⁷³

Surprisingly, however, it is not Kant's *Kritik der reinen vernunft* but Jalāl al-dīn Rūmī's *Maṭnawī-yi ma'navī* which is the most frequently and approvingly cited reference in Surūsh's chapters on epistemology in *Qabḍ wa bast-i tī'ūrīk-i sharī'at* and *Širāṭhā-yi mustaqīm*.⁷⁴ Surūsh is in particular influenced by Rūmī's cosmological explanations of concepts such as *manẓar* ('inner sight') and *didd* ('opposition') and his differentiation of *šūrat* (form) and *ma'nā* (meaning). The Sufi poet adopts these terms, for instance, to communicate the idea of the transcendent unity of religions, which teaches that religious truth is esoterically one but has different outward manifestations in terms of being channels of divine grace.⁷⁵ The famous story of the Indian elephant in the dark house is among the many passages from the *Maṭnawī* that Surūsh consults so as to demonstrate that religious knowledge is formed by external non-religious presuppositions:

We are all familiar with the story of the Indian elephant that was placed for performance in a dark house. We have taken lessons from this story but it seems however as if we only are ready to contemplate on this story in relation to non-religious knowledge. We never even consider that *sharī'at*, similar to the elephant, cannot without difficulty be enclosed in as much as a hand-clutch human understanding. Besides, we never imagine that other components of *sharī'at* communicate meanings that are interpreted differently. The significance of the story of the elephant is exactly that unknown learning affects known learning and that non-arrived knowledge influences arrived knowledge. Human error is not an incognito that conceals its knowledge even to itself. Prejudices and contradictions are transmitted over its image. In this way, a posteriori knowledge influences a priori knowledge (Surūsh 1996c:250).⁷⁶

A monistic understanding is neither possible nor desirable. Someone who charges the other's view with error must also scrutinise his or her own *manẓar* and consider it as one among others. "O learned one! The difference among Muslims, Zoroastrians and Jews emanates from their various *manẓar*" (*Maṭnawī-yi ma'navī* III:3788) (ibid.:305).⁷⁷

⁷³ Cf. Ayer 1956, Heidegger 1997, Habermas 1987, Foucault 1970, etc. Logical positivism adopts Kantian terminology when describing logic and mathematics as a priori sciences since statements within their disciplines are expressed in what Kant called analytic propositions.

⁷⁴ To make a comparison, the four chapters of the second part of *Qabḍ wa bast-i tī'ūrīk-i sharī'at*, which constitutes the core of Surūsh's epistemological writings, contain the following quantity of references: Jalāl al-dīn Rūmī (29), modern Western philosophers (26), modern Islamic thinkers (25), the Qur'an (12), premodern Persian poets (6) and a premodern Islamic historian (1). The references to Rūmī as well as to Western philosophers are as a rule of affirmative character, while the references to Islamic thinkers on the whole have the purpose of raising objections against the source. It is also significant that there is no reference at all to the prophetic *ḥadiṭ*.

⁷⁵ For the concept *didd*, cf. Surūsh 1996c:140 and 307. Cf. Surūsh 2000a.

⁷⁶ This story is also referred to on p. 182 in the same book.

⁷⁷ The above verse is also quoted on pp. 57 and 183 in the same book as well as in a number of other contexts (Surūsh 1999d:13, 1996f:47). In his *Širāṭhā-yi mustaqīm*, Surūsh

In his book *Şirāṭhā-yi mustaqīm*, Surūsh adopts the second-order epistemology for his comparative study of religion to substantiate his theory of *katrat-girāʾi-yi dīnī* (religious pluralism) and his method is not normative but empirical and descriptive. Making use of the Kantian distinction between noumenon and phenomenon, he advocates, similar to the contemporary British theologian John Hick, a new *mafḥūm-sāzī* (conceptualisation) of religious concepts to explain the perceptible multiplicity of religious experiences. He formulates, for instance, a dual classification of God according to which the Divine is understood on the *maqām-i lā ism* (level of namelessness) vs. the *maqām-i nisbat* (level of relation).⁷⁸ As it is beyond the purpose of reason to touch upon metaphysical questions, Surūsh refers to the Kantian principle of ‘equality of proofs’ in the sphere of metaphysics in order to claim that the supremacy of a certain religion over others (or any other metaphysical question for that matter) is not provable a priori. He also compares religions to *ishārī* (indexical) systems, consisting of a number of individual interpretations that are true in the sense that they are bound to individual persons. “Truth and honesty is relative in these indexical interpretations in the sense that they consist of an aspect of ‘for me’ and ‘for you’” (Surūsh 1999d:87 and 160).

While Surūsh supposes the possibility to some extent grade religious phenomena, he claims that there is no means to realistically access religions as totalities or systems of salvation. He considers religions as embodiments of different conceptions of the Divine from within different cultural contexts of being human.⁷⁹ The fact that Surūsh is both a realist and a pluralist about

(1999d:13–15) underlines that the concept *manẓar* is an analytical term that is most adequately translated as empirical ‘point of view’. Referring to the modern Iranian poet Suhrāb Sīpīhrī, he argues that “*manẓar* is nothing and no-one except man himself”.

⁷⁸ Cf. Surūsh 1999d:22. Surūsh adopts Hick’s (1984) three labels of religious understanding (exclusivist, inclusivist and pluralist) to explain various possible human answers to the question of multiple religious phenomena. Religious pluralism is diametrically opposed to the theory of *ḥaṣr-girāʾi-yi dīnī* (religious exclusivism) that relates salvation and guidance exclusively to one particular religious tradition. While exclusivism takes many forms, such as in the Catholic dogma of *Extra ecclesiam nulla salus* (outside the Church, no salvation), the thought of Alvin Platinga or the neo-orthodoxy of Karl Barth, Surūsh claims that it is characterised by the belief that the tenets (or some of the tenets) of one religion are in fact true and that any proposition (other religious beliefs) that is incompatible with those tenets are false. Aware of the fact that religious pluralism has difficulties in combining the conflicting truth-claims of various religions and sects, he suggests that religious disagreement “eventually is attributable to the two fundamental differentiations of *truth* and *understanding of truth*” (Surūsh 1999d:foreword).

⁷⁹ Surūsh’s (1999d:21, 23, 61–66) assertion that followers of other religions might be closer to the divine reality than one is oneself, as well as his tolerance concerning theological disagreements, is very close to the ideas of Hick on religious pluralism. Surūsh argues that the boundary between true and false no longer runs simply between Islam and other religions, but within each of the religions. He distinguishes the higher aspects within every religious tradition from the lower aspects and asserts that while Islam granted humanity cultural richness (i.e. its higher aspect), it also came to establish ‘barbarous’ penal laws (i.e. its lower aspect).

religions exposes him as a descriptive polytheist (as opposed to a cultic polytheist) as he recognises the reality of several gods but makes clear that he intends his own religious commitments to find their place within the Islamic tradition. This is, of course, not Kant's own account of religious experience or Divine Being, but he takes Kant's terminology of our sensory experience of the world and adapts it to serve as a way of understanding religious experience and its objects. Surūsh also defines pluralism as a mode of 'humanising' religion where spiritual realisation also becomes an individual affair. While he accentuates that the Qur'an (*Qur.* 16:121 and 48:2) uses the word *ṣirāṭ al-mustaqīm* in indefinite form (which indicates the existence of many 'straight paths'), he rejects the view of the mystics that different images of the Divine are esoterically the same and argues that the discourse on pluralism is a discourse on factual pluralism on the level of empirical *tadlīl* (reasoning) and *ta'īl* (explanation of causes):

Those who see unity everywhere behind pluralism consistent with their own views (i.e. the mystical view on pluralism), have not at all posed any question or grasped the real nature of the issue. The debate on pluralism is a discourse on empirical pluralism at the level of rational reasoning and explaining of causes, not exoteric pluralism and esoteric unity or reduction of imaginative pluralism to true unity (Surūsh 1999d:63).⁸⁰

But Surūsh's theory of religious pluralism has its dilemmas. It is, for instance, unclear whether many of his statements belong to the a priori level or the a posteriori level of discourse. He does not counter the substantial critique of religious pluralism levelled by Alvin Plantinga (1995) and others that proposes that exclusivism is neither irrational or unjustified but instead has epistemic warrant for its beliefs. Plantinga refers to the ideas of Roderick Chisholm, coherentism and reliabilism in order to demonstrate that exclusivism is not 'morally suspect', since it reserves to the Christian the right to believe in propositions that are not believed, for instance, by Muslims and leaves it to the Muslims to decide which propositions are and which are not essential to Islam.⁸¹

The fact that Surūsh largely justifies the epistemological foundation of his theory of contraction and expansion as well as his theory of religious pluralism by reference to the epistemic scheme of traditional mysticism has its dilemmas. While Rūmī is of comparable interest to Surūsh because of the

⁸⁰ Cf. Surūsh 1999d:27. As a matter of fact, the Qur'an also adopts the term *ṣirāṭ* (path) in definite form as *al-ṣirāṭ al-mustaqīm* denoting 'the straight path' (*Qur.* 1:5).

⁸¹ Surūsh seems furthermore to account for merely two binary positions on the question of religious pluralism and to ignore other perspectives that are not a posteriori based such as, for instance, the esoteric pluralism of Muḥammad Ḥusain Ṭabāṭabā'ī (1984:64) or the Swiss philosopher Frithjof Schuon (1968) which teaches that esoterical truth is one but has various outward manifestations or the inclusivism advocated by Karl Rahner in his teachings about the 'anonymous Christian' that largely was adopted by Vatican II. For a critique of Surūsh's from the perspective of esoteric pluralism, cf. Ḥusainī-Ṭabāṭabā'ī 1998.

oriented distinction between conditioned reality and unconditioned realities, his doctrine that teaches experience of God through the spiritual heart that guides man from multiplicity to Unity is not a marked critical and rational assessment comparable to that of Kant's. In Rūmī's theosophy, both the *juz'* (partial thing) and the *kull* (universal thing) are distinguished from a third entity, *lā-makān* ('Nowhere place'), the specific and generic nature taken absolutely in itself. Accordingly, every form possesses an inner meaning due to its inner reality and symbolic nature that comes from its character of being transparent, reflecting the *ṣifāt* (attributes) or archetypes that belong to the Divine. In Rūmī's terminology, the *'aql-i juz'ī* (discursive or 'partial' reason) is nothing but the 'illusory' self that places its experience of thinking as the foundation of all epistemology and divorces epistemology from religious ontology.⁸² What Surūsh does, however, is similar to Kant. He transforms transparency into opacity by appealing not to pure intuitive intellection as it functions in the heart of man or to revelation but to the individual consciousness of the thinking subject. As knowledge comes depleted of its sacred content, Surūsh indisputably makes a conscious break with the traditional Islamic conceptions of science by imposing the same epistemological principles on legal texts as theological and mystical ones and by also giving primacy to the subject over the object. He neglects, in other words, the theoretical obstacles of applying Rūmī's cognitive monism in legitimising his own brand of second order epistemology. More importantly, he does not seem aware of the danger of anachronism in explaining traditional concepts by using modern standards without differentiating the synchronic parts in a diachronic manner when he projects contemporary meaning into traditional texts and eventually attempts to synchronise all diachrony by emphasising the collective identity of written texts.⁸³

In general, many of Surūsh's references to Rūmī must be considered as a departure from the time-honoured Islamic mystical tradition. In Rūmī's view, knowledge is intuitive inspiration (rather than discursive) where the Knower, the known and the process of knowing, i.e. human knowledge, ultimately are identical. He maintains a distinction between the oneness of

⁸² Rūmī (1996:VI 2878–2880) says, "The unbeliever's argument is this: 'I see nothing but appearance'. He never considers that appearance gives news of hidden wisdom. The worth of appearance is, indeed, concealed similar to the benefits of medicine". As Annmarie Schimmel (1993:297) elucidates, Rūmī bases his notion of certain knowledge and disdain for empirical knowledge on the Qur'anic term *ʿilm ladunnā* that literally means "the wisdom that is with Him" (*Qur.* 18:65). In Rūmī's (1996:II 72–73) view, only the *chashm-i dil* (eye of the heart) is capable of penetrating the *pardah* (veil) of phenomena and distinguishing the permanent light of the Absolute from the transient shadows of imagination. "Once the mirror of your heart becomes pure and clear, you will see pictures from beyond the domain of water and clay. Not only pictures, but also the Painter. Not only the carpet of good fortune, but also the Carpet-spreader".

⁸³ Cf. Surūsh 1994b:210.

Being and the manyness of knowledge, but the second category of level is only illusory since it borrows its existence from Being.⁸⁴ In contrast to Rūmī's idea that knowledge is direct and infallible acquaintance with 'reality', that is, 'truth' drawn from our dominant a priori sense, Surūsh distinguishes in explicit terms between the thing-in-itself and as it appears in perception. The realisation that the world as we consciously perceive it is differentiated from the world in-itself, unperceived by anyone, results in his notion that it is contextually constructed, which is the very anti-thesis of Rūmī's epistemology. Surūsh perceives hence knowledge not as a metaphor of intellectual vision, where knowledge is self-authenticating and infallible, but as conjectural, provisional and probable:

The branch of epistemology that the theory of evolution of religious knowledge is grounded in is not concerned with the *wujūd-i dīhn* (existence of the mind) or the spiritual origin or qualities of knowledge, but its subject and concern is rather the branches that religious knowledge constitutes a part of. It is not concerned with a priori imagination and concepts, but with corroborations and formations of ideas that construct a specific portion of knowledge among others (Surūsh 1996c:325).⁸⁵

In *Qabḍ wa bast-i tī'ūrīk-i shari'at*, Surūsh suggests, therefore, that man should be more concerned with the human aspects of his earthly existence than with his own passion for truth. While the ultimate goal of religion is the mystical unity with the Divine, he claims that no human being can foretell when or where "the Sun will rise" (ibid.:196). He dismisses the epistemic standards of traditional mysticism as metaphysical hubris, in the sense that it is elitist and undemocratic and argues that transcendent reason tends to be 'reflexive' since it is hierarchical, relative and closed to inter-subjective corroboration. He defines it as a "strategic theory" and asserts that "in the words of the Westerners; it is reflexive and points back to itself" (Surūsh 1999d:91).⁸⁶ He does not, however, mention that modernity from its inception has tended to be reflexive in so far as it constitutes a form of life for which questioning reason is central. Even Kant regards the vindication of reason as a reflexive task, which must assemble certain 'materials' before it can begin. The modern reflexivity differs only in the sense that it is of a qualitatively different order, formed through endless processes of reflexive structuring, de-structuring and restructuring in which new forms of knowledge are generated, adopted or applied (O'Neill 1992).

⁸⁴ Rūmī (1996:I 30) says, "Everything is the Beloved and the lover is a veil. The living is the Beloved, and the lover is dead". From this perspective, human perfection culminates in the full activity of the Intellect through knowledge of God. "A knowledge not immediately from Him will soon vanish like paint on a woman's face" (ibid.:I 3449). But the intellectual aspect of Rūmī's (1992:2989) poetry must not be overemphasised, since ultimately love is the foundation and source of reality. "The intellect runs crazy in the hope for unity. In love, it moves forward in desire of pilgrimage".

⁸⁵ Cf. Surūsh 1996c:519–520.

⁸⁶ Surūsh (1999c:63) argues that *'irfān* is "a theory not for the majority, but for the minority" and that it results in autocratic totalitarianism when integrated with political governance.

Surūsh's mysticism, or what he calls *īmān-i 'āshiqānah* (amorous faith), has affinities with premodern forms of mysticism in the sense of facing the suspicion of heresy (which makes it incumbent for him to write in a special code and to maintain plausible deniability). His insistence, however, upon the mystery of God's existence manifested through a sharp division between faith and science, depicting God as purely transcendent, is quite different from traditional mystical notions of the boundaries of God's presence in the world (Surūsh 1999a:202).⁸⁷ Inspired ultimately by the deism of nineteenth century Europe and the Darwinian categories of the natural world that consider nature as cut off from the hands of God, Surūsh ontologically separates the Creator from our spatio-temporal framework by suggesting that no certain knowledge of Him is possible. Surūsh's God is utterly detached from the world and seems remarkably similar to no God at all. In this respect, his mysticism has more affinities with the epistemic conditions set by high modernity in the sense that metaphysical realism has come to an end and that our worldview has become very much more pluralized, pragmatic and free-floating. It is not an accident that many today speak of the Death of God as a postmodern type of religious experience, breaking down premodern two-world cosmology, immutable philosophical rationalism and ontological assumptions of enlightenment modernism (i.e. foundationalism) (Taylor 1984).

As divine mystery is entirely beyond human knowledge, Surūsh's invocation of the concept of mysticism as the intrinsic validity of any religious experience differentiates epistemology from metaphysics in due course. The role of religion becomes an 'interiorised' individual and private mode of experience where the concept of reality as the category of God is confined to the noumenal world of in-itself, transcending not only human language but also human knowledge. Surūsh's reductionist elaboration on human cognitive efforts turns God into a subjective privatisation, in the sense that his Kantian views of reality easily appear to make noumenal reality seem redundant. His divorce of reason from the world of faith, or secularisation of reason, connects, in other words, to the secularisation of the cosmos (which has affected a large part of religious mysticism in our modern age) and inevitably results in a downgrading of the role of noumenon in human thinking. If all we can have are concepts of reality, what, then, is the sense of trying to envisage the nature of reality as it is-in-itself? If religion in terms of noumenon is beyond our comprehension, how can we go on being committed to the truth of any religion at all? By

⁸⁷ Considering the Persian poet Shams al-dīn Ḥāfiẓ the exemplar of the religious intellectual, Surūsh makes known that it is theosophical love that guides him as an intellectual. As he describes the concept *īmān-i 'āshiqānah* in chapters 4–8 in his book *Baṣṭ-i tajrūbah-yi nabawī*, this form of personal mysticism is always connected to the guidance of the Prophet of Islam. For Surūsh's writings on mysticism, cf. Surūsh 1996a:157–170, 1996g, 1997b, 1997c:136–170, 1999a:113–281, 321–355 and 2000a.

considering all a priori propositions as *literally* false and by de-emphasising Islamic religious truth-claims, Surūsh asserts that the traditional idealisation of knowledge is not merely tentative but also self-defeating, in the sense that it elevates knowledge to a metaphysical peerage in which it loses all contact with common human experience. He argues that no such epistemic ideal or utopia is possible since all sources of cognition are fallible and lead to error:

In the contemporary period (similar to every period), our knowledge of Islamic law as well as nature is comprised of modest and incomplete components. It relies on and is captive to many other components that have not yet appeared to us in order to be explored. Our contemporary knowledge of the explored components is hence conjectural in the sense that it awaits the arrival of future knowledge to construct a new formation (of ideas) and a new understanding (of knowledge) (Surūsh 1996c:251).

While religion differs from science in the sense that religiosity and personal beliefs are not concerned with objectivity in the true sense of the word, Surūsh believes that religious knowledge is exposed to the same criterion of corroboration as science and that the repudiation of the quest for certainty does not necessarily undermine the quest for the foundations of knowledge. Instead of claiming that basic propositions are certain and that they lend their certainty to propositions derived from them, he supposes that they possess a degree of probability. The most distinctive feature of Surūsh's epistemology is therefore his effort to overcome with unwonted clarity and simplicity the difficulty of how *subjective* conditions of thinking can have objective validity, that is, yield conditions for the possibility of all cognition of objects without grounding the objectivity of eternal truths in a divine and infallible intellect. In his early book *Īdī'ūlūzhī-yi shaiṭānī* (Satanic ideology), he alludes to the Islamic conception of man as God's vicegerent on earth in order to posit a human subjectivity grounded in and mediated by God's subjectivity.⁸⁸ He refers innovatively to the theosophical concept *ḥarakat-i jauharī* in order to conceptualise the theological notions of *tauḥīd* that emerge as the centre of his cosmology or *jahānbīnī-yi khudā-markazī* (God-centred worldview):

The *tauḥīdī* view of the world does not deny existential and natural differences. It suggests rather that we are capable of observing the world with the eyes of God and comprehend everything as relying on Him, settled by Him and living in one spirit and moving in one movement... God-centredness means first of all that God is the source of all creation and existence and that no interpretation of the phenomenon of

⁸⁸ The term 'mediated subjectivity' is borrowed from Vahdat Farzin (1998:414) who characterises it as "a constant vacillation between affirmation and negation of human subjectivity".

existence is possible or convincing without the belief that all existents perishes in Him (Surūsh 1994a:173).⁸⁹

But while Surūsh is knowledgeable that the discourse of modernity is located within a specific historicity, he presents no Islamic counterforce to nominally Western universal cognitive concepts, presuppositions and terminology. The effort is rather the opposite, to delimit and decentre Western modes of knowledge, since the traditional Islamic civilisation, as he understand it, was not an intended consequence of a systematic methodology nor premised on a given Islamic science or Islamic epistemology. The account of Ghamari-Tabrizi (1999:72) and others that Surūsh “remains critical of modernist claims to universality” seems questionable. In fact, Surūsh rejects any attempts to ‘islamise’ modernity since there exists no alternative Islamic epistemology upon which a new a priori cognitive theory may be formulated. For Surūsh, religion is not an ideological standpoint through which natural and historical realities are constructed. He does not refer to the concept of man as God’s vicegerent on earth in his post-1988 writings such as *Qabḍ wa bast-i ti’ūrik-i sharī‘at*, but rather grounds this status in knowledge as such. He argues that knowledge originates in the faculties of the subject, since the key features of empirical cognition, including the spatial form of intuition and other features of our representations, must be traced to our cognitive constitution. His view of knowledge is hence largely ‘subjectivist’:

In my view, we cannot acquire a proper analysis of the modern history of man without a proper analysis of the emerging modern knowledge. Man is knowledge as such (Surūsh 1997a:424).

The sacred, complete and unified character of *sharī‘at* does not mean that human understanding of *sharī‘at* is sacred, complete or unified. Religion is aimed at humans and is, therefore, human and natural. Man’s cognitive faculties conceptualise religion as it approaches human beings. The standards of human knowledge prevail over religion and transform it into an individual knowledge among others (Surūsh 1996c:207).

Surūsh’s position is best described as an expansion of subjectivity that develops into a form of unmediated or ‘inter-subjective’ subjectivity, beyond the confines of divinely mediated subjectivity where it originates. In contrast to the traditional ideal of the subject’s transparency to itself as a total meditation where it transpires to itself the absolute subject, Surūsh’s notion of subjectivity is mediated by its social and historical accidentals. The reflecting human subject is, in his view, a non-divine historical, linguistic and social subject that is in search of meaning. It has a transient unmediated

⁸⁹ Cf. Surūsh 1994a:185. In general, Surūsh’s book *Īdi’ulūzhi-yi shaiṭānī* contains a larger amount of references to the Qur’an than his other works and embodies an effort to refute Marxist ideology from the perspective of the revealed texts as well as from the perspective of Popperian science.

nature where self-understanding is basically a social and historical becoming or growth rather than a state of contemplation. While his interest is the historical evolution of knowledge rather than the empirical psychological enquiry into how we get our beliefs, his view that knowledge depends on the structure of the mind and not the world results however easily, in knowledge having no connection to the world and hence being no true representation.

G. Epistemic relativism or epistemological relativism?

Surūsh's position on epistemic warrant as well as ontology is clearly identifiable in his discussion on the problem of relativity. The *relativisation* of epistemology is one of the hallmarks of the contemporary Western philosophical commitment and its idea that the 'ontology' of a theory only becomes meaningful relative to the interpretative subject makes every metaphysical or universal predication of ontology ambiguous. While the phenomenological perspective on religious science, where divinity appears in its continuous myriad of manifestations limited by particular social, cultural and historical conditions does not rule out the presupposition of a divine origin of Islamic law, Surūsh favours an inter-subjectivist approach to knowledge, which has some features in common with the philosophical concept of relativism in terms of disentangling epistemology from metaphysics. He seems aware of the fact that if our relativised framework principles are not synthetic a priori but empirical and changeable and revisable under pressure of empirical findings, it becomes uncertain how exactly these framework principles really differ from more straightforward empirical generalisations. In other words, if both framework principles and more straightforward empirical laws are revisable in light of empirical evidence, then what is there to protect religion from the trap of relativism? Surūsh's notion of objectivity is the idea that the third world of objective knowledge cannot be objectively understood but only explained by reference to our knowledge and therefore to something subjective. The rejection of foundationalism does not, for Surūsh, imply relativism in his epistemological position, since the specific aim of the theory of contraction and expansion is not to 'periodise' truth, but to describe the evolution of religious knowledge:

My object is not, for instance, to demonstrate how relativism functions in mechanics and to draw the conclusion that everything, such as ethics and truth, is relative. My discourse is to describe how concepts of nature and man are given new meaning, whether in mechanics, natural science or anthropology and to depict how the previous meanings and connotations in, for instance, natural science, adjust to these new meanings and how everything will be sorted through once again (Surūsh 1996c:194).

Religious science and the focus on the growth of knowledge do not invite the religious believers to forsake their viewpoints and beliefs, to give up their efforts (of acquiring truth), to intermingle truth and false nor to negate truth or regard it as relative. Religion and religious beliefs are necessary in order to pursue religious science. The religious scientists do not try to demonstrate that religious believers have divergent interpretations regarding, for instance, the Darwinian theory but they consider rather the divergent interpretations of the religious scholars as an observable fact and try to analyse the meaning of the character of religious and human knowledge and in what way it is disposed to evolution. Whether evolution and development is relativistic, static or absolute, all pertains to understanding of *sharīʿat* and religious knowledge and not to faith, *sharīʿat* itself or the challenge of religious scientists (Surūsh 1996c:208).⁹⁰

In Surūsh's terminology, relativism is a form of philosophical scepticism where the a priori and a posteriori levels of epistemology intermingles and therefore it fails to grasp the essential difference between noumenon and phenomenon:

To intermingle the two levels of epistemology, i.e. the a priori and the a posteriori, is to vindicate scepticism and to misunderstand the meaning of evolution of knowledge and to reduce it to quantitative evolution. The sceptic considers truth as relative. If his opinion has a scholarly content it involves a priori and philosophical epistemology and not a posteriori epistemology. Someone who claims that truth is relative and that we have no means of (intelligible) correspondence with reality makes claims about the nature of human perception and not about the branches of a specific knowledge. In contrast, the second-order epistemology only describes the attributes of a priori concepts of change, relativism and contextuality (Surūsh 1996c:331).

But since scepticism is far from identical to relativism in contemporary epistemology, it is useful to differentiate the two terms as well as to distinguish the narrower form of scepticism from the broader. In the broad sense, a sceptic is someone who casts doubts on the availability, at least to us humans, of objective knowledge, i.e. the idea of correspondence between a proposition and the thing(s) to which it refers. In contrast, scepticism in the narrower sense is close to other -isms, such as relativism and nihilism, which wholesomely reject the possibility of certain objective knowledge. But in contrast to these forms of scepticism, relativism also denies the existence of any objective order to have knowledge of at all by reducing all knowledge claims to immanent relations. It is hence a much more complicated phenomenon than the sheer claim that there is no unique truth and no unique objective reality. In this respect, D. E. Cooper (1999:5) argues that "relativists of different shapes and sizes have offered various answers: truth is relative to cultures, or to conceptual schemes, or to individual perspectives, or to 'forms of life', and so on". While the theory of

⁹⁰ Cf. Surūsh 1996c:133, 275, and 1997a:219.

contraction and expansion is not based on scepticism in the narrower sense in that it rejects all scepticism towards the objective existence of reality, Surūsh is in fact proudly ambivalent on the question that objects must conform to our knowledge. While part of him inclines to the realistic assumption that we succeed in knowing objects that really conform to our conditions for representing them, another part of him inclines to the view that things as they are in themselves cannot possibly have those very properties that they must appear to have, since truth has no clear sign (Surūsh 1999d:145). Similar to Kant (1996:B 43), who states that “space encompasses all things that appear to us externally, but not that it encompasses all things in themselves”, Surūsh denies that we can have any objective knowledge of noumenon or things-in-themselves:

Even if our perception of *sharīʿat* is correct and non-contradictory it is still something else than *sharīʿat* in-itself. The meaning of ‘correct perception’ is merely that perception corresponds to the phenomenon. Correct perception is, in other words, a perception that corresponds to reality in the sense that the world of phenomenon and the human capacity to know it are necessary facts. The inevitability of differentiating *sharīʿat* from the understanding of *sharīʿat* hence does not mean that all understanding is correct or that correct understanding is impossible but that correct understanding of *sharīʿat* is necessarily different from *sharīʿat* in-itself (Surūsh 1996c:341).

While the pragmatists basically reject Kantian notions, such as a priori-a posteriori or analytic-synthetic judgements, it is possible as, for instance, D.E. Cooper (1999:4) argues, to be a philosophical realist and to confirm that there is an objective order knowable, for instance, by pure reason but also to believe that man does not have the capacity to establish with certainty what that order is. Cooper also believes that it is fully possible for someone to be sceptical towards knowledge-claims in certain areas— such as ethics or religion, but to think that knowledge is perfectly possible in other areas, such as science or mathematics. While philosophical nominalism and its belief that no unshakable foundations exist for human knowledge (which makes the quest for them fruitless) is not characteristic of all modern science, Surūsh’s adherence to the nominalist rejection of universal meaning is problematical as regards his belief in constants. His evolutionary epistemology, no matter how minimal his commitment to realism may be, is not oriented towards a phenomenalist ontology that transforms epistemology into a branch of cognitive psychology, but is instead methodological. It does not primarily deal with ontological emergence, but with logical theses about novelties and unpredictable elements of knowledge that have been investigated within the analytical tradition. The ambiguities inherent in his definition of these terms are in fact largely limited to his discussion in *Qabḍ wa baṣṭ-i tiʾūrik-i sharīʿat* which vindicates the existence of synthetic a priori principles and tenets of science and religion and at the same time ‘denies’

them by reducing these constants to the internal and subjective cognitive matrix of human understanding. In the sense that he rejects the claim that we can know an objectively existing world outside of us, his position is very akin to that of the fallibilistic realism of the American philosopher Hilary Putnam, who defines the purpose of science as the development of genuine knowledge about the world even though such knowledge is never known with certainty. As Surūsh argues, science can never reveal the true nature of things or describe the reality in-itself but only how it appears, since we cannot expect our description to correspond to reality in any coherent sense:

Those who attempt to distinguish the constant part of religion from the non-constant must keep in mind that this distinction is related to religious knowledge and is contingent on a specific comprehension of religion. The constant and non-constant do not occur before religious understanding but are born out of it. We are always confronted with religious knowledge that depicts and describes, but never with religion itself. This rule applies to all human knowledge (Surūsh 1996c:53).⁹¹

Similar to Kant, who did not think he was a sceptic himself (since his work developed as a critique of the radical scepticism of Hume), Surūsh's central view that the subjective mind determines the structures of human knowledge is definitely a kind of scepticism. Surūsh has accepted much of the sceptical point of view by rejecting the idea of the thing in itself, i.e. the idea that there is no pure given, without realising it. He is, so to say, a sceptic in the sense that he denies not merely the possibility of a general criterion of non-tautological truth, but also man's capacity to establish what the objective order is with certainty (while he does not deny its existence). As A. Tolland (1991:25) argues in his study of relativism in knowledge, there are many sorts of relativism, on a continuum from the stronger *epistemic* relativism to the weaker *epistemological* relativism. While the stronger epistemic relativism takes the extreme position that all truth is relative to particular contexts and that discussions of truth have meaning only in reference to the truth of their context, weak relativism agrees that there is a contextual aspect

⁹¹ Cf. Surūsh 1996c:283 and 288. In the view of Putnam (1987), epistemology should not reject traditional philosophical questions altogether, although it does not have any final correct answers. The struggle with realism and its problems can lead to refinements of the formulations and to cognitive developments. Similarly, Surūsh's realism seems to differ from the kind of critical realism which considers that the purpose of science to be the generation of the most accurately possible description and understanding of the world as noumenon. While he acknowledges that the contradiction between the phenomenon and our perception of it does not involve the dispute between realism and idealism but rather is a semantic question that concerns various forms of realism, he is not concerned with differentiating *ri'ālism-i pichīdah* (sophisticated realism) from fallibilistic realism but from *ri'ālism-i khām* (direct realism) of empiricism. Surūsh's scepticism to the form of knowledge that states that the thing-in-itself is knowable but only in the knower's categories, not in the thing-in-itself, has also affinities with the Austrian philosopher and ethnologist Konrad Lorenz's (d. 1989) idea that the objective reflection of *das Ding an sich* never achieves expression on the thing-in-itself's own terms. Surūsh shares Lorenz' (1977) concept of the evolutionary character of epistemology as well as his anti-holism that considers all description to be necessarily selective.

to truth but believes that truth must be meaningfully discussed beyond context. Because the most extreme form of relativism involves the contradiction of holding that all truths except the truth of relativism are relative, Surūsh (1996c:178 and 286) advocates a sort of epistemological relativism in the sense that he acknowledges that “everyone’s religion is his or her understanding of religion” and that “the world of the individual corresponds to his or her comprehension of the world”.⁹² He rejects the conception of science as representing the standpoint dictated to us by objective standards of rationality or as offering a ‘God’s eye point of view’, and claims that the whole scientific enterprise is *nasbī* (relative) in the sense that it is “contingent on a selection of presuppositions” (Surūsh 1999a:304). While he claims that the theory of contraction and expansion is a demonstrative one, he makes in fact no notable use of deductive logic but rather presents his case as *a* theory based on a number of inductive examples.⁹³

Surūsh’s doubt in epistemology is hence not coherent with various types of ‘rationalist foundationalism’ in the sense that he accepts no class of a priori propositions that register genuine knowledge and that all other propositions are inferred from those basic ones. But while he rejects the notion of warranted basic beliefs, he claims at the same time that the theory of contraction and expansion protects understanding from falling into relativism since it is limited by *tawātur*, which signifies the religious tradition in the general sense, a certain sort of non-inferential known proposition that cannot plausibly be construed as empirical. While Surūsh cannot give a full rational justification for *tawātur*, it is a necessary presupposition of faith rather than non-necessary truth whose necessity transcends the deliverance of sense awareness and averts the generation of solipsism. Even if Surūsh does not divide the human epistemic beliefs into basic and non-basic, he supposes that we have an epistemic right to believe in the self-evidently true notion of *tawātur*. While our understanding is flowing, it does not indicate that everything is in a flow, since *tawātur* can be ‘known’ by some sort of doxastic a priori intuition which he does not elaborate on further:

⁹² Tolland writes, “Epistemological relativism derives its name from the fact that the mere possibility of relativism is only of interest to the epistemologist; it has no practical bearing. Even if all our knowledge is relative to, in some sense arbitrary, presuppositions, this may not matter as long as we all agree in what we presuppose. Consensus could work just as well as absolute foundations... Epistemic relativism claims that radical, rationally insolvable, conflicts between parties with vastly different presuppositions *actually exist*, or are real possibilities, because there really are, or have been, such parties. Epistemic relativism claims that there is no fundamental agreement in presuppositions” (Tolland 1991:25). Cf. Surūsh 1996c:361.

⁹³ While Surūsh’s epistemology is not relativistic as far as it believes that the epistemic norms employed by modern science enjoys a special status, he disregards that modern science itself has evolved through some major shifts during the last two centuries which some observers claim is inconsistent with any objective, universally valid, criteria of truth and rationality.

There are a number of presuppositions for the existence of God and the Prophet that one must take into consideration, such as the validity of *tawātur*, which is the only proof for the existence of a Prophet fourteen centuries ago. If someone rejects the validity of *tawātur* and puts the existence of the Prophet into doubt, i.e. not only his historical existence but also the question of prophet-hood, prophecy, super-naturality, and so on, he or she becomes an apostate. If someone rejects that a Qur'anic verse stems from the Prophet [sic!] the contradiction between that verse and the other verses will not be eliminated (Surūsh 1996c:159).

While Surūsh's epistemology does not propose a seemingly natural knowledge, it suggests a strategy for responding to scepticism in the narrower sense. While truth is not in flow, the theory of contraction and expansion is certainly a relativistic enterprise in the sense that epistemic warrant is only possible relative to things taken for granted. Knowledge is not automatic and normally implies understanding and understanding is only possible in relation to some kind of arbitrary interpretative background. In this respect, Surūsh even goes as far as claiming that 'Alī b. Abī Ṭālib's understanding of the Divine Essence can be different from contemporary understandings and descriptions of the Divine Essence, which amounts to saying that the word we hear from 'Alī is not a timeless one:

My claim is that our understanding of everything is flowing. Someone who says that everything is flowing, includes the constant matters in this 'everything'. The question is whether God, who is equivalent to constant is also in flow? Are the hidden worlds, the constant laws of the natural world and the constant laws of mathematics also in flow and change? This is not our claim... It is not possible in any absolute sense to say that God changes but I think that everyone understands that it is possible to change our knowledge of God's constant essence. The God that *amīr al-mu'mīnīn* (peace be upon him) knew is not the same God as the One we know in the sense that our understanding truly differs (ibid.:116-117).⁹⁴

In the sense that the identity of the Divine Essence in concrete terms is a product and construct of human classification, Surūsh acknowledges that epistemology is relativistic as it is largely based on *mu'allal* ('caused') knowledge. In contrast to deconstructionism that indicates the uncertainty of all prior foundations of epistemology, he claims that the relativistic character of the theory of contraction and expansion is not absolute in the sense that it replaces proofs entirely by causes. Defining pure relativism as *'illat-girā'i* (cause-ism), Surūsh's effort is rather to strike a balance between rationalistic foundationalism and deconstructionism by preserving the function of proofs as long as they have a relevant role in the attainment of knowledge and refuting epistemic relativism because of its incoherent and unscientific character:

To my belief, the emergence of the notion of relativism in modern epistemology is due to the dominant trend to look for the 'cause' behind the production of

⁹⁴ Cf. Surūsh 1996c:248–249, 298, 305 and 2000c:49.

knowledge as well as to the weakening of the position of proofs. Relativism is characterised by the tendency to sacrifice proofs for causes in explanation. It is commonly said that relativism means that everything is relatively true, but it is more appropriate to describe relativism in another way according to the current trend in modern epistemology. Modern epistemology, which relies on relativism, proceeds from the idea that the function of proof has been weakened in the sphere of knowledge or even reduced to zero... This is the position of pure relativism. Opposite to this view is the position of philosophers and thinkers before Kant and also Islamic philosophers, who degrade the function of causes in the acquisition of knowledge to the irrelevant, exceptional, accidental or ephemeral. They believed that the function of proof is essential and principal and that the comprehension of reality represents absolute, complete and proved knowledge. It is therefore more appropriate that we make our categorisation in the following and argue that relativism or relativistic epistemology supposes *mu'allal* (caused) knowledge, while non-relativistic epistemology supposes *mudallal* (proved) knowledge [...] With the description I have made, postmodernism constitutes a periodical production or event in the world of knowledge and culture that sacrifices the proofs in the place of causes and does not have any appreciation for proofs. My epistemological position in this context is briefly that proofs plays a role in the production and life of knowledge but that the proofs are replaced by causes when they have fulfilled their function and have reached a cul-de-sac (Surūsh 1999d:147–150).

In Surūsh's view, postmodern theory is equal to deconstructionism.⁹⁵ He believes that deconstructionism produces a fundamental paradox that was avoided by Kant by considering knowledge not as representation but pure causes. Surūsh's epistemological affinities are closer to Kantian than deconstructionist thought, since he shares with the enlightenment philosophical tradition a number of convictions such as: the world of phenomena is intelligible; truth is fixed, uniform, permanent, absolute and universal and religion is a *sui generis* reality that is unique and irreducible. While Surūsh's thought partly is a product of the enlightenment representational mode of thinking, his aim is not at all to construct an abstract order proceeding from Kant's epistemology in search of the universal conditions by which propositions can be really true or false. His epistemological relativism rather doubts the correspondence between appearance and reality by suggesting that human reason lacks firm foundations connecting it to the realities that it asserts to exist, which easily makes the representation of these realities become unwarranted.

⁹⁵ Cf. Surūsh 1996a:359.

H. Hermeneutics: There is nothing beyond the text

Similar to Richard Rorty, who announces the end of epistemology by turning to hermeneutics, Surūsh identifies epistemology with the broad, generic task of reflecting on the nature and limits of human knowledge. Since all knowledge entails understanding and its presuppositions always postulate other explanations, he believes that all cognitive ambiguities must be assessed in the light of hermeneutics. Epistemology gives way, in other words, to hermeneutics, since the scientific endeavour constantly preys on other readings or interpretations in an endless process and since human understanding always is blocked and empowered by the concrete and changing context of a specific hermeneutical situation. He seems in fact to suggest that the primary task of contemporary Islamic scholars is to understand science and then to understand hermeneutics and to simply relate the two. The situation is nevertheless much more complex in that the two do not stand in isolation and that hermeneutics must be understood not only in relation to science but in relation to the philosophies of science. In contrast to Rorty, who discards Kantian philosophy altogether, Surūsh's (1996c:57) hermeneutics is not the replacement of epistemology as such but the replacement of one epistemology with another.⁹⁶ While Surūsh does not attempt to establish a modern Qur'anic discipline of hermeneutics, he suggests that the theory of contraction and expansion accesses the limitations and possibilities of the human world of every individual so as to see what new ways of understanding can arise in the arena of hermeneutical discourse between the individual subject and religion:

The essential objective of the theory of contraction and expansion is not to solve the dispute over *fiqh-i sunnatī* and *fiqh-i pūyā*, to modernise, expound or complete religion nor to relativise or reject truth, but to shed light on religious understanding and the evolution of religious knowledge. As long as the secret of understanding is not revealed, the endeavour to revive religion will remain incomplete. The theory of contraction and expansion is in its essence therefore a *nazarīyah-yi tafsīrī-ma'rifatshinākhtī* (theory of interpretation-hermeneutics) that is relevant to theology, theosophy and *uṣūl* (sources and theory of religious science).

In *Qabḍ wa baṣṭ-i tī'ūrik-i sharī'at*, Surūsh (ibid.:204) distinguishes the term *ma'rifatshinākhtī* from *ma'rifatshināsī* (epistemology) and translates it as

⁹⁶ Cf. Rorty 1979:10, 180, 210 and 315. As Rorty (1986:172) argues, the history of philosophy shows that there are no final answers to the traditional questions about knowledge, truth, and representation. He thinks such questions should be eliminated from philosophy since there is no possibility to get outside of our mind and language. In the view of Rorty, the whole project of analytical philosophy fails after Sellars and Quine's criticism of the distinction between the logically/conceptually necessary and the contingent, between being true by virtue of meaning and being true by virtue of experience. "If there are no intuitions into which to resolve concepts (in the manner of the *Aufbau*) nor any internal relations among concepts to make possible 'grammatical discoveries' (in the manner of 'Oxford philosophy'), then indeed it is hard to imagine what an 'analysis' might be".

hermeneutics. But his definitions are far from clear since he also characterises Kant's theory of knowledge or Muḥammad Bāqir Ṣadr's theory of induction as theories of hermeneutics and not as epistemological respectively methodological theories, which they more correctly are. Surūsh (1999d:192) has retrospectively become very much aware of this fact. In his later works, he instead uses the word *hirminūtik* to denote hermeneutics, which is strictly defined as a separate human scientific method for the interpretation of texts and other empirical material. His incoherence in the use of the terms epistemology and hermeneutics may very well depend on the fact that Surūsh (1999k) at the time of writing *Qabḍ wa baṣṭ-i tī'ūrīk-i sharī'at* was not acquainted with the Western tradition of modern hermeneutics but merely had become familiar with the subject by way of the history of science. While the theory of contraction and expansion is formulated within the theoretical framework of the philosophy of science, it seems that he views hermeneutics as a kind of a meta-science, since he believes that the essential questions of science are hermeneutical in the sense that the emergence of modern epistemology has transformed the concepts of scientific discourse, such as objectivity, certainty and meaning:

In the course of the past centuries, colossal contractions and expansions have affected human knowledge and beliefs so that even a simple understanding of the term 'eternity' has become difficult. Understanding and preserving the eternal message of religion in the course of such an invasive torrent of change and renewal constitutes the core of the efforts and sacrifices of the religious reformers of our time (Surūsh 1996c:48).

In contrast to the traditional Shi'i belief that knowledge in its entirety is at the disposal of the Prophet and the *imāms* and therefore cannot be separated from the interpretations of it that are given by them, Surūsh claims that a moment of uncertainty clings to all knowledge claims. He suggests that the question of the sources of knowledge should be replaced by completely different questions relating to hermeneutics and acknowledges that there are no ultimate sources of knowledge that are beyond critical examination. As far as his primary epistemological interest rests within hermeneutics rather than physics and biology, Surūsh sets forth on a new path separate from his Popperian exposition of science and neo-Kantian epistemology. In the same manner as he criticises the traditional Islamic sciences for their lack of theories on the pursuit of knowledge, he asserts that the absence of coherent hermeneutical theories in premodern times explains why the problem of solving the distinction between *muḥkam* and *mutashābih* or *ta'wīl* and *tafsīr* was never solved and why *tafsīr bi-ra'y* was vaguely defined and difficult to accept. He argues in fact that the topic of *ikhtilāf* of interpretation should instead be concerned with categories of *tafsīr bi-ra'y* since all interpretations are contingent, provisional and contextual:

In light of this hermeneutical theory it is possible to understand the inevitable entry of the categories of *muḥkam* and *mutashābih* not only in the Qur'an but also in *ḥadīth*, *fiqh* and even in the interpretation of history. It becomes also evident that the categories of *aḥkām* (certainty) and *tashābih* (ambivalence) themselves are subject to change. It is not as though a verse would remain certain or ambivalent forever. Hermeneutical theory makes available a lucid definition of *tafsīr bi-ra'y* and the more this issue is scrutinised in the absence of such a theory, the murkier it becomes. A qualified justification of having a *tafsīr bi-ra'y* goes a long way toward the solution of the problem. Hermeneutics explains that interpretation without *tafsīr bi-ra'y* is utterly impossible. My argument here is not over the presence or absence of *tafsīr bi-ra'y* but over its quality and qualifications that also shed light on other questions concerning the legitimacy of *tafsīr* and *ta'wīl* as well (ibid.:58).

By adopting a modern and contemporary view of hermeneutics to solve interpretative contradictions, Surūsh asserts that the traditional terminology of Islamic exegesis is characterised by an overt unpredictability. He points to the fact that Muḥammad Ḥusain Ṭabāṭabā'ī, who himself warned in the introduction of his *tafsīr* against mixing up *taṭbīq* (conforming) and *tafsīr* suffered from the charge of *tafsīr bi-ra'y*. Claiming that all interpretations must be considered in the context of preunderstanding, Surūsh (ibid.:130) also suggests, contrary to the traditional terminological distinction of *ikhtilāf*, that there are a variety of human readings even of basic Qur'anic formulas and that the traditional method of *nāsikh wa mansūkh* is insufficient for textual understanding and explanation. While his discredit of traditional metaphysical hermeneutics provides a general strategy for interpretation, it makes no decision between different interpretations and can from this perspective first of all be considered as a critique. In *Qabḍ wa baṣṭ-i ti'ūrīk-i shar'i'at*, he is concerned with hermeneutics secondary to epistemology and the primary hermeneutical question is whether meaning is historically and sociologically situated or anchored in metaphysics. Suggesting that meaning is constructed by the human mind, he compares religious texts to the world of phenomenon, which also is represented in a variety of ways through human language. In this respect, the text has no well-defined features in terms of unity, totality, authorship or self-referentiality, and meaning is never equivalent to the author's intention. He categorically rejects the notion of *ma'ni-yi wāqī'i* (true meaning) in the realm of human understanding:

The allegory of the external world is the only accessible allegory for the written text. No written text says its meaning twice. It is rather the human linguistic mind that reads meaning into the text. Phrases are hungry for meaning rather than impregnated with meaning even if they are not satisfied with all kind of food either. The meaning of worldly phenomena is not inscribed on them and neither is it easy to grasp (ibid.:287–288).

In the textual world, we do not have anything such as truth in the meaning of conformity with or intention of the author. The author selects a language for his exposition of meaning and takes into account a specific meaning but there are,

indeed, other meanings of that text. If the author is conscious of the fact that a text communicates meaning disengaged from the intention or objective of its author, he or she cannot blame others for misinterpretation (Surūsh 1999d:192).⁹⁷

While intention lends existence to a text, it is hence not the basis of valid interpretation or an ultimate means for attaining an objective interpretation. The inference to the best explanation of a text is not related to the supposed intention of the author, since language by nature does not search for a unified meaning but essentially possesses a number of non-fixed possibilities as far as meaning is concerned. In contrast to the enlightenment notion that language must be rational and transparent and functions only to represent the real world that the rational mind observes, Surūsh suggests that there is no firm or objective connection between the objects of perception and the words used to name them (between signified and signifier). As Derrida would say, language itself effects its own deconstruction since texts are open to multiple interpretations. This undermines attempts to retrieve or repeat the truth of texts since multiple interpretations tend to mean not plentitude but a paralogy that involves conflict and disruption, as well as the ruptures and gaps in understanding. This is, according to Surūsh, the cold hermeneutic truth: The truth is that there is no truth, no master name or as Lyotard would say 'no metanarrative' that holds things captive.⁹⁸ His hermeneutics involves hence in some sense a critique of hermeneutics itself and specifically a critique of any attempt to find *the* truth of a particular text:

Language itself never points towards one single specific meaning. Philosophically speaking, the text is a *fī'liyāt-i nā-yāftah* (not yet actualised) and a potentiality. The text accepts many formal meanings as a potentiality. [...] At the level of justification, we must infer the best explanation that acknowledges pluralism. We are confronted with a lot of cases and meanings that the texts (whether profane or sacred) have in option together with many denotations and probabilities. The best guess or explanation for clarifying meaning is probably the rule that the text possesses an ambiguous and non-fixed essence of meaning (ibid.:195).

By acknowledging that the inferred meaning of a concept or sentence might very well differ from the author's intention, Surūsh (1996c:296) also questions whether we may understand the meaning of a theological concept better than the author himself:

Is it possible to understand the meaning of a concept better than the author? Again, does the meaning of a word change while the author's intention remains permanent? The descriptions we have made earlier seem to give positive answers to these questions. Yes, if meaning is informed by theories and if theories gradually become

⁹⁷ Cf. Surūsh 1994a:52.

⁹⁸ Lyotard's (1999) argument is that the epoch of postmodernity witnesses the collapse of all grand 'metanarrative' schemas (Kantian, Hegelian, Marxist, etc) that once promised truth or justice at the end of inquiry. A metanarrative is, in his terminology, a 'grand theory', a narrative about narratives.

better, deeper and *wāqa'-namātar* (more descriptive of reality), our perception of this single sentence also becomes deeper and better.

In mystical terms, Surūsh (ibid.:299) describes the hermeneutical act as an inner process of *pardah bar dāshtan* (removal of veils) where phenomena is penetrated. But in contrast to the mystics, he limits hermeneutics, the primary philosophical question, to the horizontal and historical by arguing that “science never takes a halt”. While from Plato to Hegel, truth consisted in the complete revelation and presence of the things by a purely intellectual inspection to the infinite mind, Surūsh’s hermeneutics takes not place in the wordless realm of the Logos but in finite language. For premodern philosophers, such as Plato and Ibn Sīnā, thinking seemed more like a state of rest or a halting than a movement. From Surūsh’s hermeneutical exposition in *Qabḍ wa baṣṭ-i tī’ūrīk-i sharī‘at*, it seems that reason is only another term for understanding but it emerges that he has in mind a higher role for reason by insisting that we not only make a lot of judgements about the world but also try to integrate all these bits of knowledge into an coherent scheme with general principles. While intention is not considered to be a valid ground of interpretation, that is, finished decidable meaning, he does not rule out the existence of an exit from the labyrinth of a text. Similar to Gadamer, Surūsh is not interested in reconstructing a text to find *the* meaning of a text. Since the meaning of a text is provisional and temporal and changes with the historical context, the fixation of meaning becomes difficult:

We cannot say that the text exists deposed and disengaged from a context, since it does not bear the meaning on its shoulders but must be placed in a context. The text is theory-impregnated and theory-laden and its interpretation is flowing. Preunderstanding influences textual understanding to the same extent as in other areas of understanding and religious texts are not exempted from this ruling. The interpretation of texts is contingent on the arrived external data and subjected to contraction and expansion on account of questions that are posed to them. These data exhibit a manifest and profuse discrepancy. They may be of philosophical, historical or theological character or of a more specific character, such as linguistic or sociological (Surūsh 1999a:303–304).

Surūsh considers pre-understanding, or more correctly presuppositions, as the starting-point of textual understanding, even if he is not clear on the point of how the prejudices can be transcended aside from Popper’s theory of falsification. In contrast to Gadamer, he does not believe that ‘tradition’ is the only ground for the validity of prejudices since it fails to provide a critical norm as to the requirement of evaluating tradition.⁹⁹ Surūsh also

⁹⁹ Gadamer (1989) speaks of tradition and historicity in terms of prejudices and what he has in mind is not just the subjective attitude of expectation and prejudgement but also the cultural formation, the social, political and intellectual constructions within which our encounter with the text occurs and which the text always unsettles.

believes that the possibility of dialogue between present and past cannot be taken for granted since the horizon of the original discourse disappears in interpretation. In his discussion on the poetry of Sa'dī, Surūsh (1996c:297), presumably influenced by Kuhn's ideas on scientific revolutions, considers meaning to be a paradigmatic phenomenon limited to clearly separated historical periods where the author's intention is not embedded in meaning:

In this respect, we differentiate the meanings of a phrase from the intention of the author. While the former are related to the discovery of the world of the author, the latter is related to the discovery the world of phenomena. An author employs phrases to communicate an intention but these tend to fall short in this respect. This rule applies to vernacular as well as scholarly language such as in Sa'dī's verse, 'The green leaves of the trees are all notes of knowledge before the intelligent Creator'. The intention of Sa'dī's verses cannot be grasped without reference to his world-view and theories contemporary to him and his theology, botany, and the like. But this verse-couplet might also be explained in the light of new theories and give a deeper meaning that was not in Sa'dī's mind.

Surūsh's (1997a:242) argument is, in other words, that while every interpretation follows a certain paradigm, there are no brute facts in contemporary hermeneutics (similar to contemporary philosophy of science) since what is fixed in writing always frees itself for a new relationship.¹⁰⁰ In his book *Şirāṭhā-yi mustaqīm*, Surūsh (1999d:169) calls to attention the contextual nature of interpretation that renders meaning relative due to its entanglement in formative contexts that are relational. He also asserts that, while language functions to reflect a representation of reality, it does not have a clearly demarcated structure containing symmetrical units and that metaphorical language opens new worlds, worlds of possible levels of meaning. Language at its highest level is open. Even the simplest sentence conveyed by the means of natural language must be interpreted, since words take their actual meaning from the connection with a given context and a given audience against the background of a given situation. He argues that the existence of multiple contextually situated interpretations maintains the sparkle of the originally revealed Qur'anic text. While this does not amount to saying that the Qur'an reveals its own being when it is presented in different interpretations, he acknowledges that these interpretations disseminate its multiple meaning, where the inexhaustible character of revelation finds its verification in textual ramifications. Referring to Muḥammad Ḥusain Ṭabāṭabā'ī's view that the Qur'anic verse 2:201 has one million two-hundred-sixty thousand meanings and quoting *akhbār* concerning the existence of seventy or eighty inner levels of the Qur'anic text, he asserts that different understandings of the same text have an elementary relation to each other, their textuality:

¹⁰⁰ For Surūsh reference to Kuhn's ideas, cf. Surūsh 1994b:226.

At the level of interpretation, the arena of the relationship between text and understanding, we are confronted with multiple meanings. The extraordinary variation and quantity of meaning informs us about the structure (of a text), which essentially is non-fixed and leads us to the affirmation of different meanings. In the world of text and symbolism, we are in truth essentially confronted with such a lack of fixed meaning. Even if we consent to the erudition that the *ḥakīmān* (sages) claim that they possess of the external world (i.e. "if something exists, it can be known"), their claim is objectionable in the realm of textual analysis, since the inroad of metaphors and allegory into language is beyond the authority or decision of anyone. Language is in its essence metaphorical and it is impossible to communicate meaning without metaphors (ibid.:191).

Since the text itself, as far as the Qur'an is concerned, never gives any clues to a correct reading or where language is intended to be metaphorical and where not, Surūsh (1999a:314–315) asserts that metaphors as well as meaning stem from the nature of interpretation and the interpreter's presuppositions embedded in the process of understanding:

The presence of metaphors in the Qur'an is expedient on natural understanding of the text and consists of context and location of interpretation. The non-interpreted text has no *muḥkam* and *mutashābih* meanings but the inroad of these two concepts are in-bedded in interpretation... The existence of *mutashābihāt* is hence not restricted to the Qur'an but *muḥkam* as well as *mutashābih* exist in all texts, in particular in revealed texts. The existence of *mutashābih* is also the root and the cause of the contraction and expansion of religious knowledge. When we consider the *farāyand* (justification) for religious textual understanding (the aim of which always is contingent on one supposition among others), we come across the meaning and the rationale of the existence of *mutashābihāt* in the Qur'an. It is interesting that the Qur'an itself gives no clue of how to determine the *mutashābihāt* or how to differentiate them from the other verses.

Allegory is, in other words, inherent in the text and emerges in the context of interpretation, where the exercise of language is considered to be an internal semantic process in which new meanings can be created, and at the same time an outwardly directed referential process in which our linguistically mediated experience of reality can be changed. Interpretation in this broad sense is a process by which we use all the available contextual determinants to grasp the actual meaning of a given message in a given situation. But Surūsh restrains significantly from explaining what differentiates reading from interpretation and also from establishing a criterion to distinguish between those texts whose meaning is completely transparent and those whose meaning lies deeper than the surface meaning. While he suggests that language does not only refer to itself, he neglects to explain when interpretation is complete by acknowledging various modalities of meaning.

Whereas a large part of modern hermeneutics (from Heidegger to Gadamer and Ricoeur) develops hermeneutics to the range of ontology and maintains that a text only is understood by sharing a common linguistic horizon

grounded in the ontological features of the subject matter of the text, Surūsh's interpretative endeavour never enters the sphere of modern psychology or finite transhistorical consciousness or indulges in any lengthy discussions on objectivity or intentionality.¹⁰¹ For Surūsh, the anticipation of meaning that governs our understanding of the text is an act of subjectivity, which does not proceed from the communality that binds us to the 'tradition' or participates in the decentred space covering the intention of the author. While the interpreter in a sense is decentred in the act of textual analysis, Surūsh does not adopt Heidegger's idea of the 'circle of understanding', according to which interpretation is neither subjective nor objective but instead the interplay of the movement of the tradition and the movement of the interpreter. In contrast to Gadamer's (1989:245) notion of the finite effective history consciousness that predetermines individual self-awareness as a flickering in the closed circuits of historical life, he never rules out the pursuit of objective knowledge and is indifferent to the historical horizons of the text and reader. Surūsh has more in common with Ricoeur's (1976:2) idea that the author's intention cannot stand outside the text as the criterion for interpreting the text. A text remains the construct of the human mind, since the author's intention and the meaning of the text ceases to coincide in written discourse.

As the major differences between Gadamer and Surūsh can be found in their conceptions of the text, Surūsh's position has more affinities with the fundamental Kantian principle of the subjective basis of understanding, which has no emphasis on the role of the past, i.e. affections, concepts and practices of a cultural heritage, in constituting present and future understanding. In the light of Popperian scientific method, Surūsh would also rather consider subjectivity as a process of becoming that never fully is. His subject is, in other words, a modern alienated subject, estranged from the objective and from his or her own divine nature. While Kant (1959) presented a model of the subject that reflects itself out of its own historicity, Surūsh's notion of subject remains chained in the structural abyss of historical and horizontal contexts. While Surūsh's reference to the Kantian distinction between noumenon and phenomenon suggests a representational mode of thinking (where meaning in some way corresponds to external reality), his view of human language demonstrates a critical attitude towards meaning and metaphysics as well as towards a structural function of the sacred. Language exposes a far-reaching ambivalence, not merely in symbolic usage, since linguistic description is complicated and

¹⁰¹ In this respect, Gadamer's (1989:432) position is essentially that what is produced by understanding is new and original, but the interpreter must not think that she or he is writing a new text but be open to the voice of tradition which reveals Being. He remains faithful to Heidegger's idea that the intelligible Being is what is disclosed in an authentic act of understanding. What accedes to language in the play of text and interpreter is truth as the disclosure of Being. "Being that can be understood is language".

multiple. While textual understanding in a sense is limited by the composition and structure of the text, this does not imply that textual meaning is uniform:

The world of meaning is by definition pluralistic. It is only rarely that one single meaning appears in interpretation. The most important norm of textuality is plurality. As regards 'correct meaning', this type of meaning is produced when we use our full methodological comprehension of texts (i.e. methodological and rational capacity). 'Correct meaning' differs from 'true meaning' since texts do not possess any 'true meaning'. A text can have various correct meanings. Indeed, there are alien meanings and these are the meanings which are not presupposed by you and which are not necessarily wrong, either. The structural boundaries of the text do not provide all kinds of meaning but still the text does not have necessarily one single meaning. In the textual world, there is no 'correct' meaning in the sense of conformity with the author's intention (Surūsh 1999d:192).

From a linguistic point of view, the clue to the variety of readings within the structural unity of the text is contingent on the existence of incoherence and contradiction within the text itself, "which is not the design or arrangement of anyone but belongs to the necessity of language itself" (ibid.:191). As far as Surūsh's hermeneutics is disinterested in deciphering any presumable original intentionality of authors, it represents an anti-Kantian perspective that is, nonconceptual and non-representational. In the quest for new paradigms, he actually attempts to extricate himself from the mode of representational thinking so characteristic for enlightenment thought and rather seems to believe in historical condition as a constitutive element of meaning where past meaning only can be reconstructed in regard to historical conditions. In this case, he has also more similarities with the position of the contemporary Pakistani scholar Fazlur Rahman, who has denied the potential benefits of Gadamer's phenomenological hermeneutics and perceives interpretation merely as methodologically guided understanding and not as a consciousness of historical finitude that endeavours to fuse the horizons of the interpreter and his text. Surūsh (2001:5) shares Rahman's conviction that the crucial point of interpretation is to let a past text speak to the present situation from a universal perspective in order to emancipate human rationality from the authority of tradition as well as his belief that the universal meaning by content is ethical in nature:

In the contemporary world, religion fulfills two important functions: On the one hand, it makes possible an inner experience (of the sacred) and on the other hand, it facilitates ethical knowledge. If religion accomplishes these two functions, i.e. to support ethics and religious, spiritual, theosophical and divine experiences, it performs its delicate function and conquers the hearts [of men and women]. To proceed from the perspective of jurisprudence, social norms and strict legal

enforcement has the opposite effect and this is exactly what has happened in our society.¹⁰²

While Surūsh does not explicitly discuss the question of language as a tool for human subjectivity, he rules out any transcendental ground for linguistic phenomena where past (tradition) and present (modernity) can have a dialogue on equal terms. He rather argues that the historical situation of modernity necessitates a new understanding of theological concepts, such as the virginity of Mary, and so on (Surūsh 1996c:199). While Surūsh's assertion that the text is 'silent' has some affinities with Gadamer's model of the dialogical nature of language, inspired by Platonic dialogue, where interpretation accordingly moves from what is said to what is unsaid within the text, he rejects the transcendental basis of infinite potentiality of meaning as the criterion for historical continuity of the text. In contrast to Gadamer's notion of ontological 'effective history consciousness', which argues for a transcendent and ontological feature of the subject matter within the text that sheds light on the meaning of every textual understanding, Surūsh speaks of an ordinary historical consciousness of preconditioning that we can overcome by becoming aware of the presuppositions that govern our point of departure. In contrast to Gadamer, Surūsh tends to reduce the text to its interpretation by taking the particular context of the interpreter as the sole criterion for the appearance of textual meaning. Yet, the issue remains for Surūsh as to how subjective presuppositions are to be transcended after they have been put into play in the act of interpretation. While his logocentrism and belief in scientific objectivity, as well as his method of second-order epistemology, cannot easily be reconciled with the deconstructionist denial of any patterns of rational necessity (since the supplementary nature of reason suggests a non-rational origin of reason), his discourse is, however, not captive to an analysis of truth. In fact, he shares Derrida's view that the difference between situations is the one and only starting-point for understanding, since the essence of meaning is not separate from the infinitely different possible situations in which it is understood:

Indeed, our imagination and interpretations are conjectural, miscalculated, adaptable, relative, faulty, one-sided, misleading, partial, cultural-contingent and contradictory. This is precisely what the *ṣāhib-i waḥy* ('possessor of revelation', i.e.

102 Cf. Surūsh 1996c:190 and 549. While Rahman (1982:9) acknowledges that the basic questions of method and hermeneutics never were squarely addressed by Muslims in pre-modern times, he argues that modern Western hermeneutics either sacrifices objectivity at the altar of the subject (i.e. Heidegger, Gadamer, Ricoeur) or neglects the historical contextual factor (i.e. the objectivity school). He argues that Gadamer's assertion that all understanding is predetermined by presupposition or something else makes any objectivity of anything whatsoever impossible. In this respect, he proposes a process of interpretation that consists of a double movement, from the present situation back to Qur'anic historical times, then back to the present. The past text can hence be objectively known and the tradition can be objectively brought under the judgement of the normative meaning of the context of revelation under whose impact this tradition arose.

God) intended. We are imperfect human beings and our portion of truth is such. No human knowledge is sacred and religious knowledge is no exception to this rule (Surūsh 1999a:319)

Although Derrida as well as Gadamer insists that the text has no fixed meaning in rejecting any notion of a transcendental signified, Surūsh follows Derrida's more radical step with respect to the problem of textual meaning. For Surūsh, it is not the linguistic community (via the reader) that determines the meaning of a text by means of 'the fusion of horizons', but is rather the temporality of language that makes any *authentic* understanding impossible. But while Surūsh, similar to Derrida, can find no determined meanings in texts (for it makes no sense to speak about the meaning of a text apart from our reading of it), he takes into account in his theorising that texts have readers to a greater extent than Derrida, by arguing that no reading is context-free. Surūsh, whose thinking is fully part of the humanist tradition, shares neither Derrida's (1978:292) idea of 'play' as a form of anti-humanism nor his venture "to pass beyond man and humanism", even if Derrida (1988:125–127, 143–144) becomes more disposed to hermeneutical methods in his later works, such as *Limited Inc.*

In his book *Farbihtar az idi'ūlūzhī*, Surūsh emphatically rejects non-realist approaches to knowledge which he believes signals the death of epistemology with their radical doubt and are no longer doing proper epistemology. He rejects postmodernist (*read* deconstructionist) thought where "God has no successor and the scene has been emptied from every kind of autonomous and divine source" and supposes that the postmodernist critique of reason must be considered in the historical context of anti-scientism, which springs from "the arrogant and extravagant claims of positivism" (Surūsh 1995a:9 and 1996a:256). He laments that the pragmatist and postmodernist philosophical critique of scientific objectivity "has conquered the last trench of rationality held by the neo-Kantian philosophy of Karl Popper" (Surūsh 1996a:359) and also argues that postmodernism has reached a point where it must decide whether to espouse relativism or to appeal to some other method of immediate realisation of truth:

Postmodernism has issued that the verdict of relativity of truth (which is tantamount to denying it) is now, according to its own verdict, either devoid of the truth or else invites the charge of self-contradiction. In either case, it lacks the decisiveness and the power to function as a weapon against science. It is true that science is no longer the only possible form of knowledge and the sole valid method for the discovery of truth but this refutes only a positivistic notion of science. Refutation of positivism is not the same thing as refutation of science (Surūsh 1995a:9).

Even if Surūsh (1996a:361) acknowledges that the paradox of modernism is that "it knows that certainty is unattainable but still wants to have it", neither foundationalism nor deconstructionism seem to be genuine options for him. His epistemological rejection of any foundational pieces of knowledge and

the belief that reality is only accessible to us in terms of how we interpret it (which supposes that there is no reality to be independently compared to our understanding) does in fact not necessarily imply deconstruction, since Popper's principle of falsification also rejects foundationalism.¹⁰³ If the post-positivism of Popper can be defeated, it should not happen, according to Surūsh, at the expense of reason and science, even if science is nothing but a tool in comprehending reality:

Philosophers such as Kuhn, Feyerabend (and Richard Rorty from another direction) sacrificed the scientific methods and the logic of discovery at the foot of relativism for the sake of history and decapitated modern sciences, the purest signifier of rationality. They argued that science is an ideological construct and although they are horrified by the consequences of their own deposition, the bridges to the lost heaven have all collapsed... Postmodernism was born out of the belief that no secure (cognitive) foundation exists and the lost hope for any quest for truth. Postmodernism thinks of the world as a text that may have a meaning even if this meaning is entirely mythological and allegorical. The method and object of postmodernism as regards textual analysis is deconstruction, i.e. to find contradictions and hidden assumptions, rather than understanding the intention of the author (ibid.:359).

Referring to Rorty's saying that "While Reason replaced God, today we have no God, no Reason and nothing else", Surūsh (ibid.:359) concludes that postmodernist philosophy, in its attempts to deconstruct reality has been forced to bring back the pre-modern modes of expression. As late as 1992, Surūsh (ibid.:363) actually considered mysticism the only secure escape out of the traps of deconstructionist relativism by claiming that "only one way remains and that is to seek shelter among the theosophers". However much Surūsh departs from the traditional metaphysical foundation of philosophical speculation, he revisits the Persian theosophical tradition to interpret its teachings in a non-cognitive sense to signify the mysteriousness of God. In his ambiguity towards the deconstructionist enterprise and his desire to keep up with a somewhat religiously situated discourse, he claims that "the legacy of Islamic theosophy may be able to face up to the complications arising from the uncertainty and scepticism of contemporary humanity because it has been sceptical towards rationality from its very beginning" (ibid.:363).

Surūsh's viewpoint on deconstructionism gives the impression that if all knowledge, as Foucault (1977:163) suggests, lacks a "right, even in the act of knowing, to truth or foundation for truth", then there is no longer any

¹⁰³ Surūsh's turn to hermeneutics from Popper's principle of falsification seems to be due to the fact that hermeneutics avoids any confusion of meaning with truth and understanding with knowledge (in contrast to foundationalism as well as deconstructionism) in terms that it essentially concerns interpretation, which is about meaning, that is, about what is understood. Foundationalism in the form of logical positivism denies that statements can be meaningful if they cannot be (empirically) verified and, at the other end of the spectrum, deconstruction holds that any interpretation of meaning is already true, to the extent that 'truth' means anything, just by being produced.

meaning of the revealed texts as sources of knowledge. Surūsh disapproves of Foucault's *Nietzschean* attitude to epistemology which has nothing optimistic to say, if it does not (as Richard Rorty seems to suggest) avoid epistemology altogether in a mistaken attempt to make archaeology the successor subject to epistemology.¹⁰⁴ Whereas Nietzsche and his successors abandoned the striving for objectivity or any of its substitutes and the intuition of one truth, Surūsh attempts to defend objectivity by re-describing and grounding a plurality of probable truths. In contrast to Foucault, who is interested in how power produces the subject, Surūsh (1996a:91) considers the aspiration to bring about inter-subjective scientific objectivity a noble one, which implies that all knowledge claims also are caught up by accidental error at the level of construction:

The question of objectivity in science concerns whether our human mental faculty generates systematic error or not. It does not concern whether man makes errors at all. The meaning of objective knowledge is not that knowledge corresponds to the external phenomenon nor the presence or the absence of error in knowledge. Objectivity in knowledge means that we are not caught by systematic error at the level of construction of knowledge. Objectivity is comprised therefore of truth as well as falsehood. It is possible that our perception is objective without being true.

In his book *Rāzdānī wa raushanfīkrī*, Surūsh is occupied with the question of the distribution of knowledge and information as a major component of power. Discussing the ideas of Foucault and Habermas, he argues that modern life corresponds to the nature of the information at disposal in modernity and suggests that this information undoubtedly affects the realm of, for instance, politics and government. In this respect, he refers, for instance, to the fact that the French revolution was expedited by means of clandestine leaflets, the Iranian constitutional revolution by telegraph wires and the most recent Iranian revolution by audiocassettes. While he does not adopt Foucault's concept of power, he seems prepared to go along with the French philosopher insofar as the social and historical dimensions of knowledge are concerned:

Although science and power have always gone hand in hand, the relationship between the two has now become much stronger and more extensive. This is why people speak of *sākhṭan-i ḥaqīqat* (truth as construction) and *ʿitibārī budan-i ḥaqīqat* (truth as convention). The conventionality of truth means that we define truth and influence people's consciousness in such a way as to make them see something as true and something else as false. It is in this context that Foucault's theory about truth-power comes to light and takes meaning. He claims that truth is inextricably intertwined with power. Habermas put forward a similar position in one of his major works, *Knowledge and human interest*, where he argues that knowledge is underpinned by human interests and that the nature of knowledge or scientific investigation varies depending on whether the underlying interest is understanding,

¹⁰⁴ Cf. Rorty 1998:41–49.

control or emancipation. Knowledge bent on understanding is interpretative; knowledge bent on control is empirical and knowledge bent on emancipation is critical. It is this sense that Habermas speaks of knowledge-constitutive human interests. Values are, in other words, deeply ingrained in modern knowledge. Values are tied up with power (Surūsh 1999c:3–4).

As opposed to his strong criticism of deconstructionism (which is not the only represented version of postmodernism), Surūsh is more affirmative to the phenomenon of postmodernism in a 1999 interview with *Kiyān* on the question of “Religion, tolerance and civilisation”. He is positive to the postmodernist critic of modern rationality that places universal reason under dispute and similarly evinces all signs of having been chastened by the tyranny of the arrogant knight of modern rationality. Surūsh (1999f:28) suggests that “the boundaries of reason are more accurately understood in the postmodern condition” in the sense that “postmodernism represents a revolt against the narcissism of rationality”. While acknowledging that universalism is necessary in the construction of universal ethics and laws such as the Declaration of human rights, he asserts that the contribution of postmodernism to pluralism and tolerance as well as its criticism of the superiority of Reason, is beneficial. “All the stress that postmodernism lays on pluralism and reason’s servitude to interests is found among the remaining favours of postmodernism” (ibid.:28–29). He does not, however, reflect upon Derrida’s assertion that the enlightenment conception of reason tends to be self-legitimising because it takes one historically and culturally specific notion of reason as its universal standard for all forms of reason. This is a common target of contemporary Islamic criticism concerning the enlightenment project. Many Islamic intellectuals consider the identification of universal structures of human existence as revealed solely in Western philosophy as a major obstacle to inter-cultural dialogue on equal terms.¹⁰⁵ Surūsh acknowledges, nevertheless, that philosophical universality is no longer essentialist and thus no more ‘Islamic’ than ‘eurocentric’ in the sense that scientific knowledge (i.e. truth-claims) are not merely ‘local’ but genuinely universal.

The fact that Surūsh (1999f:28–29) in the same article considers Habermas’ work *Knowledge and human interest* as a work that can be related to postmodernism suggests that his definition of postmodernism in this context is very much connected to the recognition of pluralism as a natural part of human rationality and thought. In contrast to the fundamental uncertainties of the deconstructionism of Foucault (1972:229) concerning human knowledge, whose aim is to “question our will to truth, to restore to

¹⁰⁵ Cf. Ahmed 1992, Manzoor 2000, al-Attas 1985, Qadir 1988, etc. In this respect, Derrida (1998a:12) argues that Judaism and Islam, by recalling monotheism at all costs are “still alien enough at the heart of Graeco-Christian, Pagano-Christian Europe” to alienate themselves from a Western modernity that “signifies the death of God” or “the Christianisation of the world”.

discourse its character as an event, and to abolish sovereignty of the signifier”, Surūsh does not agree that all foundations of epistemology have been shown to be unreliable. While Surūsh in his lectures on *ijtihad* advocates deconstruction at the level of methodology, writers like Derrida (1987:390) deny that deconstruction is a method since it is not reductive like an ordinary method, whether it is primary or derived. Deconstructionism cannot, however, be a complete non-method as it is not singular and homogenous nor does it advocate uncontrollable free-play.

Similar to Surūsh’s epistemology, deconstruction turns to hermeneutics, albeit poststructuralist, in the sense of disarranging the construction of terms in a sentence and disassembling the parts of the whole. Its purpose is to locate an instance of otherness within a text, an otherness that reflects logocentric conceptuality, and then to deconstruct this conceptuality from the standpoint of alterity (Derrida 1987:387–388). Surūsh’s affinities with postmodern thought are in fact closest in the realm of hermeneutics, where the meanings and significance of texts are not limited to those meanings that conventional historical criticism is designed to recover. Similar to Derrida’s deconstructionism, he believes that language refers only to itself rather than to a transparent extratextual reality and asserts multiple conflicting interpretations of a text. He bases such interpretations on the philosophical, political or social implications of the use of the language in the text rather than on the author’s intention. What creates problems for hermeneutics is language itself, which is not, as the later Heidegger claimed, the ‘house of being’, but humanly constructed. The text is therefore not simply a historical source that reduces meaning to the nexus of historical relationships but rather results from the creative interaction of the reading subject with the text. Textual meaning is the result of interpretation that is generated in the space where the text is put to play so that when “a component of this collection (i.e. mental and scientific capital of the interpreter) changes, the result of this formation and relation of components (i.e. meaning and sense) will also change (Surūsh 1996c:182).

In his *Şirāthā-yi mustaqīm*, Surūsh argues that semantic meaning is relative in relation to the knowledge and comprehension of the interpreter, as there is no original and hidden meaning present in the text. He also argues that hermeneutical divergence is not due to the structure of the text but rather is contingent on the interpreting subject in an absolute sense. By claiming that uncertainty and ambiguity is an attribute of all human language and linguistic communication, including revealed texts, he downgrades textual meaning to subjective understanding:

Meaning is identical to meaning of understanding. The variety of human minds is identical to the diversity of acquired data. The acquired data comprise the preconditions and presuppositions of meaning. The diversity of meanings of a text, which are located in the human mind, depend therefore in the end on the diversity of

human minds. The essence of the fact that the range of human minds construct different meanings of a single text is basically that the text is not the measure of multiplicity of meanings but rather gives the option of all possible meanings (Surūsh 1999d:195).¹⁰⁶

Similar to contemporary postmodernism, Surūsh also seeks to move beyond the conventional historical paradigm of tradition, whether this tradition is enlightenment modernity or premodernity. He is essentially sceptical about the recovery of meaning, since the acquisition of valid knowledge is more complex than the ordinary inductive reasoning of common man. In this respect, he takes the non-realist approach to interpretation and denies the existence of an objective, external world outside the text. While the objects are not as privileged as in premodernity, the subject is not as privileged as in enlightenment modernism either. Surūsh claims that the text itself cannot communicate any intention but is contingent upon external commodities in the sense that what matters are relations and contexts which constantly shift. In this respect, he wishes, similar to Derrida (1998:158b) to empty the 'presence' out of the text, approving the latter's maxim *Il n'y a pas de hors-texte* ('there is nothing beyond the text'). As Surūsh (1999k) argues, there is no exit from the labyrinth of a text, no finished or decidable meaning:

My writings are *ṣāmit* and remain insignificant until someone reads them. The readers are the subjects, the individual *nāfiqīn* (speakers) of my ideas and thought. There is nothing stable outside the text. Any attempt to recover the intention of the author is in vain. Interpretation is endless.

Textuality is not only true of the 'object' of study but also true of the 'subject' which studies. As the text possesses a horizon of indefinite meanings, the neat distinction between subject and object is obliterated, something which also erases the aim of providing objective descriptions. But it seems difficult to see how the inaugurating of an open-ended indefiniteness of textuality, fraught with ambiguities, would provide a way out of the closure of knowledge. The death of the author in Surūsh's thought is not merely the concluding recognition of the physical absence of the author in the process of interpretation but rather the affirmation of the ultimate metaphysical separation between the text and its author. That is to say, while the text is the product of the author, the interpretation is that of the reader. Even a signature or a declaration left by the author in the text has no authority for its interpretation, since these are elements of the text that are subject to further interpretation. The author is hence not only rendered superfluous but the text is considered open and incomplete. An interpretation of a text is considered to be the creation of a new 'text' through which the reader expresses herself (i.e. there is no meaning in speaking of any authorised or authentic versions of a text).

¹⁰⁶ Cf. Surūsh 1999a:315.

In the sense that meaning is solely a function of the reader and interpretation a reflection of the interpreter's response, Surūsh is critical to the intentionality so characteristic of enlightenment thought that would support the original intentionality of the sacred as it is revealed in the world. The initial hermeneutical task of the interpreter is, in his view, not to grasp the intentional structure of the sacred by imaginatively recreating the conditions of a sacred manifestation but rather to make it applicable to new endless contexts where the non-religious external data is projected on the text. By distinguishing faith from reason, his epistemological confessions, while not sceptical in the religious sense, suggest no metaphysical position or any structural position for consciousness that would give certainty and hermeneutical plausibility to the interpretation of the religious phenomenon. In Surūsh's view, there can be no theology of the text since the text is the trace that escapes onto-theological closure even as it inscribes it. By emphasising the non-identity or non-presence that lies at the heart of the Qur'an or any other scriptural identity, his hermeneutics is not exegesis proper, aimed at drawing (or leading) the truth out of the text but a form of *eisegesis* that imposes the reader's beliefs upon or reads them into the text.

Surūsh's recent 'turn to the reader' is, indeed, the application of Kant's 'turn to the subject', where there is, epistemologically speaking, no human escape from her/his own subjectivity and consciousness. In contrast to premodern philosophy, which always maintained that the notions of meaning and truth are intimately related, his relativistic notion of truth includes a metaphysical dichotomy between text and meaning that denies the possibility of true knowledge by rejecting certain meaning, as there are only infinitely possible versions of truth which are also separable from the 'meta-narrative' of Islamic tradition. His thought has not merely an inherent pluralistic and subjectivist character but also invokes a decentralisation that denies any position of the symbolism of the centre in the philosophical mode of thinking as, for instance, was the case with the traditional Islamic philosophical, theological and mystical epistemic schemes, which considered metaphysics as a natural disposition of the philosophical thinker because of the very nature of the intellect. By rejecting that the transcendent and universal referent of the enlightenment philosophy of Descartes and Kant would provide guidance regarding the ultimate meaning of human existence and the goal of human history, it is furthermore not an accident that his epistemological discourse gives way to a hermeneutic plurality of immanent, historically contingent and ultimately normless reasons and actualities which are intimately bound up with specific human contexts. The crisis of meaning, which is one of the predominant themes in Surūsh's thought, is hence nothing but an inevitable consequence of the impoverishment of reason, the denial of its transcendence, which is an outcome of the historicisation of the scientific discourse.

But there is still a vast distance between Surūsh and the deconstructionism of Derrida, who is more concerned with using the tools of metaphysics against itself. Derrida is a post-metaphysical thinker for whom the reality-appearance distinction has *entirely* lost its hegemony over human thought. By pushing philosophy to its limits, he writes about transcendence and metaphysics on the margins of the Western philosophical tradition. While Surūsh rejects Husserl's (as well as Kant's) notion of transcendence, which only grasps the realm of the possible and claims that the grasp is total, he acknowledges Popper's conviction that science and epistemology is a noble quest and that the effort to acquire inter-subjective objectivity in the domain of human knowledge must not be given up. In contrast to deconstructionism, which originally is a definite, negative and critical reaction to the intellectual projects of romantic idealistic and enlightenment representational modes of thinking, Surūsh is not primarily reacting against the background of enlightenment modernism but against the normative wisdom and paradigm of traditional Islam in its entirety. In contrast to deconstructionism, Surūsh's religious intellectual background, similar to that of Kant, also makes him hopeful about the fate of humankind. He has faith in the gradual development towards a future characterised by more human ideals and, more importantly, he is deeply concerned about the relation between virtue and happiness (Surūsh 1995a:2).

I. Divergent interpretations: The problem of truth and probability

From Surūsh's exposition on hermeneutics, it emerges that no interpretation of the revealed sources is absolute and that the task of the believers is to constantly renew and adjust their understanding of these texts to the contemporary context. As he argues repetitively, human knowledge is conjecture and pure guess-work since "whereas the last religion has been revealed to mankind, the final religious interpretation has yet not arrived" (Surūsh 1996c:60).¹⁰⁷ As far as the existence of divergent interpretations are concerned, he suggests that *fiqh*, in contrast to *ʿilm al-kalām* (which does not validate diverse views on the nature of God, revelation and man) is innately disposed to *ikhtilāf*. Islamic jurisprudence is etymologically related to *tafaquh* (understanding) and allows for a larger degree of interpretative pluralism since the legal discourse is never afflicted by conflict and contradictions:

The difference between theological and legal debate is evident in the fact that refutation or acceptance of legal opinions does not damage the source of *dīn-dārī*

¹⁰⁷ Cf. Surūsh 1996c:110.

(religiosity) since these *ikhtilāfāt* (divergences) are identical to *tafaqquh*. The discussion of theological opinion is, however, concerned with the source of religiosity or cognition of religion itself. Theological discourses on questions such as God's existence, the truth of revelation, predestination, free will, justice or evil, sometimes expel someone from a religion or render new meaning and spirit to someone's religion. Theology concerns the affirmation of a kind of religion while jurisprudence already has accepted a specific type of religion (Surūsh 1996a:49).

In this respect, Surūsh (1994d:360–363) argues in his *Hikmat wa ma'ishat* (Wisdom and sustenance) that the word *tafaqquh* was used in early Islam to denote religious understanding in the general sense and was not restricted to jurisprudence. Therefore, he suggests that *tafaqquh* is essentially not an *amr-i dīnī* (religious rule) but rather is connected to understanding in the general hermeneutical sense: it is time-bound and flowing. While he believes that traditional legal theory in every way restricts the interpretative space of the jurist in the inference of norms from the revealed sources, he argues that all attempts to suppress legal discourse are impossible since the hermeneutical methods and tools themselves are human and subjected to flow. In his view, all juristic opinions are provisional and in need of rectification:

The methodological tools that are under the jurist's authority are human. They have a limited capacity and cannot be expected to distinguish the good from bad and the incorrect from the correct in an absolute sense. In the end, the jurist therefore arrives at *ẓann* (conjecture) (Surūsh 1996c:110).¹⁰⁸

Inspired by Murtaḍā Muṭahharī's discussion on the forgery of legal decrees in early Islam, Surūsh (ibid.:55) argues that the theory of contraction and expansion of knowledge explains why the jurists diverge in their individual viewpoints on law, "why an Arabic *fatwā* gives an Arabic smell and why an Iranian *fatwā* gives an Iranian smell". But while Surūsh considers pluralism "the essence of the theory of expansion and contraction of Islamic law", he departs from traditional notions of *ikhtilāf* in the sense that he believes that divergent interpretation is undesirable in *fiqh*. In this respect, he also transfers the question of legal disagreements from the level of methodology to the level of hermeneutics by arguing that traditional *fiqh* was only concerned with refuting rival legal opinions and inferences:

The texts of Islamic law are from the believer's point of view free of contradictions and error. Since religion has been revealed to work out differences, we must consider how all these genuine and substantial disputes, contradictions and differences among the religious scholars appear. Is religion or the understanding of religion the catalyst behind these disputes? What kind of *ikhtilāf* is this that religion cannot solve and is even afflicted by? (ibid.:246)¹⁰⁹

Contrary to the traditional epistemic standards of Islamic law, Surūsh

¹⁰⁸ Cf. Surūsh 1996c:541.

¹⁰⁹ Cf. Surūsh 1996c:8 and 1999d:98.

(1996a:6–8) claims that *taqlīd* ought not to be incumbent in matters where *ikhtilāf* exists and he also criticises the advocates of *taqlīd* by arguing that this principle never was implemented in the *mauḍūʿāt* (subjects) or *uṣūl* of jurisprudence:

The Islam of philosophy, theosophy and anthropology accepts questioning, since it operates at the level of *tahqīq* (research). By approving inquiry, these sciences do not force *taqlīd* upon the individual. The Islam of *fiqh* takes no account of questioning, since it works at the level of *taqlīd*. Indeed, it accepts no function whatsoever for rational inspection and, irrespective of the current theory of *ijtihād* and *taqlīd*, it insists on the fact that the duty of the individual layman is to conduct *taqlīd* and to regard the word of the jurist as *ḥujjat-i taʿabuddī* (unquestionable proof). While *taqlīd* is acceptable in the realm of *furūʿ*, which is also far from recognised, it is entirely objectionable in the realm of *uṣūl*. In the case of deep divergence of the jurists' opinions, one cannot be confident which opinion is true. It is therefore not compulsory to perform *taqlīd* to a jurist. [...] In general terms, there are three branches of matters pertaining to belief: *furūʿ-i dīn* and *aḥkām-i fiqhī* (legal norms), *mauḍūʿāt* of legal norms and principles of belief and knowledge. Only legal norms are actually relevant to *taqlīd*, since it is not optional to carry out *taqlīd* in the *mauḍūʿāt* or *uṣūl*. Only one-third of these branches are, so to say, *taqlīdī*.

While Surūsh (1996c:247) considers science as an objective and universal enterprise and his exposition on hermeneutics suggests that the aim of science is to free itself from metaphysical or other ideological presuppositions, his exposition on epistemology is aimed at being purely descriptive. In his view, the theory of contraction and expansion of religious knowledge takes into account questions such as the relationship between data, belief and judgement and how a judgement turns out to be false from the 'outside', but never makes any theoretical justifications about which suppositions that are true and false. His purpose is rather to describe certain human features of science, history and philosophy and to determine to what extent these descriptions should count as specimens of knowledge.¹¹⁰ Perhaps due to their problematical ontological status, questions such as how we manage to know the truth or to distinguish what is false from what is true are largely considered irrelevant in his epistemological discourse. In this respect, Surūsh's position on divergent interpretations gives rise to a number of question-marks concerning his definition of conjecture and probability; If we cannot solve the question of divergent interpretation by reconstructing the author's original intention, if words have more than a single meaning and if there are multiple conflicting interpretations, how are we to choose among the various interpretations that can be made from a single text? If religious knowledge is a collection of all interpretations of religion, correct as well as false, then what is the criterion to judge the validity of a certain opinion? Do

¹¹⁰ Surūsh's discourse on Islamic law is actually the first in the Iranian context to be concerned with pluralism from an empirical point of view rather than from a normative one (if we set aside the normative aspects of his descriptive epistemology).

we have anything resembling a deeper understanding if all understanding is flowing? While Surūsh does not present a systematic hermeneutics to answer these questions, his argument is simply that deeper understanding, whether correct or not, is dependent on *dānish* (learning) and *diqqat* (precision), what he also calls *fahm-i rawishmand* (methodological understanding).¹¹¹ In his view, the ability to comprehend *bihtar* (better) is contingent on preunderstanding, since interpretation is always an individual validation that corresponds to the knowledge of the interpreter:

Those who are inaccurately familiar with Islamic history, who neither are well read in exegesis nor have examined the theosophy, philosophy or anthropological and cosmological foundation of their own ideas, cannot take hold of more than a limited number of features and ingredients of the natural world and *sharʿat*. They will also come up with an unpleasant, intransigent and disproportionate knowledge of *sharʿat*. In order to harmonise and increase their knowledge of *sharʿat*, they must search for more components and select more ingredients (of Islamic history, exegesis and legal norms). From these ingredients the effort of better understanding progresses. My claim is that this chase and selection does not emerge without beginning or origin and that the human sciences and non-religious data constantly grant the religious scholars increasing ability in their selection and discernment (ibid.:250).

In contrast to Popper's (1972:15–18) so-called 'critical method' and notion of 'best explanation' that suppose the emergence of the 'best' theory, i.e. that which has 'the greatest explanatory power', Surūsh (2000c:58) does not believe in hitting upon *one* true theory since no method can establish its sole truth and the number of possible interpretations remains infinite and inconclusive: a theory may only be better, but not the best. For Surūsh, the game of testing never comes to an end since it is only possible to falsify instrumental theories but not to establish their truth. While no higher standard of rationality than the assent of the relevant community exists, his position presupposes that there is at least an intrinsic possibility of arriving at correct scientific theories. Due to the processes of testing, scientific inquiry is a self-correcting activity that is progressive: it gradually provides better accounts of the ways the world is and eliminates theories that are epistemically defective. In this respect, the idea of progress in science also means some kind of accumulation of 'truth' (which for this reason is relative to the objects investigated). By referring to the relation between Popper and Wittgenstein, Surūsh (1996c:307) explains that the critical philosophical perspective is not so much characterised by the attempt to differentiate false statements from truth as it is to serve the *takmil-i fahm* (completion of understanding), whereby new epistemic 'truths' modify earlier ones:

It is generally assumed that criticism and rectification are aimed to reveal truth and error. This is correct but criticism accomplishes a greater service and that is the

¹¹¹ Cf. Surūsh 1994d:361 and 1996c:282.

fortification and completion of understanding. The opinions are not merely subjected to scrutiny in order to differentiate the correct ones from the erroneous ones but also to assist the acquisition of better understanding. Criticism establishes first of all the channels through which falsification emerges. To know the defects of a theory is a great blessing that elucidates the width of the circle of meaning and proof of the relevant theory. Wittgenstein used the falsification principle of Popper (which claims to discern empirical observations from non-empirical ones) in the realm of interpretation and argued that as long as the circumstances through which an interpretation is falsified remain unknown, one cannot grasp its meaning. While Wittgenstein later on distanced himself from this exaggerated view, his previous view is not altogether pointless. To know how error emerges in theories makes at least better understanding possible.

While the mode of knowing produced by the empirical self is ‘science,’ regardless of the individual status of the knower, Surūsh believes that the knowledge produced by science only leads toward progress in the sense that knowledge is a succession of theories, where the new are different from the old. While he rejects the enlightenment idea of true and eternal rational knowledge, since there is no stable and coherent knowing self, his concept of *tahawwul* (progress) does anticipate a value-judgement of some sort that enables us to claim that the new situation is ‘better’ than the previous one. While he argues that to know things ‘better’ is not an approximation of objective truth since all interpretations are weaker or stronger, the acceptance of interpretative pluralism does not, in his view, involve the kind of ‘epistemological anarchism’ that Paul Feyerabend allows for, which claims that “every sect is right or that whatever anyone says is correct” (Surūsh 1999d:56). By considering all probability as conditional, his argument is rather that no monistic interpretation exists and that a theory is *ṣaḥīḥ* (correct) just in the case where all its empirical consequences are true:

Every text is a potentiality and is actualised by the interpreter himself. My method of interpretation, while historical, is not a monistic one, since science never has been or is characterised by a single, universally applicable method, invariant through the history of science and the various fields of scientific study (Surūsh 1999k).¹¹²

In *Qabḍ wa baṣṭ-i tīūrīk-i sharīʿat*, Surūsh asserts that the key to deeper understanding is to measure various conflicting interpretations against each other and not against the divine law itself. Knowledge is therefore established not by comparing beliefs with anything outside of them, but with each other. While correct interpretations exist, these must be placed and evaluated a posteriori against other interpretations and not a priori against divine law itself:

The epistemic a posteriori predicates are separate from the epistemic a priori predicates. Only epistemological views can be compared with each other or demonstrate each other’s deficiencies and evidences. An opinion at the level of a

¹¹² Cf. Surūsh 2000c:54.

priori must never be compared with an opinion on the level of a posteriori. No obligatory and recommended rule (of *fiqh*), necessary or non-necessary, can be compared with the view that the science of *fiqh* is flowing (which is the genuine nature of the science of *fiqh*) and confirm or falsify it (Surūsh 1996c:328).¹¹³

When Surūsh (1996c:81–86), for instance, refutes the philosophical and juristic views of Ḥādī Sabziwārī as regards the innate nature of women, his critique takes therefore place on the second level of knowing, i.e. context of justification. He also argues that the plurality of interpretations of revelation must be compared with each other internally rather than against the Qur’anic text itself (Surūsh 1999l:4). In this respect, Surūsh’s position corresponds in many respects with the epistemological fallibilism of the American scientist and philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce (d. 1914), who rejects the proposal of a new non-foundationalist route to knowledge that would discover the foundations of human knowledge once and for all by identifying basic beliefs or beliefs that can be justified in other terms. Peirce’s claim that there are no unshakable foundations for human knowledge and that the quest for them is fruitless corresponds very well to Surūsh’s view that no interpretations are absolutely certain or immune to revision.¹¹⁴ While it is generally believed that fallibilism is incompatible with foundationalism (that is if nothing is immune to revision there are no foundations for human knowledge), Charles Landesman (1997:88) argues that this claim is only correct for certain versions of foundationalism and not for the general idea of it:

A basic belief need not to be known with absolute certainty; it need not even be known at all; further, it could very well be false and still be basic. That we have a right to believe something is compatible with our later discovering that we were mistaken, that what we believe probably isn’t true, and that we need to revise our belief system accordingly.

Surūsh’s epistemology hence occupies the middle ground between foundationalist and deconstructionist assertions on the human cognitive dilemma, since while he presupposes some self-justifying beliefs (such as *tawātur*), it is also the case that he believes that he is not always justified in holding them. But the problem remains for him of moving from these basic beliefs to other justified beliefs that are justified by reasoning from the former. While realism suggests a correspondence theory of truth according to which an interpretation only is true if it corresponds to reality or to fact, that is, truth depends upon the way the world is and not upon what we happen to believe, he reduces revelation emanating from the Divine by

¹¹³ Surūsh (1996c:116) also writes, “To differ the true from the false pertains to the first level of knowing (*that is* a priori), while looking from above and witnessing the human disputes on true and false from the outside is related to the second level, i.e. that of epistemology”.

¹¹⁴ Peirce is noted for his work on the logic of relations and on ‘pragmatism’ as a method of research.

setting the standards of truth and error to a cognitive and neutral realm, where it is historised and de-ontologised. Since scientific theories are representational vehicles that are capable of being true and false, their likelihood of providing knowledge of phenomena is *a matter of degree*. An interpretation may only be probable but it can also be more probable than another. The validation procedure based on Popper's criterion of falsifiability is hence complimented by the conflict between divergent interpretations:

One of the most fundamental claims of the theory of contraction and expansion is that the various understandings influence each other in the sense that when a new understanding emerges, it invites other understandings to follow it. While no one denies the fact that human understanding possibly develops and is flowing, some do not come to terms with the precise meaning of the idea of better understanding or its mechanism, which is the subject of this study. All hermeneutical theories must, indeed, describe the meaning and mechanism of better understanding (Surūsh 1996c:278).

Surūsh adopts the criteria of relative superiority that can be derived from the subjective probability logic, where the pertinence of a correct opinion of interpretation is related to its methodological and systematic character. But it seems that the inner contradiction between the tendency of realism to represent the external world as it really is and Kant's idea that we can only know the world as it appears to us, not as it is in itself, is essentially overlooked by Surūsh. He does not clarify the distinction between knowledge and probability since the uncertain and fallible character of the principles as well the methods of science indicate that humans are prone to error. In contrast to probabilism, which supposes that opinions are only selected by considering different degrees of probability relative to the available empirical evidence, Surūsh, similar to Popper's notion of degree of corroboration, does not deny the existence of objective (but essentially conjectural) knowledge.¹¹⁵ While he is indisposed to replace proof by probability, his position is ambiguous since he does not explicitly use the terminology of Popper (corroboration, improbability, etc). The terms preferability and probability can also be used synonymously. While he endorses Kant's critical epistemology according to which our knowledge springs from two fundamental sources of the mind, the capacity for receiving representations and the power of knowing an object through these observations, he denies that knowing includes value judgements, since the purpose of the second level of knowing is not to make value statements about what 'ought' to be, such as the necessity of religion, but rather to

¹¹⁵ Popper (1972:17) writes, "My theory of preference has nothing to do with a preference for the 'more probable' hypothesis. On the contrary, I have shown that the testability of a theory increases and decreases with its *informative content* and therefore with its *improbability* (in the sense of the calculus of probability).

elucidate the existing variation of values on the level of 'is':

'Don't lie' is a prohibition that is present in the science of ethics. The philosophy of ethics never prohibits anyone from lying but rather declares. 'Ethics stipulates that we shall not lie', whereby a value statement is transformed into a description. In similar terms, a Muslim testifies that Muḥammad is the Prophet of Allāh, while a non-Muslim historian never gives a testimony but only describes that Muslims give testimony that Muḥammad is the Prophet of Allāh. It is evident that to inform about a value is not a value itself and that to notify a command or prohibition is not itself a kind of command or prohibition. The meaning of what is being said here, i.e. that the views that are related to a priori knowledge are not confronted with views related to a posteriori knowledge, becomes clear. A descriptive norm cannot contradict or confirm a value, credential or epistolar rule. It is hence impossible for religious epistemology to collide and disagree with the epistolar norms of religion (Surūsh 1996c:335).

But if all interpretations are considered on the second level, even the principle *ḍarūrat-i dīn* (necessity of religion) becomes, as Surūsh (ibid.:336) argues, "an epistemological norm and not a juristic norm", which seems to be a contradiction in terms, since it runs against his previous view that a posteriori knowledge only is related to the level of 'is' and never to the level of 'ought' (ibid.:94–100). The idea that all knowledge must be considered as a posteriori results, so to say, in the fact that nothing has absolute a priori validity in the true sense of the word but only is a construction of the epistemological subject.¹¹⁶ The inconsistency of his argument arises in fact when Surūsh restricts the right to differentiate correct from incorrect interpretations to the level of a priori knowledge. It seems that Surūsh mixes the meaning of justification in Popperian science with that in contemporary epistemology and he also seems to relate epistemic justification to hermeneutical understanding rather than epistemology. Epistemic justification is more correctly a normative notion, a 'doxastology', i.e. a study of beliefs, in contrast to Popper's argument that knowledge cannot be justified but falsified and as long as it is not falsified we are entitled to regard it as provisionally true. In contemporary epistemology, as John L. Pollock and Joseph Cruz (1999:12) argue, a justified belief is one that is 'epistemically permissible' to hold. "Epistemic justification governs what you should believe or should not believe. Rules describing the circumstance under which it is epistemically permissible to hold beliefs are called *epistemic norms*".

¹¹⁶ In this respect, Surūsh surely accepts the argument of the philosophical pragmatists that human concepts and beliefs are the joint outcome of experience, even if he is not inclined, similar to Rorty, to reject that there is an intrinsic nature of the world waiting to be discovered by science. In the view of Rorty (1986:6), the idea of the world's intrinsic nature takes for granted an outmoded conception of the world as God's artifact, "the work of someone who has something in mind, who Himself spoke some language in which He described His Project".

In a later essay in *Qabḍ wa baṣṭ-i tīḍrīk-i sharīʿat*, Surūsh (1996c:331) acknowledges, however, that the role of the theoretician of knowledge is also to justify and that the justificatory function always is a normative one in the sense that it “both explains and justifies, both informs about the evolution of knowledge as well as about the enigma of this evolution itself”. While the question remains as to how he is to estimate the existence of divergent opinions, consisting of false and true, that pertains to a priori knowing without any criteria to discern true statements from false ones, his focus is rather on condemning what he calls the menace of “legal positivism” and “general idealism”, which equate interpretation of *sharīʿat* with the divine law itself and results in pure utopian thought (ibid.:342). Despite Surūsh’s (ibid.:260) claim that correct theories are only descriptive and not prescriptive, i.e. they are *ghair-i arzishī* (non-valuable), his definition of better understanding requires the acceptance of modern epistemology as its basic value. In this respect, the propositions of the theories of scientific method are comprised of methodological rules as well as values (or ends). Despite his purely explanatory and descriptive intention, the fact remains, in other words, that his exposition at large is both prescriptive and normative in style as it envisions the possibility and occurrence of a certain interpretation of religion that corresponds to certain postulates, such as a secular and pluralistic view of the religious phenomena. On the whole his work must be considered as a critique of traditional speculative metaphysics, even if his primary interest is in the scientific enterprise in its historical sweep and does not accept the ontological commitment of any particular theories, but rather a general and probable belief about the nature of the world.¹¹⁷

While epistemology, during its long history, has been engaged in two different tasks, one being descriptive and the other prescriptive, the philosophical study of human knowledge has in general (at least as far as realism is concerned) definite philosophical implications, since it does not merely describe the human cognitive predicament but also claims to improve our cognitive situation. While Surūsh’s (1996c:200) account does not indulge in showing which of our beliefs are correct and which are erroneous, his epistemology is unquestionably an instrument for intellectual reform. His work is therefore a provision of epistemic advice that offers guidance towards improving the cognitive situation of the contemporary Islamic community. By making religious propositions subordinate to reason in several dimensions in terms of being probable truths (where reason dictates what the possible content of a proposition allegedly revealed by God might be), he erodes the intellectual status of religious beliefs where no proposition of faith can contradict scientific reason. While Surūsh is not primarily

¹¹⁷ Besides, Surūsh (1994b:294) also makes several controversial statements on Islamic law and theology regarding the crucifixion of Jesus and the reason behind man’s fall from paradise which should be counted as a priori beliefs.

concerned with which beliefs about reality are erroneous and which are not, his inquiry has a normative import since it asks, in effect, what we ideally ought to believe. As Charles Landesman (1997:148) elucidates, the theories created by science as well by the various religions about the external world imply ontological commitments to a variety of unobservable entities:

Anyone who accepts such a theory, who believes that what is true or likely to be true or the best candidate for the truth, also commits himself to one degree or another to the existence of these entities. And because he accepts these entities as real and the theories as true, he also accepts the transcendent inferences that generated them as being trustworthy, as being such as to generate true theories.

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